



Estranged: Leaving Family and Finding Home

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A powerful, haunting memoir about one woman's childhood of abuse and her harrowing decision to leave it all behind that redefines our understanding of estrangement and the ability to triumph over adversity.

To outsiders, Jessica Berger Gross's childhood—growing up in a “nice” Jewish family in middle class Long Island—seemed as wholesomely American as any other. But behind closed doors, Jessica suffered years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her father, whose mood would veer unexpectedly from loving to violent.

At the age of twenty-eight, still reeling from the trauma but emotionally dependent on her dysfunctional family, Jessica made the anguished decision to cut ties with them entirely. Years later, living in Maine with a loving husband and young son, having finally found happiness, Jessica is convinced the decision saved her life.

In her powerful memoir reminiscent of Jeannette Walls's bestseller *The Glass Castle*, Jessica breaks through common social taboos and bravely recounts the painful, self-defeating ways in which she internalized her abusive childhood, how she came to the monumental decision to break free from her family, and how she endured the difficult road that followed. Ultimately, by extracting herself from the damaging patterns and relationships of the past, Jessica has managed to carve an inspiring path to happiness—one she has created on her own terms. Her story, told here in a careful, unflinching, and forthright way, completely reframes how we think about family and the past.

Estranged: Leaving Family and Finding Home Details

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From Reader Review Estranged: Leaving Family and Finding Home for online ebook

Anna says

Can you say SPOILED TO THE CORE! This was far from “powerful, haunting and harrowing” as described. The narrative was whiny and she come off as a self-centered ungrateful brat who was blinded by her own disrespectful behavior. It lacked empathy and I had to force myself to read to the end.

Most of the book was about her ungrateful, pity-party behavior where she went around using people and throwing tantrums till she got her way. She's always been financially dependent upon someone else whether it was her parents or her boyfriend Neil who is now her husband. She's never had to face real world financial struggles on her own.

SPOILER ALERT

In no way do I excuse the physical abuse she endured from her father as a child but the description of the abuse doesn't translate to the end of the book where she's gripped with fear to go to the neighbors because her father left a voicemail letting her know he was at a nearby hotel with his room number wanting to speak with her at his therapist recommendation to make amends. Her reaction seemed blown out of proportion with what she described.

Her parents paid for her theater camps, Vassar education, school expenses, clothes, trips around the world, provided her a car and paid for her rent. She had a mother who not only enjoyed taking her shopping but would shop for her even when she was away at college still thinking about her well being. She had a father that would write her letters and cut out newspaper clippings she may like and would travel hours to pick her up from school while she left him waiting on her.

Some of the worst parts of her selfishness shined through towards the treatment of her oldest brother Mark when she's an adult throwing a fit because she doesn't get her way so she disrespects him and his wife in their home. Her brother then shoves her several times but I would be livid too if someone behaved that way in my home! Then she goes on to say her older brother only cares about money. Mark doesn't have mommy and daddy paying for everything like she did. So yes, there's a point in your life when money matters so you can provide for your family. Unless you're financially dependent upon others so you can concentrate your time on giving free yoga classes.

I didn't understand why she stopped talking with her brother Josh and his wife. They visited her at the home she shared with her then boyfriend Neil and Josh's wife made a comment, “how are you going to support yourself financially if this relationship doesn't work out?” Jessica even admits that the question was valid because she went through boyfriends. I guess the truth was too much for her to handle?

The description of this memoir is completely inaccurate!

Teri says

jewish girl whose father abused her physically and emotionally. two older brothers. mother didn't stand up to him. she choses to abandon her family to live a happier life. husband is colby professor.
a little whiny by the end

Riva Sciuto says

My main takeaway from this book is that anyone can get a book contract these days! Advertised as "powerful" and "haunting," I found it to be neither. It's a long, uninteresting recitation of all the bad things that happened to her and how they continued to follow her into adulthood. She then attributes everything in her life to the shadows of her dysfunctional upbringing -- which is no doubt true, but it's exhausting to read a laundry list of it all.

While memoirs are, at their very core, about authors' lives and feelings and reflections, this one is painfully self-centered. I suppose she offers hope -- however implicitly -- to those struggling with toxic and abusive family members, but she doesn't offer any powerful insights beyond her own experiences.

In an effort to find the good in Gross's memoir, I did find her decision to be a testament to the life we can create when we break free from abusive relationships. While it's certainly painful to be estranged from family, it's that very detachment that creates room in our hearts for healthy, loving, positive relationships. Gross reminds us that it is our choice to fight for that happiness. "My parents had contaminated the first half of my life," she writes. "I couldn't let them ruin the second."

