



Autobiography & Memoir

Straightling: A Memoir

Cyndy Drew Etlar

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True tale of abuse at the hands of tormentors at “drug rehab” house reads like a horror story.

It is understandable if one is torn between reading *Straightling: A Memoir* in one sitting, and putting it down to hide under the bed covers. Because it’s so terrifying, as you read, you think the tale must be fiction. Yet this is a true story, written by Cyndy Drew Etlar, who barely survived her childhood and adolescence ... and, as they say, “lived to tell about it.”

Thirteen-year-old Cyndy’s best friend, Joanna, has a family. She has pocket money. And she lives to party. Her home is in a nearby town rife with rocky dirt lots and stripped-down cars; everything in sight is overlaid with graffiti. Cyndy believes that “life happens” in this hardscrabble place, and yearns for acceptance from the hard-luck “stoners” she encounters there.

So begins her tale. Better to be with kids who live on the edge than to be home where the abuse never ends. She looks up to her older sister Kim, who the reader never knows beyond learning that Cyndy thinks she is seriously cool and, consequently, steals from her—things like fancy underwear and a pin that says “Stoned.”

Cyndy is a wannabe; she doesn’t fit in anywhere. She’s longing for attention and looking for love, which is ultimately what leads to her incarceration at Straight Inc. It is ostensibly a drug rehab house, yet after the visiting parents leave, the doors are locked and the climate changes from concerned and caring to cruel and abusive.

Etlar writes about her experiences at Straight as though in real time. Readers are pulled into the story by the author’s description of sounds, smells, physical pain, and the fear she endures, like in this passage depicting a confrontation: “Her voice is like Skeletor. I don’t even want to know what her eyes look like. Feeling them drill into my down-turned scalp is enough.”

Newcomers to Straight are led everywhere by their belt loops, which demonstrates that

they have lost control over their lives. Schedules include regulated daily “rap sessions.” Patients are encouraged to snitch on each other. Those further along in their recovery make newcomers conform by cruel, threatening tactics and patients are pitted against each other to dissuade relationships.

Straight was a controversial drug rehabilitation program that existed from 1976-1993 in thirteen states. The writer was locked up (and, like her, many other teens were alleged to have been held against their will) in the Virginia facility. There were numerous allegations of abuse, and in every state where Straight had a facility, abuse was documented.

Etler’s stated purpose for writing this memoir is to help troubled teens. Her story is easy to follow because it is written chronologically. While it’s unclear whether the horrific details of this story are enough to help teens who are already in trouble, they might scare those on the brink from following the author’s path.

Though written for a young adult audience, the book also resonates for adults. With such experiences in her young life, it is to Etler’s credit that today she holds two degrees from the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She is a professional writer, editor, and teacher. A school edition of *Straightling*, featuring discussion questions and modified content, was recently released; her new book, *Coiled*, a prequel to *Straightling*, will soon be published.

Penny Hastings