



# Her Last Death

*Susanna Sonnenberg*

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Susanna Sonnenberg's memoir of growing up the privileged, peripatetic daughter of an eccentric mother falls somewhere in the middle of the contemporary memoir continuum: not as gripping as Jeannette Walls's *Glass Castle* or Augusten Burroughs *Running with Scissors*, but infinitely more readable than Jennifer Saginor's improbably wan account of growing up in the Playboy Mansion.

Were it not for Sonnenberg's silky prose and vivid retelling of past events, *Her Last Death* would be a bit of a head-scratcher. Sonnenberg's refusal to name reportedly famous acquaintances is bewildering in these tabloid times. While readers will sympathize with her scorching teenage embarrassment at her mother's antics--which invariably include some combination of drugs, sex, profligate spending, and ceaseless babbling about the three--the author's globetrotting and universal backstage access make much of her life seem more glamorous than grueling. And her confession to having "conflated or changed some events and dialogue," as well as creating "occasional composites" changing some identifying characteristics and reconstructing some conversations" takes some of the oomph out of the book's emotional thrust. Still, Sonnenberg's stories of how her mom sanctioned cocaine use in the home while shagging anything that moved--including her daughter's teenage pals are riveting, in a rubbernecking way.

## Her Last Death Details

Date : Published January 1st 2008 by Scribner

ISBN : 9780743291088

Author : Susanna Sonnenberg

Format : Hardcover 288 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir

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# From Reader Review Her Last Death for online ebook

## Rebecca says

I probably should have put this book down & not read the whole thing since it was just a memoir about the author and her relationship with her drug addicted, sex addicted, lying mom, which in turn made her become a nympho from a young age. So just sex & drugs in this one. This author married a (jack) mormon & had a couple of kids (after an abortion that this (jack) mormon approved of.) I think if I were her in laws I'd be embarrassed to read this about my daughter in law and all she did before marrying my son. I'm disappointed in myself for finishing the book. I mean the book itself is well written, the topic material is just something I felt dirty reading.

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## Lynne says

Susanna decides to not go to her mother's bedside after she's been in a nearly-fatal accident. The bulk of recovery work falls to her sister, who makes the trek to South America to care for their illing mother. Susanna looks like the bad daughter.

But when you've grown up with a cocaine-using, pill-popping, self-absorbed pathological liar for a mother, what can you expect?

Susanna tells the story of the complex, twisted relationship she has with her mother, ranging from moments of complete disgust to enthrallment. There's no denying her mother has a charm and wit about her that draws people in. It's just that no one knows what it's like to be forever caught in her web quite like Susanna does.

I admired Susanna's brash honesty, especially on the topics of her own life (sexual promiscuity, abortion) and felt she did a great job of depicting the way she longed to be free of her mother while at the same time wanted nothing more than to be a shining star upon her arm.

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## Natalie says

I had high expectations for this book. I love me some true narratives from people who've been born into a crazy famous life. I love the drama, the struggle, the shock value of the insane things they deem mundane. I was expecting a Running With Scissors memoir, equip with drugs and sex and crazy mothers and mental break downs.

And true, the book did seem to be going down that path for the first third of it. But then, somewhere along the way, the author lost sight of the interesting and it became almost a sermon on practicality of life. There are entire paragraphs about managing a budget and living life in terms of monetary responsibility. She talks about dinner menus being priced as "one month's rent" and "electricity" and "a new pair of jeans". The transformation from rich spoiled coked-up traumatized brat to mature responsible woman is immediate and without segue. It reads boring and I was a bit disappointed in the normalcy of the story telling.

That said, if you are someone who is familiar with the author, or her famous family, it is not a bad book.

There is many name-dropping and intimate details that one would expect from a book about celebrity-dom. There are some amusing anecdotes ripe with shocking points. It is not however a book for those who thought they would be transmitted into the wacky life of a famous person. At least not permanently.

