

Listen Mama

M.S.P. Williams

Souls Take Flight (Jan 1, 2021)

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Listen Mama is a devastating coming-of-age memoir about the impact of a mother's mental illness on her son.

M.S.P. Williams's moving memoir *Listen Mama* is about the heartbreak of living with, and taking care of, a parent suffering from mental illness.

Williams was born in 1979 to a teenage mother, Selita. He grew up in Houston, Texas. His father was absent throughout his life. When he was six months old, Williams's face and head were burned; this necessitated multiple reconstructive surgeries. Numerous additional challenges arose throughout his childhood and teenage years, including poverty, bullying, emotional neglect, custody battles, and depression. Because of his mother's mental illness, he had to step in as a parent to his younger siblings. His accounts of such events are colored by courage and the hope that his mother would one day recover.

Made up of letters addressed to Williams's mother, written from 1995 to 2014, the book focuses on the emotions and reactions that followed the events of Williams's youth. Williams variously expresses anger, frustration, anxiety, and hope. A letter posted after his graduation from college expresses his disappointment with his mother, who, despite having some income of her own, relied on Williams to pay her bills and meet his siblings' needs, resulting in financial strains for him. Other letters record the deaths of friends and the lasting impacts of childhood bullying, recalling times when Williams was not confident enough to stand up to his bullies. Anguish and accounts of suicide attempts also arise. Less engaging are portions of the book that cover Williams's educational and work experiences.

But the letters also include animated coverage of music, movies, and sports, as when Williams writes about *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* just after an angry letter that documents a heated exchange between him and his mother. These more cheerful subjects temper the otherwise heavy material. Williams's letters also follow every stage of his mother's declining health, showing the effects of her illness.

The people around Williams are described in detail, both in terms of their personality traits and their actions. Williams's mother is preserved most as a distant, erratic personality, while his grandmother, at her opposite, is supportive and wise, encouraging her grandson and reminding him that his mother is unwell in difficult moments, as when she hurled angry accusations at him. Those outside of Williams's family are sometimes present, but accounts of them are brief and direct, as when work colleagues are addressed with single terms: they are nice, reasonable, impressive, or smart. Full pictures are also missing when it comes to the medical challenges surrounding Williams's mother's mental health struggles; they are foregone in favor of focusing on the challenges of Williams's relationship with his mother.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (February 11, 2021)

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