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With deadpan humor and obvious affection, *Five-Finger Discount* recounts the story of an unforgettable New Jersey family of swindlers, bookies, embezzlers, and mobster-wannabes. In the memoir Mary Karr calls “a page-turner,” Helene Stapinski ingeniously weaves the checkered history of her hometown of Jersey City—a place known for its political corruption and industrial blight—with the tales that have swirled around her relatives for decades. Navigating a childhood of toxic waste and tough love, Stapinski tells an extraordinary tale at once heartbreaking and hysterically funny.

Five-Finger Discount: A Crooked Family History Details

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David Ward says

Five-Finger Discount: A Crooked Family History by Helene Stapinski (Random House 2001) (Biography). This is a cleverly-written account of the author's extended and extensive family of origin. Her forebears, principally Polish, got off the ship at Ellis Island but never made it past Jersey City, New Jersey. This account is filled with rollicking tales of low-level criminal activity, of growing up poor without ever being aware of it, and of ward-level big-city local politics. Even when recounting sad anecdotes, author Helene Stapinski always manages to bring good humor and a positive outlook to the telling. My rating: 7/10, finished 6/20/16.

Kate says

Helene Stapinski has *some* family -- seriously, it was a rare relative who didn't steal or commit worse crimes, although the author adopts a light tone at time, discussing the lobster tails and cakes her father brought home for dinner. They "fell off the truck." Much of this memoir takes place in the 1960s and 1970s, but it feels older, like a noir movie. The material is great, as Stapinski uses her family's stories to illustrate the overall corruption of Jersey City. At times, the book is heartbreaking. My only complaint is that it is a bit too episodic. But as memoirs go, this one is a standout -- particularly because the author is relatively young.

Scott Grossman says

An oxcart of sentimentality yoked by 1,000 stories of stale family gossip. People from Joisey love it. The sane world should take a pass on this "National Bestseller" of nonsesne. Clearly, this book was published because she's in NYC and know to the publishing industry. There's little other reason.

The author makes big promises, in her "crooked" subtitle. And a bigger one in her opening line, referencing the night her "grandfather tried to kill us." We soon find out grandpa was a petty low-life who liked to shoot his mouth off at the dive bar downstairs. One day he upped the ante by bringing a handgun into the place and threatening violonce against the family. The cops had disarmed and arrested him the minute he stepped outside. Yet every twenty or thirty pages she cannot help herself but to envoke the trauma of how grandpa "tried to kill her." In his drunken haze of resentment he might've had an intent but in the author's own words he's proven himself much too sloppy to attempt it. It's a needless overstatement that strains her credibility and sets the reader up for further let-downs.

The bigger strain on her credibility is the promise of the Crooked Family History. Sounds juicy, right? Maybe a mobster? A hitman? An enterprising criminal of note? We soon learn the apple falls not far from the tree. They're all unremarkable scum, two-bit low-lives, chain snatchers, numbers runners, burglars and thugs. They're disorganized grifters playing short cons. They're the guy's who'll steal anything that's been laying around too long. Essentially, they're ambitionless morons who lack the planning to carry out crimes worth committing. The author does go into great detail about those types of crimes, committed by the city's elected officials.

What pisses me off about this book is it doesn't teach anything new. It simply reinforces all the stereotypes we believe about New Jersey and its people. Every. Single. One. As an ethnographic of Jersey City it serves only to make the reader wonder why they're all so clueless and pathetic. Even the "good guys" in her book suffer the toxic effects of Jersey's scumminess. The author opines people stay (like herself for 27 ugly years) because Jersey's family and you can't change your family.

The hell you can't, miss unimaginative. This country is full of stories of individuals pulling up stakes and moving North to Chicago or West to California. Unencumbered by the past, people reinvent themselves, change their names and begin again. Or, you stick around and lament what a dipshit everyone around you is, and has always been. The author didn't ended up crooked like the rest. But daring not to become another shiftless, low-rent hoodlum isn't exactly worthy of writing a book. A book that doesn't even begin to get interesting until page 188. Faggidaboutit.

Kristen says

I thought that the narration was confused--at times it seems to be a history of the politics and corruption of Jersey City, then it would go into personal family history, and then especially towards the end how embarrassing it was to have so many criminals in the family once it was the author's peers instead of relatives who were old or long-dead. Any one of these narratives would have been interesting, but it felt very spotty as is.

Nena says

Having grown up in Hudson County just one town north, I know very well the kind of corruption that went on in Jersey City. We Hudson County natives are so used to it, nothing shocks us.

I found her story intriguing and although I do not recall seeing her by-line, I am certain I must have read many of her news articles in the Jersey Journal. (My family bought two newspapers every day - The Hudson Dispatch and the New York Daily News; the Dispatch covered my towns Weehawken, Union City, Hoboken, West New York and North Bergen more than the Jersey Journal which covered more of the Jersey City and Bayonne goings-on. The New York Daily News we bought to keep up with the national news, for the numbers, the racetrack results and because it ran my favorite journalist's column Jimmy Breslin. We bought the Jersey Journal very rarely. We also pronounced Tonnelle Avenue as "tun-ah-lee" not "tun-lee" as this roadway passed through my town as well although I avoided it at all costs).

I recognized almost every street and building that she mentions in her book and although I did not personally know the people she spoke of, I knew OF them because they made headlines all the time. In fact, my late mother worked as a labor and delivery nurse at Margaret Hague for years so I was very familiar with these names.

I thought the book was very well written and although there were just a handful of times I became confused over which family member was which, I thought the anecdotes were interesting to the point where I had a hard time putting the book down.