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## **Robert says**

In *HER LAST DEATH*, Susanna Sonnenberg achieves what I believe the very best memoirs can accomplish. She paints a vivid, living picture, not just of a life but of her relationship with her manic but unbalanced mother, and she does so with prejudice and personal perspective. Memoir is not autobiography; at its very best, the genre tells us not the facts and objective observation of the events. Memoir takes us into the heart of the author's experience, and it is its very subjectivity that gives it power. *HER LAST DEATH* brings the reader into Sonnenberg's internal world, a tumultuous place where both a mother's love and her sanity are always in question.

Sonnenberg doesn't flinch from the light when it comes to examining her own stumbles and weaknesses, and when an understanding of her troubled mother's psyche eludes her, as it often does, the author doesn't engage in conjecture or armchair psychoanalysis. Instead, she allows us to experience this inexplicable world with her, and in the end, we are left not so much with a sense of who her mysterious mother might have been, but rather whom the author has ultimately become.

In the course of facing a difficult past and its ramifications for her future, Susanna Sonnenberg has shown herself to be an extremely talented writer, and I eagerly await more from her.

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## **Sarah Obsesses over Books & Cookies says**

I love those books that you haven't been reading about or pining after and then they usually fall under your expectations or maybe meet them but then there's no surprise because it's what you expected. Then there are the books that you stumbled on without any urging from other reviewers or barnes and noble lists or goodreads suggestions etc etc etc.

The books that jump out at you at the library or maybe you read something about a new book but the review mentions an old book and that's the one you look into and that's the one that charms you for the next day or two.

*Her Last Death* was just that book for me. I was looking at BookPage at the library where I work and it was, as usual, chock full of books for the new year and susanna sonnenberg was in it for her new book about friendship. This appealed to me (I don't have many friends, haha) but what got me glued was her old book, a memoir about her mother.

I am a sucker for memoirs by people with mommy issues.

This book was unreal. Not unbelievable but unreal in that a person such as Daphne proves that the head is independent of the body; as in as what a nutjob to be able to reproduce.

She is a liar, a slut, a selfish bitch of a woman and the daughter, Susanna and her sister, Penelope had to grow up in such a fucked up environment. There's a lot of sex in the book and I cringe at the thought of a mother constantly talking to her daughter about sex and how a boy/man is in bed. It's just crossing lines. Then there's drugs and more sex, not graphic details because we all know it's about but the idea that it was a huge part of this writer's childhood and life.

I loved the writing. It skipped over parts and went back to different times but wasn't confusing. I felt for the

writer and how powerful her words were; how truthful and raw she exposed herself (good and bad) and it wasn't looking for pity. I didn't get that; if someone comes across as pathetic i get annoyed and won't finish the book. This one I devoured. What a mother. I thought mine was ridiculous. Talk about perspective.

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## **Keleigh says**

This is a compulsively readable memoir. The main focus is the writer's relationship with her glamorous, narcissistic, sex-and-drug-addicted mother, and how this bond (rife with violence, intensity and betrayal) reverberated over the course of the author's life and relationships. The writing is straightforward and not too frilly; the story is fascinating and at times shocking, with a raw-edged honesty that resonated with me. Most affecting for me was Sonnenberg's description of her use of sexuality as power-play, performance, validation and payback. The quote below rings true for any woman who has found herself relying on her powers of seduction to simulate connection, while in truth avoiding the faintest threat of vulnerability and intimacy.

"There was no such thing as waiting. I never needed to wait. I didn't know how not to meet someone, because every 'Excuse me?' meant a willingness, every released button the arching awareness of my effect on people, that urgent agenda to show off in bed what just wasn't possible to show in the produce section or the bookstore."

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## **Kathy Hiester says**

I picked up Susanna Sonnenberg's memoir *Her Last Death* in the bargain bin at Border's and it was one of my better finds among the myriad of books.

The book opens with a phone call in which that Sonnenberg learns that her mother, who lives in Barbados, has been in a horrible car accident, and there is a good chance she is going to die. The story is about her decision to not go to her mother and why. There is too much history, too many lies, too many faked illnesses and almost deception about dying. She just can't go through it again. Her real life, with her husband and sons, has weight and meaning, but her mother fictional life just wasn't Sonnenberg's real life anymore.

