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Meet Terrell Dougan's sister, Irene: a woman in her sixties who still believes in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny--but who also enjoys playing those characters for the children at the local hospital; whose favorite outfit, which she'll sneak into whenever Terrell's back is turned, consists of Mickey Mouse kneesocks and shorts; who wins over the neighborhood kids by hosting two fire trucks at her lemonade stand; whose fridge bears a magnet: NORMAL PEOPLE WORRY ME. When Irene was born, her parents were advised to institutionalize her. They refused and instead became trailblazers in advocating for the rights of people with mental disabilities. The entire family benefited, with a life rich in stress, sorrows, hilarity, joy, and overwhelming kindness from strangers. Terrell has found that the only way to get through the difficult moments is to laugh--even in the most trying of times. In her moving, funny, and unforgettable memoir about life with Irene, Terrell Dougan shows that love, humor, and compassion are enough to heal us, every single day.

That Went Well: Adventures in Caring for My Sister Details

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Heather says

Terrell Harris never expected that the beautiful baby sister born on that stormy March day would be different from the other children in the neighborhood, but as she ducks a flying chicken thrown at her by her sister in the supermarket isle many years later, she reflects back on her life with Irene by her side. As youngsters, the girls' parents struggled to give them the most joyful life possible. For Terrell, that meant going to the theater, taking horseback riding lessons and learning to ice skate. For Irene, things weren't that simple. Functioning at the mental level of a three year old, Irene grows up throwing dangerous tantrums and is unable to learn to read or write. Her disability forces her personality into disarray and she is in constant need of attention and affection. All the while, her loving family strives to give her the least restrictive and most fulfilling life possible, knowing that to do otherwise would be a grave disservice to the little girl who touches so many lives in the community and at home. Advised to institutionalize Irene, both her parents refuse and begin the long fight to create agencies and programs for the handicapped in their community. Their desire is to create a safe place for people like Irene to go to school, have friends and adjust to the rigors of normal life. Working tirelessly, they spearhead campaigns, speak to governors and senators and fight against the state for control of their daughter's future. In the process, they meet other parents who are going through the same situations with their handicapped children.

As their parents begin to age, Terrell steps into their shoes and begins to selflessly devote herself to giving her sister a normal life. But Irene can be stubborn, and sometimes doesn't want the things that her family wants for her. And so begins the struggle between the sisters, for each has their own interpretations of the ideal life for Irene. But this is not a sorrowful story, for Irene is a natural comedian and loves to endlessly thwart those around her. Whether she is inviting the firemen over to partake of her lemonade stand, holding a secret garage sale, or stealing the show by announcing for the seventeenth time this month that it is her birthday, Irene remains engaged and engaging. She is inspired, confident and headstrong, and by some strange turn of events, she teaches those around her to live with meaning and substance, proving time and time again that one can never underestimate those who we think are different.

I have to say that this is by far the best memoir I have read over the past two years. The courage and tenacity of Terrell and her family's reaction to Irene's handicap stunned and moved me. I can't imagine being as brave as these people were, and the fact that they fought to such extremes is both impressive and inspiring to say the least. Terrell makes no bones about how difficult it can be to look after Irene, and her uncompromising honesty is the glue that holds this book together. To me, Irene sounds like a card, and I laughed with glee at her antics and behaviors. I especially like her adamant refusal to change her Mickey Mouse socks, even when going to a formal event, or her sly attempts at sneaking junk food whenever she can get her hands on it. But underneath all that, there must have been some really frightening times for this family. I think back to the time when she was lost somewhere in the bus terminal, and her family didn't know if she was on a bus halfway across the country or just hidden in a bathroom playing with her dolls. I think about the times when her tantrums cause her to injure herself, or when she is violent with other people, and I marvel at the fortitude that her family shows when the unthinkable becomes the everyday.

Terrell goes on to explain that her husband and children all look after Irene with the same love and attention that she has demonstrated, and that, too, warms my heart. It was angering to see how little support was given to the families of handicapped children at that time in the United States. It seems that everyone thought the best thing to do was to lock them up and forget about them, and changing this was an uphill struggle all the

way. But the Harris family had other solutions. Using behavior modification, they manage to get Irene to comply with many things and they strive continuously to improve the quality of her life with new and inventive methods that others had never even thought of.

