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The War Came Home With Him: A Daughter's Memoir



A Daughter's Memoir

Catherine Madison



Synopsis

During his years as a POW in North Korea, "Doc" Boysen endured hardships he never intended to pass along, especially to his family. Men who refused to eat starved; his children would clean their plates. Men who were weak died; his children would develop character. They would also learn to fear their father, the hero. In a memoir at once harrowing and painfully poignant, Catherine Madison tells the stories of two survivors of one man's war: a father who withstood a prison camp's unspeakable inhumanity and a daughter who withstood the residual cruelty that came home with him. Doc Boysen died fifty years after his ordeal, his POW experience concealed to the end in a hidden cache of documents. In *The War Came Home with Him*, Madison pieces together the horrible tale these papers told of a young captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps captured in July 1950, beaten and forced to march without shoes or coat on icy trails through mountains to camps where North Korean and Chinese captors held him for more than three years. As the truth about her father's past unfolds, Madison returns to a childhood troubled by his secret torment to consider, in a new light, the telling moments in their complex relationship. Beginning at her father's deathbed, with all her questions still unspoken, and ending with their final conversation, Madison's dual memoir offers a powerful, intimate perspective on the suppressed grief and thwarted love that forever alter a family when a wounded soldier brings his war home.

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Customer Reviews

As a member of the baby boom generation, I was struck by my lack of knowledge of the Korean War. My dad was a WWII vet, and my uncle a Korea vet. Recently I asked my uncle about his military experience- all he could say was that it was the most miserable 2 years of his life. I lost friends and knew people who were POWs in Vietnam, but never knew how horrible the situation was for prisoners of the Korean conflict. As I read Catherine's book, I reflected on my experiences growing up where nearly every teacher or dad was a vet, some even POWs. Some seemed to have personalities which were troubled by their experience. The behaviors of Doc reminded me of a dysfunctional neighbor who had been a prisoner in the South Pacific. The intelligence of the members of the Boysen family seemed to carry them through to successful lives, despite the tortured life Doc lived and its effect on his family. An inspiring story of a family who seemed to have survived it all.

Madison's childhood growing up with a father suffering from internalized trauma/PTSD and a mother who chose not to protect her is at times riveting and confounding. She nails what it is like to be raised by a controlling, authoritarian, abusive father. The parallel story about his time in the Korean War and a participant in the Death March is heartbreakingly sad. I saw her read last year at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis after being nominated for a MN book award (she didn't get it). It compelled me to buy the book. However, I was left with questions and an unsatisfying conclusion. She has two brothers and their experience with the father is barely touched on. Did her brothers get away with behavior (real or perceived by this paranoid maniac) because they were male? Was there more incestuous behavior? He certainly was guilty of emotional incest and she talks about the total lack of privacy - very common in families where there is incest. My biggest disappointment with the book is her lack of coming to terms with her abusive parents, there is little reflecting back on her experience in a way that shows the reader she has moved on, would not tolerate that behavior today, can confront abuse when she sees it today. Did she ever go to therapy? Did she ever confront her father or mother about the abuse or was she simply reactive? As an adult, she still seemed to be always surprised when he blew up. I am writing a book on father/daughter incest and

one of the most important things beyond telling the story of my childhood is what I have learned about myself, my family, and the characteristics of an abusive family that gives some insight to the reader. I guess I wanted Madison to stand up to her father and mother. The whole thing about her first pregnancy and their uber control over her wedding is a case in point. Perhaps she wasn't in a place to be that strong and honest at that time, but there was opportunity later. Writing letter(s) to the offender is a great place to start naming the abuse. What they do with that is something the survivor cannot control, but the very act of putting words down and stating examples of the abuse is a powerful thing to do. I also wondered about a story she told of living in Minneapolis and two black men coming to her door (she had just given birth to her daughter) asking to look at an apartment for rent. This story goes nowhere except twice she writes about the neighborhood being questionable. One thing I get from reading a lot of memoirs is what not to do as a writer. This is one of them. This story seemed mildly racist (I am a white 66 years old woman) and did nothing to drive the narrative. I am surprised an editor didn't catch this.

As a child of a Korean War Army vet I shared so many of the feelings with this author. Her vivid description of what happened to her father who was a POW in extremely cruel and challenging conditions helped me understand how lucky we all were to have come out of that terrible war with heads held high and backs unbowed. Thank you, Catherine, for the cathartic release your book can give to several generations of military vets and their offspring. This book goes a long way to answering questions we never knew to ask, but fortunately you did.

The writing is so beautiful and the story so compelling. I tried to stretch out reading this book, but it is a page-turner. It's one of those books that left me sad when finished because I looked forward to reading and thinking about it so much every day. But the way it wrapped up at the end was perfect and satisfying. Loved that the father's POW experience chapters were intertwined with chapters about his life with his daughter when he got home. All the chapters were short and the way it was organized kept the POW experience from being too overwhelming.

This book does something rarely seen in accounts either of war or of PTSD: it shows the connection between the two not through clinical documentation but through story. Catherine Madison's account of growing up with a father who had endured three brutal years as a POW in Korea demonstrates how PTSD works. Madison's father felt he had survived because of deeply-held values and that may be true. His difficulty separating that experience from the very different requirements of

parenting, however, created a home atmosphere in which his family had to live with the ripple effect of his unresolved anger and suffering. Madison alternates her father's story with her own, a technique that demonstrates that his experience was not something in the past, something that he had put behind him. His occasional use of the Korean words he had heard in the prison camps, for instance, are a particularly poignant reminder that his POW experience was constantly alive for him. The many times he explodes at his daughter for no reason she can imagine show the reader what she did not know at the time - she was shadow-boxing with the same enemies who were haunting him. While Madison does not herself draw any larger lessons from the stories she tells, I found the book to be an urgent call for a better understanding of how trauma affects the human psyche. Madison's father was able to build a successful post-war career but at great cost to those closest to him, those who never stopped trying to love him. It is yet another tragedy of war that he survived because of his character but was not able to adapt to a new life in which his survival techniques were no longer required.

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