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A sports reporter investigates the training of girls as professional gymnasts and figure skaters, arguing that the pressure to succeed and to look beautiful results in mental and physical harm, from eating disorders to psychological trauma.

Little Girls in Pretty Boxes Details

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Meave says

Not nearly as tawdry as promised. In the prologue it was all sexual abuse and this and that all over the place, but the book was mostly eating disorders and injuries. Eating disorders, eh, the ways losing 10 pounds in a week affect your gymnastics skills, no surprise there. Maybe it was more shocking in 1995 when this book was published.

The effects of hardcore training on little bitty bodies, that was pretty horrifying, and how nearly all coaches everywhere were all WORK THROUGH PAIN & INJURY OR GO TO BABIES' GYM, FATTY LAZY SPIDER PIG-DOG, rough times. Still, I think it's the parents' fault here and they do not get enough blame in the book. How any parent could this kind of invective screamed at his/her itsy bitsy daughter (it's always girls! HA HA abused little lambs!) and continue to pay the screamer \$1k per month (in mid-90s dollars!) to continue to scream at said daughter: it is time to call CPS and give the girl to a relative because you clearly do not have her best interests at heart. And the coaches? Clearly inhuman.

She touches on figure skating a little, but not much; mostly she makes fun of Nancy Kerrigan for being nearly as white trash as Tonya Harding, but because she was the bashed instead of the basher, and because she chose to play the game instead of fight it, she became a golden girl and got married at Disney on Ice dressed as Snow White and nobody remembers her family is all blue-collar beer-drinking pretzel-eating football fans, because figure skaters are born of pixie dust, angels' tears, and the teeny slivers of ice sheered off the rink when another skater lands a perfect jump.

Anyway, I wasn't looking forward to reading about child abuse, I just felt that the prologue was misleading, and the bits about figure skating ought to have been saved for another book, so that she could have gone further into gymnastics. It was too short. STILL: well written, obviously well researched, she got amazing quotes from almost every single person she mentions, and although the foreshadowing tends toward heavy-handedness, she weaves a bunch of stories into a hideous tapestry of abuse abuse abuse. Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be gymnasts. Unless they start later, around age six, and promise not to compete higher than college-level.

Jen says

as a former gymnast (although nowhere near elite), this book petrified me. it's hard to believe what young girls and their parents are willing to sacrifice to be the best. i'm going to find it really hard to indulge my guilty pleasure of watching gymnastic and ice skating competitions on tv after this enlightening read.

Julie says

I really liked it in a sickening, this-shattered-all-I-ever-thought-about-ice-skating-and-gymnastics kind of way. Great behind-the-scenes look at these two sports. A must read for anyone whose children are thinking of taking their competition to the next level. P.S. Kim Nahoom: don't ever send your daughter to Bela & Martha Karolyi or Steve Nunno!!!

Angie Orlando says

Joan Ryan is a journalist who knows her stuff, and knows how to write. This is another book that focuses on the dark side of elite gymnastics... and also figure skating. Ryan does a fantastic job of supporting her conclusions with statistics from university studies, interviews with experts, coaches and team mates and especially the dramatic, heart breaking stories of the girls and their family... Those who didn't make it, whether from injury, eating disorders, abusive coaches or all of the above and more. This book was written a year before the 1996 Summer Olympics in which the so called "Magnificent Seven" won the gymnastics team gold. I can only wonder what Ryan thought about that, and wish she'd write another book about the more recent "stars."

Neville Longbottom says

I love gymnastics. I think it's an incredible sport. However it's important to also acknowledge how many terrible things come out of it. For so many years it seemed like a lot of fans wanted to completely disregard the horror stories and write them off as isolated cases. Now, with revelations about widespread abuse with USA Gymnastics it's impossible to ignore.

This book was initially published in 1995 and detailed horrific ways that young girls were being treated by some of the top coaches in the country. Names were named but those coaches kept on coaching because they were "the best." It didn't matter that there were stories of them verbally abusing gymnasts, sometimes physically abusing them, forcing them to compete with major injuries, and weighing them or berating them about their weight constantly.