The book continues to tell the story of Sonnenberg's manifestation of what she believes her life was like with her mother. Her mother is addicted to painkillers, has a cocaine habit, engages in uncontrolled, irresponsible sex trysts, and could almost certainly be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Growing up at a young age, Susy how her mother lost her virginity, watches her mother having sex with a stream of bizarre men, and learns that sex is power and money equals independence.

Susy has a very early strong interest in sex and she becomes fascinated with Penthouse magazines and almost fanatical with the development of her body and masturbation. Her mother acknowledges and condones Susy's problem telling her simply "Go on, my little pervert. We have no secrets."

When this behavior extends into Susy's life during college and in the early years of her adulthood, it really becomes quite exasperating. She is used to being used, to feeling empty, to lying and being lied to, and it seems that she is going to continue the cycle her mother modeled so graphically.

*Her Last Death* is ultimately about the buoyancy of the individual spirit; it is also about how strongly the messages we collect as children profile our outlook. Sonnenberg's writing is immediate and razor-sharp. She pulls you into her experiences and her point of view from the very first page, and she is not afraid to confront those topics that are upsetting, complex, and illicit.

It is really hard for me to judge this book as a like or a dislike because I felt sorry for Susy from the first page. The book touched subjects usually left alone by authors. I am giving this book five stars because of the

way it evoked such emotion and how well written it was.

5 Stars

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### **Erin says**

I was really torn between a 1 and a 2 on this book - the 2 rating ultimately won out only b/c I had such a viscerally negative reaction to it that I thought that was worth something! I just didn't like any of the "characters" - the author, the mother, the sister, and even the husband. I was so tired of hearing from the author's perspective how terrible the mother was (and if this book is true, she did some horrible things) but yet the author spent her whole life wrapped up in her mother's world and ultimately, in my opinion, acting selfish just like her mother. If the mother was really as bad as she was portrayed, I feel sorry for the author and her sister, but at a certain point, I just wanted to yell at her to finally get over it and start living her life in a different manner rather than repeating her mothers' mistakes. I was so irritated with her I couldn't wait for the book to end.

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### **Holly Lee (Bellus Novella) says**

This book was an emotional rollercoaster. I read the book very slowly because i had to take time to process what I had read. The author Susanna Sonnenberg has held nothing back in her memoir. It was difficult to read at times because it was such a personal experience, and most of the time it was quite depressing.

Its hard to call a book like this a good book, or to even say that I enjoyed it. I would recommend it though, to anyone who can appreciate a candid life story.

I always feel like a lot can be learned about people from memoirs like this. Susanna Sonnenberg provides an intimate look into the lives of the people who shaped her.

Her mother, a whirlwind woman with a drug habit and an unending sex drive. A woman that likes to pretend she is dying, or that she has just been raped. She loves to be the center of attention, at the cost of everyone around her if necessary.

Her father, a genius writer that expects his toddler to appreciate the classics and berates her for not always taking the intellectual path. When she is older he discounts every accomplishment she makes. As a result, Susanna finds herself always seeking male approval, and all too frequently in the arms of her married english teachers.

Susanna doesn't manage to avoid partaking in risky behaviors, she is a product of her raise. When she starts to realize the pattern she is creating, endless sexual partners and a path of self destruction, she winds up making a big change.

Despite the cards being heavily stacked against our author, she managed to find a normal, and happy life, in a place she never would have predicted she could end up in.

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## **Robyn says**

Susanna Sonnenberg is such a gifted writer. even when recanting being the daughter of a narcissistic, coke/sex addict mother she writes with total candor and grace. She has an incredible way of describing the most mundane to the most exotic. Hoping for a third book.

