

The Deafening Silence

By **Rosemarie Manes**, First Books, 2009.

Reviewed by: **William Feigelman, Ph.D.**

Survivors of suicide and general readers alike will find much value in *The Deafening Silence* by Rosemarie Manes (Bloomington , IN : First Books, 2003). This memoir, told from the vantage point of a bright and inquisitive 11 year-old who sustained the loss of her father to suicide during the mid-1950s, offers penetrating insights into the mental life of youthful survivors. This autobiographical account traces the author as she grew up in South Philadelphia , until the time of her impending marriage, ten years later.

The Deafening Silence offers many powerful images of survivor difficulties arising in the wake of a parental suicide: profound confusion, inability to comprehend how a beloved parent could carry through such a horrific self-destructive act, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness and yearning. The image of her elder sister incessantly howling at the funeral service “Daddy, daddy, who’s going to walk me down the aisle?” is one of many in the book that are not easily forgotten. In the tightly knit Roman Catholic Italian neighborhood where the author lived, after the suicide, the family was subjected to virtual banishment extending from religious, economic, educational and social exclusion. Under the immense stigma to which the family was subjected, they were forced to move away and to deny that any member of their family had ever taken their life in their new surroundings, lest they face a repetition of their communal rejection. It is doubtful that such far-reaching sanctioning would apply today, though inconsistent stigmatization is still pervasive. The author also does a creditworthy job of conveying her transformations from a somewhat self-effacing and timid child into becoming a more self-confident young adult, eager to dance on American Bandstand, a popular TV show of the time. She eventually develops sufficient ego-strength to become more open about her suicide loss with her fiancée and is prodded to query her mother about the unspeakable secret in the family and eventually learns more about the circumstances surrounding her father’s death.

The book’s title is a particularly apt one, referring to the deafening silence of the father who took his life (and left his family totally confused), and to the mother who didn’t wish to talk any further about it, and to the communities where discussions of mental health problems are totally suppressed. Highly recommended to those that have lost a parent to suicide, this book packs a powerful emotional impact and should be read by anyone with an interest in suicide bereavement.