

A Girl's Courage

Mary Ellen Sinclair

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A Girl's Courage serves as a reminder that while incest is an open wound, there is a way to mend it.

A Girl's Courage is a harrowing first-person narrative about a young woman's ordeal of childhood incest that offers a beacon of hope to other survivors. Most importantly, the book illustrates overcoming abuse and thriving, with the right combination of therapy and resilience.

The story begins in Rhode Island in 1958. By all outward accounts, Mary Ellen is a normal seven-year-old. She lives with her parents and brother, and her extended family lives nearby in a typical Italian American setup.

Mary Ellen's father, Larry, is a two-faced Janus: a handsome master manipulator who struggles to make ends meet. To most folks, he's just an odd duck. But whenever Mary Ellen's mother leaves the house, Larry locks his young son in the basement, closes the blinds, and leads his daughter to the bedroom where he "teaches" her how to be a woman.

Eventually, Mary Ellen finds her voice and stands up to her father, but after seven years of abuse, the damage is done. The young girl is ashamed, frightened, and confused. What follows is a surprisingly uplifting story of awakening, awareness, and self-confidence.

Though a work of fiction, this story is raw and powerful, and it's hard not to think that parts of the book were inspired by real life: the narrator's name is the same as the author's, and both grew up in Providence, Rhode Island, before becoming New York-based artists. Sinclair's 2005 *Why the Plum for Courage* did explore her abusive childhood years, and *A Girl's Courage* seems to pluck much from reality to tell a story that's impossible to put down.

This is a tautly composed story that refuses to be ignored. A book chronicling the depravity of incest could easily become morose and bitter, but *A Girl's Courage* is not filled with rancor. Mary Ellen doesn't just survive; she thrives and leads a full life.

Toward the book's midpoint, a sensitive and encouraging therapist suggests that Mary Ellen find some sort of closure by revealing her secret to her mother, who has a few bombshells of her own. There's hardly a gratuitous description in this work. Each of the characters is developed fully and with care, lending richness to the volume.

It covers a taboo topic, but *A Girl's Courage* also serves as a reminder that while incest is an open wound, there is a way to mend it.

BARBARA NICKLES (April 21, 2017)

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