



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

Reviewed by: Emily Cooper, MacEwan University

“Mistakes to Run With”, written by Yasuko Thanh, is a memoir of a bright girl who was dealt an unfortunate hand of cards throughout her life. Thanh’s book is an intimate look into her life story as she reveals the good, the bad, and the ugly experiences of growing up in a poverty-stricken family with parents who have a dysfunctional and toxic relationship. This memoir is about survival in the streets and how she battled through adversity, whether drugs, sex work, mental health, or unhealthy relationships. She demonstrated the impact that her childhood had on her future decision-making as to how it helped her to survive but also drove her to the edge. The theme of love is prevalent throughout the memoir as she was missing it in her relationship with her family, so she searched for it elsewhere. There is also a theme of resilience as there were many internal and external battles she had to overcome.

“How could I be “hard” when I was obsessed with love and being lovable? An obsession rooted in my childhood” (p. 125). Thanh had an obsession with love. To be loved or to love others, she was always craving reciprocated love. For much of her childhood, she did not receive the love she needed, often acting out to get her parents attention. She described her upbringing with her parents as giving her everything, “yet failed to provide with what I needed.” (p. 257) The disparity

of love created a void within her. She even resorted to religion and God for love and some self-comfort. The lack of care and comfort her parents gave her, the more it would eat away at her self-esteem and understanding of what love is. This is apparent when she wrote about herself losing her virginity, there was no love like she expected there would be, but she enjoyed the fact that someone needed her. This theme of love had transcended throughout her life as she entered the sex work field. Her everyday life in this work was fueled by her idea that love had to be earned, and this was a way to receive it. She often would fall for the pimps that would supposedly protect her when she needed them. Her peculiar sense of love would lead her to believe that they were there for her and only her. She continually would fall for men who simply paid attention to her because she never received it as a child, so in her mind, it is the comfort and care that she needed to fill that void. Often, she would be the second choice to her current love obsession, a theme rooted from her childhood with the birth of her younger brother. She always felt like second best as her parents would give him attention and love, but the same love was not given to her.

Although Thanh had been through many troublesome relationships throughout her life, that love did not expire when she had her children. She has always dreamed about raising a large family, one that was full of love and hospitality. She described her ideal family:

A huge family—seven, eight, eleven kids, pit bulls and Rottweilers, tomcats, budgies, goldfish, guitars, sunny porches, the door always open. A pot on the stove day and night for anyone who came by. Who hungered. Who knew that, at my house, any comer would find nourishment. Love (p. 147).

Her children were a fresh start for her as she wanted to give them the childhood that she never had. She encouraged them to be whatever they wanted to be and reminded them that she

would love them no matter what. She envied the bond that her children had, something she did not have growing up. Thanh got tattoos of her children's names with flaming anchors above them. She described her reasons for getting them, "I wanted to be anchored. By my children, by love." (p. 233). This demonstrates the love of her children that she knows will not leave her or place her in a position of second best.

There is a theme of resilience throughout this memoir. She has been forced to fend for herself her whole life, creating a thick skin. Despite the many instances where she was faced with suicidal thoughts and traumatic experiences, she continued to survive. Although she was in and out of institutions, there was still a drive within her to do better for herself. Her resiliency is represented by the title of this book. She has made many mistakes in her life, but she chooses to move forward and grow. She does not fit the mould of what society expects of a woman who is academically accomplished as she was, but her mould is what made her resilient. Her story makes the reader challenge their cognitive biases about women in sex work and the stigma surrounding it. The lack of safety within the field forces the women to be street smart and hyperaware as they risk their lives every meeting they have. She experienced sexual, physical, and emotional abuse starting at a young age, which in turn depleted her mental health and self-esteem. What got her through those tough times was to write. It was like therapy to her, an escape from the realities of her everyday life and have the freedom to create her own.

At the beginning of this memoir, she notes that it was written for her children. This frames the memoir as a learning curve for her children to understand that people make mistakes, but they can also grow from them and come out the other side as a better person. Her message was to not

dwell on the past but to learn from it and not repeat it. When she wrote about her children in the book, she would demonstrate that she wants the best for her children, and she will love them unconditionally no matter what choices they make. Her intention was to show that you do not have to be a product of your upbringing. Although it may create barriers, it does not define you. She mentions the word enantiodromia, which is “the way things change-the tendency for night to become day, for everything, given enough time, to turn into it’s opposite” (p. 137). This is symbolic of her life course as she was a product of her parents, but over time she became her own person, which ended up being their opposite. She became loving, caring, and a good parent. She was there for her daughter through everything. Whether it was through her mental health journey or showing up to her gymnastics lessons. She listened to her children and supported them.

The memoir immersed you in her life at an interpersonal level, giving the reader a sense of what her experiences felt like and meant to her. Although it gave the reader insight into what it was like for her, the book lacked any understanding of what her family had been through. She briefly discusses her parents immigrating to Canada and their meeting, but there were many questions left unanswered. Perhaps if the reader knew more about her parent’s upbringing and life in Canada before her arrival it would explain more of why they are such distant parents. It makes the reader question if there were cultural differences in their upbringing or if they lacked a relationship with their family. This could also apply to her brother as not much information was told about his well-being. The readers may be curious about how he grew up, considering they both grew up with the same disconnected parents, but he received more care. This would allow the readers to understand the differential treatment and how it can alter someone’s life path.

These unanswered questions would intrigue the academic audience of many areas such as sociologists, psychologists, women's studies, and social work. Thanh's memoir could be utilized as a case study to understand her experiences within societies at varying angles. Whether it is to observe her position as a woman within society, her childhood neglect, or the external societal forces and changes that she had to cope with through out her life. This memoir was raw and engaging as it makes you realize how fragile, yet resilient family structures can be.