There are some truly heartbreakingly stories in this book. Stories about girls who broke their neck and were paralyzed for the rest of their lives. Stories about girls who developed eating disorders because of the constant criticism from coaches and judges. Stories about girls who were never able to recover from their eating disorders and ended up passing away as a result. Stories about girls who felt so worthless because they were considered "failures" that they attempted suicide.

This book isn't entirely about gymnastics, it also talks about abuse and corruption in figure skating. However gymnastics does take up the majority of the book. I wasn't as interested in the sections about figure skating. Not because they were bad, just because I'm so much more of a gymnastics fan.

I hope somebody is writing a scathing exposé of current day USA Gymnastics. It seems like little has changed in the time that this book was first published. With the crimes coming to light it seems like the right time to finally blow the doors off that organization and expose every slimy, corrupt person who abused gymnasts and the people who sheltered abusers and allowed them to thrive for years.

PinkAmy loves 💕 books📖 , cats😻 and naps🛏 says

Twenty years before most of us heard the name Larry Nassar, the Gymnastics who molested over 150

gymnasts and other athletes, journalist Joan Ryan wrote **LITTLE GIRLS IN PRETTY BOXES** about the often dark secrets behind competitive gymnastics and figure skating. I still have my copy from 1995 which I read cover to cover the day it was released.

I've been a Gymnastics and figure skating super-fan since watching Olga Korbut, then Nadia Comaneci. I wrote a fan letter to Tai and Randy and thought life couldn't get any better when Randy responded. **LITTLE GIRLS IN PRETTY BOXES** both crushed my fantasy of perfect girls effortlessly twisting their bodies in unimaginable ways by showing the abusive coaches, the eating disorders, crushed self esteem, intimidation and lack of regard these girls and young women endured. Some didn't survive their sports.

Ryan interviewed athletes, family, trainers, used news reports and footage show the tears behind the smiles and presented the stories in a compulsive readable chapters that had me wanting an update.

With the news of Larry Nassar's crimes and USA Gymnastics complicity, Joan Ryan or somebody else needs to write the next chapter in the failure of USAG and the USOC to protect its athletes from predators. Sadly, Bela Karolyi's emotional abuse of young gymnasts is clearly documented and well known internationally. Officials led the public to believe when Marta took over as USAG team coach, the sport had turned away from its abusive past to a gentler, more humane way of training athletes ****children**** trying to pursue their dreams of Olympic glory tumbling toward the gold.

Lisa says

Pretty much what you'd expect out of a book about female gymnasts and ice skaters. The crazy parents, psychotic coaches, horrible injuries. The references were a little dated (the book is from 1997 or so), but it was interesting. The editing kind of sucked, as there was a bit of repetition.

Theresa Leone Davidson says

Joan Ryan wrote a book, largely anecdotal, but with the findings of a few studies to back her up, about the harm done to girls, not those who simply learn gymnastics or figure skating, but those who are in the 'elite' class of either sport. This is an important distinction, as Ryan writes that girls who take gymnastics or figure skate learn a lot about competitiveness, self-esteem, and discipline, but for those few who fall into the elite category (the ones who practice for three hours starting at 5 a.m., go to school, then practice again from 3 p.m. until 9, the ones who are striving only for the Olympics because nothing less will suffice, the ones whose parents spend tens of thousands of dollars on coaches, or uproot their families so they can practice under a specific coach) for these girls, Ryan argues, more harm than good is done. If this book is at all interesting, it is because it is like driving by a terrible auto accident; you can not help but look out of some sick fascination, especially for those parents who are the ultimate stage parents, wanting their children to succeed to make up for their own pathetic mediocrity. Not all parents, of course, of elites are like that but the majority are, and you don't need a full length book to tell you that people aren't the greatest parents if they allow their ten year olds to work that hard, to practice even against medical advice, as so many do, to be humiliated and belittled by demanding coaches. This would have been a great full-length article; making it into a full-length book was unnecessary. And, one more minor point, I really liked everything the author had to say about the values of our country, how beauty often trumps skill, how youth is often valued more than experience, etc., and how she believes, of course, that our priorities are completely wrong because of this.

