



The Three of Us: A Family Story

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This is the story of three people: Julia Blackburn; her father, Thomas; and her mother, Rosalie. Thomas was a poet and an alcoholic who for many years was addicted to barbiturates, which would often make him violent. Rosalie, a painter, was sociable and flirtatious; she treated Julia as her sister, her confidante, and eventually as her deadly sexual rival. After Julia's parents divorced, her mother took in lodgers, always men, on the understanding that each would become her lover. When one of the lodgers started an affair with Julia, Rosalie was devastated; when he later committed suicide, the relationship between mother and daughter was shattered irrevocable.

Or so it seems until the spring of 1999, when Rosalie, diagnosed with leukemia, came to live with Julia for the last month of her life. At last the spell was broken, and they were able to talk with an ease they had never known before. When she was very near the end, Rosalie said to Julia, "Now you will be able to write about me, won't you?"

The Three of Us is a memoir like no other you have read. The writing is magical, and the story is extraordinary, not only for its honest but also for its humor and its lack of blame. Ultimately, this is a tale of redemption, a love story. It will surely become one of the classics of that genre.

The Three of Us: A Family Story Details

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From Reader Review The Three of Us: A Family Story for online ebook

R.C. Waller says

I loved this book. I recommended it, but be ready because it is a wild ride. I just had to keep turning pages, anxious to see what strange thing Julia's parents, especially her mother, might do next.

Julia Blackburn opens the door and lets us see every aspect of her unorthodox upbringing at the hands of her father, a poet and her mother, an artist. These two adults never seemed to forego anything for the sake of their daughter, but rather were both self-indulgent, co-dependent and caustic. Her father, addicted to alcohol and pain meds and her mother, addicted to her own ego and sex simply made only "physical" adjustments to her presence in the household. They took their young daughter on every emotional path that corresponded to their own mixed-up existence. They both used her as a buffer and console for their angry ravings at one another. Her mother felt the need to talk to her about her sexual conquests of every boarder that crossed their homes threshold...and there were many.

Nevertheless, Julia manages to write sympathetically about these two people whom she loved. She goes into their backgrounds to shed light on the events that produced such unstable people and she writes about her own path to discovering her true self...warts and all.

Belinda says

I heard about this book on "A Good Read". Harriet Gilbert recommended it, the two other people on her panel agreed that it was compelling, and that, despite the dreadful childhood Julia Blackburn had to endure, that it was neither self-absorbed nor unhappy reading. I got it out of the library and was immediately drawn into this memoir.

Julia, as is implied by the title, is one in a family of 3. She is the daughter of Thomas Blackburn, poet, alcoholic, drug addict, and Rosalie de Meric, artist, sex-addict, without appropriate boundaries, and selfish just like her husband. Poor child - she didn't cut a break from day 1.

Both parents had issues and should never had children, but together they were appalling. Rosalie needed love and tried to get it by being available to her husband at the expense, or so it seems, of her own wishes. Thomas seems to have been a monster. His horrific father scarred him and he escaped his own misery by taking huge amounts of barbiturates (often prescribed) and far too much alcohol. It's hard to see which parent ruined the marriage, but it does seem as though Thomas's drinking, affairs, drugs, and violence, made Rosalie into a highly anxious, desperate, insufferable pain. My money is on him as the main culprit for sparking the dysfunction within the family. Rosalie's way of coping with his neglect and cruelty was to offload the fear Thomas engendered onto Julia.

Possible Spoiler Alert here:

So, Julia is used to shield her mother from her father, as a sounding board, dumping ground for her mother as she recounted (to a very young child) her sexual needs, her orgasms, the amount of sex she had, the lovers and what they did to her, etc. When Daddy went nuts and tried to beat Mummy, Julia stepped in. When Mummy tried to pacify Daddy, Julia was somewhere nearby as they had sex. It is really as sick as you can get. It reminded me of Anne Sexton masturbating next to her 9 year old daughter, Linda.

Even after Mummy and Daddy divorce the lovers take precedence over the mother/daughter relationship. It's a complete wonder that Julia was never physically abused by these horrible men, although she was certainly groomed by them on a mental and emotional level. Mummy, on the other hand, never protected her, often left her home alone (this is a girl under the age of 13) and accused her of trying to take her men from her.

Finally Julia grows up and leaves home (with a smoking habit thanks to Mummy allowing it) and then ends up in a messy, awful situation which Mummy blames her for, often publicly. No one ever seems to notice that this poor child is being treated badly by her totally screwed up parents. One friend, a woman who helped look after Julia when her parents went out, blames her for it. I found this lack of compassion unbelievable.

Somehow Julia survives her parents and manages to understand them and herself enough to live a relatively normal life.

It's a bloody miracle.

They don't deserve such a humane daughter.

I thoroughly recommend the book because it's well written - very well written - fascinating, and so balanced. I know Julia had access to her parents writing, so some of the marvellous writing may be able to be attributed to the two of them, but she manages to rise above both parents on a psychological way. She's certainly a better writer than her father (the poetry has dated).

However, this is a difficult book because Julia is so relentlessly abused by her awful parents.

Gird your loins.

Eslin Hansma says

Boring

Aberlowitz says

Sorry guys- I couldn't read this. Who is she? Who cares?

Lit Folio says

This is a read for those who come from emotional dysfunction. And after reading substantive reviews of this strange memoir, I simply had to give it a read for myself. What's so striking about Blackburn's work here is her downright, unabashed honesty. Dad is a monster, alright, but his crazy drunken antics were somehow more acceptable than her mother's odd, boundary violations of an all too prurient interest in her budding daughter's private sexual coming of age. This is a torture Blackburn takes us through, interspersed with passages on accounts she made some thirty years forward as this very same mother lay dying.

