

BOOK REVIEW

“An Unquiet Mind”

by Kay Redfield Jamison

1996 Vintage Books, 216 pages

Reviewed by Chelsea Zamora

“An Unquiet Mind” had me hooked from the beginning. It is a memoir written by Kay Jamison, a woman who struggles with the highs and lows of a thirty year battle with manic-depressive illness. Jamison begins telling the story of her life with a story that serves as a metaphor for her illness. Jamison was raised in an Air Force community, as her father was an Air Force officer. One day during her childhood, a plane went flying over a school playground during recess and crashed into a bunch of trees a short distance away from where all of the children were playing. Jamison talked about the smoke lifting into the sky, but at the bottom of it all was the heroic pilot. He was a hero because he has the choice of landing safely in the playground area but decided to take his own life in order to save all of the children. For her the dark, smoke, and flame filled sky is always there.

My first impression of this book was that it is written very well and that there was something that kept me wanting to read more. It takes you through phases of Jamison’s life, growing up, going to college, falling in love, and battling her own mind through her illness. In addition to just telling the story of her life, she takes you on a ride through a range of powerful emotions. Ultimately, really showing you how it feels to suffer with manic depression.

Looking back, Jamison began to see signs of manic depression in college, where she would do things like buy tons and tons of unnecessary books. Her initial goal in life was to go to medical school, but with her sudden overwhelming bursts of energy that

were creeping up, she realized that she couldn't handle having to sit down and focus for long periods of time. So, she decided to pursue obtaining a PhD in Psychology at The University of California Los Angeles. Some small manic episodes were strange to her but she also enjoyed them because they caused her to do things faster and she became more interested in anything that came her way. For awhile at the beginning of graduate school, she thought these episodes were gone for good. To her shock, they became more severe. The littlest things like her hair style and her clothing choice went with her mood. Her daily life was deeply impacted by the constant extreme highs and the lowest of lows. Interestingly enough, she never applied all of the things she was learning in graduate school to herself. After graduate school, she began to work as a professor at UCLA and within three months of working she became psychotic. She would continuously work and starve her body of sleep. Irrational fears flooded her mind, such as killer snakes making their way to her. Organization became an unfamiliar task. Her mind was made up of only poems and fragments intermixing with each other, nothing made any sense. Hallucinations started and gave her insight into how truly paralyzing thoughts and visions could be. Jamison found herself agitated, delusional, overtaken by manic wrath, unable to control the speed of her lightning fast thoughts, and most of all untrusting of her very own mind.

Jamison decided to speak with one of her coworkers to determine what was going on and she was then diagnosed with manic depressive illness. Specifically, she was suffering from grandiose and expansive manias, where her manias hit before her depressions. Although being resentful was her main feeling at this time, she found herself relieved. Jamison began to take lithium, but coping with a medicine that makes you feel

so ill and exhausted to the point where filling an ice cube tray is nearly impossible was a difficult task. The very thing that was intended to help her, almost took her life. One of the lowest points in battling this illness was when she became suicidal and overdosed on lithium. Jamison ended up in and out of a coma for quite awhile after the attempted suicide and made a successful attempt to use lithium to control her moods without controlling her life.

Mood disorders became the focus of her research and she now is using her illness to try and develop better treatments and to help change public attitudes toward mental illnesses overall. Jamison's life came together and with talking publicly about coming out with her illness she feels it can only benefit others. Kay Redfield Jamison is a psychologist, psychotherapist, and researcher who currently works at Johns Hopkins Medical School. She has battled and learned to live with manic-depressive illness, specifically bipolar 1 disorder, severe, with psychotic features for over thirty years.

I completely agree that this memoir will benefit others, especially anyone who has or knows someone with manic depression. Jamison creates a clear relationship between madness and creative genius in this memoir. She is completely honest and extremely personal in every aspect of her life without even a hint of self pity. I found my attention always held because of the high quality of her writing. It was poetically written and never left me uncurious. I learned a great deal about manic depression because of all the clear stories and characteristics laid out. I believe this memoir was very uplifting and shows how you can live a normal life despite all the tough things associated with genetic diseases. I enjoyed that it included detailed struggles encountered with medication

complications and denial. Also, that it shares stories of romance and overcoming embarrassment to truly feel comfortable in your own skin again.

There is only one thing that I can think of that could've been improved. At times, I found the time line to be a bit confusing. There were so many interesting stories that described in great detail the intense feelings experienced, that it was sometimes hard to judge exactly if the illness was becoming more extreme or improving. To be honest, maybe this might be something that Jamison isn't even sure of.

This book is not intended to help treat people with forms of mental illness, but to give others a glimpse of what it's like to live with a form of depression. It shares not just the intense episodes and delusional thoughts, but gives hope to people who are or know others suffering from such illnesses. This book can provide advice to anyone who encounters depression. Including a point that Jamison stresses concerning the importance of using medication, lithium in this case, combined with psychotherapy to treat mental illnesses. Jamison used both medication and love as protectors from her dark side. Many people have something built into them that they wish wasn't there, but making this darkness apart of who you are and learning to cope with it can make the darkest times brighter.

If you are looking for a beautifully written, intelligent, and emotionally driven book about what it's like to live with manic depression, "An Unquiet Mind" is a perfect fit. It will take you through the highs of manias and lows of depression. This book is always giving sincere facts about the reality of what it's like to live with a mental illness.