



In the Shadow of Memory

Floyd Skloot

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In December 1988 Floyd Skloot was stricken by a virus that targeted his brain, leaving him totally disabled and utterly changed. *In the Shadow of Memory* is an intimate picture of what it is like to find oneself possessed of a ravaged memory and unstable balance and confronted by wholesale changes in both cognitive and emotional powers. Skloot also explores the gradual reassembling of himself, putting together his scattered memories, rediscovering the meaning of childhood and family history, and learning a new way to be at home in the world. Combining the author's skills as a poet and novelist, this book finds humor, meaning, and hope in the story of a fragmented life made whole by love and the courage to thrive.

In the Shadow of Memory Details

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Catherine says

In 1994, Floyd Skoot contracted a virus that - overnight - rendered his brain irreparably damaged. His short-term memory floundered; his long-term memory shorted out in unpredictable places; his ability to find the right word or know to pour the milk on his cereal instead of down the sink disappeared. Who he was changed dramatically, and this book is the story of his quest to understand, quantify, and live with that change.

There is much that is compelling about this book - its very existence, for a start, since Skoot can't easily write in linear fashion, and was often forced to leave blank spaces that he filled in later. (One chapter took eleven months to write.) But what resonated with me most was his slow journey toward acceptance - not resignations, or apathy, but the quest "to take to ones self" (the closest translation of the Latin *accipere*) the experience of living. Doing that is a different quest for everyone; finding the places and people in which that's possible are often life-long quests. Skoot's brain damage forced him to confront what he would prefer to never have considered, but his experience - on this front at least - is simply further along a spectrum of living with which all of us engage.

And in that - and especially in his rumination on the neurological ramifications of child abuse (he was beaten by his mother) - I found this gem that explained so much about my own choices, and how I construct my own life:

I still equated the city with self-sufficiency. But after spending a few weekends at Beverly's place in the woods, I began to consider escaping the frenzy, lfeeing the noise and energy and commotion. It would always be difficult for me to think clearly, but being surrounded by urban commotion made it worse. I felt scattered. I had come to see that it was impossible to slow down in the city. It was impossible to find harmony between my surroundings and my newly diminished self, reined in, slowed down, isolated from the worlds of work, running, and community that I had always lived in. There was too much stimulation, too much outer life for a person in my situation. I had nothing but time on my hands but was living where time seemed accelerated. I needed an emptier place, I thought, pared down, humbler; a place that I could embrace as fitting my circumstances. (26)

Renee says

Skloot is a brilliant writer who poignantly captures the physical and psychological losses of debilitating chronic illness—explosive lapses and losses in memory, vacillating mobility and balance, and the necessary of both literally and metaphorically transforming his life perspective to cope with a new reality. In order to reconcile his present self with his former self, Skloot also dives deep into an exploration of family history, childhood trauma and the legacy—both epigenetic and psychological—of his ancestors. He also dramatically demonstrates how the arts and nature informs his journey, linking the past to the present. The poetic way in which he unravels the many layers of life to find meaning and wholeness is beautiful and incredibly

inspiring.

Verna says

I was deeply touched by this man's account of being suddenly struck down in his prime of life with a brain virus. His whole life changes and his way of looking at things undergoes a metamorphosis. He also includes early childhood experiences of being physically abused by his mother. He comes to the conclusion that his early childhood trauma contributed to his difficulty when attacked by the brain virus. A further transformation takes place while witnessing his mother's late life struggle with dementia. He is able to forgive his mother for the abuse and feel love and compassion for her having suffered much of the same.

Mary says

Essays about what it is like to have a failing memory. Which is a remarkable thing to be able to write about.

Gillian Neimark says

I bought this book to see what connection he made between childhood abuse and later illness. Although the specifics of his brain injury due to infection was really well described with a wry tone that was nicely devoid of self pity, it was the abuse and how it primed his body and soul for illness that I was curious about. Indeed, the book, when not about his illness (and that of his brother) is about his mother. Though he and his brother chose opposite ways to handle the abuse, they both became disabled early by illness and his brother died at 57. At the very end his brothers final hallucinations were about the mother he'd distanced himself from all his adult life . And for Floyd it's the mother who fills the book and basically occupies the latter part of the book. He describes her vividly, and without much rancor (occasionally there's a flare of anger--but mostly he is a man who counts his blessings. And I think his blessings are his own, hard-won blessings.)