Of course, all this makes for an exceptional memoir. One I can be thankful for in portraying complex parents one still must come to terms with long after both have departed this world.

Powerful reading ranked highly on my list of must-reads. Should be better known (I think of the mega-hit, THE GLASS CASTLE, which is page-turning reading, but not nearly as well written and reflective as

Blackburn's.)

Recommend--especially if you've experienced, first-hand, the pain of difficult parents.

Deja says

One of the best memoirs I've read recently. Pretty deeply depressing, with this gorgeous lacey hope weaved through.

It's written by Thomas Blackburn's (a poet's) daughter, and her home life was insanely rough. Just insane, really. In the book she reconstructs it through letters and journals and detailed memories. Clean, tight, beautiful prose.

She ends each volatile chapter with a short excerpt from a journal or fax exchange from much later, in 1999, when her mother is dying and their relationship, in the face of death, heals and smooths and becomes beautiful. A structural stroke of genius to have those ending passages in each chapter. It's almost like each psychological wound is healed as soon as it arrives on the page.

Emi Bevacqua says

I devoured this brutally honest story written by daughter Julia who is all but destroyed by her narcissistic parents Alcoholic Tom and Sex-Addicted Rosalie, because despite her being tainted and abused and miserable, Julia makes it. She doesn't just survive her childhood, she makes peace with it, she makes amends and facilitates her mom making amends too, and not only that but she is fully functional (such a great writer!) and best of all she is reconciled with her one true love. And this is non-fiction!!!

This beautiful book is filled with photos and diary entries, and my only criticism is that the cover art (though beautiful and aptly evocative, should have a more appropriate nose on it).

Gerard De bruin says

Prachtig geschreven biografie van een ongewoon en disfunctioneel gezin. Met twee ouders met een zo mogelijk nog 'disfunctionelere' achtergrond.

Jenny Yates says

This honest and thoughtful memoir is about being raised with tempestuous artistic parents. The author's father is a fairly famous British poet, and her mother a painter.

Her father was also an alcoholic, and prone to violent rages, although they were always directed towards her mother, never towards her. What this meant is that Julia Blackburn had to take on the role of her mother's protector.

However, her mother was even more challenging. A vibrant and passionate woman, she became more and more jealous of her daughter as she got older. After her parents divorced, her mother took in lodgers, and mostly slept with them, while frequently accusing her daughter of trying to seduce them.

Finally, it happened. Blackburn slept with one of her mother's boyfriends, and they moved in together. The first triangle of the book is Blackburn and her two parents, literally at each other's throats. The second triangle consists of Julia Blackburn, her mother, and Geoffrey, the man who was lovers with both of them. It's a tense situation, and it's Geoffrey who actually ends up in worst shape.

Blackburn takes pains to recreate the past from letters and journal entries as well as her memory, and she is clear and unsentimental as she describes the way things unfolded. And this narrative is juxtaposed with letters written much later. These letters describe the changes in their relationship at the end of her mother's life, when she was dying of cancer. So we follow these two story lines simultaneously, and the gentler trajectory of the second story helps the reader cope with the careless cruelty of the earlier years.

Kathleen says

This is a book about emotional child abuse. Talk about never having a childhood! Julia intersperses each chapter in this memoir with italicized letters and journal entries about her dying mother. The book also has many fascinating black and white photographs. To me it seems inconceivable that she could possibly have anything to do with her mother after suffering so much emotional abuse, lack of boundaries, and inappropriate behavior during her childhood. With a nymphomaniac mother and a drug addicted father who were an artist and poet, she received all sorts of mixed messages. Of course her parents were who they were, due to their own horrible childhoods. I found it interesting that her mother, but not her father frightened her. Still, the human spirit is inextinguishable and forgiving. Julia is truly amazing. How on earth did she get to be a writer?? I was especially interested in this book, since it was "the three of us" with my parents and me as well.

Debbie says

I read it quickly but it felt like a toxic read. I felt a lot for Julia Blackburn and it put my own disturbed parents into perspective, but it left me feeling disturbed. How do children survive such parenting in one piece?

RUTH GUTHRIE says

A very moving and well-constructed memoir. I have found myself coming back to incidents and vignettes that Julia describes again and again. There was a timelessness about the story even though I'm aware it's happening in the 70's, 80's and 90's, and yet also an immediacy about the experiences. A tantalizing tale

Ruth Brumby says

When I look back to times past in my life, I feel I've been quite different people; Julia Blackburn seems to remember more and see a clearer development, which I found odd. It may be partly because she kept notebooks and thought more about selfhood. Her story is fascinating, but I was also puzzled by the way she does not seem to have a distanced perspective on the past from her new position; it's more as if she relives it. This makes some of the parts about the sixties feel strangely dated. In a way she seems to write for herself; I'm not sure what she expected a reader to make of her lack of anger towards her father or of her anger towards her mother. I found it quite distressing in parts. It's also strange to me how she didn't seem to worry about where money would come from.

Iva says

An only child of a crazy alcoholic poet father and a sex maniac mother, Blackburn, a wonderful writer of books on the most varied topics, appears to have come out whole in spite of a family that could not be invented. Proof is having wonderful family photos sprinkled throughout. For those who can't get enough of dysfunctional memoirs. (They are never-ending and I aim to read them all!)

Mousy Brown says

A disturbing read...definitely had all my child protection radar buzzing...but written in an engaging and captivating way and impossible to put down. Shows how much things have changed!