Another wonderful thing about this book was the strong undercurrent of feeling running through it. Whether Terrell was tired, frustrated, elated or dejected, she never spared her truth and forthrightness, and that was something that elevated this book in to the must-read category. This is not a woman who sits around feeling sorry for herself, this is a woman who sees the path she is on, and marches straight down it with a resolute strength that many would not have. Although Irene is a handful, and sometimes her life seems a never-ending set of trials, Terrell maintains her plucky attitude and stays the course. Did I mention that in the intervening time she has made a name for herself with a weekly newspaper column? Well she has, along with raising a family, helping her parents, and lobbying for the mentally handicapped. Terrell also has an extremely humorous presence on the page, at times laugh out loud funny and at times quietly amusing. She seems to have the gift of portraying everything with just the right touch of levity. This book was written both cleverly and deeply, and there were times I wanted to laugh as well as cry.

Please don't just take my word for it, go out and get this book and see for yourself! As I have said before, it is a must read in the category of memoirs, and I would highly recommend it to all types of readers. The story told within these pages is an honest and awe inspiring tale of one family's love for each other, and it was such a pleasure to read. One day I hope to get a chance to tell the author of this book how much this story touched me, and how wonderful I think she and Irene really are. A stellar read.

Trupti Dorge says

I had varied reactions to this book in the course of reading the 200 or so pages. At first I was really impressed by the writing style, simple yet effective. After I got used to the writing style, I admired the way the family coped with Irene's disability. They wanted her to have a life in the community and not to be sent in some home where there are no proper facilities. After 100 pages or so I started getting irritated because it was more about Terrell and her sacrifices and her accomplishments. Honestly I was expecting a more compassionate approach towards Irene. But most of the time it was how unmanageable she was, how stubborn and manipulative.

I was all about writing a negative review for this book. But then somewhere around the last 50 pages or so, I realized something. Whenever I read a book about mental disability or any form of disability for that matter, there is always an expectation that you get to know how wonderful that person is and that he/ she has enriched your life in so many ways and that you would not have it any other way in spite of everything.

In the beginning the book felt like all complaining and how much Terrell and her family had to sacrifice for Irene. But deep down you see they care and they love and do it because they want to and not because they have to. At the end of the book there's a letter to Irene which says all the things I wanted to read, that she was special and she impacted her life and all that. And then there's this,

However, as my dear friend says of her mentally disabled son, "Yeah, yeah, I know. But I still wish it had happened to the neighbors."

So yes, I understand now. I loved the honesty in this book. And even though it's a difficult subject, the book does not get overbearing at any time. This book, I feel, is not about Irene, it's about the people who deal with

her and cope with the difficulties that come with raising and managing a mentally disabled person. There was this fear of what would happen to Irene when no one was around, the guilt of not doing enough that always seemed to be there, the codependency (read about this in the book) and finally coming to terms with the situation. I think people who interact with disabled people will be able to relate to this book very well.

Samantha says

Funny and cute

Mariah says

Quick, entertaining, heartwarming memoir of the author's life with her disabled sister. I picked this up without knowing it all took place in Utah--the geographical and cultural references as well as the conversational tone took it from three to four stars for me.

Jackie says

A heart warming, and also heart wrenching, book about two sisters, one with a disability. Well written and insightful. I loved the fact that it was an honest account of both sides, the caregiver and the disabled. Some of these types of books are sugar coated or full of justifications. I appreciated Ms. Dougan's comments on the LDS Church and their kind acts of service to Irene. My brother-in-law's family is Catholic, and when his mother was diagnosed with cancer he told her to find the nearest LDS ward house so that the Relief Society could help her as she went through treatments :0)

Hannah says

please be aware that my copy of the book is an advanced release

I absolutely adored this book. This book deals with the author's account of her life with her disabled sister, Irene, at a time when people described as "different" were shut away in institutions. This story spans decades, discussing the legislation changes for people with disabilities, the author's life, and her struggles with her sister.

This book will make you laugh and cry. The author's descriptions of the changing times and her own crusade for equality show the love and compassion she had for not only her sister, but for others. She definitely does not sugar-coat anything. Very real. Very enjoyable.

Barbara Nutting says

A humorous look at what must actually be a very trying situation. Beautifully written with love.