This gives me pause but I have to say its probably true. The need to be nurtured especially by ones mother, as a baby and a child, isn't just a want or wish or hope. It's writ in the biology. It's how the offspring flourishes. It's natural to life and usually new mothers comment they never knew they were capable of such love. When I read that kind of statement I always think yes it's love but deeper than that its biology and nature has perfected a suite of hormones and neurochemicals to profoundly stimulate that attachment and love. It's a rebour, utterly against nature, to feel repulsed by, or to purposely hurt or damage your offspring. When it happens its so deep it damages the fundamental wiring of body and soul and is carried through life. The entire field of psychology doesn't really give this its full scope. Anybody who can survive that kind of abuse -- disabled and haunted perhaps but able like Skloot to love and write as well -- is a testament to a profound resilience. And also to a profound sadness over the suffering. But in the end--he is writing, he has found another way to appreciate life (directly in nature, rather than the hubbub of the city), and has a loving and beloved partner--that is triumph.

Raymond Wong says

Imagine being in your early forties, a writer and a poet, a distance runner. Now picture suffering brain damage from a virus that requires every bit of your concentration to walk without falling on your face. Words that once flowed easily from your mind to paper now crawl forward haltingly, scrambled, and often without coherence. You are disabled to the point where you can no longer work in public policy, and communicating is sometimes an exercise in folly because what you mean to say and the words that end up being heard are utterly different. Welcome to the world of Floyd Skloot. His book, *In the Shadow of Memory*, is a collection of essays that takes readers into his world.

Skloot writes about his condition with the candor of a man who has come to painstaking terms with himself. Though his illness has changed his life, he never sinks into self-pity. Just the opposite, he finds a new perspective on living: he and his wife move away from the aggravation of Portland and the constant noise and frantic pace of the city. They go to an isolated rural setting in Oregon where they are in harmony with nature. Skloot is forced to live in the moment because he loses much of his past to the brain injury, and thinking ahead often lands him face-first on the pavement. His condition requires concentration to simply walk.

The act of writing, something that came naturally to him as a novelist and poet in his previous life, is relegated to a hardship. His damaged mind has difficulty conjuring the right words to convey his thoughts, so he writes in longhand and leaves spaces in his sentences to fill in later. He depends on his wife, Beverly, to proof his drafts for coherence, and it takes him eleven months to complete a single essay. Yet his finished pieces are works of art. They delve into what it's like to be brain damaged. They recount the horror of his childhood beatings at the hands of his mother. They reveal the epiphany of the moment he sees his father come to terms with Skloot, a boy who will be commanded no longer. They show the irony and compassion in Skloot, a brain-damaged man, caring for his mother as she loses her memory to Alzheimer's.

The essays are personal and touching, and Skloot's language is pinpoint perfect. He describes seeing his father in the hospital after a horrific accident: "As I approached his bed, the smell overwhelmed me, blood and sweat and waste and vomit and disinfectant, a mixture of odors that forever defined loss for me." He uncovers insights into his mother that only a son could convey: "When it became clear that my father would not, in fact, treat her the way she wished to be treated, would neither return her to her throne nor eradicate the uprisings all around her; that her two sons were tainted by associations with peasants, by strange appetites for Velveeta or football, by profanity and rock 'n' roll; and that time and the world were passing her by (it was already the 1950s!) without granting proper recognition; my mother's frustrations grew unmanageable. Her eccentricities and flamboyance turned into open hostility and she became dangerous."

Skloot renders his brother's acknowledgement of his impending death with a portrait: "The final image was taken a half year ago, after our last restaurant meal with Philip. He is at the head of the table, his wife beside him with her hand clasped in his, and a single red tulip juts from its vase, tilted toward them as though drawn to their warmth. I am next to Elaine (brother's wife), looking across the table at my wife. We are all smiling. We seem almost giddy at being together. There is nothing held back and there are no questions in the air. His expression says I've had a good life."

The reader has the sense these last two sentences could just as aptly be about Floyd Skloot.

Deborah says

The format of the book was a little odd, but still a pretty good read-if you are interested in the brain.

