



The Women Who Raised Me: A Memoir

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The story of a remarkable woman's rise out of the foster-care system to attain the American dream—and of the unlikely series of women who lifted her up in marvelous and distinctive ways

Born as a ward of the state of Maine—the child of an unmarried Yankee blueblood mother and an unknown black father—Victoria Rowell beat the odds. Unlike so many other children who fall through the cracks of our overburdened foster-care system, her experience was nothing short of miraculous, thanks to several extraordinary women who stepped forward to love, nurture, guide, teach, and challenge her to become the accomplished actress, philanthropist, and mother that she is today.

Rowell spent her first weeks of life as a boarder infant before being placed with a Caucasian foster family. Although her stay lasted for only two years, at this critical stage Rowell was given a foundation of love by the first of what would be an amazing array of women, each of whom presented herself for different purposes at every dramatic turn of Rowell's life.

In this deeply touching memoir, Rowell pays tribute to her personal champions: the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, mentors, teachers, and sisters who each have fascinating stories to tell. Among them are Agatha Armstead, Rowell's longest-term foster mother, a black Bostonian on whose rural Maine farm Rowell's fire to reach for greatness was lit; Esther Brooks, a Paris-trained prima ballerina, Rowell's first mentor at the Cambridge School of Ballet; Rosa Turner, a Boston inner-city fosterer who taught Rowell lessons of independence; Sylvia Silverman, a mother and teacher whose home in a well-kept middle-class suburban neighborhood prepared Rowell for her transition out of foster care and into New York City's wild worlds of ballet and acting and adulthood.

In spite of support from individuals and agencies, Rowell nonetheless carried the burden of loneliness and anxiety, common to most foster children, particularly those "orphans of the living" who are never adopted. Heroically overcoming those obstacles, Rowell also reaches a moment when she can embrace her biological mother, Dorothy, and, most important, accept herself.

Ultimately, *The Women Who Raised Me* is a story that belongs to each of us as it shines a glowing light on the transformational power of mentoring, love, art, and womanhood.

The Women Who Raised Me: A Memoir Details

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Sherese says

An inspiring story of famed actress/activist and foster care success, Victoria Rowell. I didn't know much about Ms. Rowell except that she was a daytime actress on one of my mother's favorite Soap Operas from the 1980's " Young and the Restless" and that she also appeared on "Diagnosis Murder". Her story is unlike many stories that I've heard about children growing up in the foster care system. Ms. Rowell was very lucky and blessed to be placed with and surrounded by the many women that raised, loved and cared for her throughout her life. The most prevailing theme throughout this book, is the idea of "Sisterhood and Motherhood". Family has nothing to do with being of the same blood. Your friends and anyone who loves, cares and support you unconditionally are part of family. No one chooses to be born, and when you get here you have to make the best of the circumstances you were given, which Ms. Rowell did with the help of some very important women in her life including her long term loving foster mother, Agatha Armstead and various mentors and friends she met along the way. If only all children were given the opportunity to have at least one or two individuals in the lives with the caliber of Mrs. Armstead we'd certainly have less problems in the world. This autobiography only reinforces the old African proverb that it "Takes a village to raise a child" as well as my personal belief in the need of further promotion of adoption especially in the Black/Latino community.

Becky says

I wish that I could have liked this book more--the title was very intriguing. The author grew up in the foster care system before becoming a ballerina and TV actress. Poorly written, I struggled to read what felt most like a rambling personal history without descriptions, cohesion or a point.

??? says

Her story itself is amazing, I don't deny that. The telling of the story, on the other hand... Horrible. Dull, generic voice and a failed attempt at eliciting any sort of pathos; ordinary diction, bland tone, overuse of the phrase "years to come," not to mention there were a handful of typos throughout. The way she took a life lesson out of everything felt unnatural, like I was reading a forced fable, and it just fell completely flat with me. It was painful to read. Which is a shame, because there was a wonderful story to be told here.

Barbikat60 says

I grew up in the foster care system. I'm glad she had a better experience than I.

Rebecca says

I give this book five stars for Rowell's ability to combine the personal and the political. Her well written history of her foster family, combined with her soul baring details about how she has successfully found her way in the world, make for a book you just can't put down. Her thoughts on foster parenting and adoption should inform policy and policy makers.

Sylvia says

Excellent book! This is an autobiographical book written by the co-star of Diagnosis Murder. Prior to that show, she also had a supporting actress role in the Young and The Restless. During her run on her soap, Victoria's early storyline was loosely based on her real life. She was a foster child from birth who with the help of many people, including the State of Maine, became a ballerina. Her story is riveting! I am so impressed with her autobiography!

Suzy says

My favorite chapter by far was the early, long chapter on Victoria's foster mother, Agatha Armstead. She writes such a touching, inspiring, nostalgic biographical piece on this great lady, I don't think I'll ever forget it. That being said, if I had known who Victoria Rowell was before reading the book (soap opera, TV series and movie actress, mother of Wynton Marsalis's son) I might have been more interested. The book is weak in some places and after about the third chapter begins to suffer from poor editing--just plain old typos, dangling participles, misspellings, etc. Too bad; I found it distracting and detracting. Vicki is not a great writer, but she does a good enough job. I was interested enough, and, as I said, propelled by the Agatha chapter to read through to the end. I can think of many women who would absolutely love this book. Though it is specifically about Vicki's life as a foster child, it has some good "lessons" for all women, on women, sisterhood, inclusion, forgiveness. I'm glad I read it.

