



Handbook for an Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (with Great Hair)

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From the New Co-host of the View, Oscar-nominated actress Rosie Perez’s never-before-told story of surviving a harrowing childhood and of how she found success—both in and out of the Hollywood limelight.

Rosie Perez first caught our attention with her fierce dance in the title sequence of *Do the Right Thing* and has since defined herself as a funny and talented actress who broke boundaries for Latinas in the film industry. What most people would be surprised to learn is that the woman with the big, effervescent personality has a secret straight out of a Dickens novel. At the age of three, Rosie’s life was turned upside down when her mentally ill mother tore her away from the only family she knew and placed her in a Catholic children’s home in New York’s Westchester County. Thus began her crazily discombobulated childhood of being shuttled between “the Home,” where she and other kids suffered all manners of cruelty from nuns, and various relatives’ apartments in Brooklyn.

Many in her circumstances would have been defined by these harrowing experiences, but with the intense determination that became her trademark, Rosie overcame the odds and made an incredible life for herself. She brings her journey vividly to life on each page of this memoir—from the vibrant streets of Brooklyn to her turbulent years in the Catholic home, and finally to film and TV sets and the LA and New York City hip-hop scenes of the 1980s and ‘90s.

More than a page-turning read, *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life* is a story of survival. By turns heartbreaking and funny, it is ultimately the inspirational story of a woman who has found a hard-won place of strength and peace.

Handbook for an Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (with Great Hair) Details

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Felicia says

very candid and honest. I just have a hard time believing the forgiveness she gave her mother. I don't know what it is about latinxs and forgiveness but they always want you to forgive and forget because "family". my heart ached for Rosie and I'm glad she climbed out of what could have been a completely different life given the circumstances.

I knew nothing about her life, and I recommend the audiobook if anyone decides to pick this up.

Evi Rodriguez says

What can I say? I've always loved Rosie. Reading this book was almost like taking a stroll down memory lane. It reminded me so much about my own childhood. While I would not consider this a literary classic (the writing needed work), I still loved it. The book is full of humor even though there are parts that are disturbing. It made me appreciate my childhood and Rosie even more.

PS. Pages 113 and 114 are HILARIOUS! (Holla!)

Gina Marcelin says

I really enjoyed this book. I saw Rosie on a talk show saying how her childhood left her with PTSD. Really? Sounds about right if a child has been severely abused, like Rosie was. By her parents, my the sisters of the foster care home where she was raised, by her father, by almost every adult in her young life. It's a compelling story. It makes me like Rosie more than ever. The story of negotiations with Spike Lee with a machete are hilarious. I read the book in two days.

Michael says

As I put my finished copy of Rosie's book into my bag, I feel like I am actually just leaving Rosie's house. I didn't know her too well, but she invited me into her home anyways. Sitting in her cozy living room, with the back wall filled with pictures of Minguita, her dad, and, maybe even her mom Lydia, I just had a 300 page conversation with Rosie Perez. Over coffee, a box of Kleenex, some killer music playlists, Rosie just took me on a journey through her life. She told me about her childhood. Damn, that childhood - the abuse she experienced, traumas, and living in that Catholic Home for all those years. Blended in with those authentic stories of her past, she continually reveals to me this really loud, beautiful, confident, and loving personality. Someone who really cares about all of the people around her - even when some of the people surrounding her created an environment where no one would blame her for being hateful or resentful - but that's not Rosie.

When it comes to autobiographies and memoirs, I really don't believe you can really judge the book by the content. Rating it based on content is saying that a person's story, a person's journey, has some sort of number rating in comparison to other people's life journeys - which is simply bizarre. I think you should try to rate it based more on writing style, structure, flow, and voice. On that alone, I think this book is excellent. The narrative is laid out in a really cohesive way that starts by laying out her childhood in a more linear path. It then transitions into more of her career development while simultaneously reflecting on how these past childhood traumas and hurts have affected her perspective, her situational reactions, and emotional well being. I think this book speaks with an authentic voice, that honors her past, is inspiring, and insightful.

Thanks for sharing your story Rosie!

A few quotes that stuck with me are:

- "I've hated my past so much that I've spent countless hours downplaying or even hiding bits of the truth of my childhood in an attempt to make it seem less severe..."
- "I've been acting all my life, hiding, creating different realities, and suppressing true emotional responses."
- "I had met my history, and it made me feel present and validated. I knew now that I belonged to something, and it gave me strength to believe I could do anything."

Armando C. says

It was a good read. I read it in a day. Heavy in the family drama and lite in her professional life. I wanted more about her work. That is why we know her and the reason I bought the book.

