ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Ellen Who? Story of a Secret Love Child
E. O'Neill
We Three Press
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Three Stars (out of Five)

In the United States, 30 to 60 percent of married people engage in infidelity, and 43 percent of Americans have been exposed to alcoholism in their families. These statistics alone make Ellen O'Neill's account of her own struggles with addiction in *Ellen Who?* a compelling read. O'Neill's story will also ring true with the 2 to 3 percent of children who are the product of infidelity.

O'Neill's early years were steeped in tension. Readers will immediately sense that something in this family just isn't right. Her mother's apparent perfection and her father's hatred drive O'Neill to cling to her sister and begin a lifelong pattern of substance abuse. As a toddler, she'd sneak into the garage to sniff gas fumes from the family car. It is details like this one that will grip readers.

With each passing year, O'Neill's efforts to avoid her father increase, and her feelings of separation from her family intensify. During her early teens, she eats to console herself, earning the degrading nickname "Ellen Melon" from her father. Readers watch as violence in the home escalates, eventually forcing O'Neill to leave after injuring her father by shoving a dresser at him.

Perhaps even more compelling than the situation in her home is its impact on O'Neill and her siblings: growing up too fast, taking risks, and seeking solace in food, alcohol, drugs, and relationships.

Her adult life, though seemingly free from the tumult of her parents' home, is by no means stable. O'Neill wends a trail of jobs, relationships, and coping strategies, and weaves an unsettling tale of repeated cycles of both physical abuse and substance abuse.

The story's urgency wanes during O'Neill's young adult years, but it picks up again when she submits to a method of "alternative" therapy. During the session, O'Neill has a vision: an in-utero "memory" that suggests that the man she has always called "Dad" is not her biological father. It almost seems this turn of events should be the climax of the story. The

things that follow—the DNA test, the confrontation between parent and child, and the you're-not-my-father moment—feel almost superfluous in the context of such a deeply damaged family.

Following this revelation, the second half of the book describes the fragmentation of the family and each person's road to recovery. As multiple family members decide to face their alcoholism, their stories of healing their broken lives are presented.

O'Neill's writing is clear and crisp. The true hallmark of the book is her relentless honesty. She hides nothing. And while the story may feel biased toward her own experiences rather than making sense of the family as a whole, it's a viewpoint she clings to openly. Readers will sense that O'Neill's focus on herself is her best means of self-preservation.

The book will serve as a startling and chilling—but, ultimately, healing—mirror for people who have endured dysfunctional family relationships, battled substance abuse, or wrestled with secret horror and shame.

Melissa Anne Wuske