Cari Miller says

While I hate the thought of disbelieving anyone who has endured abuse, the way the author relayed her story left me feeling like she simply was someone who was throwing a temper tantrum about not getting her way at home. Maybe it was the words she chose to relay her story, or the tone she used, regardless, I finished the book feeling sad for the family disconnect and how much her family must've been hurting as a result of her choice to walk away in unforgiveness. I only hope that through parenting her own child she is able to realize that parenting isn't black and white and as parents even though we try our hardest, we fall short and hopefully grace can be extended within this family and restoration can occur.

Phyllis Schaufler says

I enjoy reading memoirs, but I found myself annoyed with this author. If you are looking for a book in this genre, I would suggest *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls or *Etched in Sand: A True Story of Five Siblings Who Survived an Unspeakable Childhood on Long Island*, by Regina Calcaterra. Both of these books are outstanding.

Jessica says

There were so many mixed reviews of this book that I almost didn't read it. But, after reading it I think the issue with the reviews is whether or not you've experienced abuse or trauma. If you've never experienced that it might seem like she's spoiled or complaining or unreasonably angry (all things I read in reviews), but if you've experienced abuse or trauma you can see that she is trying to sort through everything and come out on the other side and in her case she was only able to do that by cutting off contact with her family. That's obviously not the outcome for everyone, but it was painfully obvious to me that her parents NEVER took responsibility for how they treated her - it was always "also" her fault. I think the worst part of the book for me was when her brother who had always protected her and looked out for her attacked her as an adult and also refused to take responsibility or go to therapy to deal with it. It's also obvious that Gross can see how

terribly she sometimes behaved growing up, but how she struggled to change - so she's not trying to justify her behavior, but show how her upbringing led to some of her decisions or behavior.

Was this book *The Glass Castle*? No. But, it was still a good book about a difficult topic. One thing I'm curious about is now that this book has come out has her family tried to contact her? I would worry that they would show up at an author event or something. Despite the topic, the book is hopeful especially at the end. Good for her for creating the family and life for herself she always wanted.

Some quotes I liked:

"In that small hushed office in the Village, with the comforting sound of a noise machine and the view of a brick wall, I began to deal - truly deal - with my past. Not by offering up forgiveness to my parents, or by confronting them in any outward way at all, but by going inside and allowing myself to take in the seriousness and sadness of what had happened to me. It was grueling work." (p. 195)

"My parents had contaminated the first half of my life. I couldn't let them ruin the second." (p. 235)

"After that day I decided to change my life. Each morning I forced myself to meditate or bundle up and take a cold country walk. On my yoga mat, during long drives, in kitchen conversations with Neil, late at night when I couldn't sleep, while reading Eastern philosophy or writing in my journal, I contemplated the meaning of forgiveness. The real kind that has to do with acceptance and moving forward, not the bullshit forgive-and-forget package of lies I'd been trying to swallow for years." (p. 244)

Hannah says

I enjoy reading memoirs a lot; part of it is seeing how other people cope with this thing called "life" and with the curveballs that get thrown at them. Another reason is the fact that usually you know things will turn out at least OK. The person made it out of whatever horrible situation they found themselves in and are now able to tell their story. I find solace in that and it makes reading about the aforementioned horrible situations bearable. I also find it important to see how other people live - it makes me more empathic person I hope and shows me that there is always more to a person than meets the eye.

Jessica Berger Gross tells the story of her childhood and her early adult years - about how her father was physically and mentally abusive and how her mother stood by. She does a remarkable job at still painting a well-rounded picture of her parents who are far more than abusers to her - they provide for her and they do love her and still do horrible things. Her parents until the end of their relationship with Jessica Berger Gross never see how all his wholly their fault and none lies with Jessica. No child deserves to be abused and to be scared at home and to internalize all the hateful things they hear.

I devoured this book in a couple of hours; I just needed to know for sure that she gets out and gets better and finds a way to live with her scars. The way the story is told is wonderfully crafted and painted a vivid picture of Jessica Berger Gross' journey and how difficult it was in places and how much better things got for her. While at the same time showing that those scars do not disappear over night and that she still fights with her memories.

Marika says

You truly never know what goes on in the homes of your neighbors and friends do you? This book is a perfect example of how little we do know about the people around us and the abuse that might be going on. Jessica is from the typical, nice Jewish home, (it even has a pool!) but one in which abuse occurs on an almost daily basis. Jessica's father is physically and emotionally abusive to her and during these periods of torment, her mother is just. silent. Similar to *The Glass Castle*, but one in which the child/victim comes to term with her abuse and changes the narrative.

I read an advance copy and was not compensated.

