





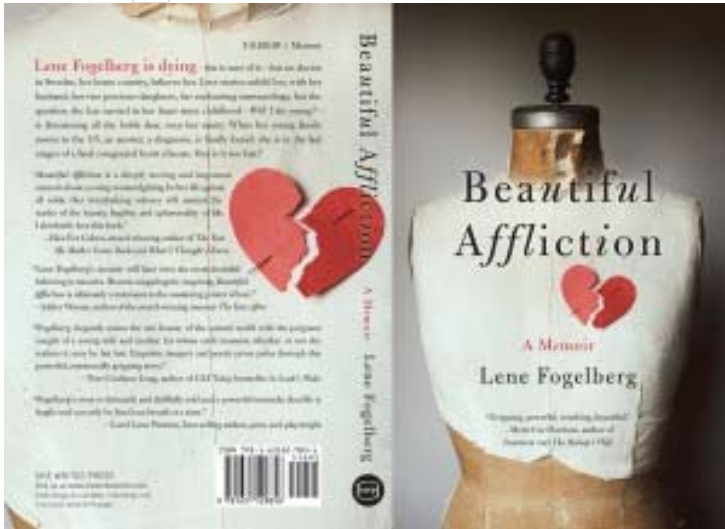
Book Review: 'Beautiful Affliction: A Memoir' by Lene Fogelberg

Posted by: Suzanne Brazil August 26, 2015 in Book Reviews, Books, Editor Pick: Books, Memoir, Non-Fiction

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In *Beautiful Affliction: A Memoir* Lene Fogelberg shares the true story of growing up with a life-threatening, congenital heart condition that goes undiagnosed, and worse, untreated. Yet, she knows something is gravely wrong with her. She can't sustain normal physical activities of others her age. In addition, she lives with a fearful question burning inside of her that clouds her every thought: will she die young?

Excerpt: The riddle closes in. I can hear its heavy footsteps, echoing in my ears. The dark brings out that which the day hides. The answer to the question. I have known for a couple of months. Breathe — air, darkness, night, buzzing — I need it all to go down to my lungs, to my blood. I don't have much time left. We don't talk about it; the doctors can't find anything. Friends and family were starting to get suspicious, always disappointed. They know I'm weak, but how do you tell people 'I'm dying?' How do you know you're dying and not just crazy?

Surrounded by nature's bounty in her native Sweden, Lene Fogelberg has made a beautiful life for herself. With the man of her dreams and two enchanting girls, she does her best to make it through the trials of parenting, household chores, work and education. But she's at a disadvantage those around her can't see and don't believe.

The story is told in chapters alternating between the past and present. Readers visit the author's childhood near the sea, her romance with a boy named Anders who becomes her husband, and her daily struggles to move, to breathe, and to keep from fainting. It is a constant battle that grows dangerously more so after taxing pregnancies and the births of her two daughters.

Her often debilitating condition shapes her personality, her future, and that of her family. Despite her husband's unwavering support and belief, her faith in herself is challenged by the constant dismissals of Swedish health officials and the skepticism of those around her. Forced to choose between the reality she feels inside her body and the misguided opinions of others, she questions her sanity while striving for a semblance of normalcy in the lives of her children. Amidst it all is her fear that she will not survive to watch them grow into adulthood.

Then, an opportunity of a lifetime comes their way. Her husband's company offers him a job in the United States. Across the globe in their new home, the physical and mental struggles continue, but there's an upside. Unlike their daunting experiences with the social health care system in Sweden, the company insurance affords them access to the entire spectrum of private health care providers in their area. What the Fogelbergs discover is that each casual walk to the park, each trek up the stairs to put away laundry, each night Lene lays down to sleep, could be her last.

The lyrical language contrasts with the relentless pace of the story, mirroring the joy and terror described by the author. What happens to her children if she faints at the park? Will a simple winter's trek turn into catastrophe in the icy woods? Through it all, there is one person, her husband, who believes and tries to ease her way in life. The repetition of similar events throughout the story emphasizes the unending, day-to-day struggle for survival until an eventual diagnosis heralds more danger. Will the potential cure be the thing that ends her life?

In *Beautiful Affliction*, a literal life-and-death drama plays out against the backdrop of a life-long love story between Lene and Anders Fogelberg, the beautiful pains of parenthood, and one woman's struggle to believe in herself. While never preachy, a hint of social commentary threads its way through this memoir of destiny and chance. Readers will find themselves railing against a seemingly archaic medical system more focused on rules and schedules than on people and well-being. The author's story also raises questions about how chronic illnesses shape the lives of their victims and testifies to the resiliency of the human condition.

In the end, Fogelberg weaves together a tale of love, devotion, ultimate fear and undying hope. With poetic imagery and a spirit of gratitude, her memoir is an engrossing journey readers will find hard to forget.

About Suzanne Brazil



Suzanne M. Brazil is a freelance writer and editor living in a recently empty nest in the suburbs of Chicago. Her work has been featured in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Writer's Digest*, *The Daily Herald* and many local publications. She is a frequent blog contributor and is working on the second draft of her first novel.