When I read a book and have that recognition of names or places, it makes the book that much more fascinating and hard to stop thinking about long after I am finished reading. There are two other books that I can recall having the same impact on me; Blind Faith by Joe McGinness and Spiked Snowballs and Flaming

Cats by John Daly. Both of these books took place in my hometowns, Union City where I grew up and Toms River the town just south of where I live now and where my family owned a summer home.

I have to give this author credit because I have very "colorful" relatives too but I would never pick up pen to paper to publish a book talking about them. Mainly because it borders on family disloyalty and because these are not my stories to tell. She has a lot of guts writing this book!

I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the history of Hudson County and particularly Jersey City and/or who loves anecdotal memoirs. I know I do!

Jane Goldberg says

This book is a National Bestseller. Why? I have no idea. I ordered it because it is a first person account of a woman's life growing up in Jersey City, New Jersey. The fact it is a National Bestseller was NOT the reason I wanted to read it; I'm from NJ and THAT was the reason I wanted to read it.

Terribly disappointed. Most of the book reads just like a grocery shopping list. Just a recitation of her and her family's life events, devoid of any emotion. My grocery list has more emotion than this book. She doesn't reveal her feelings, anywhere. Just a monotone recitation of events. How it became a bestseller is beyond me.

Rick says

Helene Stapinski definitely comes from a colorful Jersey City family. This book describes some of those characters---including her Grandpa, probably the one member of the family that could be described as truly evil, after he tries to kill his daughter and grandchildren. Stapinski eventually is able to grow up and escape Jersey City and "that life" by becoming a journalist. An ok story, though not a "must read". It was ok if you like stories about goofy, dysfunctional families.

MaryBeth says

Take a little Frank McCourt, shake on some Cheryl Strayed, add a dollop of Jimmy Breslin plus plenty of Helene Stapinski's own street wise voice and you get a taste of this funny, troubling take on one family's rise and fall in Jersey City. Only bone to pick: keeping the myriad characters straight over the many years was tough. But as a newcomer to JC, I learned so much.

Adrian says

Provides a lot of good information about the politics of New Jersey in particular about Jersey City. Run by tyrannical Frank Hague for thirty years (1917-1947) the tie between local politics and the mob becomes clear. Author also details the history of her family a good portion of whom were on the take in one way or another. Her grandfather, Beansie, was a Frank Hague type maintaining control through intimidation. She shows how corruption can start small but really is very similar to political corruption. Lays bare her own wrongdoing and that of near family members which couldn't have been easy. If there is such a thing as

criminal culture then this book offers a view of how it develops and perpetuates.

Robin Fichtelberg says

It was a good premise and she writes well, but she was not a criminal. I thought there would be something juicy. Boring!! Just a memoir but not very interesting. You think she's leading up to something with her family history and she's just a regular person. Which is good, but doesn't make for an interesting book.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

'I stole. But in a socially acceptable way.'

This interesting memoir by Helene Stapinski is her account of what it was like to grow up in Jersey City during the 1970s and 1980s. If Jersey City was well known for corruption during this period, then many members of Helene Stapinski's family would have felt right at home.

Ms Stapinski's family had its share of interesting characters, as well as its share of tragedy. Her story, including a family legacy of crime, is recounted with a mixture of affection and humour. Her grandfather ('Beansie') threatened to kill her family when she was only five years old, while her father fed his family (at least in part) using food stolen from the cold storage company where he worked. Other relatives and friends kept her family supplied with free toothpaste and soap from the nearby Colgate factory. Another family member was active in the New Jersey political machine, while an aunt brought home books (stuffed in her girdle) from a local bookbinding firm.

According to Ms Stapinski: 'Swag wasn't the same thing as out-and-out stealing. It was an unwritten rule in Jersey City -- and all of Hudson County -- that you could take as much merchandise as you could carry from your job. The politicians skimmed off the top, so why shouldn't the little people?'

This is not simply a recounting of a tough childhood, although it certainly contains those elements. I found it hard to get behind the descriptions of events and incidents to appreciate the people involved. Certainly, it is a story of people adapting – in both the best and the worst possible ways – to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

I found the book interesting reading: the story of Ms Stapinski's family woven around a story of New Jersey. Still, I think that Ms Stapinski's story is far from complete – she can only have been around 37 years of age when this memoir was published.

'.. so close yet so far from wondrous New York City.'

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Steven says

Great title. Some excellent material, but it never quite paid off the way I hoped it might. Of course, it's 'true,' so there's that. But the jacket includes so many rave reviews that they oversell the book. The comparison to

Angela's Ashes was impossible for this book to survive.

Knowing little about Jersey City, I enjoyed the memoir on several levels. The best material may be the talk of swag and the frank stories about corrupt politicians. (Wow.) No wonder the author grew up a cynic.

But the reviewer just did this book damage by saying the author does for Jersey City what McCourt does for Limerick, Ireland. This is a good book. It is not a great book--but it is good enough for what it is. And there will always be room in the world for good books. Publishers should not give cover space/jacket space to reviewers that spoil books with unrealistic expectations.

Lindsay Gallagher says

Loved this book! Incredible story and wonderful characters that come to life--and what a life it was! Fantastic memoir about Jersey City family. Great read.

Amelia L says

The stories in this book are entertaining but as a memoir and family history it's hard to follow. I became confused over the characters and the time line.

Ken French says

This is my pet peeve book. I grew up in Jersey City around the same time as the author (full disclosure: she did research at the library I was working in at the time and even thanks me in the acknowledgements). My family was not as colorful as hers, I have to say. She tells a good story, but I bristled when she said that her father was the one honest member of the family, but that he took home stolen goods occasionally, since apparently everyone in Jersey City did that. Well, my Dad was a blue-collar worker in JC at that time and he would have died before taking anything that was stolen. To me, this spoke of her myopic view of the city and the times. If it didn't happen outside of her world, then it's ignored. The whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth.