Debbie says

I thought this was going to be a memoir, but it turned out to be "thank you" to foster mothers, mentors, friends and the many, many people who helped Ms. Rowell survive and perhaps thrive. I think the book could have benefited from a good editor.

As always my book discussion folks tempered my opinion a bit. We all felt some upheaval in the book and that seemed to reflect Ms. Rowell's early life. We talked about what an author chooses to include in a memoir is not necessarily what we want to know about her/his life.

Mary says

I expected The Women Who Raised Me to delve deeper into issues of parental rights, the foster care system,

and child protection services in general. Instead, this is a memoir that includes hagiographic vignettes of the women who took in Victoria Rowell throughout her turbulent, disjointed childhood. I didn't finish the book so maybe I missed the analysis I was hoping for. Perhaps it would have helped me through this story if I had been more familiar with Rowell's adult success in dance, TV, and as an advocate for foster children.

Laurel-Rain says

In a splendid and glorious memorializing of a company of women who contributed to her growth, opportunities and eventual success, Victoria Rowell has created a grand gesture of epic proportions.

Her story, told with grace and honesty, reveals the multi-layered character she became as a result of the fostering and mentoring she received...as she describes it, like the piecing together of a quilt.

In successive foster homes in the state of Maine, from infancy, Victoria Rowell sets an example of triumph over adversity. Despite the early deprivation of a “biological mother”, she grew in a positive direction through experiences that many would find challenging, at the very least. And yet, with the help of her foster mothers and mentors, social workers and others along the way, she faced every challenge, excelling as a ballet dancer and later as an actress, a mother and then as a creator of her own network of support for foster youth by founding the Rowell Foster Children’s Positive Plan and serving as a spokesperson for the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services.

While in LA recently, attending Book Expo America, I had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Rowell while signing copies of her book. I felt very honored to be in her presence for a brief time and want to congratulate her on her many accomplishments, including this wonderful book.

Aberjhani says

A DANCER'S STRENGTH AND GRACE

In the brilliant pages of
"The Women Who Raised Me"
a daughter born to destiny
is what one clearly sees.

Challenged from the start
by the blood of history flooding her path--
crashing waves of denial and shame,
racism screaming its scornful wrath.

Consider her skin the color
of America's dream of democracy;
a ward of the state of Maine, yes,

but a child as well of aristocracy.

Through the schizophrenic shadows
of her mother's pleading tears,
caring hearts sang strong angelic prayers
to guide her through the years.

With a philosopher's taste for wisdom,
and a dancer's strength and grace,
over pits of hell and sorrow she leaps
to run a blessed and noble race.

If Love is a kind of country
where royalty is determined by beauty of soul,
then somewhere waiting for Victoria Rowell
is a glittering crown of diamonds and gold.

by Poet-I-Am Aberjhani
author of "I Made My Boy Out of Poetry"
and "Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance" (Facts on File Library of American History)

Osa says

I must say that I am very grateful to have come across this memoir. Yes, I generally read the memoirs and biographies of celebrities, but this one offered a very different story in that Victoria Rowell concentrates on giving due to the women who, as she aptly puts it throughout the book, raised her to succeed, despite the odds stacked against children raised within the foster care system. Ms. Rowell writes about her mother, Dorothy's insistence, that she and her sisters be raised together, and preferably, by Black foster parents, resulting in Victoria being torn from her first, loving family. In those days, the laws had not yet been amended so that White families could adopt Black children. Ms. Rowell writes about learning to work hard from women who broke the rules every day, by beating the odds, raising families with and without spousal support, and having successful careers during times when women had little to no outside help.

Ms. Rowell's story is particularly inspiring as she points to the threads of support woven by each mother or sister who took her in, so that she could train as a ballet dancer, and pursue her dream of first becoming a dancer, then, an actress. I was only aware of Victoria Rowell as an actress on the American soap opera, *The Young & The Restless*, but I am now inspired by and in awe of her intellect, her command and precision of

language (she so perfectly paints a picture), her humility in recognizing the angels throughout her life, and her ability to learn from life's lessons at each stage of her life - something that many people are either incapable of doing, or only manage after middle age.

I urge you to read this captivating true story, and share in the triumphs of the people within it. By the way, this book is rated four and a half stars on Amazon.com.

Valerie says

I admire Victoria Rowell for her courage and her heart for helping others. She had to come a long way to be a successful person. That being said, I didn't especially care for this book. It was bogged down with a little information about a whole lot of people, mostly women. So many that it was impossible to keep track of who they all were. Hearing more about Victoria herself would have been an improvement I think.

Wynne says

This is a memoir of a woman who was the 5th child (all different fathers) of a mentally ill woman. Right after Vikie's birth the children are taken by family services for their safety. The older two boys go to live with the mother's ex-husband and the girls are put into foster care. Somehow the girls luck out, with loving, generous foster mothers. This is the journey of her life in foster care and how she came out as a whole and thriving adult. It would be interesting to compare her sisters' experiences because although they were in the same homes, they did not appear to enjoy the same level of care and love.

Mary says

This woman's life is remarkable. Maybe I'm a grinch, but after a while it all started to feel TOO positive. It somehow lacked something, some depth. I guess since she's a movie star (though I had not heard of her until reading the Sunday NY Times wedding section, which I always do,) she was trying to give kind of an overview, glossing over difficult relationships and times.

I would have liked to learn more about her biological siblings, especially her sisters, with whom she was raised in the same loving home.

Born to a white mother in Maine, and a father of African heritage whom she never met, this book is about all she was given and how she took strength and wisdom and love from all who gave to her. After going the rigors of classical ballet, she went into acting. She then went on to start an organization that offers the arts to children who are in foster care.
