

**"A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" by Dave Eggers, Simon & Schuster, 375 pages, \$23.**

By **MICHAEL GILTZ**

**T**hese days, if someone discovers their son is autistic or their father has Alzheimer's or their mother is also their sister, their first reaction seems to be: "I'll write a book about it!"

Dave Eggers is well aware of this. Nonetheless, when both his parents were dying of cancer, the then-21-year-old Eggers began raising his 8-year-old brother, Toph, and taking notes. His notes led to a journal and that journal led to this memoir.

But Eggers is also aware, let's say acutely aware, that a memoir is inherently suspect — one person's sketchy memory of conversations and events from the past, colored by his or her prejudices, yet presented as incontrovertible fact. That's why Eggers adds the tag "based on a true story" to his cheekily titled book.

He also knows a memoir is an invasion of everyone else's privacy — his parents, who are dead and can't even complain about it; his friends, his older sister and brother, and especially Toph. That's why the first page of the book contains one sentence: THIS WAS UNCALLED FOR. Uncalled for or not, Eggers has written it. And his qualms, instead of being

tiresome, are funny and true, reflecting his anger, confusion, pain, sadness and love.

Indeed, despite the footnotes, parentheticals, "Rules and Suggestions for the Enjoyment of this Book," and the 20 pages of acknowledgements ("The author wishes to acknowledge the existence of a planet just beyond Pluto..."), Eggers wears his heart on his sleeve.

There's much more to this book than the sad story of his parents' death. There's also the sad story of his parents' life. (Dad was a functional alcoholic; Mom threatened to leave but never did.) Not to mention the series of mishaps that befall his friends — one of whom is always threatening suicide, another who falls into a coma after a freak accident, and a third who dies suddenly from a viral infection.

But the book's overwhelming mood is of hope and humor. Eggers tries to get on MTV's "The Real World" by pitching himself as the Tragic One. His alternative magazine, *Might*, hatches a surprisingly effective hoax when it prints a lengthy obituary of the very much alive Adam Rich from "Eight is Enough." And the friend in the coma comes out of it, albeit a little shaky on short-term memory.

Throughout it all is Eggers and Toph's relationship, a combination of brotherly roughhousing and deep devotion. Heartbreaking? Heartwarming is more like it.

