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Autobiography & Memoir

Room for J
Daniel s. Hanson
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The author's youngest son, Joel, thinks he is God. As God, "J" doesn't need to eat, protect himself from Minnesota winters, or take his prescribed medication. J was diagnosed with schizophrenia in college, and since then, his parents and his two older siblings have waged war with his illness. Like many schizophrenics (perhaps as many as sixty percent) J doesn't feel "sick." While others view his behaviors as signs of his illness, J feels that "he is connected to another, more enduring and transcendent, reality." As a result, the family has become well acquainted with police officers, paramedics, lawyers, social workers, mental health professionals, and doctors, all in an effort to let J live his life in as productive and independent way as possible.

Adding to their struggle is society's attitude towards psychiatric disorders, which is still very different from the mind-set about other grave illnesses. Even people whose lives haven't been directly touched by alcoholism or cancer, heart attack or stroke, Alzheimer's or Parkinson's will discuss these diseases, support those with them, and raise funds to help eradicate them. But, according to the author, the same can't be said for mental illness. Though people with mental illness are no longer routinely warehoused in "insane asylums," in this book Hanson documents just how far there is to go.

Hanson worked for thirty years in key executive positions at four Fortune 500 companies and now teaches communications at Augsburg College; his previous books, *A Place to Shine* and *Cultivating Common Ground*, focused on creating a caring environment in the workplace. This one is not a chronicle of a family's daily battle with schizophrenia (unlike many books about personal struggles), and Hanson tells only a little about the family's life prior to J's diagnosis. Rather, it is a coming-to-terms story, acknowledging the soul-searching that is required to fight a lifelong battle. The voice of every family member, including J, is heard through journal entries, providing insight into how the illness affects each one. The book

describes dealing with grief and anger, and working within an under-staffed and under-funded system, while maintaining a life beyond the illness.

And, unfortunately, there is no triumphant ending, because there is no cure for schizophrenia. Says Hanson, “In spite of recent breakthroughs in our understanding of the brain, we still know so little about the causes and effects of mental illness and even less about how to cure it. With other incurable diseases, there is a measure of dignity in fighting the illness even when the battle is lost. With mental illness, there is little dignity. Even when the symptoms are gone, the stigma remains. The best one can do is learn how to cope.” For those who must cope, or for those who simply seek greater understanding, this book can help.