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Even When Life Doesn't Play Nice: One Child's Journey from Unfortunate Beginnings

Patricia Christian Punches
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This memoir aims to be an inspiring tale of a child's perseverance as she grows to successful adulthood despite difficult circumstances. The author is to be commended for her authentic voice and forthrightness. However, the story fails to achieve the appreciable level of substance and interpretive thought that a good memoir requires.

Patricia Christian Punches was born in 1950 in Decatur, Illinois; her "unfortunate beginning" is that her mother was overcome by illness when Patricia was an infant. Her heartbroken father never remarried, and she and her older brother were often left to fend for themselves. The live-in housekeepers hired in succession were neglectful, slovenly, incompetent, and even thievish.

In one touching scene, second-grader Patty awoke alone in the house, dressed, and went to a neighbor's house, where she always met a classmate to walk to school. "His mother, Mrs. Lehman, upon answering the door said, 'Patty, it's ten o'clock and school has long been in session.' As I must have looked confused and frightened, she empathetically assured me that it would be okay and proceeded to pin a note on my dress for the teacher to read."

Another scene vividly illustrates the maid's negligence: Arriving home from a movie, Patty and her father found the kitchen overrun with cockroaches. "Dad, out of disdain rather than fear, emphatically instructed, '*Quiet down and start stompin*'!'" Punches describes these scenes so matter-of-factly that they seem amusing rather than horrifying, and most of the rest of the book is bucolic and sweet.

At age seven, Patty joined the Good News Club, and sat with other children in the basement of a neighbor who taught them Bible stories and encouraged each one to "receive Jesus into his or her heart and come to know Him in a deep and personal way." One day, the lady dismissed the other children, took Patty behind a curtain, and had the girl "repeat after her in prayer, receiving Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior." The author credits her success to her faith: "I truly believe my emotional recovery and feeling of security was rooted in God, a relationship which began with my strong commitment as a child."

Punches idolizes her father and doesn't skimp on the adjectives when describing him: "For more than being an intelligent, industrious entrepreneur, I deeply respected him as an utmost honest and caring man." She does not resent his failure to provide proper care for her and her brother during their young and vulnerable years.

In fact, Punches seems blissfully oblivious to the difficulties of her childhood. As a result, her "unfortunate beginnings" do not seem like much of a hardship at all, and she offers little in the way of the kind of deep self-reflection and interpretation that would make her story relevant or important to anyone other than her family and friends and those who share her religious beliefs.

KAREN MCCARTHY (June 28, 2011)

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