

Book Review: *Darkroom: A Family Exposure* by Jill Christman

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Summary

Darkroom: A Family Exposure, written by Jill Christman, is a memoir of the struggle of Christman to discover her identity. The book opens with a story of a brother whose childhood traumatic burn experience Christman believes affected her existence. It determines, in a way, the direction of the book as questions concerning this origin story compels Christman first to reach out to a father who has long deserted her. The memoir compels her to ask questions of herself and from artifacts of her family's life along with her father, mother, and other relatives as she tries to paint her own portrait in memories obscured by photographs in her grandmother's albums and by sexual assault from her neighbor.

As Christman grows up, we see side by side her move with her mother, boyfriends, and a fiancé, Colin, through New England suburbia, Northwest mountain roughing, California and Alabama university, and changes in her psyche as she struggles with PTSD in the forms of bulimia, flashbacks, and disassociation. Christman's mother cares but loses track of her troubled daughter among her own various relationships and interests, her father represents himself to her by occasional portraits of himself from his artist's hand, her wild Uncle Mark goes his own way frequently in trouble with the law, and her Grammy seems more absent than present in health and more distressed and focused inward as her health declines.

While Christman struggles against the childhood sexual abuse, ruling her life in ways she does not understand, the real key to the memoir is her relationship with Colin who she is eventually engaged to. It is Colin who patiently stays with Christmas through nightmares, complicated living arrangements, and old and new obsessive-compulsive behavior. It is Colin who helps her overcome her bulimia and who helps her begin to heal. It is Colin's unexpected death before their having very many years together that both initiates the telling of Christman's exploration of self and who initiates Christman discovering, if not the answer, then a way to live in her self.

Comparison with Memoir *Educated* by Tara Weaver

Educated, by Tara Weaver, in comparison to *Darkroom* is first a very much more grounded style of narrative in that the storyline tends to be direct and the scenes more detailed than the meandering and backtracking of *Darkroom*. *Darkroom*'s form, though, is a picture of Christman's life as she is continually drawn first towards this story, person, or ideal and then others in her confusion in and search for identity. *Educated*'s straightforward style exemplifies the solidity of Weaver's belief in the understanding of her place in life that her parents drive into her from birth: something she does not begin to question until closer to the end of the memoir. Part of Christman's attempt to create her self-portrait is to focus on dates, on specific times and moments, and on the broader stories of people in relationship with her. Weaver's story on the other hand seems timeless, as if her life might unquestioningly move forward without change in lifestyle and family relationships, as she vaguely goes through stages of her life until her independent spirit springs forth not only in the choices she begins to make as a teenager but also in a more thoughtful voice. Weaver's *Educated* is written predominantly in present tense while Christman's *Darkroom* continually switches voice tenses to accommodate the meandering and backtracking that represents the trail she takes to comprehend her struggles, family, and most of all herself.

Takeaways

Darkroom exemplifies an effective way to write a memoir where memory is a fickle thing, scenic details are sidetracked, and narrative is branched. Christman effectively keeps track of her meandering, backtracking narrative in her signaling in voice tense, exact dating, and event correlation. The narrative style is also effective in representing the disassociation that is often a result of traumas such as sexual abuse by its appearance of floating from one association to the next without dwelling as much on the grounding of specific details, such as colors, environment, season, and so forth. Though details are often important in making a scene come alive, the absence of such in *Darkroom* rights the importance on Christman's inward development, on the rooms of her mind rather than the location of her body.

The most important element I take away from Christman's *Darkroom* is how transparent her narrative is, particularly at the end, voicing the dialogue in her mind, doubting not only her own memories but the memories perhaps created from her attraction to photographs of her and her family's life, and pointing out to the reader questions arising from the lack of scenic details. As is a rule of memoir, she realizes and describes her own evolution and continued growth. It is important for me as a memoirist to not box myself into what I think I already know of myself and my story, but to constantly remind myself as Christman does, "I have not arrived" (241).