



The Dead Inside

Cyndy Drew Etlar

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For readers of *Girl Interrupted* and *Tweak*, Cyndy Etler's gripping memoir gives readers a glimpse into the harrowing reality of her sixteen months in the notorious "tough love" program the ACLU called "a concentration camp for throwaway kids."

I never was a badass. Or a slut, a junkie, a stoner, like they told me I was. I was just a kid looking for something good, something that felt like love. I was a wannabe in a Levi's jean jacket. Anybody could see that. Except my mother. And the professionals at Straight.

From the outside, Straight Inc. was a drug rehab. But on the inside it was...well, it was something else.

All Cyndy wanted was to be loved and accepted. By age fourteen, she had escaped from her violent home, only to be reported as a runaway and sent to a "drug rehabilitation" facility that changed her world.

To the public, Straight Inc. was a place of recovery. But behind closed doors, the program used bizarre and intimidating methods to "treat" its patients. In her raw and fearless memoir, Cyndy Etler recounts her sixteen months in the living nightmare that Straight Inc. considered "healing."

The Dead Inside Details

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From Reader Review The Dead Inside for online ebook

Ginger McNulty says

I read an earlier edition under the title Straightling. As a program survivor myself, I can tell you that this book was really hard for me to read. Cyndy Etlar tells the tale so vividly and well. It brought back some deeply buried, troubling memories along with a sense of relief. Finally! Our story is getting out there. I can't wait to read the 2nd edition. I've heard there may be a prequel in the works too.

Christine Flannery says

For me, the worst, most terrifying part of being in Straight Inc. was, as Cyndy called it...the beast (group). Etlar nails it in her description. The beast (group) was an instrument of verbal, emotional and psychological abuse. "Positive Peer Pressure" as Straight called it, was actually untrained teenagers attacking, bullying, insulting, belittling, humiliating, screaming, yelling, cursing at and tearing down the victim over and over until the kid was completely destroyed. Kids hurting kids. At any moment, you could be the next target, the one who was viciously ripped to shreds, to the point you would say or do anything to make it stop. And the only way to make it stop, was to "get honest" (real or false confessions), participate in the abuse, "apply your program" and become a compliant robot, a "happy Straightling."

The environment of terror and fear never let up. For me personally, I was terrified the entire time I was in Straight Inc., all 15.5 months and during my "aftercare." As a result, I have PTSD. I'm not the only one either. Many, many Straight survivors have PTSD because of Straight. Some survivors even committed suicide because of Straight/PTSD. Many survivors, including myself, believe the type of PTSD we have is actually C-PTSD, Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I know many people who read this book never heard of Straight Inc. I keep hearing it's hard to read. Please, read it anyway. Take this book seriously because kids are STILL being subjected to abusive "troubled teen programs." And, like Straight survivors, some survivors of other programs are also walking away with PTSD because of the "treatment" they received.

I also wrote a review for this book in 2012 when it was self published as "Straightling." I want to include it in this review (I hope that's ok). Here is what I wrote then:

As difficult as it may be for someone to believe Etlar's harrowing tale of survival in Straight, Inc., every word Etlar wrote about Straight Inc.'s daily abuses is completely true. "Straightling" takes you on the darkest journey through hell where every freedom imaginable is stolen from a child by Straight, Inc.: freedom to move about a room unrestrained, gone; freedom to speak to whomever you chose, gone; freedom to use a bathroom alone, gone; freedom to choose one's own friends, gone; freedom to dress as one wishes, gone; and worst of all, freedom to think for oneself gone; freedom to have one's own identity, gone. "Straightling" illustrates the horror and pain of being systematically tore down until there is nothing left except a shell recreated in Straight Inc.'s image. "Straightling" sounds a loud warning of the dangers caused by not listening to a child, warns of the destruction caused by allowing broken children to have power over other broken children, and warns that a trail of human wreckage can be caused by zealots with seemingly good intentions. "Straightling" is a must read for all parents and for all professionals who work with "troubled teens." Straight, Inc., under that name, is closed now, but other abusive private programs still exist to this day. Cyndy is a gifted writer and courageous woman. From the bottom of my heart, thank you Cyndy for writing such a powerful and moving memoir.

Mischenko says

To learn more about Straight, see the Q&A with the author, and meet another Straight Survivor, please visit www.readrantrockandroll.com

This review may contain some spoilers...