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## **Annie says**

I found this memoir to be very self-indulgent. I actually didn't believe the majority of the "stories" that the author relayed about her life. I found myself rolling my eyes a lot while reading. The author complained (a LOT) about how her mother lied to her throughout her life. She complained about how her mother's mania caused her to be choppy and hard to follow in conversations. I think both criticisms could be applied to the author herself.

The author had quite the high opinion of herself; very proud of her looks and her sexuality. I found myself wondering why she would write this memoir. And how believable is it that she suddenly transformed from a promiscuous, self-absorbed woman to a loving, indulgent mother who never would lie to her children? It would have been interesting to hear more about this transformation.

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## **Maria Headley says**

Ranks up there with the best writing about the kind of parents who are impossibly ill-suited-to-be-parents. This definitely stands with *The Liar's Club*, *The Glass Castle*, *This Boy's Life*, and any other book in that vein. I enjoyed all of those, tremendously, and I enjoyed this just as much. Susanna Sonnenberg is blistering on all levels - toward herself, toward the world she grows up in and learns to live in, toward her completely off the rails mother. Blistering in a good way, I clarify. She's pretty damn honest. Reading the book, I found myself thinking, over and over, would I have been this brave? Sonnenberg has balls. I wish I knew her - I think she'd be exactly the kind of person I'd like to sit down and have a no-bullshit conversation with. I'm talking about the way she reveals her own fears, confusion, and mistakes just as clearly as she reveals those of her mother. This is a terrific book - I was riveted, wondering which of the characters were going to crash and burn, and all of them do, at one point or another. I could go on about the plot - but the writing is really what makes the plot sing. Without a wonderful writer behind this story, it would feel like (sadly) just another story of woe. This despite the fact that it's a unique one. There just happen to be a lot of stories of crazy parents out there, both anecdotal, and published. Sonnenberg really is a writer, though, and she takes us through this story with strong, clear prose, and without malice. I finished it in a marathon read - because I couldn't bear to stop reading.

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## **Mammabird says**

It is interesting to see what others have said about this memoir. For those that did not like it I believe it has a lot to do with not being connected to the reader. Having been born in the sixties with a dad who got addicted to coke I read some of this with rapt interest and would like to sit down with the writer over a bottle of wine and share some of our odd memories and ways we have struggled to find normalcy in this world that does

not believe or comprehend our experiences,

Sonnenberg's voice and art of telling reminds me of the sardonic tone of Ellen Gilchrist. The availability of money and the desire for society is numbing as one realizes Daphne's tools for survival that she teaches to Suzy are all dependent on the woman using her body rather than her brain. The lies come easy and make life more interesting but do not really demand much effort.

The struggle to figure out normalcy is well expressed. If it seems to slow down and lose its glittery excitement towards the second half it is because it is supposed to, the struggle to create a trusting foundation to be called normal rather than the fantasy world of her mothers is a poignant struggle that many people do not know. Most people are trying to pull away from the vanilla lives of growing up while this is a story of a young woman trying to find a life in the vanilla realm.

I recommend this book to any one who is interested in what happened to all the kids born during the sex, drug and rock and roll culture of the sixties and seventies.

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### **Betsy says**

So you think you had a difficult mother? This memoirist's mom - an intoxicating and intoxicated coke-addicted, sex-obsessed, narcissistic, party girl (and ridiculously irresponsible parent who hits on her daughter's boyfriends, among other things) - takes the cake. But midway through the book - which not only details mom's sexual excesses but the writer's - I grew increasingly irritated. Just why did she write this peep show of a memoir and why was I reading it? Judging from a favorable NYT review I skimmed, the book sounded like a well-written, engaging, coming-of-age story that might offer insight into one person's struggle to overcome a difficult childhood.

Not quite.

It was a seductive tease, detailing one outrageous episode after another, but not particularly well-written or thoughtful until the final (and best) chapters when the author becomes, against all odds, the good mother (in Missoula, no less.) It documented the author's bumpy youth but offered little insight or introspection, and few truths, large or small, about the human condition. (And the author's self-confessed propensity to lie invited skepticism.)

