

The Unbroken: A Firefighter's Memoir

Steve Serbic

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Steve Serbic's centered memoir *The Unbroken* is about confronting a traumatic past while pursuing the dream of becoming a firefighter.

Serbic grew up in a dysfunctional home with an alcoholic mother. The police made multiple visits to his house due to his parents' constant fighting. But as a child, he also admired his neighbor's father, who was a firefighter. Learning about that career, he envisioned a meaningful future for himself for the first time. Though he involved himself in dangerous antics in his teenage years, he turned his life around in adulthood to become a firefighter himself. In the course of that work, he also faced, and reckoned with, his tragic past.

The book's opening is gripping. It flashes forward to Serbic's career, depicting its hectic challenges through the account of how he helped to rescue a man who was stuck in a tree; his team arrived back at the fire hall just after midnight, and learned that his infant daughter had stopped breathing. Still, while his daughter was in the hospital, he had to report back to work.

Indeed, one of the primary themes of Serbic's book is family, and how families impact each member. His parents' relationship is used to portray the effects of alcoholism and violence in a home; Greg, Serbic's half brother, and his father had constant arguments, leading the former to several emotional breakdowns. Meanwhile, Serbic got in physical fights with his sister as his behavior became more and more unruly. Still, his happy memories help to balance these accounts: of watching hockey with his father, growing closer to parents into adulthood, and meeting and dating his eventual wife, Helen.

Nonetheless, the book's individual chapters are without clear focus. Each includes multiple events, with sudden breaks between them; their titles tend to only reference one, though. Marked changes in Serbic's life come to dominate them, as when Serbic's father pursued custody of him, or when growing parental support led him to make better decisions. Still, several events, as with a near-catastrophic explosion that inspired Serbic toward personal changes, command audience attention. The last chapter deviates from this anecdotal work to draw general lessons from Serbic's struggles with depression, childhood trauma, and work-related trauma. It also addresses the critical challenges that firefighters struggle with, like the stigma that surrounds mental health issues; it argues that social structure are necessary to assist them.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (May 10, 2021)

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