

THE BOOKSHELF

Nancy, Rappaport, *In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Reviewed by Andrew Clark

On the morning of September 16, 1963 Mrs. Nancy Rappaport, a mother of six and a well-known Boston social and political figure, was dealt a setback in her bitter divorce proceedings from her husband. Having previously lost custody of her children, but fully expecting their return, she learned that her husband's last minute appeal to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts had been accepted, and the order to return the children to her had been stayed. Later that day, Mrs. Rappaport took what proved to be a fatal overdose of medication. Mrs. Rappaport's then four-year-old daughter and namesake, Nancy, who is now a child psychiatrist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, spent 18 years exploring her mother's life and death, and in *In Her Wake* she has produced a heartfelt, engrossing, and ultimately uplifting book.

Dr. Rappaport, whose memories of her mother were fragmentary, grew up in a large, rambunctious blended family, where her mother was rarely mentioned and her death rarely acknowledged. As an adult, a mother herself, and a psychiatrist, she began the process of trying to piece together something of her mother—first through conversations with family members, then through archival research, and finally through finding and questioning her mother's relatives, lovers and friends. Much like a detective novel there is a mystery at the heart of this story, around why a devoted and loving mother would choose to take her own life. Dr. Rappaport is indefatigable in her digging, undaunted by the resistance she encounters from many in her family, and respectful of the limits of empathy and information in trying to truly comprehend a suicide. The portrait of her mother that emerges is of a brilliant, vivacious, somewhat troubled and rather complicated woman with a fierce love for her children.

From the perspective of a child, parental suicide and divorce have certain things in common—both are associated with profound loss and disruption, of course, but beyond that both are acts committed by those upon whom the child relies for safety and support, and so leave a complicated emotional legacy of anger, confusion and shame. The children in the Rappaport family were left to cope with both their mother's suicide and their parents' divorce, and each child took a somewhat different tack in doing so. For one sister, it was a relief finally not to be torn between two parents; for another, her mother's ill treatment during the custody battle was an enduring source of bitterness and outrage. For one brother, his mother's death by suicide was a source of shame, and another brother simply does not talk about the subject. Nancy, the youngest of the children, felt helpless and baffled. Although all the siblings have remained close through the years, they have rarely spoken with each other about their mother or her death, as if the topic was understood to be taboo from early in their lives.

Dr. Rappaport, after a somewhat rocky childhood, became a psychiatrist, and she weaves in stories of her clinical work with suicidal patients as a counterpoint to her exploration of her mother's life. Her mother's suicide has marked her—she spends her professional days and nights working with and writing about suicide—but as a treater she is no longer helpless and no longer baffled. She also interposes stories of her own children and family, exemplifying her drive to be there for them in ways that her mother was not there for her.

In the aftermath of suicide, as in divorce, there is a powerful tendency to try to find someone to blame. Nancy and her siblings looked first to themselves as somehow responsible, but as their world

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grew larger they broadened their search. Many of those involved, interviewed years later, offer compelling but self-serving perspectives that point the finger of blame toward someone else. Nancy's father, a powerful and sometimes prickly man who was not always at his best during the dissolution of the marriage, is carefully considered for the role of victimizer, but in the end her empathy and honesty lead her to reject that caricature. It is one of the great strengths of this book that Dr. Rappaport avoids such facile characterizations; she writes "It has taken me a long time to realize there are no villains in our family tragedy." Perhaps the 18 years that it took her to write this book allowed for it to become so much about forgiveness.

Somehow Dr. Rappaport has managed to make a book about her parents' divorce and her mother's suicide entertaining—its backdrop of 1960s Boston politics and urban renewal make for fascinating reading on their own—and she artfully weaves in information on the current psychiatric understanding of suicide with her very personal story. The process of searching for her mother leads to the discovery of a dusty trunk of material in the attic (including an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel her mother had been writing), and sends her nervously to lunch with her mother's old lover (who is coincidentally the father of three of her step-siblings).

In Her Wake is a fine and well-written book, a meditation on loss and an illustration of resilience. Dr. Rappaport is guided by a clear-eyed, compassionate, insistent honesty, and the portrait of her mother that she manages to construct is both solidly grounded and achingly evanescent. This is an outstanding book for those working with families who have experienced the consequences of suicide or high conflict divorce, for those who have been touched by suicide in their own lives, and for those who simply enjoy a compelling read.

Andrew Clark is a child and adult psychiatrist who is the medical director of the Children and the Law Program at the Massachusetts General Hospital. In that capacity he has been involved in conducting court ordered evaluations as well as teaching and training psychiatry residents and psychology fellows. He has maintained a private practice of psychiatry, and was for many years the psychiatric director of a large correctional facility in Boston.