

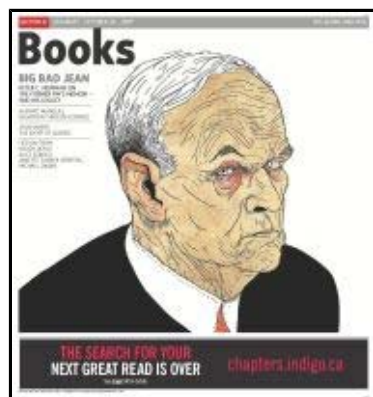
MEMOIR

Bipolar explorerPAT CAPPONI
OCTOBER 20, 2007**A PROMISE OF HOPE**

The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted With Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her

By Autumn Stringam

HarperCollins, 283 pages, \$21.95?

Print Edition - Section Front

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I approached this book with a healthy dose of skepticism, simply because of its bold subtitle - *The Astonishing True Story of a Woman Afflicted With Bipolar Disorder and the Miraculous Treatment That Cured Her* - which is more suited to a bottle of Mrs. Hailey's Wondrous Elixir than to a serious work.

That said, there are lots of good reasons to read this autobiographical effort: for the writing, for the story and for the experience of bipolar disorder the author so harrowingly details.

Alberta writer Autumn Stringam takes us back into her early childhood and to a mother she once adored, who married at 18 and had child after child after child, in spite of crippling depression, mood swings and the subsequent inability to care for her infants. Autumn and her elder sister, 8 and 9, were expected to take care of the brood, while her father went to work and her mother shut herself off in her bedroom.

In an eerie resemblance to the story of Andrea Yates, the woman who drowned her children in a bathtub, Stringam writes of the time her exhausted mother piled six children into a car and headed down to the lake, intent on murder-suicide, losing her nerve at the last moment, even as the water sucked at the tires. There were more children to come, nine altogether, leaving the reader to believe that birth control might have been a greater cure, a greater relief, for Autumn's mother, who eventually committed suicide.

Raised in this environment, faced with a parent who could smile one moment and rage the next, Stringam and her younger brother, not surprisingly, found themselves in difficulties later in life. Manic depression, or bipolar disorder, is believed to be inherited, but the reader wonders about learned behaviour, and how much that played

into Stringam's subsequent diagnosis: nature versus nurture, an unending debate.

"When she's dark and dangerous and on the prowl, I've learned to be submissive. When she's been spending money and is fake and breathy and giddy, I am even more careful. It means a quick temper. It means a fast, hot rage. At times like this, I humour her. Smile. Be pleased with her. Above all, I don't give her any offence to remember when she flips to the dark side. Because she will remember."

Autumn marries, and while she's pregnant with her first child, her husband is diagnosed with a brain tumour. He survives, but Autumn is losing herself. Her feelings toward her new child change from moment to moment, and she is eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder and placed on lithium, among other drugs. Calling herself baby-hungry, determined to get pregnant again, she stopped taking her drugs and, in days, found herself in full-blown psychosis. In striking, intimate and lyrical passages, Autumn Stringam brings us into her madness, into the world of the psychiatric ward.

Its around this time that her desperate father, Tony Stephan, breaks his silence, and finds himself revealing all to a hog-feed salesman he encounters in the halls of his church. He tells this man, David Hardy, about his daughter and his son, a young man now showing signs of the same illness, and as the feed salesman listens, he comes to believe that the symptoms Stephan described were mirrored in his own experience of "ear-and-tail-biting syndrome," something that happens when pigs are crowded together in close quarters, and which can be cured by a dose of vitamins and minerals.

The two men experiment with a human version of the formula, and when they're satisfied, administer the first dose to Stephan's son. He shows immediate signs of improvement, so Stephan forces Autumn to take the same mixture with the same results: freedom from symptoms.

Their story doesn't end there. Hardy and Stephan formed a non-profit company, Truehope Nutritional Support, to market EMPowerplus, and soon snagged the attention of Health Canada. The one study the company had been able to persuade a doctor to undertake was shut down, and soon the drug itself was embargoed. Charges flew back and forth, there were threats of imprisonment, and a trial. Stephan was eventually vindicated and the supplement placed back on the shelves. Health Canada is made the villain in the piece, but surely we need some policing and regulation of the claims and the contents of even miracle drugs.

In a telling segment of the book, Stringam, now cured, speaks to a woman who wants to be taken to hospital, and Stringam, though she acquiesces, views this as a choice to be ill, a choice because, of course, the supplement works. And therein lies the problem. In an afterword to the book, Dr. Charles Popper of the Harvard Medical School states: "We cannot know whether Autumn's response was due to the ingredients of EMPowerplus or due to psychological, situation, accidental, or random factors. And we cannot assess the side effects and potential risks ... while many people assume that vitamins and minerals are safe, these micronutrients can have serious toxic effects if employed improperly."

Autumn Stringam's wrenching experience of anti-psychotics is a common one, her complaints universal in the world of the psychiatric patient: the lack of emotion, the weight gain, the difficulty staying awake, the muddled thought processes, the despair of ever returning to oneself.

While many of us may lament Big Pharma's stranglehold on psychiatric treatment, at least there are studies and regulatory bodies out there, and the side effects of every drug listed for those who wish to know them. And many of us have frankly moved on, stopped searching, stopped waiting for the magic bullet, that special pill that will eliminate mental illness and return us to normality. Instead, we've gone to work on ourselves, on our behaviours, learned self-discipline and the art of reaching out to others and found, if not a miracle, some measure of peace, some measure of calm where once was chaos and terror.

Pat Capponi is a Toronto writer, activist and psychiatric survivor. Her new Dana Leoni mystery will be published next spring.

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