



## Songs from an Imperfect Life

**J. Ronald M. York**

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*Through both its lyrics and prose, Songs from an Imperfect Life is a memoir that mixes tragedy with happy memories to achieve a sense of thoughtful reflection.*

J. Ronald M. York's memoir *Songs from an Imperfect Life* works through the pain of childhood sexual abuse alongside hopeful and happy memories of his flawed but beautiful family.

Combining songs with a chronicle of the author's sexual and romantic encounters, the book works to make sense of York's connection to his parents and his religious upbringing. It begins with his childhood, when multiple men in his church sexually abused him.

As York grows, he comes into his own: as a gay man, as a musician, and as an artist and gallery owner. Hints from his past indicate that his own father was accused of sexual abuse, too, which York only discovers through letters found under a work bench. Happy times, college years, friendships, gut-wrenching loves, and manipulative partners combine in this full picture of a life.

In part, the book seems to be an effort to find closure. Traumatic events are considered alongside beautiful moments. York's memories expose the hypocrisy and tragedies that can hide behind church walls. The aftermath of sexual abuse is explored in all its complications; abusers are denounced, feelings are difficult to parse, and resultant attention is a complex element.

The book includes many characters who are hard to track; some are near anonymous, and York's boyfriends and abusers are not always established as distinct beings. York himself is well fleshed out, his account accented by his present-day reflections; they deepen the impact of the work.

Interspersed songs allow for a welcome break from the book's dark and sad themes, adding attractive white space to the page while also revealing more about York's emotional states. Some of the lyrics are clichéd, but they are also heartfelt and convey York's yearning for true love. Photographs likewise add depth and connection, especially those that show York as a very young man.

Some scenes are over too quickly, and the general lack of dialogue makes it hard to picture some of the repeating characters, including York's mother and father. The prose favors descriptions of emotions over active scenes between characters to show those feelings at play. The language around daily traumas is oddly dispassionate. The epilogue reflects on becoming stronger over time, even knowing that some wounds don't truly heal, and brings the story to its conclusion with dignity and coherence.

Through both its lyrics and its prose, *Songs from an Imperfect Life* is a memoir that mixes tragedy with happy memories to achieve a sense of thoughtful reflection.

LAURA LEAVITT (March 29, 2018)

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