Demetria says

This was fantastic! The writing is accessible and true to Rosie Perez's very recognizable speech pattern and the broached topics are important. This memoir devotes a lot of time to Perez's traumatic and colorful childhood. It touches on mental illness, cultural and racial identity, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and most of all, perspective and self-awareness. There's also a sprinkling of behind-the-scenes Hollywood stories that range from hilarious to mortifying. But my big take-away from this memoir is the importance of kindness. That means being kind to the "bad" kid with the attitude and being kind to the "crazy" lady who does inexplicable acts and being kind to yourself. That latter bit is clutch.

A lot of celebrity memoirs amount to one big literary pat on the back with tons of self-congratulatory confetti littered through out, but this memoir is truly different in that sense. It feels raw and refreshingly honest. Kudos to everyone involved in this project.

Sherring says

I was completely in shock and awe throughout Rosie Perez's memoir *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (with Great Hair)*.

I knew Perez as a sassy Nuyorican dancer, choreographer and actress, and was not prepared for what she shared about her childhood and her unlikely path to success. The memoir is aptly titled, so we might as well deconstruct it.

Sister Renata

Rosie and several of her half siblings grew up in Catholic children's home run by strict and abusive nuns. Prior to landing at the home, from the age of a baby to three or four Rosie was raised by her aunt, whom she believed to be her mother. Lydia, Rosie's biological mother, was married when she met and had an affair with Rosie's father. For unknown reasons, Lydia chose to remove Rosie from Tia's home and dropped her off in the upstate New York children's home, where she would remain until moving into a group home.

My Crazy Mother

While many people may refer to their mothers as crazy because they drive them crazy, Lydia was indeed mentally ill. It was not uncommon for Rosie or her siblings to catch their mother talking to the kitchen cabinets and exhibiting other erratic behavior, such as carrying a handgun in a plastic bag to the corner store. As if that weren't traumatizing enough, Lydia unabashedly treated Rosie differently than her older and younger half siblings, clearly playing favorites by requesting they leave the children's home to visit her on holidays and weekends, leaving behind Rosie. The physical abuse was widespread, but Rosie felt like a pariah even amongst her siblings. She never bonded with them as she did with her cousins, whom she originally thought were his sisters and refers to them as her cousin-sisters.

Smiling

Rosie's smiles and laughter are hard earned and well-deserved. Through her distress she always knew she'd eventually have a better life, but she never imagined having stints as a dancer on *Soul Train*, her first acting role in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, being a choreographer for the likes of Bobby Brown and LL Cool J and the show *In Living Color*. She was even Oscar-nominated for a role that flopped stateside but did well overseas.

I purchased *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life* as an audiobook, which was read by the author herself. Anybody remotely familiar with Rosie Perez knows that she's a fiery and passionate person who brought all of that to the reading. There was also her thick New York and Spanish-tinged accent. Plenty of times, sentences were punctuated with "Come on, people!" when trying to get the audience to see her side of things. I wonder if these were included in the print version of the book or if she was ad libbing. I also wondered if during the recounting of especially emotional times if she was acting or actually choking back sobs and tears.

Rosie Perez's story is the epitome of overcoming a difficult past, none of which was her own fault. Her career path was not planned, but with each twist and turn she adjusted and became stronger, wiser, and eventually the successful and creative person she is today. This one of the those memoirs in which you truly see and believe that if someone else was able to make it through, then so can you.

Mrs. Joseph says

An enjoyable read about a woman who endured so much and has done so much self-development. It is raw and funny, just like I imagine Rosie to be in person. Great vacation reading!

Ash says

A friend of mine, who had read this book before me, had warned me that the book is "too ghetto." I replied with that it's Rosie Perez and, if it was indeed ghetto, that means it was authentic. I'm in no way trying to disparage Perez in any way but if he wanted the technical vernacular of Sonia Sotomayor, this was the wrong Puerto Rican biography for him.

Rosie Perez's Handbook for an Unpredictable Life was inspiring and uplifting and, conversely, heartbreaking. I literally had no semblance of an idea regarding Perez's life pre Hollywood. I felt so bad for her and the abuse she endured from her mother and the nuns at that Catholic home. Thank goodness, she had people in her corner like her Tía and her womanizing father.

I was reading Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers at the same time as this and I could see how his tenets to success could be applied to Perez. She had a good support system, the little that she had, she had a good work ethic that could be attributed to her cultural history (her Tía worked countless jobs at the same time to support her family, and Perez kind of faked it until she made it (choreographer of In Living Color).

I have to admire Rosie Perez. It took incredible endurance to withstand that level of abuse and still keep going. I also admire her for forgiving her mother. I know, if I were in that position, I would have never done that.