PEN Center USA says

2005 PEN Center USA Award Winner for Creative Nonfiction

Brooke says

Where to start... Hmm. I had high hopes for this book, being someone with a chronic illness myself who shares many symptoms with TBI victims. The book started out amazing - even better than I'd expected. The essays were both thought provoking and easy to relate to based on my own situation. Then things changed. For some reason, the author decided to spend the middle third of the book talking about random events from his childhood that had absolutely nothing to do with his current predicament. It honestly felt like he just needed to vent about how horrible and odd his mother was during his childhood. Which would have been fine if it fit with the overall theme of the book. I found myself bored out of my mind many times, but continued to drag myself through page after page of childhood memories in hopes that the author would return to his initial topic. Eventually, he did. While not as focused as the first several essays, the last few were once again worth reading, minus some repetitive passages about his mother's progressive dementia. Overall, I'm not sure I'd recommend this book to friends - and if I did, it would be with the suggestion of skipping over some of the middle essays. That said, I applaud the author for the tremendous effort required to complete these essays, and for sharing his journey to acceptance with the rest of us. I know how difficult it can be to write under those circumstances, and appreciate the dedication and effort that went into this book. In the end, I'm glad I read it, but it's not a book I'll feel the need to come back to again.

Christine says

Recommended to me in the wake of my stroke. The first third and the last quarter of the book was an amazing memoir of Skloot's illness that left him with great brain deficits. I found myself reading the book with a pen in hand, furiously underlining and marking passages that spoke to me, that rang true, that made me feel less lonely, that made me want to shout. I'm not a fan of the middle, where he makes a foray into his family history—without tying it back to his brain injury—it just sort of floats there. What does his mother have to do with his brain? His father? Ah. At the end, it's tied back together. But this book is worth reading for the first chapters. I wish I'd read it sooner.

S Pat says

It's nonfiction... that should be enough to tell you what I thought of the book. But, given the need to write a ""super"" review, I will continue.

Typically, I find nonfiction autobiography to a little self-serving (for example, I won't be rushing out to read ""Mommywood"" anytime soon). However, it is very well written, especially exceptional considering it took him days to write a paragraph or two.

Skloot lost much of his memory and cognitive skills via a bacterial infection (What kind of bacteria eats away at the brain?) His story deals mostly with memory lost and how he copes. Is delves in and out of his past, in an interesting way... tells stories of his horried mother, his family and eventually as his mother slips into dementia.

To tell the truth as I closed in the final pages, it began scaring the hell out of me. It frightened me about growing old... especially given my own grandmother.

I'm 35... years away right?

Janet says

Collection of essays that add up to a memoir. Skloot was struck down by a virus that attacked his brain in 1988, when he was 41. He's been disabled with brain damage ever since. He was a poet and novelist before 1988, with a day job in government. Since being disabled he's continued to write, but very slowly. I saw him read his poetry at Wordstock last year, enjoyed it, and picked up this book. His story is extraordinary, and beautifully written.

Lexie says

"I used to be able to think." That's the first sentence of this intricate series of personal essays by Floyd Skloot, a man who was felled by a virus that targeted his brain. For somone who "used to be able to think", he's composed a masterful record of loss ... and resilience. I'm grateful for this book ... I could have highlighted every page. Here is proof that a person whose cognitive and executive functions have been ravaged can rise above the damage done. Floyd's work has inspired me to keep at my own ...

CJ says

Floyd Skloot has created an historical account to help people see what it is like dealing with brain dysfunction, sudden disability, a parent with Alzheimer's. Writing essays in spite (or because of) it all. I learned a lot because he took the time and effort to write it all down (with the help of Beverley, his wife). Thank you both!

Flower says

This book is a bit hard to read. It has many great references to writing about brain injury.

Danielle Moody says

I found this amazing, because I had suffered a severe traumatic head injury, and even though my experience of neurological deficits was different from Skloot's, it was comforting to read about someone else's experience with the struggle to recover.