The Dead Inside is a compelling memoir written by the author Cyndy Drew Etlar. Cyndy was a troubled teen in the 80's who had some experiences that aren't all that uncommon. She was making wrong choices while trying to find her place in the world. She spends some of her time smoking weed and drinking alcohol with her friends, until she finally runs away from home because she just can't take her family anymore, especially her step-dad, Jacque. There were things going on in that house that no child should ever have to succumb to. After making the decision to enter Foster Care, Cyndy finally has some peace. She's able to still see her friends, have a safe environment and doesn't have to deal with the turmoil from home. It's not long after that, at the age of 14, her mother decides to throw her into a drug rehabilitation for throwaway kids who are deemed out of control. Cyndy is told that she is under evaluation for three days and she's counting down the minutes to when she can leave and she'll do whatever it takes, including lying. Straight, Inc. will now be Cyndy's home for 16 months.

The story itself is unbelievable. I had a very hard time reading parts of the book that describe the physical and mental abuse these kids are exposed to in this program. They are basically in this building with a load of other drug users who have been sent there for the same reason and are used against each other. I can't believe that it went on for so long and these kids had to endure it. They were locked down and not allowed to have any interaction with the outside world for a very long time. It's violent and almost seems like torture at times. As I continued reading, I couldn't wait to find out what was going to happen to Cyndy. Would she ever escape? Will her mother ever realize her and her husband are the majority of the problems here? Will Cyndy be able to endure this treatment without losing it and causing herself to be set back?

The book is written very well and it doesn't sound like there are many details spared. I liked the music references. I did wonder throughout the story just exactly how bad was Cyndy as a teen? It seemed like all of her problems were stemming from her treatment at home and the lack of love from her mother. I was very happy that there was an epilogue included in the back which explains these programs and how they were eventually shut down, but at the same time shocked at how, in a way, they worked. The kids were basically brainwashed.

This is NOT an easy read or for the faint of heart. It's extremely revealing, raw and horrifying at times and I wanted to get up and do something about it. I wanted to help Cyndy. It's no surprise that she ended up in the career she has chosen and I commend her for her bravery in taking a very negative human experience and turning it into a lifetime career in helping others.

If you don't feel like visiting my blog, you can see videos online that show what it was like inside these institutions. Here's one. There are so many available and I do have more on my blog.

Check out a short video about the movie "Over the GW"

Thanks to Netgalley and the author for sharing this book with me in exchange for an honest review.

4****

Brittini (The Long Island Radium) says

As a teenager, Cyndy Drew Etler lived in an abusive home. Her stepfather was an alcoholic who attacked her physically and sexually with no fight from Cyndy's mother. Cyndy runs away often to avoid being near her stepfather when he was drunk and looks to spend the weekends with her friend who has a second home in another neighborhood. Cyndy is looking for approval in this gang of kids and that leads her to some unsettling situations for a girl of her age. Like many other teenagers, Cyndy experiments with smoking weed and drinking but she has not fully descended into drug and alcohol use as an escape from her home life. Around this time her mom ships her off to Straight, Inc. Straight was a "drug rehabilitation" facility for troubled youth. However, Cyndy was far from a druggie or problem kid – same as most of the kids at Straight. What she needed was for someone to stand up for her and protect her from her stepfather. I am truly shocked that Straight, Inc. existed and was able to get away with their negligent, abusive treatment of youths. Cyndy was at Straight for several years and completely brainwashed into their thinking. Although we see her get reintroduced back into her old HS, we do not get a great sense of what happens "next" for her and how far reaching Straight's impact will be on her life. From what I have read there will be a sequel to this memoir and I am truly looking forward to it. It's important to continue to shed light on facilities like this and the abuse inflicted on the unwilling children.

Thanks to Net Galley for an ARC in exchange for my honest review

Mika Reyes says

I am in no position to rate someone's life so this will be a rate-free review.

To be honest, I do not know how I'd be reviewing this one because it is a memoir. I cannot judge the characters, plot or setting. Those aspects were not invented or carefully weaved and structured in the mind of the storyteller to come up with a great plot and narrative to tell.

These accounts are memories of a real, living person. This story happened in real life, specifically to this person named Cyndy.

