



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

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Yasuko Thanh's book, "Mistakes to Run With", is a heartbreaking yet inspiring memoir that explores neglect and how it intertwines with fear and bravery. Thanh celebrates dishonourable mistakes yet acknowledges the ugly and mortifying consequences that follow. This book admires and embodies survivors of abuse, prostitution, and trauma without a pretentious purpose of glorifying their survival. Throughout the memoir, Thanh risks her character, self-worth, and even her life to feel loved. In doing so, Thanh becomes the victim of abusive relationships leading to years of emotional instability, self-harm, and substance abuse to cope with the void of emptiness she has dealt with since childhood. Thanh, an academically intelligent woman, finds comfort and beauty in writing and devotes herself to becoming an author. Thanh's passion for writing gives her hope to realize her dreams; she uses it as motivation to continue to scrape by, endure, and survive. This book reflects how inherent loneliness and burdensome experiences can influence and shape one's future. Thanh's book focuses on five central themes, all contributing factors to one another; she suggests that neglect at a young age leads to delinquency, fear of abandonment, and low self-worth, while an ongoing passion for writing becomes her means of escape.

Thanh finds herself in an unstimulating household where she feels overshadowed by her younger brother, who steals the spotlight and attention away from her; this causes a memoir-long

pursuit of feeling accepted. At an early age when Thanh's academic and athletic accomplishments go unappreciated, her existence seemingly becomes unnoticed, and loneliness becomes her new reality, "sadness coexisted with happiness like rats in the walls of a house-trapped but stay hidden, and in that darkness continuing to breed" (p. 15). Thanh's feelings of neglect sparked the beginning of her depressive and self-abusive behaviours. In turn, she learns to hide her emotions and sadness due to the fear of becoming unbearable and idealizes those who seem strong, independent, and confident. The author consistently provides examples of the emotional deprivation and neglect she experienced to allow the reader to understand and sympathize with her character. The author experiences medical neglect at the hands of Avery, her pimp. Thanh gets sexually assaulted, beaten up, and taken advantage of by her customers; however, Avery shows no remorse and asks her to go back to the street to make more money. Avery impregnates her and expects an abortion but fails to provide support or even a ride to the abortion clinic. Thanh's experiences of neglect encourage the reader to consider the deterioration to one's mental health when affection is no longer present.

Delinquency becomes a part of her character from a very young age. Thanh becomes a model student in school, albeit living a double life as she is secretly stealing her father's antidepressants and getting high in the girls' washroom. The lack of parental attention led to Thanh pretending to be a well-mannered student in the hope of receiving love, as she was desperate for care and emotional fulfilment. The author states, "my craving for acceptance and my inability to express my need made me misbehave..." (p. 7). Thanh shoplifts, abuses drugs, plays with knives, leaves home and begins a life of prostitution at fifteen years old. Her rebellion stems from a source of dissatisfaction and an obsessive desire to find love: "my need for love made me exploitable; I

wore my weakness like an open wound" (p. 60). However, rather than leading to feeling free, her delinquency led to adverse consequences such as being homeless, sexually assaulted, and developing a drug dependency. Additionally, Thanh spent time in maximum security jail for young offenders, the epitome of juvenile delinquency. It appears to the reader that Thanh's motivation to be in control of her life was causing angst-like feelings, forcing her to find her purpose and be free as she states, "I would die if I stayed. I was sure of it. If I remained strapped to what felt like a time bomb, ticking away while someone out there was living the life that was supposed to be mine, I'd never grow up." (p. 43). Thanh's brave but foolish and rebellious choices invoke worrisome feelings in the reader and allow the reader to understand the significance and impact that decisions can have on one's life.

By portraying Thanh's tolerance for violence at the hands of the men she desperately wants to feel loved by, the memoir depicts her fear of abandonment. Thanh consistently mistakes humiliation for admiration "...ritual beatings, and the bonding that occurs between aggressor and victim, the scars left behind, serve as proof that someone cared enough to hurt you" (p. 105). It is up to the reader's interpretation if Thanh genuinely believed that the men cared for her or if she forced herself to believe in their false love.

The author dates Kyle, who is bipolar and suffers from paranoid delusions; Kyle restricts her freedom to a frightening extent as she states that "whenever I left the room to buy food I had to ask his permission, spell out my itinerary, my travel routes, my expected time of return" (p. 188). Despite Kyle's controlling behaviour and Thanh's subsequent loss of freedom, she remained loyal and abided by his rules due to her fear of being alone and abandoned. The writer's constant

self-sacrifice to keep her partners satisfied turns into a cycle of toxic relationships that deteriorates her self-worth. The author's honesty encourages the reader to think about why Thanh chooses and tolerates destructive relationships while reinforcing that her behaviour stems from insecurity and the lost opportunity to experience and feel worthy of love.

The writer's low self-esteem is apparent through her choices and demonstrated by her intrusive thoughts and self-criticism. Thanh punishes herself due to feelings of worthlessness "When I'd been naughty, I punished myself by inflicting small cuts on my arm..." (p. 31). Thanh self-harms to feel alive and to feel emotions, further creating a sense of sorrow within the reader. Unable to face her reality and unable to deal with her trauma, Thanh creates Michelle, an alter ego: "She was tougher than me, and in that vein more willing to accept the things I feared – arrest, disease, violence, murder – for the sake of love." (p. 138). Thanh's low self-esteem also causes her to doubt her skills; this leads to a failure to recognize her accomplishments. Thanh wins a competition for the best short story in Canada. However, instead of celebrating her success, she wonders: "Was everyone nuts? I couldn't believe the win had anything to do with the strength of my writing...I concluded that the story had won only because it was politically correct." (p. 234). The author's deep-rooted insecurity leads to a life of constant self-sabotage, leaving her without lasting peace or happiness. The impact of low self-esteem on Thanh's life makes one recognize and reflect upon their habits and thought patterns, further creating an engaging atmosphere for the reader.

The author's passion for writing gives her a raw strength to strive through hardships, providing her with bursts of hope and courage. Thanh writes to be free, as she states, "my writing

would do this. Wash away my pain." (p. 173). She lives inside her stories and they act as a defense mechanism to shield her from her harsh reality. At times, Thanh makes illogical choices to gain inspiration for writing, such as becoming a parent to be able to write from a perspective of a mother. Other times, literature allows her to cope; she states: "I carried on writing, a maladaptation to modify anger and sadness..." (p. 217). Thanh's commitment to writing allows her to gain validation within herself and dare to aim high by competing for the \$25,000 Rogers Writers' Trust Prize and ultimately winning. Her journey with literature brings satisfaction to the reader as it provides an alternative to the book's melancholic tone.

Thanh's intended audience is namely troubled young adults, criminologists, sociologists, developmental psychologists, or social workers attempting to gain insight into the impact of one's experiences. The book could also be an asset for those interested in creating rehabilitation services targeted towards troubled youth and sex workers. The author does a phenomenal job of writing brutally honest chapters about her life course without filtering any humiliating elements. I find beauty in Thanh's honesty, vulnerability, survival, and resilience. This book gives a voice to those who could not share their stories, and a voice for the victims shunned through violence and addiction. However, I argue that the book ended abruptly without much focus on Thanh's success. Her diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder, which may have played a massive role in her questionable decisions, was barely explored, creating a lack of depth of analysis in her narrative. Overall, Thanh's book was an engaging and educational read that celebrated the importance of love and self-acceptance.