

Crossing 13: Memoir of a Father's Suicide

Carrie Stark Hugus

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Teenagers are more likely to listen to other teenagers when they are in need of guidance than they are to heed the words of grown-ups. Adults are out of touch since they were born umpteen years ago and they certainly can't say the right thing when something as devastating as a parent's unexpected suicide brings the world crashing down. The guilty second-guessing and the inherent disorientation begs answers forthcoming if only someone knew how to get through to them.

Carrie Stark Hugus is a public speaker and a survivor who knows what that trauma feels like from firsthand experience. She gets around the great divide and reaches an adolescent audience by writing an account of her father's suicide from the point of view of her thirteen-year-old self. The girl she was asks "Why didn't I have the courage to enter the garage and try to stop him sooner? How could everything I grew up thinking and believing about my father be a lie?" Hugus does more than reminisce—she successfully assumes the persona of a girl dogged by the angst and social awkwardness attendant to the middle school years. Observations and idiom choices are true to both the stage of development and the era of 1979–80. One could easily forget that they are reading words laid down by someone their parents' age.

The stigma attached to suicide is further magnified for early teens who are already achingly self-conscious in general. The narrator says "I hated the way everyone kept looking at me their faces full of pity concern and judgment. There was nowhere to escape..." This family responds in a largely defensive way refusing to discuss the tragedy with most outsiders and as rarely as possible amongst themselves though the author's mother does see that they all meet with a counselor. Few acquaintances are of help; a number mention the Catholic notion that those who take their own lives go to Hell. A psychic tells the family that their loved one is angry and trapped in the house where he died.

The bulk of the book is a single narrative concluding on the one-year anniversary of the death. Appendices include a list of risk factors contact information for suicide prevention and grief counseling organizations and some practical advice to those dealing with a grieving survivor. Amazing but true: even in the twenty-first century some folks don't know not to say insensitive things to the suffering like "It was God's will" or "Aren't you over this by now?"

The book is digestible in one sitting; readers may wish that such a well-honed voice would expand the story but the author has chosen to limit the coverage period. *Crossing 13* sails right through the generational barrier; it is a great tool for starting a dialogue with a partly grown person who is feeling more alone than ever before.

TODD MERCER (August 14, 2008)

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