Cyndy Drew Etler didn't have an easy childhood. She tried everything she could to look cool and to fit in: she wore pants (since according to her, the type of pants you wear determines whether you're one of the cool kids or not), smoked pot with her friends, pretended to be asleep when someone tried to molest her and so on and so forth. Approval was so important for her and that was the thing she had a hard time getting. She ran away from her mom because she hated her stepfather, slept in the houses of her friends while she's trying to be gone and away and ended up in a warehouse called Straight Inc. where chaos continued and intensified.

This book feels like a Lana del Rey or a Ginger Bronson song. It also reminded me of some fiction books I've read before. This, for me, is a good mix of *Girl Interrupted*, *The Fault in Our Stars* and *The Bell Jar*.

I think what I loved the most about this book is the writing style. I love how poetic this book is. The metaphors stated here were beautifully painted in my mind as I read them. The mention of some old music is amazing too. (*Shine On You Crazy Diamond* and *The Wall* by Floyd are my favorites.) While reading this book, I felt like I was either watching a sad 90's movie or listening to a friend talk. It was an easy read but the contents are not easy on my eyes and my heart. And that's okay. I think I can take that.

Overall, I like this memoir. I like the courage that Cyndy displayed both on what happened to her and in writing this story, her story. Nothing like this happened to me— I have never run away from home, been to a rehab center and all that— but I can sympathize with her. I'm really glad that what happened to her in the past didn't totally drag her down but instead, made her a better person and a stronger woman: The woman she's always made to become.

Laura says

I was very drawn to this book because I had a similar experience in my teens. Fortunately, my parents enrolled me into an outdoor program. It ended up being the opposite of Etler's experience. Hiking in the Northwest mountains empowered me and I gained many life skills. (Such as, starting a fire with flint and steel, ha! I haven't had the opportunity to use that skill as of yet. But if I am ever in the woods and need to start a fire...)

When I found out that I was going outward bound, I thought it was a death sentence. I truly believed my parents were sending me off to get eaten by a bear or fall off a cliff. Or possibly starve. I begged. I pleaded. I cried. In desperate hope that my parents would change their minds and take me home. They didn't. Enough about me.

Etler writes about possibly the worst experience in her life. She didn't use a victims tone or tell the story to make me feel sorry for her. Although, I did feel her pain and abandonment (by her mother). She clearly details the fear of all the teens at Straight, Inc. It was a terrifying experience and they couldn't trust anyone, not even each other. One of the girls Etler wrote about was on her last step and then a Straightling had a "concern" which sent the girl back to step one. She couldn't even defend herself.

What's even more frightening is that the U. S. government endorsed/recommended the Straight organization as a safe and helpful place for teens.

This is an eye opening book for anyone.

Arousa says

I didn't feel the need to rate this because this was someone's personal life and I don't think that it should be rated by a scale.

I've never, ever read a memoir before and I have no idea why I requested to read The Dead Inside (thank you NetGalley & publishers!) but I am thankful that I had a chance to read it. I have never experienced what this author went through and it was really, really difficult to read. It was...horror. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been to bare her soul out for the world to see.

This girl, who wanted to fit in with the world and feel like she belonged, a girl with a harsh life, and sent to a place where she has no business being, made my heart hurt. At times, I felt like it wasn't even real life but repeatedly I was reminded that it was. That this actually happened to someone and many others.

I'm proud of how far this author has come.

Leilani says

My heart goes out to Cyndy. What a brave soul to have to endure endless evils that keep coming her way.

Perverter, alcoholic stepfather, a mother who sees, but chooses not to help, and this terrifying, cult like institution, Straight.

Cyndy found strength to survive through it all though.

Throughout the book, I kept screaming, "RUN! RUN!" Because Straight CLEARLY is a dangerous place to be. It somewhat reminded me of the Stanford Prison Experiment.

Thank you, Cyndy, for sharing your brave, and terrifying experience with us. It's shocking to know that places like this truly do exist.

Sandy says

4.5 stars

Oh, to be "cool." This novel was one of those books that after I read it, I stopped and reflected about what actually I had just read. I thought there were moments inside this novel that had excellent issues to ponder and the novel being a memoir made it hit home even harder. It wasn't that Cyndy was a bad kid, she had just wanted to be with the cool kids and get away from her home life. She experimented with drugs just a few times to look "cool" and after reading the novel, I thought what could she have done differently because what she did now would change her life forever.