Joan says

The author is the father of Rebecca Skloot (Henrietta Lacks) who wrote this book of essays after suffering a catastrophic viral encephalitis which has left him with various neurological deficiencies. Several essays discuss his mother who was mentally ill. She abused her children both physically and mentally. She was demanding of her husband and lied about her past. Somehow her son rises above this very difficult early life and supports his mom, and even finds compassion for her as she ages and loses her memory. There are some beautiful phrases in the book. He talks about how when people age they are reduced to the essences of themselves, something I'm noticing as I visit older friends and family. He also writes about some of the absurdity of evaluations he went through as part of demonstrating his continued disability. It would be helpful reading for all those who work with patients. The author shares at times how difficult writing is and the help he receives from others to arrive at a final product in spite of his neurological limits.

Ann says

In the Shadow of Memory took me forever to read because it's a lot to absorb. Literally overnight, Skloot became brain damaged due to a virus. The first part of the book deals with the adjustments he's made, the middle part deals with the family memories he's trying to reclaim while his mother has Alzheimer's and his brother is dying from complications of Type II diabetes. Most interesting for me is the connection between childhood trauma and the brain, and how the brain rewires itself in response to trauma (literally rewriting memory or omitting memory). He is a wonderful writer, and the fact that he did this book in 15 minute chunks while he searches for words with his damaged brain is all the more reason to read it. It really makes one think about how self and biology are related and intertwined.

Christine says

A stellar memoir about illness and recovery. Floyd Skloot writes with grace, self-effacing humor and bracing intelligence.

Mel says

I found myself wondering throughout the text; exactly how brain damaged is this man? He is clearly articulate. His writing has structure, order, discipline and a “so what?” at the end. And it’s a good read. It is obvious to me that he has done extended research in his quest for finished polished prose. Once or twice I reached for my OED to check the exact meaning of a word only to discover entirely new layers and nuances to the writing in front of me.

So, how damaged is he? How long would it take me to write an essay in which I seemingly knew all the layers of all in my word/metaphor choices? Eleven months suddenly doesn’t look too long. I knew Whirlaway was a Triple Crown winner, I knew he had been jockeyed by Eddie Arcaro (the only jockey in history to win 2 triple crowns, which is why I know that) – but – it takes some serious research to find the horse that was both a champion and clumsy. Did he just happen on that? Luck? Is he more careful because of his perceived defect? Who does his fact checking? Would I have done the research to discover the particulars about this horse? Did he know them? The amazing nuance here makes it seem likely that he did, makes us want to believe he did. But there have only been eleven Triple Crown winners and Whirlaway sounds fast, certainly faster than say, Sir Barton (1919) or Citation (1948) and that might have been enough for him. I don’t know.

I found myself wanting more concrete evidence about his disability because it wasn’t palpable in the prose (beyond the first section, “Gray Matter”). Had I not been routinely reminded that the author was brain damaged I would not have known throughout the majority of the essays in the text. What sort of virus did he contract? How does he know it was contracted on an airplane? Does it have a name? If so, why is that name not provided to the reader? My daughter was in the hospital, in ICU with a random un-named virus that had attacked her. I was reading this book at her bedside. She had a high fever, violent headaches and was very disoriented. It was very random and frightening. It made reading this text very challenging for me – but it also led me to questions about his disability that I perhaps would not have otherwise thought about. As I read “What is This and What Do I Do With It?” and my daughter was asking me why her soup was so cold – her soup that was in reality lime sherbet I wanted to know about his loss of cognitive capacity.

Skloot quoted reference upon reference and he did so very eloquently – but gave me nothing personal in the way of his own medical condition. None of his doctors were quoted (with the exception of the SSI psychiatrist). I have learned a lot about random viruses that attack us in the last three weeks and wanted the author to provide me with something more specific to his condition—not broad generalities quoted from Harvard professors and vague references to failed drug studies.

Despite all this I found myself engaged in his story and this led me to wonder what else has he published? So I did some checking and surprisingly all but one of his seventeen books came out after the onset of his illness. I am curious to read the book published prior to his illness (*Kaleidoscope*, 1986) to see if I can detect any sort of radical changes in his style or subject matter. I think before I can judge the “wisdom” of this book I would need to see other things. I need to know did his wisdom (a word I use very guardedly) come from revelations about himself through his illness as he suggests or are his truths what they have always been and now that he has lost his immortality (a place we all reach eventually) he feels compelled to commit them to a print.