But for whatever reason, I happened to notice the author's age, 59, when the book was published, and even allowing for it being written a few years before that, maybe when she was, say, 55 or 56, why is there a picture on the back flap of a woman no older than 35? Could it be that those screwy priorities are HER priorities, or her publisher's? Interesting...but still, not interesting enough to recommend it.

Nicola says

Little Girls In Pretty Boxes, Joan Ryan's exposé on women's gymnastics and figure skating, is a brutal read. It starts with an account of a teenage girl who broke her neck while performing on the vault, and it doesn't get any cheerier.

The book is well-written enough to be engaging, but it's so excessively negative in tone that it inevitably caused my hackles to rise. I suppose any exposé is likely to be biased, but Ryan seems *so* biased against gymnastics/skating that I inevitably found myself playing devil's advocate, despite having no stake in either sport.

Ryan leaves no room for the reader to make up her own mind as to whether the gruelling training and risks involved in the sports are worthwhile. Her answer is NO NO NO, NO WAY. It turns what could have been a thoughtful piece of journalism into a depressing polemic.

Crumb says

An eye-opening account of the rigorous and often abusive training methods that elite gymnasts and ice-skaters endure in hopes of claiming an elusive Olympic medal. This book detailed the unavoidable eating disorders, injuries, and overbearing parents that skaters and gymnasts face. There were anecdotes about the rise and fall of famous athletes such as Shannon Miller, Kim Zmeskal, and Betty Okino. This book did exactly what it set out to do: Expose what the world of elite gymnastics and ice-skating is really like, behind all the glitz and glam. It was a little slow in some parts, but overall I think it did an excellent job of providing the reader with an inside look into this secret society.

The book focused a lot on the militaristic coaching technique that Bela Karolyi implemented. To me, it seemed flat out abusive. The long-term effects of intensive training can have devastating outcomes on a gymnast or ice skater, both mentally and physically.

Here are some pictures of the gymnasts:

Shannon Miller

Betty Okino

Kim Zmeskal

Dominique Moceanu

Chelle Stack

And finally, in memory of **Julissa Gomez**. She left the world far too soon..

(November 4, 1972 – August 8, 1991)

V says

As a former gymnast I found this stuff fascinating... and since I knew several of the gymnast the book spoke about it got even more interesting. There is a lot of truth in there, but of course, it focusing solely on what is negative. Still, it was hard to put down since it's all too close to home.

stephanie says

more about gymnasts than figure skaters, i read the version that included the 2000 epilogue. which is great, because the first version was written in 1995, before the americans won gold in atlanta. i'd still like to read a more recent book on gymnastics/ice-skating, but wonder if the fact that the country has had more success in the olympic arena has pushed down the urge to write about it.

there's a lot of heart-break in this book. girls who died as a result of bad vaults, or extreme eating disorders. competing broken and battered at the age of 15. thinking your life is over at 17.

in a way, i never thought of after, that they do retard their body growth so much that they never turn into physical adults. and when your career is over at 18, 22, and you have bone problems and hurt all over, what do you do? when you are done with gymnastics, or gymnastics is done with you - what options do you have? i mean, we know shannon miller won heaps of medals, but what is her life like now?

anyway, this is a really good, incisive, non-apologetic look at the sports and the risks and things that we don't want to hear about. i think the most shocking chapters were about the parents, who either made the problem worse or refused to see anything - who still can't give up the dream, and the coaches.

i will never look at bela karolyi the same way. i think that's good, but it makes me a little sad that he isn't the big bear hugging personality he seems to be. but it makes me more sad to think how many little girls are sent to his gym because their parents see him that way too, and then their girls are torn apart.

