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Review of Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You (by Sue William Silverman)
by Diana G. Pace and Kathleen M. Blumreich

In this award-winning memoir, Sue William Silverman relates the physical and emotional trauma she endured as a victim of incest. From the ages of four to eighteen, Silverman was sexually abused by her father, a highly respected and influential figure in politics and business. Focusing on the key aspects of her experience, Silverman graphically details the sexual molestation, explores the coping behaviors she employed in order to survive—first within a severely disturbed family and later as an independent adult—and describes the ways in which therapy helped her to overcome the shame that incest victims invariably feel.

To say that this autobiography is beautifully written is at once a description both apt and incongruous: apt because Silverman's prose is vivid, lively, graceful, and rich in metaphor, the labor of one who deeply senses the rhythms of written language; but incongruous because Silverman's experiences were so profoundly painful that one begins to wonder how the writer found strength to voice them in any language at all. Indeed, much of the book deals with Silverman's attempts to break out of silence, to recover her sense of self and to learn to speak a new language, one in which "love" isn't synonymous with "terror" and "father" synonymous with "lover."

A particular strength of the work, then, is its brutally honest writing. The depiction of the author's physical and mental suffering, though often difficult to read, gives us a key to understanding the path of damage brought on by incest.

Of particular interest is the author's attempt to demonstrate the interweaving of family structure and the way the family's facade hid the abuse. Silverman describes how her parents maintained a facade that hid the sexual abuse. She also describes how she coped with the trauma, using a range of coping mechanisms. The book also discusses the role of therapy in her recovery.

An essential read for anyone interested in understanding the effects of incest and the healing process. 

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Of particular interest to readers of *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* is the insider's view of an incestuous family. Demonstrating that this dynamic can occur in the most normal-appearing of families, the writer simultaneously exposes the mechanisms through which such families manage to conceal the truth and present a facade to the outside world. Through Silverman's autobiography, the personality structures of the parents and the dynamics of the child-parent and sibling relationships can also be discerned and analyzed.

Outwardly, Silverman's father was a successful businessman, equally devoted to his wife and children: he served as Chief Counsel to the Secretary of the Interior from 1933-1953, wielded power in a variety of political and financial ventures, maintained a comfortable lifestyle for his family, and presented himself as a loving parent and husband. In the secret world he maintained at home, however, he was controlling, sadistic, and often violent, a rapist whose sexual pathology nearly destroyed his own daughter. To all appearances, Silverman's mother was likewise a dedicated homemaker and accomplished social companion to her husband. But aware of the abuse, she made no effort to protect her child. Rather than face a life without the security of her husband's income, she became instead a co-conspirator, tacitly accepting her husband's behavior. Placing blame on the victim, Silverman's mother called her a "slut," viciously scrubbed the child's genitals to "kill any germs," and even forced the young girl to wash her own bloodied underwear. Significantly, both of the author's parents were sexually abused as children. Silverman's older sister, who claims not to have been molested, nevertheless chose to escape the chaos at home, finding refuge in both psychological withdrawal and literal absence from the household.

An estimated 20% to 40% of women and 10% to 18% of men have been sexually abused as children (Morrow & Smith, 1995). A major presenting concern of students in university and college coun-
counseling centers today, incest is also cited as one of the reasons for the increase in students seeking psychotherapy (Stone & Archer, 1990). Research further suggests a negative attitude by practitioners toward such clients (deYoung, 1982; Courtois & Watts, 1982), and that this non-empathic response can impact the client in a harmful way. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of successful therapy with incest survivors is the therapist's attitude and knowledge (Adams & Betz, 1993).

