



West of Then: A Mother, a Daughter, and a Journey Past Paradise

Tara Bray Smith

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At the center of *West of Then* is Karen Morgan -- island flower, fifth-generation haole (white) Hawaiian, Mayflower descendant -- now living on the streets of downtown Honolulu. Despite her recklessness, Karen inspires fierce loyalty and love in her three daughters. When she goes missing in the spring of 2002, Tara, the eldest, sets out to find and hopefully save her mother. Her journey is about what you give up when you try to renounce your past, whether personal, familial, or historical, and what you gain when you confront it. By turns tough and touching, Smith's modern detective story unravels the rich history of the fiftieth state and the realities of contemporary Hawaii -- its sizable homeless population, its drug subculture -- as well as its generous, diverse humanity and astonishing beauty. In this land of so many ghosts, the author's search for her mother becomes a reckoning with herself, her family, and with the meaning of home.

West of Then: A Mother, a Daughter, and a Journey Past Paradise Details

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From Reader Review West of Then: A Mother, a Daughter, and a Journey Past Paradise for online ebook

Bookmarks Magazine says

Smith's first memoir intertwines different stories that pit her memories and experiences against the larger backdrop of Hawaii's history. Smith offers evocative descriptions of the state, from its sugarcane history and cultural clashes to its unparalleled beauty. A thin line separates this beauty from Smith's painful attempts to reconnect with her mother. Critics agree that her account is in turns intelligent, sad, and dazzling. Yet for all its merits, a few critics thought Smith somewhat na

Abby says

Her writing reminds me of Alexandra Fuller. Emotional and spare at the same time.

Barbara says

I was attracted to this book because the subject matter dealt with the homeless in Hawaii. I had been shocked when visiting "paradise" to see the many tent communities. This is the tragic story of a young woman trying to rescue her hopelessly addicted mother from drugs and vagrancy. What a mess.

Jessica says

I'm not really into memoir and really not into books about drug addiction, so it was hard for me to get too enthusiastic about this. I read it because it was written by a friend of Rachel's, and I'm giving it three stars because it was well-written, and I'm sure someone who gravitates more towards this kind of thing would enjoy it more than I did. As it was, I was not all that interested in the story of her family, and mostly just wanted to hear about Hawaii. The structure of the book's narrative -- that she was looking for her missing, drug-addicted mother -- seemed a little artificial and imposed, and I think the whole thing could've been more organic if she's come at it with another premise. While the background on Hawaii's history was good, I wanted more of it, and I wanted footnotes. I guess I should've been reading a history of Hawaii, then, and not a memoir....

A lot of this was extremely well-executed, though, and many of the details and descriptions really stuck with me. Smith successfully evokes a nostalgia for childhood settings that I could relate to (the nostalgia, not the settings -- for better or worse, I didn't grow up in Hawaii), and she conveys certain details -- for example, the way white Hawaiians' skin gets from being in the sun -- so well that you almost feel you had this experience yourself, instead of just reading about it. I'd recommend this to anyone interested in what it might be like to grow up haole in Hawaii, and also to people interested in what it might be like to deal with your mother's

ongoing instability, drug addiction, and homelessness. In a way I felt something was missing at the end, and never quite got a sense of these women's relationship with each other, though I knew all about her mother and knew all about Smith, but then maybe that was the whole point.... I actually gave this to my boss at the time to read (she never returned it), because I thought it was a helpful counterpoint to our social service perspective on our clients (incidentally, Smith is not real keen on the addictions treatment industry). As someone who works with people who have this mother's problems for a living, reading Smith's perspective was helpful and somewhat illuminating.

So, I guess I actually got more out of this book than I initially admitted. Okay, so this book was pretty good after all.....

Rosie Crawford says

Proving once again that children are programmed to love their parents, no matter how unworthy they are. Sad and poignant how the daughters lived with hope through years of the mother's addictions. Interesting history lessons of Hawaii. Years and events scattered willy nilly throughout the book, making following a bit tedious.

Klaudyna Z. says

Absolutely horrible book and I could not finish it. There is only one other book that I could not finish and that was Crazy Horse. This book had entirely too much Hawaiian history in it and it took away from the story line. I do not like history and so this was very boring for me and it kept the book very uninteresting. I didn't even get half way through it before I just gave up thinking that I will not waste my time on this.

Carrie says

A fascinating true story about a haole Hawaiian who comes from a prosperous family and ends up living on the streets of Honolulu. The story is told by and from the perspective of the main character's daughter. While the story itself is interesting, I think what kept me so enthralled throughout the book were all the references to people and places I knew growing up on Kauai. (Much of the book takes place on Kauai.) A worthwhile read for kama'aina. For others, it could be difficult to follow.

Christiane says

This is a heartbreak book. For anyone who grew-up in Hawaii, as I did, it is an amazing insight into a culture in these islands that I knew nothing of. The history of the islands intertwined within the story is fascinating. Even if you do not know Hawaii, but have loved someone with an addiction, you will ache for this author.

Cecilia says

Smith's first book is one part memoir and one part history lesson on Hawaii. It tells about Smith's journey back to her home state of Hawaii to find her homeless, drug-addicted mother.

Content-wise both parts are interesting, however I did not like the narrative style. The book skips back and forth in time, without an identifiable pattern. This sometimes made it difficult for me to follow if I had not read the book within the last day or so. I wanted this to be a better book, yet I would recommend it because of its interesting integration of personal history with Hawaiian history and its honest and compelling story.

