

Tweak: Growing up on methamphetamines
Nic Sheff (2007). Atheneum Books. \$16.99.



“Though I have done many shameful things, I am not ashamed of who I am.... I have tried to rip myself open and expose everything inside — accepting my weaknesses and strengths — not trying to be anyone else. ‘Cause that never works, does it?”

Nic Sheff writes his memoir with an almost shocking lack of emotionality while at the same time drawing the reader into his chaotic and intensely emotional experience. Not until the very end of the text did this reader find herself in tears for the pain this young man experienced. Instead the author gives one the sense of his own numbness to the reality of the desperation in his life as he experiences addiction.

Nic Sheff’s life as portrayed in this memoir is characterized by a self loathing that causes him to run from everything he holds dear. Out of fear that the emptiness he feels within himself will be seen by others and all his worst beliefs about himself and the world will be confirmed, he escapes into a world of drugs and despair. It appears that the author’s intent is to give the reader a peek into his subjective world in the hope of providing understanding about the experience of addicts in general. Nic experiences a kind of existential loneliness that feels overwhelming to him. The inability to stand up to the helplessness of the human condition portrayed by the author represents a theme reflected in the lives of addicts. He seems to want to make the reader understand the world of the addict in its darkest manifestations and to know the difficulty of getting and staying sober.

Part of the difficulty for Nic as for many others he meets along the way, is the presence of other mental illnesses. For Nic it is depression and bipolar disorder. Trauma, abuse, and

other difficult life experiences pile up for Nic as he navigates childhood and adolescence. The subtitle, *Growing up on Methamphetamines*, describes the kind of passage this young man makes through adolescence into young adulthood. This book is meant in part to be a warning to other young people and parents about just how dark that road can become. Nic describes the book as a kind of therapy, an exorcism if you will, and an attempt to help others gain hope.

Not only does this book inspire one with hope, it is a realistic and cautionary tale. The text ends on a positive note before moving into an epilogue which describes Nic's life as still clean and on the road to recovery. One would be tempted to stop there and breathe a sigh of relief but he goes on with an afterword and blog entry both of which depict him as again picking up. His language and self description deteriorate with his chemical use. This is the truthful and cautionary tale. Addiction doesn't always have a happy ending. In this case, no matter how much one wants to root for Nic's recovery, it is an on-going story and only time will reveal how it ends. For parents reading this book it is a reminder to keep your eyes open and know that your child's pain has very deep roots. For those suffering from addiction, Nic's relapses and fight back into sobriety are a reminder that one doesn't need to give up.

Nic gets these messages across through a combination of harsh realism and descriptive imagery. The memoir covers 642 days of Nic's life but includes flashbacks to happier times when he's using methamphetamine and other drugs and darker times when he's sober. This technique not only gives the reader a feeling for the course of his life, but it creates a sense of what it is like to live with oneself in this context. Memories intrude on Nic's life either pointing to what life was and could be in a sober world when he's using or reminding him of how bad things can get and why he wants to stay sober when he is sober. These contrasts serve to

highlight how different these two kinds of living can be and keep the reader curious about the type of life he will ultimately choose.

Just as the flashbacks create contrast, so does the tone of the book. Sheff describes horrific experiences of using, having no place to go, being out on the street, selling crack or his body to get money for meth, and so much more in a tone that is almost matter of fact. This is how it is on the street the book seems to say. This is what's normal. One doesn't need a great imagination to believe that this is indeed what life as an addict in the throes of addiction could look like. In fact, the world he describes is so dismal, it is almost surprising he is not exposed to more violence than he portrays in the memoir.

Perhaps it is this reader's misguided expectation that there is more violence than Sheff describes in the world of active addiction. The media love to focus on gang wars and gun violence but it well may be that the life described by Sheff which included stealing from family and friends, is more true to the experience of most drug addicted individuals. Reading this memoir felt deeply disconcerting. The real pain Nic feels in his quest to hide from himself and everyone else is riveting in an almost morbid way. His story is appealing in the sense that it is at once gut-wrenching and beautiful in its stark honesty. This is an individual who desperately wants to be whole and doesn't know how but is trying to bring others along with him on his journey to discover how. That is what this book does. It brings the reader along for the ride. It opens the eyes of people who have no idea what this world is like while offering hope and possibility to those who do.

Nic Sheff's work is well worth the read. It provides access into the real-life experience of an addict. If one wants to understand the felt experience beyond the "textbook" descriptions, Sheff provides an opportunity to take it deeper. Much of the book is difficult to read because of

the starkness of his portrayal. Some of it is an invitation to sit with loss and abandonment. Other parts may cause the reader to question his or her way of relating to vulnerable individuals. All of it will challenge one's thinking about who the addict is. This book is recommended strongly to anyone who works with or will work with individuals plagued with addiction.

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