

Judy Mandel's *Replacement Child* Reviewed by Tracy Kauffman Wood

by Tracy Kauffman Wood on February 24, 2010



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By Tracy Kauffman-Wood, Guest Reviewer



Author Judy Mandel

"I was born of fire," begins Judy Mandel, the author of *Replacement Child, A Memoir*. The book begins with an excerpt from the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, Wednesday January 23, 1952 and with Mandel's more intimate explanation opposite it. We enter the book given the knowledge of an apocalyptic event that devastated her family before she was born. In fact, it was the reason she was born – to be the salve on the wounds of her family.

An airliner, American Airlines Flight 6780, plunged into her family's home on a winter afternoon, claiming the life of Mandel's eldest sister Donna and leaving her sister Linda severely burned and scarred for life. But the entire family, their mother, Florence who suffered from shock and burns on both hands as she struggled to rescue her children from the inferno, their anguished father Al, who blamed himself for not being home to save his family and Judy, who was not yet born, was scarred for life.

This is Judy's story – written in a style that allows the reader to uncover, just as she does, the multi-layered truth beneath the smoke and ash. She begins in the present, introducing us to her parents in their last moments, and then releases them – their ashen remains after cremation, into the river by the town where they raised her. What follows is a journey back and forth in time, winding its way through moments of pain and celebration to the answers about her birth and relationships that she hopes will heal her heart. Besides its riveting topic, another thing that makes this memoir unique is that while Judy Mandel peels away at the dead skin of secrecy in her family surrounding the "accident," she also allows the reader a fresh window into her memoir writing process.

"I'm getting more disciplined now with this 'project' as I have started to call it. Mornings I will find one pile of notes or news clips and re-read them until they jar a memory from my past. Then, I'll write a page or two from that memory. Afternoons, I review and re-write the piece. The next day, I either add it to my growing file called 'The Book' on my computer –or trash it if it's awful. Either way, I usually wind up with a revelation I didn't expect."

Judy Mandel has a friendly and accessible, journalistic writing style. Her book is a quick read, structured like a short flight from Newark, circling back through the remote and recent moments of her past, carrying the reader with her through the clearing fog and a smooth landing. Unlike the ill-fated aircraft that abruptly changed the course of her family's life, Judy's flight has made it home. She may have been conceived as a replacement child for her parents, but Judy Mandel has created an irreplaceable role for herself in the family of memoir writers because she uses the fire from which she was born, to forge a brave, self-revelatory quest toward truth and understanding.