ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Dummy: A Memoir
David Patten
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What does it feel like to struggle with dyslexia and autism, to cope with cognitive disorders that make reading and writing impossible to master? In *Dummy*, David Patten explains precisely how frustrating and demoralizing it was to have been labeled stupid and lazy by his teachers and to have been left far behind in his school classes until there seemed to be no way of catching up.

Patten's memoir takes readers back to his birth and his mother's determination not to allow him to completely withdraw from her, their family, or society at large. She holds him for lengthy periods as an infant, rocks him, talks to him, and brings her son out of his inner world no matter how long it takes to reach him. Still, as he starts school, Patten becomes disempowered. He quickly recognizes how different he is from the other children in terms of focusing and learning to read and write, "I wasn't afraid of disappearing or dying," he writes. "What terrified me was living a left-behind, lonely, powerless life."

As a child, Patten's solution to being left behind arrives in the idea of suicide. He steals some mercury from his father and stashes it away so that, if and when he needs it, death is just a gulp away. With the confidence of this "way out," Patten soldiers on at school, demonstrating that he is an innovative businessman from a young age, as well as a defender of the underdog and a kid who is unafraid to fight boys bigger and stronger than himself.

He begins a school-based business selling candy and cinnamon toothpicks, learning to manage his inventory, save his money, and even expand the business beyond his elementary school. These are skills that help him later, in his teenage years, when Patten begins a gradual spiral into the world of drug dealing, a phase that follows not long after his failed suicide attempt and a period of institutionalization at a mental hospital.

Life is hard for Patten, but as he grows older and learns from his mistakes, he discovers he is surrounded by friendship and meaningful relationships, and that he is an intelligent individual with a great deal to offer the world. The journey to reach this realization is frequently painful, with many dark periods. At times there's too much detail of such periods in *Dummy*; nevertheless, Patten's memoir is an unusual, and valuable, glimpse at life as a dyslexic in the

1950s through the ’70s.

Lauren Kramer