



Clarion Review ★★★★☆

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Losing the Atmosphere: A Baffling Disorder, A Search for Help, and the Therapist Who Understood

Vivian Conan

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Losing the Atmosphere is a heartbreak account of life with a rare psychological disorder, and of the events that broke a budding mind to pieces.

Vivian Conan's compelling memoir *Losing the Atmosphere* concerns dissociative identity disorder and its shattering effects.

Raised by parents who used socially normalized violence to discipline their children, including yelling and hitting, Conan's reality split into pieces. She had a "love mommy" and a "hate mommy," two sides of her mother that switched according to invisible variables. Rule infractions were punished, though rules were not explained. As Conan grew up, she needed treatment for her coping behavior: when stressed, she shut down or drifted away, finding a safe place deep in the recesses of her mind. This behavior progressed into a psychological disorder.

Conan's sense of equilibrium was disturbed by her parents' erratic, harmful actions. The cycle intensified as she encountered ordinary milestones, like school challenges and a job search. In one disturbing scene, Conan tells her father that she is taking fewer graduate courses than he wanted, and he shouts at her and menaces her until she hides in a closet. However, she found support with an understanding psychiatrist, whose comments on her case are included in the afterword. As Conan learned to understand herself and her needs, she took steps toward self-confidence and independence.

The book is unsettling as it recounts the lifelong effects of abuse that is experienced during childhood. Although Conan expresses affection for her parents and explains her process of forgiveness, the episodes she recounts are harrowing, and the book is quick to let her parents off the hook; they are confronted in therapy, not in real life. Still, the narration is compelling and prescient; Conan's early awareness of her family's dysfunction intensified her sense of despair.

Elsewhere, descriptions of post-war Brooklyn, including its fashions, culinary smells, and norms for women, evoke a lost city. Conan grew up in an industrial, blue-collar neighborhood with colorful neighbors from different backgrounds; in one anecdote, a landlady responds when Conan's father disassembles the family radiator and drags it into the road.

As the narrative fractures into multiple personalities, its pieces create an image of what Conan's life might have been like without the abuse, and of how trauma impeded her growth. Individual scenes are moving, and the book is suffused with grief, though Conan's anger often turns inward, causing further harm—unnerving, if it demonstrates the effects of dissociative identity disorder.

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