In diagnosing and working with individuals who have been sexually abused as children, practitioners tend to think in terms of symptoms (Courtois, 1988). While this methodology can be useful to some degree, merely listing symptoms does not portray the psychosocial setting in which the abuse occurred, nor does it illuminate the logic behind what appear to be random and malfunctional coping behaviors. Morrow and Smith (1995) suggest that a qualitative examination of the stories of actual incest survivors can help to shift the focus from presenting concerns and coping mechanisms to the “individual-in-context,” reducing the sense of personal blame and examining the common social themes of incest. Similarly, Long and Jackson (1993) suggest that victims of childhood sexual abuse utilize those strategies which they developed at the time of the abuse in order to avoid feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

As Silverman shows throughout her work, the victim of incest must acquire a remarkably strong will to survive: in the author's case, this included childhood escapes into fantasy, reading, and at times into the fevered haze of physical illness in order to gain respite from the abuse and be nurtured in a non-sexual, non-violent manner. To preserve her core identity and distance herself from the abuse, Silverman also created separate personalities capable of enduring the violations of her body for her. Later, in her adolescent and adult years, Silverman sought comfort in promiscuous, often unfulfilling or abusive relationships, extra-marital affairs, and food; this latter coping behavior evolved into actions characteristically associated with bulimia. Silverman describes her therapists to see her at least twice a week and to be dysfunctional dialogue, a technique she describes as "works".

By examining her own experiences and those of others, Silverman describes the process of healing present in the lives of many victims. She suggests that victims are struggling simultaneously; she and others hear that their experiences are too severe than expected. The prognosis for assistance is not good and few prescriptions are offered. She offers an own sense of her own healing. The process is perhaps not as simple as it appears too disturbed to make sense of the early years.

Although Silverman recognizes that others, the damage was with, she does not the victim's and a therapy succeeds as much as the relationship with the therapist. In the way in which therapies are rendered it can be difficult for those reading Silverman's experiences and with her patients. The following visits are intense and often quite disturbing.
with bulimia. Through reading this memoir, then, therapists are afforded an opportunity to develop greater empathy for clients and to see how and where certain adult behaviors, which may appear to be dysfunctional, originated. In addition, because Silverman describes some of her therapy sessions, at times incorporating actual dialogue, practitioners reading this book are allowed to see what “works” from a client’s perspective.

By expressing the depths of the pain and violence forced upon her, Silverman engages in a catharsis valuable not only for her own healing process but for other survivors of incest as well. Because many victims have not discussed their experiences with anyone and are struggling to hide the reality of their past, they often need to hear that others have endured similar situations—possibly more severe than their own—so that they can begin to open themselves to assistance. Incest survivors should find Silverman’s articulate descriptions of her feelings helpful for identifying and labeling their own sensations of shame, guilt, and isolation. One word of caution is perhaps warranted here: the narrative is quite explicit and may be too disturbing for some survivors prior to entering therapy or in the early stages of therapy.

Although Silverman ends on a positive note, offering hope to others, the tone of her book is neither misleading nor unrealistic: she does not imply that therapy automatically puts an end to the victim’s anguish, or that once therapy is completed, life simply proceeds as normal. Instead, Silverman addresses the nature of her relationship with her family members post-abuse and post-therapy. The way in which she deals with the failing health of her parents is rendered in a particularly insightful manner, speaking to the power of those relationships in which abuse has been the binding force. Silverman does not paint an idealized picture of those final days with her parents, nor does she forgive them. However, in describing visits and conversations with her father and mother immediately prior to their deaths, and in acknowledging her own grief at
their passing, Silverman underscores the false simplicity of the assumption that there can be no further relationship development or ongoing contact among members of an incestuous family.

Re-living the experiences of incest victims from their perspective can be very useful to practitioners since all too often they may rely only on the "professional literature" to gain an understanding of a psychological dynamic or problem. Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You is a comprehensive account of the events, interpersonal interactions, physical and psychological damage, and progression of one woman's life during and after childhood sexual abuse. If Silverman's goals in writing this memoir were to understand her past, communicate the secrets of her family to the outside world, and in so doing help other incest survivors to heal, she has succeeded admirably. We highly recommend this book.


References