Cyndy thought she had finally become someone as she was now "cool" but this "coolness" came at a cost. No longer listening to her mother, her mother had her arrested and foster care became her new home. She loved it here, she had rules but no one touched her and she was accountable for herself. Her time was up and her mother found her a new place, Straight, Inc. To me, it felt like a cult, the children all behaving in automation. This drug rehab center for teens was in a warehouse, where it was worse than boot camp, where the teens lie just to get a ticket out. With honest accounts, Cyndy tells her story of being a straightling. I listened intently as she told her story, absorbed as she lives her days out in the straightling facility. She doesn't feel she belongs there but she has no choice now, she crossed the line. I had a hard time sitting still at the meetings, her mother gathering the support of the others around her, she played the victim well. Her child, Cyndy carrying the weight of her childhood, feeling alone in the sea of others around her. Did it really need to come to this? When did it all go wrong? She was so desperate to fit in, the ramifications of her actions she didn't see coming and what other choices could she have made? This was an excellent novel and a hard one to read thinking that this was a true story.

I received a copy of this novel from NetGalley and Sourcebook Fire in exchange for an honest review,

Lorca Damon says

I had the honor of reading an ARC of Straightling and it was an amazing read. I can't put into words the experience of reading this little girl's nightmare. On the one hand, you want to close the book and pretend these things don't actually happen to children, but on the other hand you had to finish it because you have to know that she survives her nearly two-year ordeal.

Beyond the compelling story, Etler is simply a brilliant writer. Even when describing scenes that are so foreign to me as someone who did not endure a forced sham of a rehab facility and imprisonment, her

descriptions are so vivid that there was nothing left for me to misinterpret or be confused by.

Anyone who was moved by Dave Peltzer's memoir series, *A Child Called It*, will be gripped by *Straightling* and held hostage in the child's story. I truly hope there's a sequel, because the world needs to know how this abused child grew into such a capable adult.

Mandy Peterson says

What makes this book so horrifyingly gripping is that it is real. A true story. Starting out in the 1980s, 13-year-old Cyndy had casually tried marijuana and alcohol as a way to cope with her disgusting step-father and her turn-the-other-cheek mother. While Cyndy's friends were more into drugs and alcohol, she preferred their company and the loyalty she received when she made the choice to run away from her destructive home life. Unwilling to admit what was really going on, her parents told Cyndy that she was being sent to boarding school and dump her off to Straight, Inc - a place that 'fixes' troubled teens by making them admit to things they never did, brainwashing them, treating them like sub-humans, and shaming them for sport.

My heart and stomach sank multiple times as I read Cyndy's account, thinking to myself that there is no way places like this could have existed in the United States. But Cyndy provides a full appendix of proof of the existence, past, and current state of Straight, Inc and all of its incarnations. A simple online search yields thousands of results to confirm her story.

Written in a totally relatable narrative, I was torn between not being able to put it down and having to for my own sanity.

Leaving me raw after reading, this book is a must read for teachers, parents, students, and any adult who deals with teens on a regular basis. The resounding theme is that all teens want is love and acceptance - and they will do just about anything to get it.

JenacideByBibliophile says

Disclaimer: This book was sent to me by the publisher, Sourcebooks Fire, via NetGalley for an honest review.

Opinion:

WOW.

When I say WOW, I mean...Holy S*** WOW.

I have to say guys, I wasn't expecting this story to turn out like that at all. A few months ago I was looking through the new books on Netgalley, found this story and immediately requested it. I had heard about these types of camps and institutions years ago, but I have never looked into them that deeply. This story follows Cyndy Etler as she recounts her adolescence and her time in a "tough love" style rehabilitation camp.

At the young age of fourteen, Cyndy is thrown into a boarding school by her mother, or so she thinks. Cyndy quickly realizes that her new home is called Straight Inc., and it is actually a drug rehabilitation center for youths. From her first moments stepping inside Straight, Cyndy begins to realize that the methods used in the

facility are far from normal. From being dragged down hallways by her pant loops, group meetings where teenagers wave their arms around erratically chanting, and frightening moments of being broken down by her peers...Cyndy has to decide how she is going to survive in this program.

So let's first begin with how SERIOUSLY BIZARRE these programs are. Cyndy explains the more than frightening and psychologically damaging rules and things that went on at Straight, and I am still in shock. Kids are lead around by the back of their pants, forced to believe they have drug problems even if they don't, screamed at and put down by their peers, and encouraged to report each other in order to get ahead in the program. The rules that the program instills is even more absurd. If you lean on the back of your chair in group, a peer will roughly drag their first down your spine to remind you to keep your back straight. As a newcomer, Cyndy wasn't allowed to look or speak to any boys, and she was monitored at all times...even in the bathroom.

