

Replacement Child - A Memoir

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An Interview with Judy L. Mandel, author of Replacement Child

1. Q: Why did you write the book?

A: I started writing Replacement Child to try to piece together my own history and discover how the plane crash before I was born shaped my life. In the process, I found out a great many things about myself and my family that I never would have known, or understood any other way.

2. Q: How long did the book take you from start to finish?

A: Four years, plus the 40 or so thinking about it.

3. Q: What aspect of writing the book did you find particularly challenging?

A: Looking at my parents as people, objectively. Being honest with myself about some of my own resentment toward my parents and even my sister. Understanding my role in their lives, and mine in theirs.

4. Q: What surprised you the most about the book writing process?

A: How it was a journey in self-discovery. I never thought I would be finding out more about myself by writing about my childhood—but I certainly did.

5. Q: What do you hope your readers will gain from reading your book?

A: I hope readers will get a sense of the complexity of recovery—and the far-reaching tentacles of the tragedies they read about in the newspaper every day. And, I hope they might gain an insight into their own recovery from whatever has been thrown at them during their life. I hope the book gives people a way to accept and forgive. Especially finding that there is a way to forgive your parents for things that were beyond their control. To realize most parents do the best they can.

6. Q: Did you do any research for your books, or did you write from experience?

A: I wrote both from experience and extensive research of the plane crash and surrounding history as well as notes and letters written by my parents and my sister. Some of my research included conversations with family members, especially my sister Linda, and one of the reporters that was on the scene of the accident for The New York Times. I also had some great help from the Elizabeth Fire Dept. in unearthing some photos of the scene while the fire was still being fought. My doctor and my rabbi also helped me verify pieces of the book, and an attorney friend helped with some research as well.

7. Q: How did you come up with your title?

A: When I discovered that there was an actual psychological syndrome called 'replacement child syndrome'—I felt an affinity with that definition and thought it would make an intriguing title.

8. Q: When did you first get the notion that you might have been a replacement for your sister who died in the crash?

A: I don't think I had a name for what I felt through my childhood. There was always a feeling of being on the outside of the family, that I missed the main event of their lives. It wasn't until I was deeply into the research for the book that I began to realize that their decision to have another child — me — was part of how my parents dealt with their grief, and part of their recovery. That was especially true for my mother, not as much for my father, except in the fact of my mother's recovery from depression.

9. Q: You have some pretty complex feelings about your father in the book. How have you personally dealt with those feelings towards him.

A: There was a time, even as I wrote the book, that I was very angry with my father. I blamed him for my bad track record with men and marriage. I couldn't reconcile his happy-go-lucky persona that he had with others with the coldness I felt from him. Writing the book has been a journey to forgiveness, especially of my father, who I believe did the best he could with the cards he was dealt. I understood more about his upbringing through my writing, and also the devastating impact losing Donna had on him.

10. Q: Do you feel you were definitely a replacement for your sister that was killed?

A: You know, I will never know the real answer to that question, since I didn't start questioning this until after my parents were both gone. I do think that I was born as their way to recreate a somewhat normal family, and to help them recover from the sadness of losing their first-born child. And, I believe my mother may not have recovered as well as she did if she didn't have another child. I have to say, even now it's hard to give that answer. It's still hard for me to admit that I was a positive force in my family.

11. Q: How has being a replacement child influenced your life?

A: I think it was the basis for me feeling that I was somewhat insignificant. I was never the main concern for my parents. And, I took that role to heart. There were always more important things to attend to: Linda's surgeries, her recoveries, her mental state and social acceptance. My role was to be easy—not to have to be worried over. When you grow up feeling like the other, you tend not to have high expectations for yourself, or from those around you. For a good part of my life, that was the case for me. It wasn't until I was in my forties that I started to take a hard look at the reasons behind why I couldn't seem to find and keep the right relationships in my life.

12. Q: What could your parents have done better?

A: They would have benefitted from some additional help from a mental health professional, probably during all phases of their recovery—including Linda's and mine. There were certainly attitudes and behaviors that might have been addressed that could have helped my parents relationship, Linda's adjustment, and my own.

13. Q: What are the lingering effects of the crash on your outlook on life?

A: I still have an underlying feeling that anything at all can happen at any time. That we really have no control over many of the forces that impact us. It sounds fatalistic, but I've also managed to remain optimistic about life — I just don't count on it!

14. Q: Do you think it's wise for parents to have another child after the loss of a child?

A: I do think it can help parents recover from a loss of a child, which as a mother is a pain I cannot even fathom. I think if they go into it with their eyes open to the possible pitfalls for the child, they can guard against them. On the other hand, no child should be made to feel that they are expected to become the child that died, or to live up to a memory. Those are the elements that I believe harm children that are born into that circumstance.

15. Q: Do you think your parents would have stayed married if they hadn't had you?

A: I'm really not sure. They may have, merely because of the bond of the tragedy and Linda's need for ongoing care.

16. Q: Have you had reactions from other family members about the book?

A: It has been interesting—and most family members have not read the book as yet. My son's reaction has been so understanding, and supportive of my work. I have a few cousins that may have vastly different recollections of my parents and some of the revelations in the book. I think my husband has a deeper understanding of me as a result—and thankfully has been indulgent of my exploiting our life in the book!

17. Q: What was the most important discovery you made as a result of writing the book?

A: The most important result of this for me was to realize the importance of my life to my family. It's hard to say it, but I did help them, and did bring some measure of joy to them. The other important result for me was to be able to be at peace with my father and our relationship and to forgive him for the things he may have done to hurt me.

18. Q: Did your sister Linda read the book before she died recently? And what was her reaction?

A: Yes, I'm very grateful that she read one of the last drafts of the book—although not the final one. She said some of it surprised her, especially my feelings about my parents and how I felt as a child. We talked about what it was like for me when she used to be hospitalized so much during our childhood. She was glad I wrote it, she said, and was starting to think about writing her own version of the story—her story. I even have the notes that she began writing that I found in her apartment after she died.

When she was in the hospital a few days before she died, I brought in the cover designs for the book—as a diversion really. Now, I am so glad that I let her actually choose the cover for the book.