

Greshner, Connie. (2020). Borderline Shine: A Memoir. Toronto: Dundurn Press.

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Connie Greshner puts her heart and soul on display in her memoir “Borderline Shine.” An insightful and honest portrayal of family violence, mental health, and addiction, takes the reader on a riveting adventure of a woman just trying to survive, and if she can, heal. Greshner explores the lifelong effects of trauma and the cycle of intergenerational violence, providing an inside look into the mind of those struggling. Through helping others, she found purpose. By putting her clinical skills to use, she was able to shine the light on her own indiscretions. she began to advocate for trauma-informed care and judgement-free support.

Greshner’s story begins as a child abandoned, struggling with her mother’s death at the hands of her father. Bouncing between homes and schools, she begins to struggle with rage and depression in a world in which she feels she was never meant to be happy. She becomes stuck in the recurring patterns of her own behaviour resulting in promiscuity, aggression, addiction, impulsive behaviour, suicidal tendencies, and bad relationships. Despite these difficulties, she is able to successfully complete a Master’s degree in mental health. Though time passes before she is able to put this to use, the story of Connie Greshner speaks to the resiliency of an individual who took many tries to get it right in the exhaustive search to figure out who she was and what she was meant to do. As life experience shifts perspective, she is able to prioritize healing, family, and the pursuit of her goals.

Greshner offers first-hand insight into the lifelong effects that can result from childhood

trauma and the stigma of mental health. As a child essentially orphaned, she begins to have issues with abandonment and a belief that people are not to be trusted. Instead of support, she is made to feel shame for her actions – fueling her future addictions and leading to a downward spiral of depression and suicidal tendencies. In desperate attempts for acceptance, she would turn to the attention of men, ignoring any red flags or obstacles. When it became clear this wasn't enough, she craved the home she never had, placing insurmountable pressure on her relationships. Even after priorities began to shift, the fight to foresee a positive outcome for herself was ongoing. Motherhood and family life became both a confirmation that love was possible and a resource constantly at risk. Childhood trauma had become the defining figure in individual development – a fact Greshner would struggle with for the rest of her life.

Often resulting in unhealthy coping mechanisms, a tendency to repeat history, and an inability to heal, Greshner speaks to the effects of intergenerational violence. By repeatedly referring to time folding back on itself, she highlights the inability to move forward while finding both a sense of comfort and fear in recurring patterns. Having been labeled a Greshner, a family known for violence and alcoholic tendencies, she is forced to feel shame before her own cycles could even begin: “It is never spoken, but the sin of my father has stained me” (p. 12). Despite this, there is a need for family connection. Greshner offers interesting insight into perpetuating unhealthy relationships by portraying the complicated history between her brother and herself: “Steven’s rolling rage and pain was the only thing that came close to my own. There was some comfort in seeing my own living hell reflected in him” (p. 72). To be understood and unjudged by those with a similar history, allowed for a continuation of behaviours that others in her life

withdrew from, mirroring the experiences and violence that defined her youth: “Even at that age I could see time bend, the cycle repeat...Sometimes I simply left them to go at it and walked the silent streets of the town, despairing of the drink and the rage that defined my family” (p. 39) It was many years before Greshner was able to disconnect for the safety and sanity of her own growing family. In the end, this complex relationship allowed for love and forgiveness. Reconnecting meant acknowledging that everyone had their own journey to healing. By understanding their struggle, she was better able to understand her own. As she healed, she was able to understand the discrepancies in support from those around her: “My lens was less distorted by fear and anger and pain, and the clarity opened me up to accept what others did give me” (p. 171). As the relationships around her strengthened, the chains that once weighed her down, became a place of comfort.

The resiliency of an individual is defined by their ability to make the most of what is given, grow within themselves, and ultimately survive. Having indulged in various forms of self-harm, Greshner shows us that even at our lowest we can find strength in our basic survival instinct. She shows us that through experimentation and hardship, it is still possible to find the light. As her brother Steve insists, we must all play the hands we’re dealt. We must take the things that cause us pain and use them to become who we were meant to be – to become better than the pain that hurt us, or at the very least, endure it:

I have learned that I am as safe now as I ever will be. Achievement and success, or a cabin in the woods, will not increase my safety or protect me from pain. Pain is always possible. I can make choices to improve my health and wellness, but I also know that at any moment I may get played a wild card. I only have control over my own choices, and I choose to embrace the present with gratitude and trust myself to handle what happens (p. 230).

By accepting light and love back into her life, Greshner was able to build on the foundations she has created within her family, dream past her comfortable routines, and be tenacious in the pursuit of her career ambitions. Working within the field allowed for Greshner to learn coping mechanisms and clinical approaches. Suggesting techniques for others meant acknowledging and working on the same things in herself

It took knowing what didn't work to know what would. Greshner stresses the fact that receiving insufficient support can often intensify rather than help mental health. Labeled as 'chronically suicidal' and 'treatment resistant', Greshner repeatedly came into contact with services and clinical teams that felt largely indifferent to her struggles and circumstances. Med-focused, "cold, impersonal psychiatrists who had surveyed [her] from behind their intimidating desks and masks of authority" (p. 91) only increased insecurities about being unworthy of time or love. A lack of trust in the system meant she would need to advocate for herself or quit trying. She became resentful toward "a system that [she] was angry at for not being the salvation [she] hoped for, personally and professionally" (p. 123). Able to see the fault in her own clinical experiences, Greshner now advocates for the importance of trauma-informed care:

Trauma-informed care means shifting the view from "what is wrong with you?" to "what has happened to you?" Having a trauma-informed lens as our primary lens allows us to always remember the following: Our core beliefs about our safety and the trustworthiness of others, and ourselves, are formed from experience. Our experiences influence our perceptions. Conversely, our perceptions shape the reality we experience. If we have been attacked, assaulted, or abandoned, we will be vigilant for those things. When we are scared, we may see scary things. If I see attack, I will defend. You may not see attack. Your eyes are different than mine. Within my reality, my behaviour makes sense. You cannot compare realities. That's why normal is a meaningless word. Common or usual, sure. Those are nonjudgmental words (p. 234).

Trial and error proved to be a valuable learning experience in the life of Connie Greshner. When faced with hardships beyond what anyone should have to go through, she did falter. She did make mistakes. She did it all with shame. She did it with an addiction. She made it through. She found her purpose. She let people in. She let the world in.

Anyone with an interest in supporting their loved ones, who want to better understand the hardships of others, and those who work within the field of mental health, will benefit greatly from this memoir. In an academic setting, those in Sociology, Psychology, and Child Development would do well to take a read. Greshner has an amazing way of drawing the reader in. You hope for her, you cheer for her, you wish you were there to support her, and most of all, Greshner offers the opportunity to understand her. Through only the opportunity to view one's entirety, are we able to get a clear picture of a person's behaviours. And only through seeing what doesn't work, can society finally get it right.