



Malnourished: A Memoir of Sisterhood and Hunger

Cynthia Ritchie

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Elegant prose and intimate details elevate Cynthia Ritchie's mental health memoir *Malnourished* to a requiem for her sister.

Ritchie and her three sisters grew up on their stepfather's farm in rural Pennsylvania. Their mother's attention was slight, their sisterly bond tight. Three of the four girls were subjected to sexual abuse that left lifelong scars; these led to the death of the second eldest girl, Deena.

Both Deena and Ritchie experienced adulthood eating disorders, attributed to exhaustive hunger for affection that was never given. Despite their common experiences, the things they so needed to talk about remained unspoken. Ritchie's book is a response to that awareness, seeking catharsis without pretending faith in happy endings.

Written as a series of vignettes that move from Ritchie's youth into the present, the book's saccharine childhood moments are juxtaposed to bitter truths about her suppressed upbringing. These reveal that a lack of supervision lent itself to freedom and imaginative play in secret nooks of the farm that only the children knew about, though their loneliness and yearning to belong burned into their adulthoods as much as their long, fearful nights did. Emotions are palpable in the prose, as tender as fresh wounds.

The book admits to deep, animal compulsions that the higher human mind would rather ignore: licking a newborn baby's hair; taking a nibble of a loved one's ashes; sneaking a look at a sibling's secret writings. Details of depression, anorexia and bulimia, and risky behaviors are relayed without reticence and in meticulous language that highlights the visual, auditory, and tactile experiences that are unique to these particular mental illnesses. It is honest in acknowledging that recovery is a process.

Throughout her exacting memoir, Cynthia Ritchie works to process her sister's inevitable but heartbreaking death and her childhood of abuse.

AIMEE JODOIN (January / February 2020)

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