Betsy Taylor says

Depressing

Well written but ultimately I felt like she was selfish in her refusal to let go of her anger. I can see not willing to be able to see and interact with them, but as a mother maybe she could have at least extended more compassion. It also felt like one of those blogs that make you feel bad about your life - the yoga, the garden the perfect family... ain't buying it.

Cassandra Neyenesch says

I read this book on a plane ride and subsequent long, boring wait at the airport and I'm SO GLAD I had it because it was a great read and made the whole process fly by, pun acknowledged if not intended. I personally don't have many problems with my parents but felt a lot of suspense about how the author was going to get through her childhood and ultimately how she would confront her family. The writing style is honest and intensely-felt, and the details she mined from her memories of her childhood in Long Island made even the toughest scenes visceral and absorbing. I thought it was also very interesting how as a mother she decided to do everything the opposite of her own parents-- never to yell, and so on-- something which most of us don't do and therefore perhaps are more likely to repeat some of the worst patterns of our parents. (I know I yell too much, for example). A friend of mine who also had a terrible mother called this "having a reverse guru."

Lots of food for thought no matter your relationship to your family.

Jodi Gerbi says

The author gives a very accurate and brave account of what estrangement is like while still being fair to her family of origin. It is a must read for anyone, estranged or not to get people talking about that very unspoken about subject of abuse within families and possibly can give the courage to someone who needs to do this in order to have a better quality of life.

Shawna says

Privilege wrote this book.

The further I read in this book the less sympathy I found I had for the author. In the beginning she is completely helpless and dependent as a child, and repeatedly victimized by her father's behavior and her mother's complicity. As she gets older and finds more autonomy, I read along slackjawed as she described her Vassar education, her seven months abroad in Nepal, her extensive time working in Israel. Her travels here, her travels there. And her friends, she had so many close friends! So much support.

She goes through several periods of depression and is supported at least once by her future husband's inheritance. She quits a job (personal assistant to Bella Abzug) because it triggers her abuse PTSD. Most of us would not be able to get in the door to interview for a job like that, let alone have the option of quitting and then collecting unemployment and laying around feeling bad about it.

I guess, in the end I am really torn, it seems as though she was happy to take her parents money as long as it suited her, then kick them to the curb when it no longer suited her. I think I would have had more respect for her if she'd taken a stand and made her own way rather than taking their money for so long, and now she's going to be making more money off of exposing them and their sins.

A swath of this book describes suburban childhood. Lots of talk of the food she ate, and the clothes she wore, the shows she liked and the books she read. (Not for everyone, that kind of writing can make your eyes glaze over.)

I did think she was very honest, telling of her own faults and sins, like charging her cigarettes to the college account that her father paid because it was billed as "miscellany."

But in the end, I just couldn't get over my resentment of her privilege. She has a husband with an academic lifestyle who supports her freelance writing. (A husband she met via her Vassar friends/connections.) They can travel, they can afford IVF. She has time and space for all the navel gazing it must have taken to write this book which again, indicts the very people who facilitated this life she lives now.

Allie says

It felt a little bit like fate when I received a free copy of this in the mail. I enter Goodreads' drawings fairly often and have never won one before this book or since. It came at the right time.

It made me cry, it made me smile, it gave me hope, but more than anything it made me feel seen, heard, understood, and *not alone*.

Berger Gross' family resembles mine in some ways, not at all in others. I think if you read this book, you might feel the same way.

This book deserves a longer, more detailed, better review. But it took me months to finish because it was emotionally challenging. Please just trust that it's worth it.

Rich says

I can understand her trauma, anger, and hurt. But I cannot understand how the author can expect or receive any empathy with the ruthless heart she portrays. I hope I never carry such hatred or bitterness. Why does anyone need to read this?

Deb says

I received this book through NetGalley and its publisher, Scribner. This is a story about a girl growing up in a dysfunctional Jewish family. The family consists of her father, mother, and two brothers. The trials and tribulations she encounters with an abusive father and submissive mother.

At times, it feels like a typical teenager complaining about her father. Her parents were involved in helping her often: obtaining a car, buying clothes, attending summer camp. She appears out of control with drugs, alcohol and sex. She shares a few instances where her father is verbally and physically abuse while her mother stands by.

She rebels against her parents. She gets married and doesn't invite her family. She has a miscarriage and provides heart-wrenching details of the experience – without her mother. Eventually she has a child and doesn't share the news with her family. The child never will know his grandparents. Jess has made it clear she wants nothing to do with her family. This isn't just about her family; she has few long-term friends.

As a parent of adult children, my heart ached for the parents. Perhaps the abuse was more prevalent than the book relays. I'm confident Jess's parents weren't without faults. However, Jess was absolutely unforgiving. It felt like a harsh sentence. Is she a bit spoiled?
