

The Ordeal: A Journey from Misfortunes, Illness and Betrayal to Truth

Josephine Walden

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In her intriguing memoir *The Ordeal*, Josephine Walden reveals often uncomfortable truths about family, showing how learning to trust her instincts saved her from heartache.

Walden, a divorced mother from Michigan, worked as a nurse while suffering from multiple bouts of a “flu-like” illness. Then, during a short span of time in the 1980s, her mother and then father became ill and died. Facing resentment from family over her perceived lack of support and dealing with her sister’s reluctance to hand over family heirlooms, Walden was forced to confront the behavior of those she had loved all of her life and question whether being related to someone guaranteed their loyalty.

The memoir explores a variety of relationships and their dynamics, including those between sisters, colleagues, mothers and daughters, and exes. Walden saw her relationships evolve in unexpected ways and found that her most beneficial relationships were with the least-expected people—as with Brad, her ex-husband, who proved himself to be a loyal, caring, and valuable feature in her life. She also found support in others whom she’d known for short periods of time and who had no real obligation to help her. This contrasts with her relationship with her sister, to whom—despite being given ample reason for distrust—Walden continued to give the benefit of the doubt in the name of sisterhood, not wanting to break a bond with a close relative.

Driven by multiple ordeals and the impact they had on one another, including the medical troubles that are its constant, the memoir muses through the difficulties of assessing others’ deceit. It notes that it is built on unreliable memories of confusing moments, as with Walden questioning the information her sister provided but being unable to come back with a clear response. With hindsight, she notes that people tried to make her aware of those who were taking advantage of her and laments that she still failed to see past the love she felt for her sister, blinding herself to the truth.

Though it is thematically compelling, the book is hindered by interruptions to its arrangement. It progresses in a generally chronological order, with chapter headings noting the time frames of their particular scenes by listing the year or years when they occurred. However, the book is less consistent about noting when its coverage breaks away from the central narrative: it shifts to unrelated scenes and descriptions too frequently, and the effect is jarring. While these divergent stories result in deeper insight into Walden’s personality and enhance the understanding of her experiences, they also hinder the book’s flow.

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GAIL HOFFER-LOIBL (December 6, 2022)

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