

## **Book Review**

**Title:** *Perfect Chaos: A Daughter's Journey to Survive Bipolar, a Mother's Struggle to Save Her*

**Authors:** Linea Johnson and Cinda Johnson

**Publisher:** New York: St. Martin's Griffin 2012.

**ISBN #s:** Hardcover: 9780312581824; Trade Paperback: 9781250023254; Ebook: 9781429948883

**Cost:** Hardcover, \$24.99; Trade Paperback, \$15.99; ebook: \$9.99.

**Reviewer:** Charmaine Crockett

In *Perfect Chaos*, a searing testament to the unrelenting darkness of mental illness, that casts shadows and confusion in one American family, Linea Johnson confided in her journal, "I now don't even care enough to hurt myself (p.111)."

Hundreds of millions of people experience mental illness. In the US alone, 55.7 million people experience mental health challenges in a given year while one in 17 Americans suffer from a mental health illness. This is the story of the Johnson family, an unflinching look at the chaos within, the singularity of pain and how a community of family members, friends and professionals support a young woman through her illness.

Stories instruct us, becoming roadmaps for those who struggle through illness or who know someone with an illness. This non-traditional memoir, told in the voices of a mother and daughter, breaks open a wall of silence of a middle class American family, who by all appearances, were privileged, well-educated and talented but whose lives were thrown off course by the emotional turbulence of teenage daughter Linea.

Readers become an intimate partner of Linea and Cinda Johnson's journey. Even those unfamiliar with bipolar illness, are likely to identify with the inner demons of self-destruction where the lust for escape becomes overpowering, inevitable at times. Linea, a talented young music major at Columbia College in Chicago drank, drugged and cut herself when she was not in classes. These days and weeks of darkness, penned with clarity by a gifted young writer who eloquently describes her spiraling descent into depression, are contrasted by a mother's voice of love and dedication to save her daughter from hell. Cinda carries her own grief like a well-worn backpack, shedding her own silence on a brother's apparent suicide while utilizing all her personal and professional resources to keep Linea safe and free from pain.

Armed with a cadre of family and community support, both Linea and Cinda appreciate their luck even in the midst of personal and familial chaos. While in the hospital Linea solemnly notes that while she had friends and family, most patients had no visitors. Feelings of unimaginable loneliness and despair are difficult enough - having no friends or limited access to health care push people over the edge. While these women focus on their own story, at moments

they contemplate the fate of millions of people who do not have access to resources, services and human support.

The Johnsons' story reads like an archetype of the hero's journey where ordeal, near death and rebirth is followed by a resurrection and return home. The return home for Linea is this: her illness does not define her, nor does it navigate her choices in life. What gives this memoir the fullness of hope and coming full circle from an unwelcome adventure, is the relentless courage of mother and daughter. Call this writer an idealist but the book's ultimate strength lies in the resiliency of the human spirit, the ability to manage and transcend depression and emerge as a leader and advocate for positive social change for persons with mental health challenges. While Linea's illness led her to blackouts in alleys, death wishes, hospital stays and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), her courage to live is an inspiration for thousands of young people. Parent and community advocates will likewise be inspired and guided by a deep understanding of the complexities of a young person.

Mental Health stigma continues to permeate our society, creating barriers towards accessible and equitable services and resources. *Perfect Chaos* challenges those stigmas, and is a welcome addition to enriching the intersection between disability studies, mental health and literature.

**Charmaine Crockett** is special projects coordinator at the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii and has a rich and varied background in international human rights, finance and the arts.