Litia De says

EXCELLENT BOOK! The writer makes you feel like you're in the story line. She pulls you in. Lots of Hawaiian history also in this book and the blood lines as to who owned sugar plantations and how they list them. The struggle of the main character and her mother and her mother's addiction is the real story. I bought this book at Ala Moana shopping center 3 days before heading home from a 10 day vacation, I finished it before getting on the plane!

Randy says

A sad, sad story but a fascinating page turner of a read. I finished it in a 24 hour period. Normally not a story I would be interested in but Hawaii plays such a big role in the tale that I kept on going. Tara's family is fifth generation in Hawaii but the family has fallen on hard times relative to their previous lofty perch. Tara's mom, Karen, a privileged child, a student at Punahoa School has become a homeless junkie and Tara comes home from New York City to find her and try to connect and help her mother. In doing so she tells her family story. A really different look at Hawaii.

Monica says

Brought this along on my trip to Hawaii, to have something relevant to read. The author grew up partly on Kauai, where we were staying, so it was useful for Kauai history and culture. Ok, so maybe a book about the author's heroin-addicted mother was a bit of a downer for a vacation read. Good writing, but I couldn't get into it that much.

Anne says

I really liked this book. She is a wonderful writer and has a way of telling a very sad story with honesty and a light and graceful sense of humor. She makes you smile while reading about her journey with her mom who is an addict, mostly a using one, her daughter's entire life. The story ends when her mom is 52. Hawaii's history, her family history and her mom's life are woven together nicely.

Molly says

"Homeless women are the saddest. Somehow the men don't seem as lost to me. It's like an extension of being a man, the vagabond life. Men seek that freedom. A homeless woman is naked, stripped of what give her power - the domestic scene - and though she must be a kind of sorceress to survive on the street, a woman seems truly vulnerable there. Her beauty, her weapon, disappears little by little as she loses her teeth. Her cheeks draw toward the bone. Her death mask shines. She is fierce and perhaps even crueler than the men, whose cruelty seems by nature's design." ~Moekolohe (September 2002 - Honolulu), Pg. 159

Memoirs are a favorite of mine. They are an entertaining way to learn about other ways and walks of life. Unfortunately, it was really hard for me to be invested wholly in this one. I couldn't keep track of the people, the places, the time. Author Tara Smith skipped around from one memory to another, with little rhyme or reason that I could discern. I am certainly more comfortable with a linear story - but I can follow flashbacks if they alternate and run a parallel timeline. Because Tara's book does not, I had an impossible time keeping track and keeping up.

One positive experience of this structure, or lack thereof, was the effect of being in Tara's mind - jumping from one thought to the next as her brain scrambled to make sense of her world. Tara is always reacting and adapting to the world around her. She is rarely driving the boat - she's just along for the ride.

Tara was born to a very young mother in 1970. Her parents divorced quickly and her mother fell into a life of getting by, bumming around, mooching and cozying up to one guy or another. She also fell into drugs, making her instincts even worse than before. Tara's father steps in and swoops her out of the danger zone when she is not yet school-aged. She grows up in a "normal" home her whole life with her dad and stepmom, but her mom is always the prize she can never claim.

Her mom ignores her, forgets her, overlooks her, underestimates her, uses her, and abandons her. And yet Tara can't let go of what she can't have. She has half-sisters who are raised with their mom because their fathers aren't able or willing to do what Tara's did. They go through chaos and hell. And I sense that Tara is jealous of them - because they have mom. Even though they don't - no one really does.

Tara's mom (Karen) ends up homeless and drug addicted. She has failed herself time and again, and the system has failed her as well. She does rehab, stays at treatment centers, counsels others in need and opens her door to them to help them through tough times. But when she needs serious help, Tara and her sisters can't find anyone to take Karen in. She's not addicted enough. Or she's too addicted. She has the wrong coverage. Or what she has keeps her from getting services. It's maddening. Tara goes around and around on the hamster wheel and never gets anywhere.

I really was horrified by what Tara experienced at the hands of her mom. And how hamstrung she is because of her mother. Her world revolves around Karen - missing her, loving her, hating her, avoiding her, trying to help her, trying to explain her.

It is a love story of a mother and daughter - but Karen is just not capable of what Tara is. And I felt angry and sad about it all. I hope putting all of that energy and memories and emotion down into a memoir has helped Tara release herself from some of the frustration. I hope she has accepted her mother for what she is and found a path for herself of her own design. I sense that her sisters have let go and moved on. Tara can

too. Karen wouldn't have it any other way.

Sue says

From Sue: A memoir similar to the Glass Castle--a story of resiliency. Just not written nearly as well. Book review (see below)from "Cecilia" Sept. 1, 2007 conveys precisely how I felt about this book. My comments in brackets...

Smith's first book is one part memoir and one part history lesson on Hawaii. It tells about Smith's journey back to her home state of Hawaii to find her homeless, drug-addicted mother.

Content-wise both parts are interesting, however I did not like the narrative style. The book skips back and forth in time, without an identifiable pattern [I'd underline this part for emphasis!]. This sometimes made it difficult for me to follow if I had not read the book within the last day or so.[so true!!] I wanted this to be a better book [I agree], yet I would recommend it because of its interesting integration of personal history with Hawaiian history[and LOTS of Kauai history incl.people and places Kauaians will be familiar with] and its honest and compelling story [Again, I agree].

[After I finished the book I googled the author to see if there were any updates to the story--A year and 1/2 ago her father--age 60 (who was very well known and well respected in Honolulu), died suddenly while doing what he loved the most--surfing. The author married a German photographer a couple of mos later. Karen's sad plight was not updated...]
