



Eckler, Rebecca. (2019). Blissfully Blended Bullshit: The Uncomfortable Truths of Blending Families. Toronto: Dundurn Press.

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Rebecca Ecker's book, "Blissfully Blended Bullshit", is a brutally honest take on the author's family relations and personal relationships that, while controversial in many ways, nonetheless provides an intriguing journey through the author's experience of family blending. Key to Ecker's experience are certain thematic elements, such as the belief of experiential learning as a means of navigating life, idealized perceptions of relationships, as well as prejudice and favouritism. These elements are expressed through Ecker's raw, unfiltered writing style, which by the end of the book becomes a prominent theme by itself, albeit a controversial and sometimes unpleasant one. Rebecca Ecker tells her story through a simple but efficient structure by establishing the setting of a problem, her decisions in response to that problem, and a post-event conclusion using advice she has later learned or has received from others. This structure combined with Ecker's uncut narrative makes "Blissfully Blended Bullshit" a unique and engaging read that is unique among its contemporaries.

One of the most prominent thematic pillars expressed by the author is the idea of experiential learning, or 'you live, and you learn'. The author's preference of personal, lived experience as a means of growth is evident from the beginning, and continues to be the author's most important belief throughout the book. The author expresses her disdain for "so-called experts

and well-meaning friends” on multiple occasions, dismissing their advice as inapplicable to her and her families’ unique situation (p. 109). Her conclusions will occasionally admit to now recognizing some value in the advice of others, however she only does so after having experienced the consequences of her actions herself. In the authors ‘reflections’ at the end of the book, she concludes with the belief that there was a right way to blend her family, listing several things she has learned in the process. “I will not repeat the same mistakes” is within her list, indicative of her belief of actions as the means of learning if she were to attempt blending a family again (p. 270).

There are many examples of idealized interactions that Ecker references in the book. The author approached the idea of blending a family with the belief that many details will get worked out along the way, and in many ways the book is presented as an example of the pitfalls of that practice. Early in the book the author confesses that she did not speak to her new partner about money at the beginning of their relationship, admitting that she had assumed her new partner would eventually help with finances, despite reading and being told by others that it is an important topic to discuss (p. 42). By the end of the book, she is not only proven wrong by her boyfriend showing very little fiscal responsibility in the relationship, but money also becomes one of the largest points of conflict for the couple, as well as a large topic of reflection for the author (p. 224).

Prejudice and favouritism are also running themes in the book. There are many examples, with prominent moments being when the author experiences what she perceives as prejudice from her husband and two daughters, along with occasions that the author demonstrates favouritism towards her daughter (p. 117). It is also noteworthy that her husband and his two daughters are referred to as ‘boyfriend’ or ‘Husband’, and “bonus children” for the duration of the book, with

the author and her biological children being the only ones mentioned by name. This is interesting when evaluated in tandem with the discussions the author has about loving one's children in a blended family, and the inherent imbalances in that process (p. 77). The author uses this and many other examples to conclude that expressions of love are complicated in blended families, exemplified by the inherent biases that parents have for their biological children (p. 80).

The uncensored opinion of the author is presented as a key selling point of her book, with the subtitle proudly stating that it contains “the ugly truth of blending families” (p. 1). Unapologetic in her approach, Ecker's perspective is blunt and unsympathetic, providing a visceral account of the events throughout each chapter, and is representative of one of the book's greatest strengths. The author's writing also gives valuable insight to the unpaid emotional and physical labour that women put into family and relationships, and the emotional and mental consequences of this labour going unnoticed. The behaviour of the author's now ex-husband at the end of the book as they divide possessions is particularly telling of the disregard that a partner can have for the effort of their spouse, whether emotional or fiscal (p. 252).

The blunt narrative approach the author uses is also one of the book's greatest weaknesses. While it is refreshing to see a no-holds-barred perspective that is visceral, vulnerable, and honest, the reality of the author's life as well as the author's attitude and actions throughout the book serves to undermine attempts at providing a generalized ‘truth’ on blending families for any family other than her own. The author's experience is effectively so personal that it becomes unrelatable to the experiences of others undergoing similar family blending. For example, her favouritism towards her biological daughter is difficult to ignore when she is talking about being ‘unfavoured’

by her husband and his daughters, and not present in their family photos (p. 98). These sorts of biases and immaturities become more obvious over time, and while they may be present in the lives of others, their presence eventually leads to detrimental effects to the author's narrative, presenting an unrelatable and sometimes unlikeable person to the reader.

Rebecca Ecker's book is difficult to recommend, as her intentions behind writing it are not necessarily clear. If she had intended in simply telling her story about family blending, then she has succeeded. However, the book is quite literally subtitled "The Uncomfortable Truth of Blending Families", leading a reader to believe that it is meant to represent a generalized truth on the topic (p. 1). The author has framed the book as such, and while all the necessary parts are in place to make such a statement, it is ultimately compromised by the same blunt honesty that the author has used to tell her story. It is not a book that I would recommend to others without some warning about its shortcomings.

While the author's intentions missing their mark may have compromised its academic value as a book about blending families, I believe that it has increased its value in other fields. The book provides textbook examples of gatekeeping, narcissism, gaslighting and many other negative social behaviours and traits that would be valuable in studies of psychology. This book would still be of value in family studies, just not in the same way that I imagine had been intended by the author. In addition, it is also valuable in sociological circles, not only for insight into unpaid labour of mothers, but also for the cultural norms and means that the author, her ex-husband, and her blended family are subject to, as well as project upon themselves and others. The author mentions in the prologue of the book that the members of her extended family 'were anxious' about the

content of this book, and that she should ‘be cautious’ when writing it, the author believing it to be out of concern for themselves. The author ignores those concerns, instead saying that ‘they should be worried’ about what she would reveal about them (p. 11). After finishing “Blissfully Blended Bullshit”, I cannot help but think that the person who should have been worried about being exposed to the world was the author herself, as her book did not paint her as a righteous person among terrible people, but a troubled person among troubled people.