Then there was the obnoxious name-dropping, or no-name-dropping since the author keeps referring to famous people (including her family members) but doesn't reveal their names (granted she may fear a lawsuit but a simple Google search revealed all I needed to know.)

I also was annoyed by the writer's high self-regard, self-absorption and sense of entitlement (although they may explain why she wrote the memoir.) And call me a prude, but the more I read, the more I felt like a shameless voyeur. Worse, I got the creepy feeling that just as the young Suzy didn't appreciate her mother's open-book sexual shenanigans, the author's two young sons might feel similarly some day about her (maybe Suzy turned out more like mom than she realizes.)

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### **Anastacia says**

I wanted to like this book. I'm interested in well written memoirs and I enjoy a good backstory of drugs and other nefarious activities. And I did like the book at first, but somewhere in the middle I found myself increasingly put off. She paints her story with sex, sex, sex, sex, drugs, mom did this to me, sex, sex, sex. It's



exhausting and, while I like her writing style, I found her to be indulgent and more than a little self-righteous and mean. For instance, she and her husband get a puppy. Puppy misbehaves - she describes the puppy as a beast, which, come on. Give me a break. Supposedly after all the "training" they got for Ruby, the puppy, Ruby was still a terrible dog. Really? I've been around dogs of various temperaments my entire life and I have NEVER encountered a dog who didn't respond to love, attention and training. But we're supposed to believe that, despite the two of them coming to the instant conclusion to "put the dog down" - a very nice way of saying that they had a vet end kill the dog because they couldn't handle it. For the entire second half of the book she describes her incredibly active sex life in candid detail to the point where I squirmed (and I'm not a prude). She treated people horribly. She describes how she wants to throw her baby in the river and how that made her feel powerful, that the baby should thank her because she did not throw him in.

I truly feel for her if she did suffer abuse from her mother, but if her mother did all the things Ms. Sonnenberg claims, her mother would have probably died a long time ago. People don't just flutter in and out of the kind of drug abuse that results in massive, pus-filled sores. But Ms. Sonnenberg has her mother in and out of a very long history of such abuse like each event was little more than a headache but less than a hangover.

I have a hard time believing her story and, indeed, glancing at the fine print I realized that I am probably justified in my disbelief, as she writes, "In the interests of the narrative, I have conflated or changed some events and dialogue and created occasional composites." I know it's somewhat standard to write a disclaimer because no one remembers everything in every detail, but to create composites is a little absurd. Why not just write fiction then?

I give the book two stars because she really is a great writer. I just found her to be an insufferable, arrogant, entitled jerk whose story seemed more than a little "conflated." It's a book that I feel is a little like the feeling of discomfort a person may get when someone overshares - it's that sort of awkward feeling where you find yourself thinking that you just want to get away from the person. I would hate to be a relative or friend of hers after reading that book. Ugh.

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## **Lori says**

Children who were raised in poverty, in abuse, in neglect, in terror but made it out can often be lumped into large groups:

- They hide their past from themselves and from others. They say it has no bearing on who they are now.
- They broadcast their past, one-upping the upbringings of those around them.
- They minimize their childhood, saying their life was no different from others. They did what they did to get by.

Most pick and choose from the above scenarios, depending on audience and timing. It's no secret that I'm one of those kids, now adult. And I'm a big believer in being judicious -- what I share depends on who I'm sharing with and why. I generally win the "my life is worst" contest, if I choose to play. Mostly, though, I'm who I am now, not who I was. Most folks don't need to know any more than that.

Susanna Sonnenberg's memoir stunned me again and again. As familiar as some of the situations (and

sometimes even exact words) were, she trumped me over and over. She was painfully honest not just about what she went through, but who she was and how it made her who she is now.

And she's so brutal that you can see the beauty in her past, too. You can't help being aroused, envious and enthralled even while you're terrified.

I don't know that I've ever been quite so appalled by what one person went through. No, the book isn't about war or genocide, murder or suicide. Surely some have had it worse and lived.

But none have hit so close to home for me. Or made me feel that I was so lucky.