Dani Kass says

I grew up with gymnastics. Never competing, never being anything resembling good at it, but loving to cartwheel down long hallways and hold handstands in the outfield of softball games. It never stopped being fun.

I've never been so grateful that it wasn't something I took seriously and tried to compete in as when I was reading Little Girls in Pretty Boxes.

The book is a journalistic investigation into child abuse in elite gymnastics and figure skating. It was published in 1995, meaning it's a bit out of date and focused on athletes I didn't grow up with, but it still felt like a vital read.

Joan Ryan interviews a wide array of former elite gymnasts, figure skaters, parents, coaches and national organization officials trying to understand how these sports turned into a breeding ground for child abuse.

"Women's" gymnastics and figure skating are the only sports where a nation's Olympic expectations fall on young teenagers, as even male Olympic gymnasts are usually college-aged. These are the most popular Olympic events, and the ones that require absolute perfection, providing deductions for the tiniest of errors and only giving athletes one chance to meet that goal. The pressure is enormous and leads to athletes and those that are supposed to be taking care of them turning to extreme measures.

The girls have to stop puberty before hips and breasts weigh them down and make them heavier. To keep that girlish figure, they stop eating or throw up or swallow laxatives by the bottle, encouraged or overlooked by parents and coaches just focused on glory. It doesn't matter that this can cause a lifetime of harm.

The book is a deep look into the methods championed by Bela Karolyi, who used emotional abuse, namely fear and guilt, to make girls compete despite serious injuries, punish themselves for not being perfect at all times, practice without food because they were constantly berated for being fat (even though none reached 100 pounds) and made their parents go even further down the rabbit hole than they were.

There were girls who died from anorexia and broken necks, all because they were so obsessed with chasing an Olympic gold and their coaches never treated them like actual people, *like the actual little children they are.*

Ryan goes into the psychology of how parents go from good intentions into further hurting their children, the lack of regulation that allows coaches to get away with such conduct, the insane judging style (especially in figure skating) that allows this all to proceed and the public perception that, to some, makes all this worth it.

Even today, Karolyi is considered a hero for the Olympians he has produced, remembered more for the proud hugs he gave athletes on TV than for the incredible abuse that has been widely known for decades now.

The book left me desperate to know how much of this is still accurate. Today's gymnasts look healthier than previous ones ever had, but then the national team's doctor just got sentenced for sexually abusing more than 200 girls. To top it off, there were so many people in charge who knew about his conduct and chose to do absolutely nothing.

I could go on and on detailing the finding, many of which are now pretty well known anyway, so I'll move on to the quality of the book itself.

For the most part, it's brilliantly written. Ryan does a great job of weaving personal stories into a larger picture and making the book truly flow. She suffers from repetitiveness at times, but I'm choosing not to fault her too much for that.

The weakest part of the book was describing the Kerrigan/Harding attack. The entire section is awkwardly written, like Ryan couldn't get interviews and so instead just drew a bunch of conclusions and expanded on them without the wealth of evidence she had in previous chapters. The attack itself was also referenced so many times as something that had already been described when it wasn't detailed until quite late in the chapter.

My last complaint was that this book is sold as both gymnastics and figure skating, when it's really 75 percent gymnastics. I wanted just a bit more depth on the figure skating. But even then, I learned so much from that 25 percent.

Those complaints are nitpicking because it really was a fantastic work that I would highly recommend across the board.

[Review posted here]

M. Milner says

Who knew gymnastics was so horrifying?

Joan Ryan's Little Girls in Pretty Boxes is a chilling, sobering look at the world of women's gymnastics, where the coaches yell and taunt at young gymnasts while their parents overlook – or exaggerate – the abuse, creating a culture of destroyed confidence, eating disorders and. It's an unflattering portrait.

