

**Jorgensen, L. (2015). First Gear: A Motorcycle Memoir.  
Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc.**

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Lorrie Jorgensen's book, "First Gear: A Motorcycle Memoir", captures her triumphant journey through trauma and how she comes to forgive and heal in this Odyssean narrative. In this literary piece, Jorgensen reminisces on the conflicts and traumas she struggled with, leading up to her earlier adulthood while riding her motorcycle through Eastern Canada. Her heroism is translated through her bravery and remarkable transparency in this delayed coming of age story. Jorgensen explores the progression of her family's relationships, and how the unpacking of her trauma leads to her metamorphosis as an individual.

The family dynamic in Jorgensen's childhood is ruled by patriarchy and secrecy. This linear passage of power is passed down from Eric's father to her. The masculine domination of Jorgensen's body is instilled through the sexual and physical assaults from her father and her male partners Peter and Lenny. Furthermore, this oppression is reinforced from her mother's expectations of gender conformity and compliance to male control. Jorgensen expresses that her mother "will always protect the powerful men in her life" (p. 233). The lack of parental support is showcased when Bev uses Jorgensen's pregnancy with Peter as revenge, playing on Eric's perverse interpretation of infidelity. Bev offers no emotional loyalty when Jorgensen is forced to go through with an abortion by Eric's commands. She describes "feel[ing] like [she] was being

punished” (p. 116) by Bev. Ironically, Jorgensen was first taken off birth control (without Eric's knowledge) because of her mother's disapproval with her sudden weight gain. This insistent back and forth power struggle between her mother and father pulls at Jorengenson's adolescent confidence.

Bev is confronted by her mistakes and regrets them every day when she looks at her daughter. Their relationship is turbulent and Jorgensen questions the value of her role as a daughter. Bev is resistant to Jorgensen because she sees in her the infidelity, her inability to protect herself and her own daughter from abuse, her faulty marriage, and finally her own skewed sense of jealousy of her daughter. Bev reflects on the ways “[h]e used to hit and beat [her] up too” (p. 233), suggesting that she raised Jorgensen the only way she knew how. Bev constantly tries to change Jorgensen to fit the mold of an ideal feminine daughter - to somehow make her more attractive - suggesting that in Bev's eyes, it is not too late for Jorgensen - she can still grow up and find a man to take care of her. Perhaps, that is why Bev reinforces gender norms and domestic attitudes. Throughout Jorgensen's reflections on Bev, Jorgensen begins to recognize it was not only spite that made Bev encourage her to conform to gender expectations, but rather her own experiences navigating the patriarchy. Bev attempts to give Jorgensen the tools to navigate the systems of power and oppression in their lives. Jorgensen accounts a time when Bev forces her to go buy false eyelashes - ones that she wears. Jorgensen describes shamefully purchasing them while her mother waits in the car for her. Her experience made her feel like she “robbed the store” (p. 202). Purchasing fake eyelashes paralleled breaking the law, an uncrossable moral absolute. Similarly, no matter the impetus, her mother robbed her of her right to dress how she

wished.

Jorgensen's personal growth is showcased in her trials and tribulations while riding her motorcycle Thelma D, mirroring her reflections on her adolescent and childhood trauma. While under the guardianship of her two parents Bev and Eric, she endured years of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Her ten-day motorcycle trip encompassed these painful but liberating memories. Although challenged by this trip of dangerous highway driving and frustration from inconveniences she is able to accomplish serenity through this ride in solitude. The juxtaposition of the journey on her motorcycle and her childhood increases in intensity or declines in anguish as the two parallel each other. Jorgensen recalls feeling lost and absent from her life as she approached her mid 20's. While "depression claimed most of [her] life" (p. 120), in this decade, she finally confronts her trauma, the source of her misery. Jorgensen experiences liberation from Bev and Eric's control of her body, reclaiming physical agency through her struggles and journeys through mental health and MS diagnosis. She eats healthier, exercises and loses weight over the course of the rest of her life, developing a relationship with her body outside of the will of her parents. Similarly, she finds sexual and emotional satisfaction, not through the men, but rather through the women in her life. Through her relationship with Paula, she is given the freedom to live her authentic self.

Jorgensen is able to replace the unreliable people in her life and find individuals who she can finally trust. Her partner Paula, her brother Craig, and his wife Kathy fill in those missing gaps. In keeping with research around same-sex relationships, the power dynamics were more egalitarian. Jorgensen and Paula's relationship is strengthened with equal roles unlike those she

grew up around. Through these new relationships she has found a way to find space in patriarchy. In fact, as she confronts her old relationships and the patriarchy in court, it is the new relationships that offer her comfort and safety; everything from her gender expression to her sexuality changes while in close proximity to her abusers. Ultimately, despite failing to get justice in the court system and in fact even losing the illusion that she knew her biological father, she finds greater strength and peace. Perhaps this relationship to her sexuality is reflected in her relationship to her motorcycle, Thelma D, potentially an allusion to “Thelma and Louise,” an exploration of sisterhood in the face of masculine violence. In the film, Thelma experiences sexual violence, but finds support through her friend Louise. Jorgenson rides with Thelma D, a reflection of her own trauma, and her newly discovered sisterhood to the very end of the road, no matter how dangerous the path is.

Gender theorists, those in women’s studies, and those in education would be particularly interested in this book because of the first-hand account of how identity shifts based on relationships to society and family. The strength of the piece comes through the metaphor of the motorcycle journey. This narrative structure allows the audience access to emotionally challenging material in a more accessible way. Jorgensen is able to illustrate suffering and trauma through her attempts to literally and metaphorically move on down the road. However, the literature offers an example of a confrontation with her abuser that is not necessarily reflective of most physically and sexually abuse situations. This could potentially suggest that the only path past trauma is through a potentially retraumatizing experience. Due to the deeply personal nature of this memoir there is very little I would recommend to change it as it comes from personal experience that cannot be authentically rewritten.

Jorgensen captivates her audience as she free herself from resentment, anger, and sadness. Undoubtedly, she untangles the interconnected trauma and challenges that have impacted her up until adulthood. This is an overwhelmingly turbulent narration of living your true self. Ultimately, through self-discovery and perseverance, she is able to assert her unwillingness to give up on herself. Jorgensen becomes her own hero and seeks justice to reside the torturous memories of her father. Furthermore, the dimensions of her family are dramatically changed forever. Her relationship with her mother dies in its immaturity; however, new and stronger relationships take it its place. Through a period of adjustment, she comes to regain her spirit and even forgive.