It's not a spoiler to reveal that Sonnenberg makes it out -- she writes a book, after all. In the first chapter, you learn she has children and a husband and what looks like a normal life.

But as you progress, you realize there's no way Sonnenberg will ever be normal. But the drugs, the men, the pain, the insanity have shaped her into someone wise and timid, scared and brave, bold and beautiful.

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### **Mauren Milton says**

This book is a great read to addicts and people affected by similar circumstances. It really reveals the impact of her mothers mental and physical issues on her growing up and personality/ endeavors in her adult life

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### **Chrissy says**

I should have put this down after the first few pages. I felt an absolute kick to the gut that can only be explained by deep understanding. Ms Sonnenberg could have been writing about my life, my feelings and my mother.

My mother, while not a drug addict or as overtly promiscuous, rivals Daphne in her inability to share. I was tickled by the bad reviews of this story - and I can only guess that those who grew up in an environment where safety and love are related have trouble comprehending a home where they are not.

Sonnenberg's memoir is entertaining and lively. Heartbreaking and understandable. I'm so glad she wrote this. I thought it drifted a bit while discussing a major life decision, I was glad to learn her life goes on - that she finds strength within herself. That she learns to stay put.

Fantastic. What Unquiet Mind did for me after a diagnosis, this book makes it all relateable. Great book.

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### **Michele says**

#### **Mummy Dearest**

Reading this book, the story of Susanna's upbringing and early years of marriage and motherhood, was like reading someone's diary. Her Last Death is the intimate purging of an extraordinary life with Mummy-- perhaps one of the most unfit and reckless characters ever to raise children. What's remarkable is that

Susanna not only lived to tell the tale, but also ultimately seems to have turned out to be quite "normal." She has certainly realized her potential as an educated and talented writer.

It's the good writing that got me through this quick read. It certainly wasn't the subject matter. I kept asking myself, uh--WHY am I reading this? It had a definite Mommie Dearest revenge factor thing going for it, but the author's love for her mother came through as well, as she struggled to find herself while standing in an overwhelming shadow. I think it made me appreciate my own childhood, and marvel at the power we have over our children in mapping out the world for them.

The mother she names "Daphne," (the author makes it clear in the front notes that all names but her own have been changed), is in a word, outrageous. Living a sexy, single-girl life with two baby girls in tow, she consistently puts herself, along with her drug and sex addictions, ahead of the responsibilities of motherhood. From a daughter's eyes, the reader senses Susanna's conflict of love and betrayal as she bestows the horrendous details of her childhood. Namely, her mother's constant offerings of cocaine and alcohol to the adolescent Susanna, parading an endless line of lovers through their apartments and hotel rooms, her need to seduce each and every one of Susanna's friends (particularly the boyfriends), and explaining orgasm and introducing birth control when her daughter was hardly beyond puberty. It made me feel both sick and very sad.

Susanna divulges several of her own poor choices on the way to her life, as well as her initial struggles with motherhood. She may not be the most likable character walking the roads of Montana; however, due to the way she was raised, she has evoked this reader's sympathy. Overall, I found this to be an interesting and unique memoir and would enjoy reading future work by Susanna Sonnenberg.

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## **Badly Drawn Girl says**

I read several different books at the same time, alternating back and forth through the day and the week depending on my mood. I picked up *Her Last Death* and didn't pick up another book (even ones I had been happily reading the day before) until I finished it. I've read a lot of memoirs and sometimes I feel like it's all been done (and written) before... but not this time. This is a jaw dropping experience, a memoir that is so far out there it feels like fiction but so emotionally right on that it has to be true. This is a writer who isn't afraid to show herself in a potentially bad light. Her honesty is so refreshing. She does an incredible job of painting these vivid pictures of life with her mother... a character so unreal and unpredictable that I couldn't imagine what it would have been like to even meet this woman much less be raised by her. I highly recommend this book with the warning that it is very graphic (sex features prominently) and at times quite disturbing. But it is also a true story of redemption, courage and coming into one's own.

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