

(Extra)Ordinary Women: Ten Inspirational Stories

Kristin Bartzokis

KiCam Projects (Oct 16, 2018)

Softcover \$12.95 (216pp)

978-0-9991581-4-2

Kristin Bartzokis's *(Extra)Ordinary Women* features ten contemporary stories of women who've been through hell and back. The hardships they endured are related with their firsthand input and a steady authorial tone.

Each chapter is devoted to one woman, and goes over the tough incidents they faced and fought through; these include grief, bombings, severe health issues, substance abuse, and homelessness. They survive hardships including guerilla attacks in 1940s Greece and drug addiction in modern-day Illinois. Many stories have a health focus, and related medical issues are often defined and expanded upon.

The stories mostly follow the same narrative formula, and the inspirational factor tying them all together is that their subjects are survivors. Stories are enhanced with quotes from their subjects, giving the book a true quality of intimacy, like the feeling that arises in a support group when others take the time to listen to a person's long, difficult story.

Still, there is a sameness to how the stories are told that leads to some narrative distance, and at points the book can read like a catalog of woe. A passive tone reduces many of the women to the things that happened to them, simplifying them according to the virtues, from strength to resilience, that they gained through their experiences. Contextual asides pull focus away from the stories, while summaries are given preference over scenes, so that even shocking events don't have much urgency. Here, the sharp bits seem to have been tumbled smooth with time and repeated retellings.

These are true, emotional stories of perseverance. The remarkable women profiled survived incredibly difficult times, and their life stories are retold with compassion.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (September/October 2018)

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