

Andy Watson's Review of "Wolf: A Memoir of Love and Atonement"

We, as a nation, are carrying an almost insurmountable load of trauma and stress that we have difficulty processing. The erosion of democracy and justice before our eyes, a pandemic claiming a million lives (displacing two years of our American history) and the steady, daily drumbeat of the News and social media. We have collectively become an angry and defensive nation. Individually, we want to confront, lash out and defend ourselves to hopefully stop the madness. We are enraged, we raise a clenched fist, we place blame and seek retribution! But what if that response was due to a series of traumatic experiences from our adolescence that we've just naturally carried into adulthood? That's the basis for Carter McNamara's deeply personal and thought-provoking memoir "Wolf".

This page-turner is at times hilarious but also a terror-filled recollection of rage and emotional poison against his drug addicted and alcoholic mother while growing up in a small town in North Dakota. Older siblings have effectively moved on and a boy of nine is left to deal with an emotionally shattered and vindictive shell of a woman who wields a knife to hunt imaginary rats in the middle of the night, berates and punishes the boy at every turn, and swears him to secrecy from the neighbors. She ignores his pleas for love and understanding and his only way to get through to her is through rage and dominance....and he deals with overwhelming guilt for needing to treat her that way. This goes on until he is freed in his late teens.

Carter's story is told through flashbacks. Decades later, he displays the same defensive survival mechanisms at his job and with his family--which is when the issue rises to the surface and must be addressed through group and individual therapy. His wife makes it clear that this cycle of rage and blame must stop.

His is ultimately a hopeful tale but, beware dear reader, it will cause you to reflect on your own experience. A first response of "whew, nothing that bad ever happened to me" is quickly followed by "oh, wait...yeah it did!" We naturally push away unhappy feelings and events from our childhood, believing we've moved on, forgiven someone and now that past experience doesn't matter. McNamara reminds us it's still there. Remove one layer of self-awareness and the next one rises to the top. Repressed feelings of injustice and abandonment are all part of growing pains, but were you really okay with Mom not showing up for your Choir Concert or your older brother escaping from the house at his earliest convenience and never looking back? Or did you just convince yourself it didn't matter, you didn't care and, today, you adamantly refuse to be hurt by it?

The author is especially effective at capturing the voice of the characters involved in the storyline. Whether he's 9 or 15 or 60, each page presents an age-appropriate recollection of his thought-processes and vocabulary. With a breezy writing style, each character is described in vivid detail with the personal thoughts and observations of the writer doing a remarkable job of letting you inside--even when the anger rises from within to become a ticking time bomb. The therapy sessions are intimate and honestly told...you'll be a fly on the wall. The story structure reveals what you need to know when you need to know it and the text is not riddled with difficult to follow jargon.

To summarize, McNamara has poured his soul, recollections and aspirations into an honestly told, sometimes disturbing memoir that, perhaps unintentionally, forces the reader to examine their own past, their behavior under stress and how it is all connected. "Wolf" is a powerful memoir that you'll be recommending to friends and family...especially to those who would benefit from it.

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