

In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide

By Nancy Rappaport, Basic Books, 2009.

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

In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide by Nancy Rappaport, offers a richly rewarding read as the author fearlessly places her family life up for public scrutiny as she struggles with the difficult and necessary task of trying to understand her mother's suicide. Rappaport's mother took her life with an overdose of sleeping pills in 1963 when the author was 4 years old. The narrative starts from her mother's headlined death. At the time of her death Rappaport's mother, a prominent Bostonian socialite from an Irish Catholic family, was engaged in a bitter custody battle with her ambitious, successful, lawyer-politician husband, of New York Jewish parentage, as they struggled contentiously for parental control over their six children, who ranged from 4 to 11 years of age.

The author was drawn into this important task of sense-making of the death by several reasons. Bearing her mother's name and having a striking physical resemblance to her mother, she feared a possible recurrence to the death cycle in the absence of having a clear understanding of the particular "whys" leading to her mother's death. As a mother herself, Rappaport wanted to be able to satisfy the curiosities of her three children who would inevitably be puzzled by their grandmother's suicide. In addition, as a child psychiatrist, working with adolescents and families facing mental illness crises much like those of her own, she was keenly aware that a deeper knowledge of how her family dealt with their demons would be helpful in becoming a more astute and capable clinician.

In Her Wake reads much like a mystery story as Rappaport gains access to a trunk containing letters written by her mother, her mother's unpublished novel (written near the time of her death), newspaper articles written about the family and its custody battles, and the legal records pertaining to the custody disputes---the author draws on all these things to make better sense of the death and its effects on the family. She also interviews anyone with data to better illuminate her mother's personality and her death. All family members, family friends, her mother's ex-lover and best friends, even the attending physician at the death are all called upon as Rappaport painstakingly follows up any lead to flush out the 'why she died story' and to examine its effects on her family and herself. For many families, when a suicide occurs, members find it convenient to say and share little together about the deceased in the years after the loss. Each draws a circle around themselves holding their own private reveries about the event and the deceased. Rappaport's inquiry stirs up this pot in helpful ways, though not all family members were ready to participate in this sometimes painful analysis.

At the end of the book readers stand at nearly an equal footing to the author in understanding-- as well as anyone might-- the suicide death of another human being. Rappaport's analysis takes us along two intersecting journeys, one aimed at following through the shock waves and upending experiences of losing a loved one to suicide, and another into the vicissitudes of growing up in a blended family. The Rappaport family underwent many changes over the course of the author's life. Before her mother died, both parents had divorced and had married other partners. Later, the author's father divorced his second wife after nine years of marriage. This step-mother played a critical role of guiding the author through her sometimes turbulent teenage years. As readers follow these two cross-cutting stories they penetrate deeply into the sometimes divisive and challenging relationships that blended family life brings. Beautifully written and unsparingly honest, the author has created a work that will--for a long time to come--illuminate the way for many suicide survivors and mental health practitioners in better understanding the effects of suicide grief and family disruption.