I think the oddest aspect of this program for me was what they called "motivating". "Motivating" entails all these kids to be sitting in plastic chairs, boys and girls separated on either side of the room. Basically what happens is they flail their arms around above their heads, jerking and screaming about. Cyndy describes this process as a way to motivate each other to want to share your experiences, but admits that many of the kids "motivate" so hard so that they won't be called on. Once called on, the kids are expected to stand up and admit a story from their past...but in most cases these kids are forced to make something up in order to impress the staff. If you mess up or do something wrong, you are confronted. This is where a peer may run up to you and start screaming in your face, or even psychically harm you.

The list truly goes on and on with all of the strange things these kids were forced to do, and from the outside this program made it look like they were only using tough love and peer pressure techniques to get these kids off drugs (see video on my blog post). Cyndy expresses that it took her years to get "back to normal" after all of the psychological abuse and brainwashing that she went through at Straight. She wrote her story in a way that it felt like the reader was actually with her at fourteen, listening to her describe the horrors that became her life. Her writing style becomes a little confusing when she starts to describe "THE BEAST" or her group when she is first introduced to the "motivating" technique. It got me a little jumbled up, but as I continued to read her writing started to feel like a horrifically beautiful style of poetry which I really began to enjoy.

Honestly, EVERYONE needs to read this. For parents who are thinking of giving this to their kids to read, please keep in mind that there is a bit of sexual abuse that happens in the beginning of the story. That aside, this is a tale that anyone would be enthralled by. As soon as I finished this book I immediately started researching Straight Inc. and other programs like it. This is a disturbing story that will make your heart droop, but it is a MUST read! GO GET THIS!! You will not be disappointed.

For more information and personal stories on Straight Inc., check out <http://survivingstraightinc.com/>

To see more reviews, head over to my blog: Jenacidebybibliophile.wordpress.com

Dannii Elle says

I received this in exchange for an honest review from NetGalley. Thank you to the author, Cyndy Drew Etlar, and the publisher, Sourcebooks Fire, for this opportunity.

This is a memoir chronicling Cyndy's teenage years. She wasn't a bad kid and she wasn't a perfect kid, she was just an average one. She struggled to belong in her own skin and to find her own crowd. Every bad

decision she ever made was one calculated to allow her to fit in. But what Cyndy soon realised was that every one of these decisions came at a price. Was she often misguided? Yes. Did she deserve the way her life panned out? Definitely not.

Cyndy's fractured home life was far from a happy one, but things soon got worse for her when her family ship her to Straight Inc. It was quite clear that she doesn't belong in this drug rehabilitation centre and all this lost, little girl really needed was someone to love and protect her. Instead, however, she received nothing but abuse and neglect.

Cyndy's tragic experiences were relayed to the reader with such raw emotion, that it was hard not to get sucked into this painful world. It was sickeningly honest and shockingly bleak and penetrating: painful but necessary, is how I would describe this book.

It seems unfair to applaud a book for its honesty and yet slate it for the same thing in the next breath. However, I found this just far too painful to process. It was a read that shed light on a corruptness that lies inside of humanity, but also one that affected me too deeply for me to take away from this what I believe I was supposed to.

Hans Watts says

Think you know anything about the "troubled teen industry" and drug treatment facilities?

This story will take you into the bowels of one of the most destructive (and yet "successful") centers the US has ever had- and it was supported by Nancy Reagan and her "Just Say No" campaign.

Had this story seen the light of day 30+ years ago, who knows if anyone would have listened. I hope you're listening now.

Be sure to read it with an open mind- willing to accept that there are NO exaggerations in this book. Then, when you're finished, read the epilogue and try to not have your stomach turn in knots for the thousands who, like Etler and myself, were actually there and are still here.

What happened was enough to drive many people beyond the limits of what they were capable of living with and now they are no longer with us. Read it for them, but read it for yourself too.

And then, if you have children (especially "difficult" ones), hug them a little tighter and try to remember when you were going through what they are. And, for GOD's sake, do your research before you "quick fix" them.

Lexxie (un)Conventional Bookworms says

The Dead Inside brought tears to my eyes more than once. I find it so hard to think that parents believe their spouses over their children. That they won't give their own children a safe place to stay. And that they willingly send their children to places like Straight Inc.