Lisely says

This was a great read! Reading about Rosie's hard life you really feel for her and you definitely cheer when things start going well. It's written very well but casually so that you almost feel like you're just in the room chatting it up with her and her Tia in one of their long conversations. As a Puerto Rican I also loved reading it for the cultural perspective. I grew up lower-middle class and with all my family's issues it seems super functional compared to Rosie's, but at the same time there are so many things I recognize in the culture of her upbringing; things that are just Puerto Rican no matter where or when you are.

Erin says

I LOVED THIS BOOK!!! If Charles Dickens wrote about New York in the 1970s, he would've penned Rosie's story. Also, there's absolutely no question -- you NEED to listen to the audio. Rosie's voice is filled with so much emotion, passion, and humor that you'll immediately fall in love with her. Can't recommend highly enough!

Lori says

this book was a real eye opener. I have seen some of Rosie Perez's movies. tv and on the View. I did not realize what kind of life she had until i read this memoir. She spent the first three years of her life happy with her beloved aunt she knew as "mommie" when she turned three her biological mother tore her away and put her in a Catholic home for children. she spent most of her childhood in this children's home. only seeing her aunt during summer stays with her. Rosie's mentally ill mother would not let her live with her aunt. she also

spent many years in group homes with some bad memories there as well. she did not get to know her father until later years.

She shares with the readers her early years in show business including working on the show "IN Living Color" i was impressed with Rosie Perez's honest writing of her very rough childhood. It is amazing how well she turned out. this is a tough memoir to read. Ms. Perez had a very difficult childhood with many family members. It amazing she was able to rise above her difficult life to make a success for herself.

Martha says

Thanks to her honest and candid approach as well as her refreshingly witty and humorous personality which shines through on every page, I absolutely LOVED the time I got to spend with Rosie during my reading of her story.

And I word it that way because that's exactly how it felt, as though she was right there next to me, telling me her story just like any good girlfriend would, holding nothing back including her anger, her fears, and her hopes--along with good gossip tid bits on such names as the Wayans brothers, Woody Harrelson, P. Diddy, LL Cool J, and the so-called "feud" with Jennifer Lopez--Ha! Highly recommended.

Janet says

I will always say this at the beginning of every bio/memoirs, I don't like raring them. How can you rate how much you like someone's life story. I think people rate them more on how they felt about the person. I don't know much of Rosie perez's acting. I have been watching a lot of boxing and I loved how she was always enthusiastic and was genuinely passionate about the sport. You don't see a lot of women who genuine fans or commentators. So when i seen this at the library i grabbed it. I've only seen white men can't jump and do the right thing. I always feel guilty when I don't watch every single or know everything an actor is in. So anyway I learned so much from Rosie that I never knew. I definitely didn't know about her coming up as a choreographer. I loved her strength and hope through her struggles. I would honestly want to hang out with her. The beginning I thought her personality would be too much but she grew on me.

Stephanie says

This review first appeared on Young Adult Hollywood.

I received an ARC copy of this book from the publisher, in exchange for an honest review

SPOILER ALERT

I really loved this book! Reading it was effortless! Kind of like sitting with Rosie, having a drink, and chatting with you, like you were a really good friend.

Right from the start, she begins with the story of how her mother and father met – scandalous! From there, she goes on to tell how she was raised for the first few years by her Tia, (Aunt in Spanish), whom she called, “Mommie.”

When her schizophrenic birth mother, Lydia, comes back into Rosie’s life, she takes Rosie away and enters

her in to a Catholic home for children. Rosie is about three years old and is scarred and confused, and that is where Sister Renata comes in. It was heartbreaking to hear Rosie's recount of her time in the home.

Luckily, Rosie's father, whom she knew as "Uncle Ismael," kept in contact with her and helped her recognize her Puerto Rican roots, and never let her forget, even though she was constantly made to forget she was of Latin descent at "the home."

Rosie goes on to recount her days of when she stumbled upon becoming a dancer on Soul Train, then a respected choreographer for Bobby Brown and LL Cool J. From there, she caught the attention of film director Spike Lee, who cast her in the 1989 film, Do The Right Thing. Soon after, Rosie went on to choreograph Fox's hit show, In Living Color.

My personal favorite movie of Rosie Perez's is Untamed Heart. What can I say, I love chick flicks!

Rosie Perez's career was taking off, but personally, she was struggling with PTSD and depression. She seeks help, and also goes on to become an advocate for Puerto Rican rights and HIV/AIDS.

I give this book 5-stars and like Rosie's Tia used to say, "God Bless America two times" for Rosie Perez on her honesty and candidness.