Christine says

This was a humorous, usually heartwarming and sometimes heartbreakng book about a difficult subject. Terrell's sister, Irene, suffered brain damage at birth and would forever be a child in heart and mind. After the death of her parents Terrell became primary caretaker for her sister. This book not only describes her trials and tribulations in that role, and the effect it had on her everyday life, but emphasizes that sometimes necessity is truly the mother of invention. Her family was the first driving force in Utah for establishing any kind of social support system for people with mental disabilities other than institutionalized care. The system did not always work for her sister, but than only spurred her into action for developing some sort of independent living situation that would work for Irene. Ms. Dougan is an amazing woman, who was also one of the pioneers behind the Sundance Film Festival.

There are two major things I took away from this book, one – I do not think I could handle a similar situation with the fortitude, grace and humor that Ms. Dougan did and, two – as Ms. Dougan so often points out, sometimes those we perceive as being challenged have a lot to teach those of us perceived as “normal”.

Kathy (Bermudaonion) says

When Terrell Harris's younger sister was born, it was a difficult birth for her mother. The baby's brain didn't receive enough oxygen, so Irene was born brain damaged. The family had Irene tested at the University of Utah and were told that she has an IQ around 57, she will never learn to read and write and that her emotional age is around 3. Doctors recommended institutionalizing her, but the family refused. They brought Irene home and life went on. They tried enrolling her in school, and when that didn't work, her father formed the Salt Lake County Association for Retarded Children. The Harris family became very active in the fight for the rights of special need individuals.

Irene's parents were always concerned about her future and sent her to a school in California for several years, hoping she would become more independent and self-sufficient. Irene was not happy there. They brought her home and struggled with deciding how to best care for her. When their parents passed away, the decisions for Irene's care fell to Terrell.

That Went Well by Terrell Harris Dougan is the story of Terrell's life with and without Irene. It is the story of a family bonded by love and fierce determination. I thoroughly enjoyed this book because it was told with love and humor. Terrell shows how those with special needs impact the lives of their families and their communities. She is honest about the frustrations, failures and triumphs she has had to face. I have several friends who have children with special needs and I know they struggle with some of the same decisions Terrell does. It's easy to sit back and be judgmental about the choices that are made, but if you read about the way family members, like Terrell, agonize over each of these choices you will have more empathy for them.

Hester says

This book struck home for me in many ways. My future brother in law is mentally handicapped, and reading

this memoir made me so grateful to people like the author. Because of people like her, he lives in a group home that understands how to take care of him.

I respected her honesty in describing the difficulty of caring for her sister. She is not someone who succumbed to denial. She is excruciatingly aware of her sister's flaws and of their effect on the author, as well as her parents and grandmother. Some of the most heartbreak moments for me were the examples of the author's parents' irrationality and occasional outbursts that resulted from the constant stress of caring for Irene.

One of her great struggles is balancing what she thinks Irene wants versus what Irene wants and what Irene wants versus what Irene needs. Irene does not understand consequences, so is unable to compare short term and long term goals. She does not understand that a diabetic should not eat chocolate. She does not understand that if she puts clothes away damp, they become mildewed.

A related balancing act for the author was figuring out when she was being codependent and when her sister was not getting the help she needed. There were some nerve-wracking passages where she related the caregiver's excuses for her sister's abysmal living conditions, saying that it was because Irene was "spoiled" and "lazy." While that may very well have been true, she also has the IQ of a three year old. The caregivers did not know where to draw the line between helping and enabling. All this underscored the need for more people to become experts in the very new field of taking GOOD care of the handicapped.

My great respect for the author is tempered by my sympathy for her daughters. Only once did either of her daughters ask for time alone with their mother, without their violent aunt; I thought she responded cruelly. The story, however, illustrates how hard it is to figure out where the lines are when taking care of a handicapped loved one. The caregiver wants to ensure that the handicapped person is always included. It is hard to keep in mind that in families without handicapped people, it is common for subsets of the family to spend time together.

I found this book to be important. It is fantastic that America stopped putting the handicapped in institutions to be forgotten(or worse, in cages, like the author's great uncle). There has not been much written about the families, and especially the siblings, of the handicapped. I think it is an excellent addition to the literature and believe it will be incredibly useful to families that find themselves in a similar situation.

Naomi Campbell says

The feel of this book reminded me of "A Girl Named Zippy," and "She Got Up Off the Couch: And Other Heroic Acts from Mooreland, Indiana." Funny but yet heartfelt memoirs. She really did crack me up, and you'll fall in love too with her sister Irene! Yes, there were struggles. No, they didn't always probably do the exact right thing, and they know this, but boy did they love and care and TRY! Small warning, this author doesn't have a relationship with God, so, in not knowing Who He is, she a few times refers to the gods and the higher power and whether God is he/she. But you kind of get over that and just hope she DOES keep praying and seeking "that higher power" she's talking about and someday can know that YES, it WAS HIM who was there helping her along as she tried to pray and ask for help along the way.

