



Daughters of Madness: Growing Up and Older with a Mentally Ill Mother

Susan Nathiel

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June was 9 years old when she came home from school and her schizophrenic mother met her at the door, angrily demanding to know, Who the hell are you? What are you doing in my house? Tess's mother would wait outside church, then scream at family friends as they emerged, accusing them of spying and plotting to kill her. Five-year-old Tess and her 7-year-old brother would cry and beg their mother to take them home as onlookers stared. These are just two of the stories among dozens gathered for this book. The children, now adults, grew up with mentally ill mothers at a time when mental illness was even more stigmatizing than it is today. They are what Nathiel calls the daughters of madness, and their young lives were lived on shaky ground. Telling someone that there's mental illness in her family, and watching the reaction is not for the faint-hearted, the therapist says, quoting another's research. Nathiel adds, Telling them it is your mother who's mentally ill certainly ups the ante. A veteran therapist with 35 years experience, Nathiel takes us into this traumatic world--each of her chapters covering a major developmental period for the daughter of a mentally ill mother--and then explains how these now-adult daughters faced and coped with their mothers' illness.

While the stories of these daughters are central to the book, Nathiel also offers her professional insights into exactly how maternal impairment affects infants, children, and adolescents. Women, significantly more than men, are often diagnosed with serious mental illness after they become parents. So what effect does a mentally ill mother have on a growing child, teenager or adult daughter, who looks to her not only for the deepest and most abiding love, but also a sense of what the world is all about? Nathiel also makes accessible the latest research on interpersonal neurobiology, attachment, and the way a child's brain and mind develop in the contest of that relationship.

Daughters of Madness: Growing Up and Older with a Mentally Ill Mother Details

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Paula Kirman says

I thought this book would be more clinical or academic, but instead it is a series of slightly disjointed personal anecdotes from women who grew up with mentally ill mothers, describing their lives at various stages: early childhood, adolescence, etc.

Tatjana says

This book, on first glimmer, seems academic.

In fact, I got it from a University library in an inter-library loan programme. I saw the very crisp, very white pages, footnotes, extensive bibliography and shuddered. It would take me a month to pour through it.

I was fooled.

Though the book is not written as a pop-psych classic usually is, it is a pleasant read. Susan Nathaniel, while clearly an educated counselor, is also a lyrical writer. Within one chapter I was mesmerized, but not in that overly emotional, 12-step way. I was mesmerized by the stories of women who are very similar to me... they were my stories too.

Without the feeling of victimization, a sense of outrage or feeling sorry for one's self, this book offers a refreshing sense of kinship with others. I felt I was not alone but I didn't feel the heavy heart that usually makes me stop reading a pop-psych book half-way in. I don't want to know how Jillian's mom locked her in the closet and now she has multiple personalities that she brought together by fasting and using coffee enemas... or whatever.

I wanted to continue to feel ok that I got a crappy hand. That LOTS of people get a crappy hand, but I didn't want to feel as though I should have been sitting in my closet crying over it. If you aren't a victim and you want a factual, documentary-style (okay, it's slanted towards the daughters, but maintains pretty darned good balance!) book that makes you feel like you aren't a complete freak, this is a great book for you.

Linda Owen says

This book was really not what I thought it would be. I was looking for advice, but all the book included were stories. It deals primarily with serious mental illness, such as Schizophrenia.

Julene says

Of the three books on unavailable mothers this was by far the best. Real stories from interviews. The only thing that would have made it better would have been to have each woman's story stand alone. It was divided by stages of life (for example: Adolescence; middle childhood) and so the continuity of each woman's story was lost. Very moving in many cases.

SooYoung says

It's primarily anecdotal from Nathiel's patients with some insights and trends from the doctor. Most of her patients/clients grew up in the 60s, 70s, 80s, so it feels out dated in some respects.

I did find myself connecting to certain phrases and view points. Much of it wasn't relevant in my case - my mother never went to a psychiatric hospital nor my father never sexually abused as was the case with some of the patients -- but some stories were relate-able to my own past, and in all cases, I often found myself going, oh that's why I felt like that, oh I thought that was normal. And knowing the cause for something is often the first step in changing, to be able to recognize and accept it and move on.

At the end of the book, there were summaries on what happened to each of the women. In some cases, they have their own mental health issues, in some cases they readjusted and have happy families. Interestingly, in two different cases, the patients brothers became radically sick and committed suicide. Perhaps there needs to be a book called Sons of Madness. Nevertheless it's reassuring to know that being the daughter of a mentally ill mother does not make one doomed.

It was eye opening and helpful. Definitely recommend to anyone interested in mental health and psychology, anyone who grew up with a mentally ill parent (particularly mothers as the cover suggests).

Brittnee says

I don't like the way this book is organized. It doesn't flow and it's hard to follow the individual stories of the women interviewed.

Claire Herndon says

I loved this book, and I think it's incredibly important if you grew up with a mom who "wasn't there" mentally or emotionally. But be warned: the stories will hit home if that's the case, and this will become a very intense thing for you very quickly. Read the book, but take breaks!

Elizabeth says

This book is a must-read for women who have or had mentally ill mothers. There is no other book quite like it.
