



Thanh, Yasuko. (2019). Mistakes to Run With: A Memoir. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton.

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Yasuko Thanh's memoir, "Mistakes to Run With", is an in-depth recount of her struggles growing up in British Columbia as a young prostitute. This autobiography of Thanh's life offers insight to her life as a teenage runaway who experienced childhood neglect that developed into troubles with prostitution, low self-esteem, and mental illness. Throughout her book, we are exposed to the internal conflict Thanh faces between wanting a better life for herself and not wanting to leave what feels familiar. Based on the Buddhist Eighteen Levels of Hell, each chapter guides us through the many "hells" that shaped Thanh and inspired the creation of this memoir. Despite the hardships, including a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and bouts of depression, Thanh represents what it means to be resilient in the face of adversity as she pursues her dreams of becoming a writer, earning a degree, and becoming a mother.

Thanh's memoir begins by reflecting on her neglectful childhood in Victoria, British Columbia, with her immigrant parents while living in poverty. She often speaks of the attention and love her parents failed to provide while caring for her younger brother, David. Her childhood can be described through the report of a psychologist that reads: "Her responses on the Rorschach are the type of responses that might be expected from a neglected and deprived child and leave me wondering about the adequacy of care that has been provided by her parents, even in the most

basic physical areas” (p. 6). Thanh’s references to her childhood are used to emphasize what shaped her adolescent and adult years, from dropping out of school to becoming a prostitute to what influenced her own parenting styles. “You are valuable to me,” the words Thanh had longed to hear from her parents but never received despite her various academic and athletic achievements caused her to feel unloved and uncared for by her family (p. 8). Throughout the remainder of the memoir, Thanh suggests that her self-destructive behaviours of drug use, self-harm, and prostitution are rooted in her childhood neglect and feelings of inadequacy.

In Thanh’s adolescent years, shortly after escaping her home life, her encounters with prostitution began. The emotional memories she uncovers of rape, substance abuse, and her abusive relationship with her pimp, Avery, are simply heartbreaking. These painful years led to her acceptance that: “As a sex worker, you’ve got to be tough, you’ve got to assume that every man is a serial killer. Forget his better nature or his nobler self. Don’t fool yourself into thinking people have the capacity for self-control, for compassion, for understanding. It’ll get you in trouble every time. Don’t let your guard down for even a second,” further explaining the fear for safety that herself and other women were forced to endure (p. 99). Thanh continues to accentuate how sex workers are treated by society, pimps, and the men they interact with, causing a “dread [of] going to work with an intensity [she’d] never felt before, [her] fear of being killed the outcome of an unlived life” (p. 138). An example Thanh provides of the trauma and abuse she survived was the beating and rape that occurred after a bad date, something that was a common occurrence when working on the track (p. 115). Despite Thanh’s desire to make money and have the lifestyle she yearned for, the track she worked on caused inherent pain and trauma that would affect her in the

many years to come.

Thanh also explores how her battle with low self-esteem that began as a child permeated into her romantic relationships and her capabilities as a mother. She finds herself believing she is “second best . . . less valuable . . . deficient in all the ways that matter – beauty, youth, obedience,” throughout her romantic relationships, doubting her quality, feeling she deserves to be cheated on, and is unworthy of love (p. 91). Similarly, she feels she has failed her children as her memories of her “children’s birth, their parties, their laughter – [she] viewed with detachment” (p. 249). Thanh’s low self-esteem was undeniably ingrained within her childhood and her career in prostitution, providing readers with a heart-wrenching testament to the importance of parenting that encourages and nourishes a child.

Both childhood and adulthood brought the struggles of mental illness into Thanh’s life, allowing readers to empathize with her on an issue that is common in our society. Thanh explains how “[m]any children grow up unloved, but they don’t go to the extremes I did . . . this is a story about how borderline personality disorder . . . develops in a child” (p. 43). Thanh’s diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and depression uncovers the issues of childhood neglect that affected her self-worth, mood, and ability to raise her children as she “needed an antidepressant and a mood stabilizer to get through the day” (p. 247). Thanh’s frequent examples that openly expose the trauma she endured draws a connection to mental illness that is undeniably powerful and creates a touching relationship between Thanh and the reader.

Throughout her memoir, Thanh highlights the good and the bad memories from her past with vivid detail, profoundly impacting her audience’s emotions. Thanh interprets her experiences

in the sex industry as life lessons as she overturns her pain into strength while reaching her goals of becoming a mother and an author. Prior to the separation from her pimp and boyfriend, Avery, Thanh wrote her future in her notebook: "You will not be homeless. You will not go hungry. You will continue to write. You will get your break. You will make your own money. You will have the options you have created" (p. 174). Thanh's persistence and drive to improve herself and achieve her dreams symbolize the impact of believing in oneself. Moreover, her resiliency in being a wife and a mother of two while earning a university degree is an inspirational story itself and proves to those readers in her position that one can do anything they set their mind to. Thanh's closing lines of her memoir read, "win or lose, I'd written a book . . . nothing could hurt me now," providing the raw emotions and struggles she endured until this point (p. 257). To Thanh's readers, she embodies the strength and resilience needed to achieve one's dreams, and her achievements are undoubtedly the epitome of what it means to come out on the other side of adversity.

The intended audience of Thanh's memoir is for those in the field of sociology – perhaps those pursuing women's studies, mental illness in society, or deviance in childhood specifically. Additionally, I believe it can also be used for psychology students who are learning of the impacts trauma and neglect can inflict on mental health and one's life trajectory. This story would also be inspirational to those who are in a similar position as Thanh once was, experiencing prostitution, abusive relationships, or battling addiction and mental illness.

Thanh's memoir is a very intriguing story that exposes her life in an extremely intimate way. I believe "Mistakes to Run With" is a well-written book that provides first-hand experiences that have the power to open society's eyes to the systemic issues that exist within our youth and

adolescent populations. As shown throughout Thanh's story, there is little support for adolescents who are facing the negative consequences that arise from trauma and neglect. For an individual who may be experiencing these unfortunate situations, this book can be a step in the right direction – to encourage rehabilitation and the chasing of dreams. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Thanh's memoir, and it changed the way I think of taboo topics such as prostitution as our society often fails to acknowledge the causes of it. Despite the strengths of this book, I often found myself confused with the timeline of events as they were presented in an unorganized manner. Ultimately, I would highly recommend Yasuko Thanh's memoir to those studying the topics of mental health and other societal issues, or to those who enjoy the moving and inspirational stories of those who have struggled.