

## Underwater Daughter: A Memoir of Survival and Healing

**Antonia Deignan**

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*Underwater Daughter is a poetic memoir about transformation and transcendence after abuse.*

Drawing on a collage of dreams, poems, vignettes, lists, and epigraphs, Antonia Deignan's unusual memoir *Underwater Daughter* concerns the traumas and triumphs of the body.

Divided into three parts, the book begins with an impressionistic account of Deignan being sexually molested by her father, a respected hematologist and a talented pianist. In her poetic, hallucinatory description, she escapes from her father's indecent touch into an underwater fantasy. Her mother, a former dancer raised by brilliant, cultured parents in a world of cucumber sandwiches, was aware of the abuse, yet did nothing to intervene.

Deignan writes that, as a child, she confused her mother with God; since this all-powerful being did not come to her aid, she had no one to turn to. Among her peers, she was considered weird and called a "slut." Her body became both a site of trauma and a vehicle for triumph as she entered the world of dance via the Children's Theater Company and School, where at last she fit in. However, she was raped at the age of fourteen by a trusted older performer and abandoned ballet. Later, she sought help by attending a conference for sexual abuse survivors and convincing her parents to join her for a therapy session. She also found sanctuary in jazz dancing (though she had to fend off unwelcome advances in the process) and motherhood, through which she endeavored to break the cycle of abuse.

As improvisational as the music and dance that it expresses love for, the prose is playful throughout: nouns become verbs and adjectives; there's an evocative description of "the spider dust of darkened light" in Deignan's grandmother's attic and another of the "lizarding greasy potheads" who hung out in the bathroom of her high school. Still, while they hold interest, such linguistic turns also obscure meaning at times.

Further, although the memoir moves from Deignan's childhood to her middle age, its narrative is too selective and nonlinear. Acute attention is paid to the knotting of a thread, for example, while significant events such as the death of her niece, the births of her children, and her marriage are mentioned only in passing. More focus is devoted to physical details than anything else: there's coverage of Deignan's mother's scoliosis, an accident that left one of her father's legs six inches shorter, and a cycling accident. From these pieces emerge a partial sense of how Deignan learned to reconfigure the impact of her physical and psychic pains to achieve healing and forgiveness.

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SUZANNE KAMATA (January 3, 2023)

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