

Raging Bibliomania



Judy Mandel is a replacement child: a child born to take both the emotional and physical place of her sister Donna, who was killed in a freak plane accident when she was just seven years old. Judy's older sister Linda was also seriously injured in the accident and spends her life bouncing from one reconstructive surgery to the next. Although Judy longs to be loved and accepted by her parents, it seems as though she lives as a shadow beside the memory of Donna and the perpetual care that is the hallmark of Linda's life. Though the plane accident that robbed the family of so much is broadly hinted at, it is not until Judy begins to research her own memoir that she discovers the horrible secrets about the day that changed her family's lives. As Judy tells the story of her life, she intersperses chapters from the past and chapters that relate the minute by minute countdown to the moment when the fateful accident occurred. Judy paints individual portraits of each of her family, from her stern and distant father to her overwhelmed mother and brave sister; each member touched differently by their torturous trial. Her journey centers around trying to understand her role and place among those marked by tragedy and trying to find her own small voice above the din. Both disturbing and sensitive, *Replacement Child* exists as part tell all family chronicle, part examination of the the attempts to reconstruct a family out of the ashes.

I was really moved by this story and thought that it was written very respectfully and with great conscience. It was not until the later sections of the book that Judy discovers that the term for people like her is "replacement child" but it was easy to see that once she found the definition, her story seemed to fit perfectly within the boundaries of the definition. It wasn't that her parents were cold or calculating people who disrespected Judy's individuality or singularity; instead it seemed that they were just unconsciously trying to fill a hole that existed within their family.

I found it very sad that Judy's father decided to never call attention to his daughter's beauty because it might diminish something in his other surviving child who had been so disfigured by the accident, or that he never really showed any outward affection toward her either. I also found it very sad that the family never seemed to notice Judy or the trials that she experienced in her life, instead focusing so much energy on Linda and the memory of Donna.

For the most part, I would have to say that Judy was extremely well-adjusted and, remarkably, not bitter about the experiences of her life. Instead of becoming isolated and angry, she seemed to realize what her role in the family was and responded by becoming more loving to her sister and more understanding to her parents. I can imagine that it probably hurt her very deeply to be thought of as second best, a replacement or substitution for the sister that she never knew. In reading the book, it seems clear that her situation mostly manifested itself in some very severe self-image and self-esteem problems, problems that her parents never addressed or spoke to her about.

I also got a very clear picture of what a family living through constant grief must go through in their day to day life. It seemed as though the girls' parents spent a lot of time rehashing the accident while still trying to keep the actual facts of that dreadful day under wraps. As Judy examines the family both through the past and the present, she comes to some startling realizations about her family's financial situation, her parent's marriage and the realities of Linda's future that shape the way that she deals with them and reinforces some of the ideas that she has held for years.

There were bits in this story that were humorous and comic, but overall the book cast a somber and reflective tone throughout Judy's analysis of her family's particular dysfunction. The book also examines the many unsuccessful relationships that Judy found herself in after moving from her parents' home. As she explains her reasoning behind her choices in mates, it was very easy for me to see the influences in her past that had led her to make the types of decisions

that she did, and I was genuinely happy for her when she broke out of the pattern of choosing distant and emotionally cold men.

I thought this was a very powerful memoir and very different from any that I have read before. The book was very balanced and didn't attempt to portray either camp in a damaging or negative light; instead the author chose to spotlight the situation and respondents in a clear and unambiguous way that gave me a great deal of respect for her. If you are a reader of memoirs, I would definitely recommend picking this one up. It is the unusual story of a life of compromise, told with affection, grace, and respect. A very moving and incredibly solid read.