

The Boy Who Loved Tornadoes

Randi Davenport

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Randi Davenport guides readers through the labyrinthine world of mental illness in her moving memoir, *The Boy Who Loved Tornadoes*, masterfully weaving decades of memories into a truly groundbreaking family portrait.

With tenderness and painstaking detail, Davenport revisits key moments in her life in an attempt to make sense of her son's illness. Poignant memories enliven the main storyline, which traces the alarming progression of Chase's psychosis and, eventually, his complete psychotic break. Scenes set in Chase's childhood—a school science fair where Chase shares his passion for tornadoes, or a disconcerting moment watching him twist round and round on a swing set—help humanize an illness too often held at arm's length. This willingness to analyze and pinpoint sensitive moments creates a sense of familiarity that connects the reader to Davenport's struggle and ultimately creates a better understanding of how mental illness slowly unravels a family. It is these moments, vivid and fleeting, that anchor the memoir in meaning.

This book also serves as a deeply felt critique on the shortcomings of a healthcare system ill-prepared to treat cases of rare mental and developmental disorders. The conglomeration of Chase's diverse symptoms and behaviors is a puzzle to the medical community and Chase's illness remains undefined. Davenport's meticulous research into the lack of treatment programs appropriate for her son, combined with her personal frustrations with the absence of a name for his illness, combine to produce a well-balanced portrayal of the problems faced by those caring for mentally ill family members in the United States.

The Boy Who Loved Tornadoes is a deeply personal memoir that reveals a mother's most private and deeply held hopes and fears. However, in Davenport's darkest moments, the absence of immediate family members is glaring. The strange lack of a reflection on any role Davenport's own mother, father, or sibling may have played throughout her struggles with Chase is incongruent with the level of intimacy she exemplifies throughout her narrative. This oversight is easily overshadowed, however, by Davenport's fluid and masterful use of language. A seasoned short fiction and essay writer, Davenport delivers a beautifully written, much-needed memoir that sheds light on the ways mental illness can reverse the orbit of a family and ultimately, how the efforts of one mother helped rebuild a life and family she thought she had lost.

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