Heather says

Another book that I'd give 4.5 if had the option.

I often tab pages that I would like to refer back to when reading a book.
This book had many parts that I enjoyed re-reading.

Good lessons on how to work with others regarding volunteer efforts.

SouthWestZippy says

Very touching story using humor and a open and honest heart. Not only is Terrell Dougan a wonderful sister but a beautiful person. What a open and honest look into a caretakers world of a special needs person. I read this book in a matter of hours, just could not put it down.

Jennifer says

Basic Overview

That Went Well: Adventures in Caring for My Sister documents the author's journey in caring for her sister with special needs. Terrell Harris Dougan's sister Irene is a woman in her 60s who still believes in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny -- but who also enjoys dressing up like these characters for children at a local hospital. Irene's favorite outfit consists of Mickey Mouse knee socks and shorts -- no matter what the weather. Irene finds love wherever she goes -- including her regular visits to the local firehouse and stores -- but she also has a tendency to spend money she doesn't have. Irene wants nothing more but to live independently -- but she can't always be trusted not to spend all her money on candy or to remember to dry her laundry. Irene can be charming but also is prone to tantrums, screaming fits and physical violence. When Irene was born, her family was told to institutionalize her (that is what people did with "those type" of children in the 1940s). But her parents refused and worked for years to find a way to keep Irene at home or living as independently as possible. Their efforts included finding other parents in similar situations and starting the first day care center for special needs children. But Irene seems to have a special talent for getting out of any placement arrangement created for her. And when Irene and Terrell's parents die, Irene's care is put squarely on the shoulders of Terrell, whose efforts on behalf of her sister are amazing, heroic and heart-warming.

My Thoughts

Reading this book is like hearing a funny girlfriend talk about her nutty family. Terrell Harris Dougan has a very down-to-earth and humorous writing style that suits this memoir well. She never allows you to pity her or Irene, but she doesn't sugarcoat the very difficult aspects of caring for a sibling with special needs. She writes in straightforward style that simply tells her of her "adventures" in caring for Irene. What she does on behalf of her sister is amazing and provides a pretty thorough history of the special needs community. From her involvement in grassroots Utah politics to serving on the National Association for Retarded Citizens, Terrell's involvement in making life better for all special needs children and adults is eye-opening and interesting. It interested me to learn how the attitudes toward special needs children and adults evolved over Irene's lifetime (spanning the 1940s until the present day). Ironically, so many of Terrell's efforts failed to work for Irene -- forcing Terrell to create a living arrangement that fits Irene's own particular needs.

Although the book focuses primarily on Terrell's adventures of caring for her sister, there is also a fair amount of information about her own life separate from Irene, which is interesting in and of itself. For example, she took part in the beginnings of the Sundance Film Festival, and her account of the initial meeting with Robert Redford is priceless. The sections on her involvement in community theater is hilarious, and I enjoyed reading her thoughts on how hard it is to be a woman today -- do you go for the career, the marriage, the family? How do you balance it all and make it work? These are issues of importance to any woman, and Terrell's opinions are -- like the rest of the book -- down-to-earth, realistic and funny.

Final Thoughts

I think this is a book that everyone should read -- whether you know someone with special needs or not. Raising awareness about the needs of the special needs population and the burdens that fall on their caregivers is perhaps the best by-product of this book. This is an uplifting book filled with humor and reminders that -- although life doesn't always go the way we hoped --we can often find love, humor, caring and goodness along the way. At the same time, the book doesn't shy away from sharing how difficult it is to be a caregiver for a special needs child or adult. For this reason, I think the book will have special resonance and meaning for anyone who cares for a child or adult with special needs.

Bottom line: This is an easy, fun read with an important message that will open your eyes to the realities of living with and loving a special needs person.

Lynne says

Terrell is local. She is a close friend of my cousin. Her family later lived in our neighborhood where I grew up. This is such a wonderful and uplifting story about dealing with an almost impossible situation. We all seem to have one family member who needs a lot more oversight, care, or nurturing. She tells her story about dealing with her mentally handicapped sister in a way can all feel. I am uplifted by her words in dealing with my own life.
