

Off My Knees: From Skid Row to Sunset Boulevard

Julie D. Summers

Ingram Sparks (Oct 13, 2022)

Hardcover \$24.99 (190pp)

978-0-578-25241-4

In the powerful memoir Off My Knees, a woman turns her life around after hitting rock bottom.

Julie D. Summers's *Off My Knees* is a compelling memoir about overcoming abuse, addiction, and time in prison.

After a tumultuous childhood marked by financial difficulties, her mother's volatility, her father's death, and sexual abuse at the hands of a family member, Summers found herself leading a precarious existence in her young adulthood. She also survived rape, disclosing the assaults to no one; as a coping mechanism, she began to act out. A pregnancy was followed by the decision to give her baby up for adoption. She was later manipulated into prostitution and was introduced to drugs and criminality.

Thorough in examining each event, this painful story is honest in chronicling its hard details. There are some jarring gaps in the narrative, though, including around how Summers overcame her looming addiction to methamphetamine during her time in prison. Still, there's a clear sense of Summers's emotions, including of her sorrow and her anger, leading to affecting passages, as with the book's account of an assault, which assumes the perspective of her inner child, conveying feelings of helplessness, terror, and grief. Later, Summers is also seen grieving her son's death after they found each other again.

In straightforward and concise terms, Summers also describes the inhumanity of the prison system. The book recalls how the inmates whom she served with, none of whom were incarcerated for violent crimes, were deprived of sunlight, fresh air, and exercise. The prison's guards are recalled to have engaged in violence against the inmates, including once after Summers met a guard's eyes, despite an unwritten rule against doing so, and was grabbed by her neck and slammed into a wall.

But there are contradictions and inconsistencies in the text between its sentiments and its details, including with its accounts of Summers's partner of several years, Aris, who is described as good and kind, but is also remembered to have been cheating on his sick wife with Summers and another woman. Aris is also positioned mentor, despite the fact that his interactions with Summers are shown to have been sexual and romantic, rather than based on guidance. Still, the book works toward a note of triumph, expressing joy at how Summers overcame each of the major challenges that she faced.

Written by a survivor of sexual assault, drug addiction, life in prison, and family deaths, the powerful memoir *Off My Knees* is about a confident personal reinvention.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (September 30, 2022)

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