Another Bullshit Night in Suck City: A Memoir by Nick Flynn

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"Devastating....Ranks with Frank Conroy's Stop-Time."--Michael Cunningham

"Sometimes I'd see my father, walking past my building on his way to another nowhere. I could have given him a key, offered a piece of my floor. But if I let him inside the line between us would blur, my own slow-motion car wreck would speed up." Nick Flynn met his father for the third time when he was twenty-seven years old, working as a caseworker in a homeless shelter in Boston. As a teenager he'd received letters from this stranger, a self-proclaimed poet and con man doing time in federal prison for bank robbery. Nick, his own life precariously unsettled, was living alternately in a ramshackle boat and in a warehouse that was once a strip joint. In bold, dazzling prose, Another Bullshit Night in Suck City (a phrase Flynn senior uses to describe his life on the streets) tells the story of two lives and the trajectory that led Nick and his father into that homeless shelter, onto those streets, and finally to each other.
Reviews of the *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City: A Memoir* by Nick Flynn

Dancing Lion

Who are the drunks, the drug addicts, the crazy men who sleep on park benches, and urinate on city streets? They are someone’s sons, someone’s fathers. This is a book about homeless men written by a son.

Both Nick Flynn and his father Jonathan were late bloomers. Jonathan was a never-do-well who claimed to be a writer, but spent little time writing anything except the letters he wrote to Nick. When Jonathan took a job as a house painter, he used the credit card meant for paint and supplies to buy bourbon and new clothes. That was just one of his many cons. Jonathan ended up in prison for cashing bad checks, and then he slept in a friend’s basement for awhile. Soon he was living on the streets.

After a succession of dead-end jobs, Nick ends up as a counselor at a shelter for homeless men. Jonathan is one of the boarders. Jonathan mostly lives on the streets because he causes so much trouble, the shelter has no choice, but to ban him for a night, a week, a month or more.

The story itself is fascinating. But the text is sometimes hard to follow. The prose is often poetry disguised as prose. It’s a hodge-podge of situations mostly relating to Jonathan. Nick writes about Ham in the Bible punished for seeing his father naked and drunk; he writes about leaving a sandwich on a park bench beside his sleeping father. He asks if this constitutes a family meal.

If I wanted a book of poetry, I could have purchased one. Too many beautiful phrases strung together often end up meaningless.

Sometimes the story meanders and becomes something else. What’s with the dialog between the five Santas and the three daughters? Was that an inserted short story?

Sometimes the text is raw exposition with no beauty. The story moves, but the writer forgot to make it interesting. This is juxtaposed with the poetic. I try to avoid pointing out poor grammar or making it part of a review. There are many other factors that go into both good and poor books. Usually reviewers who write about a book’s poor grammar don’t know enough about grammar to be more specific. They might not know about different style books, but I was an English teacher for many years. I make mistakes too. That’s one reason I avoid the “poor grammar” comment, but...

This author does not enclose appositives or introductory phrases in commas. He often puts quotes in italics instead of between quotation marks. The paragraphs are what Robert Newton Peck calls “prison walls.” They are too long, and they have no design reason. One paragraph might have three main points; another paragraph is a ranting with no main point. Some sentences made zero sense. There are run-on sentences. Present tense and past tense are mixed up sometimes in the same sentence.

There are times when a poet or a prose writer might intentionally use poor grammar. In this book, the prose rambles like a homeless person, not sure where to go next. Commas do house phrases, clauses and appositives, so omitting them might be way to emphasize homelessness. But I’m making excuses.

The author needed an editor. He should have been a better proofreader himself. Yet he gets high scores for honesty. Nick himself spent years in questionable activities. He worked for people whom he describes as a mafia, but maybe not the Mafia. When a former tailor gives the homeless shelter racks of quality clothing from the 1950’s, he brings them home, and he and his friends dress in style. Homeless men don’t need furs or evening gowns or tuxedoes. But those items could have been sold for cash. The author doesn’t say if they ever made it to the shelter.

It’s a good story, but the execution needs ample revision.
Iphonedivorced

Although there isn't much plot here, Nick's creative style carries the book beginning to end. The narrative had me interested in the day-to-day activities of two main characters, a bum (Nick's father) and an underachieving stoner (Nick), even in many of the chapters when nothing of significance was really unfolding. Nick style is clever and provocative, with some symbolism and references that not all readers will get, surely I missed some of it, I'm sure. It's also edifying in terms of homeless and shelter life. I like the book enough to stream the moving, Being Flynn, which is a plotless movie, which, despite Robert DeNiro and Juiliane Moore, doesn't work as well as the book does.

I'll surely add another Nick Flynn title to my wish list and download it eventually.

Hugighma

A powerful, absorbing, moving memoir, unlike any I've read before (and I've read a lot of autobiographies and memoirs -- it does remind me a bit of Peter Reich's "A Book of Dreams," also a son's story of his elusive, possibly mad father). Full of short, sharp vignettes and beautifully structured, the book tells of author Nick Flynn's creative, delusional, criminal, alcoholic father and of Nick's own struggles with addiction, abandonment, and loss. If it were a novel, the story would seem almost contrived -- for example, not knowing his father when he was young, Flynn encounters him as an adult when he's working at a homeless shelter where his father is a client; or Flynn finding out that his college girlfriend is the daughter of his father's loyal friends who have taken him in over and over again, over the years. Flynn is a poet and his writing reflects that -- mostly straightforward, but laced with imagery and passages that are wonderful to read, sometimes abstract, and often heartbreaking. Flynn's father fancied himself a writer, and one of the great themes of the book is Flynn both resisting and fulfilling his father's legacies as a writer and an addict -- he is brutally, and not always flatteringly, honest about his own travails, and the result is a deeply compelling book.

PC-rider

I want to give it four stars. I like the book a lot, and the fact that it's kind of sad doesn't make me hesitate to recommend it; rather in fact it helps make it feel true.

Here's the thing. It's great that Flynn comes at his subject matter from all different directions and explores different kinds of formal approaches, but there's a little kind of Becketty play in one section about which I liked precisely three things and hated everything else.

The rest of the book? Really fine. Great job not saying things like, "Here's the only reason I did this unsavory thing," or "Here's what a swell guy I am...." In a lot of ways, I feel like I could have given it four stars.

Rleillin

I assume that, like me, many people read a memoir the same way that they read fiction - with an expectation of certain plot points, general development of characters, plot/theme, or moral of the story. I also realize that this is a mistake.

So, if I peel that away from my feelings of the books (i.e. the expectations I have for traditional fiction), and consider this book strictly for what it is - a true story, one that cannot be manipulated for the sake of formula, then I say this is an excellent book.

However, since I am human and because my review may never be read, I can say that I wish that there was some kind of decision by the end of the "story."

Nick Flynn explores his own demons with drug addition - although, not deeply - and his personal
conflict about working with the homeless while knowing that his own father is both an alcoholic and homeless. The fact that nothing is fully resolved by the end of the story reflects on his own humanity overriding ...well, my need to have him find closure.

He is a great story-teller, though. His balance of detail and illusion made this book a pleasure to read.

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