

My Mighty Mother

Texanna Fernandez

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Mental illness within a family is frightening, especially for young children who witness parental behavior they don't understand.

Author Texanna Fernandez attempts to explain the family consequences of bipolar disease, which can cause tremendous mood swings, and may be genetic. Fernandez is a retired teacher who now works with groups that support people with bipolar disease.

She tells the story from the point of view of a ten-year-old boy, Lasaro, who hasn't seen his mother for half his life. When the boy was five, he witnessed an episode that had her screaming and reaching for ghosts and objects that were not present. She spent two years in a psychiatric hospital, and the next two years working on getting her life in order. Lasaro anxiously waits to see her again. His father has prepared him for the changes. She's taking classes and "making her own medical decisions." Someone has counseled Lasaro on the proper way to greet her—no hugs. In a poignant moment, she reaches out a shaking hand and holds his hand in hers. They walk and talk and his mother explains that one day Lasaro may become bipolar. The story explains how serious effects of the disease can be avoided by making good medical decisions from the beginning—something his mother recognizes that she didn't do.

The information in the book is practical, but Lasaro often does not speak like a ten-year-old when he tells his story and presents the facts. For example, he says, "That day was the beginning of a gentle, strong, and compassionate relationship between son and mother." Later he says, "It has been through her strength of dealing with her weakness of the disease that she was able to become a productive member of society." At other times, the child's voice rings true, like when Lasaro explains that he was five he thought his mother had died.

There is no suggestion of what life was like for him during the intervening five years or how he felt when he learned that he might become bipolar was well. Nor does the author reveal whether the mother returns home to live with Lasaro, or has a separate life now. Grammatical and usage problems pop up as well ("safety that I had once knew" and "disturbing ideals," for example).

The color illustrations are child-like, with characters mostly facing forward rather than interacting with each other. Although, this may be a subtle way of reinforcing the separation between family members because of the mother's illness. The cover is amateurish and doesn't present the story or topic well. Pain, through lack of self-forgiveness, is illustrated here, rather than the mother's courage to heal.

Nevertheless, Fernandez offers hope to children with a bipolar parent by showing that they can have a future and that life can change for their parents. Lasaro's pride in his mother, "despite her disability," underscores that hope.

LINDA SALISBURY (July 1, 2010)

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