Ryan tells of the sad fates of several promising girls who were sucked into this world by their talent, chewed up and used by ego-driven coaches and, once they proved too weak or useless for coaches, disregarded like scraps, often the worse for wear.

It's names like Julissa Gomez and Christy Henrich who resonate throughout the book. All young gymnast prodigies, all three were quickly brought down by its environment – Gomez broke her neck in a risky routine and was dead by 19, Henrich developed an eating disorder likely brought on by over-zealous coaches and starved herself to death. Ryan brings their and many other grim stories into deadly sharp focus, squarely planting the blame at coaches.

It's these coaches, she writes, that have created and fostered an environment that's extraordinarily detrimental to these young athletes. The average age, weight and size of gymnasts has plummeted (Ryan says it's gone from Women's gymnastics to girls').

Ryan saves the worst for coaches like Bela Karolyi or Rick Newman who have pushed cruel, Eastern Bloc-influenced coaching methods to the forefront to create winners. Their gyms often feature long, harsh training sessions and verbal abuse from coaches push these young athletes past their mental and physical limits – insults about the weight of these girls is not uncommon. Ryan writes of many cases of girls breaking down, both mentally and physically – stress fractures and broken wrists seem almost scarily common in these gyms.

This isn't to place the blame squarely on coaches, however. Ryan also writes of parents blinded by the dream of an Olympian daughter who look past whatever problems their kids have and often convince their children to keep competing. They refinance their houses, they take second jobs and move across the country to go to these gyms where maybe a coach will mould their daughter into a winner. Ryan summarizes their ambition

by asking what do their parents value more: their daughter being healthy or winning?

But it's winning that often blinds everybody, the coaches, the parents and especially the athletes themselves who do everything to win, regardless of the risk. Ryan's book is a sobering, chilling look at what these drive to win-at-any-cost has done to these young athletes. It should be required reading for any parent looking to put their kid in figure skating, gymnastics or the like.

Margaret says

I really liked the writing of this book and the lengthy interviews that make it more than researched rumors, but the heart of the book and what it reveals is horrifying but not so terribly surprising.

It begins with a 2 AM phone call to Otilia Gomez in Houston. Her 15 year old daughter, Julissa is in Tokyo performing in an important gymnastics competition. Julissa had been training since the age of 10 with the famed coach Bela Karolyi. Known for his production of Olympic medalists Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton, Julissa was one of Kaolyi's hopefuls as one of 6 girls to train for the Olympics. One phone call after 5 years of hard work and grueling training dashed any hopes for that.

Author Joan Ryan digs deep into the methods of "factory" training of our young women athletes, both in gymnastics and in figure skating. As Ryan points out, since the burst of young and tiny Olga Korbut and then even younger and tinier Nadia, the term "women's" gymnastics or figure skating became a misnomer.

Young pre-teens can flip higher, leap higher, bend in positions that are seemingly impossible. They are lighter and unburdened by the natural changes that begin when girls start to develop into women. It has become "necessary" for coaches to focus prepubescent girls and to keep them that way for as long as possible—no matter what.

The "no matter what" is revealed in this book. Verbal abuse, taunting, withholding food, pitting one girl against another, ignoring serious injuries and medical advice...it goes on and on. Only a handful of hopeful gymnasts and skaters actually make it to the top but so many of the hopefuls are willing to take whatever it takes to get there and many of them pay dearly.

I have always admired the beauty and grace of the two sports, the glittering costumes, the beat of the music...but in the back of my mind I have wondered about what training and dedication these performers put into their talent. This book describes it all. It is heart-breaking and eye-opening and I hope that a change is in the making. I kind of doubt it. Young girls are so vulnerable and impressionable and their dreams are in front of them. Their parents are blinded by the dream and what attaining it could mean considering all of the sacrifices they have made to get so far. The sport is not guided by any "restrictions" that would protect the young hopefuls. The desire to be the best is too great. But really, after so many of the Olympic medalists retire (usually before they are even 20 years old), how many of the names and faces do we truly remember?
