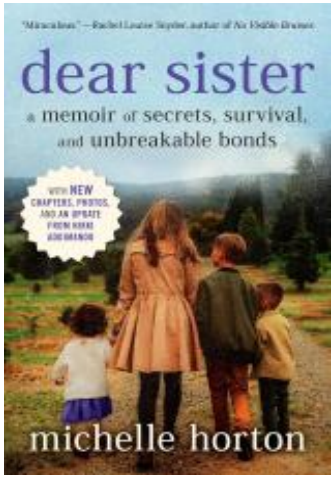
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Dear Sister: A Memoir of Secrets, Survival, and Unbreakable Bonds

by Michelle Horton



About the Book

In this "incendiary" memoir, a woman fights the criminal justice system to release her incarcerated sister after she kills her long-time abuser (*Publishers Weekly*).

In September 2017, a knock on the door upends Michelle Horton?s life: she learns that her sister has just shot her partner and is now in jail. Stunned, Michelle rearranges her life to raise Nikki's two young children alongside her own son.

During the investigation that follows, Michelle is shocked to learn that Nikki had been hiding horrific abuse for years. Michelle launches a fight to bring Nikki home, squaring off against a criminal justice system designed to punish the entire family.

Since DEAR SISTER?s original publication, Michelle?s fight --- alongside a tireless network of supporters --- has resulted in Nikki?s release from prison.

With a new chapter, an update from Nikki, and never-before-seen photographs documenting the homecoming, this edition provides a touching new conclusion to a profound, intimate story of resilience and the unbreakable bond of family.

Discussion Guide

Criminalized Survivors

?There are many Nikkis out there, living the same cruel fate --- born into a body that is abused and traumatized, trapped by unthinkable violence behind closed doors, and then, after fighting back, ushered into a prison system that replicates the tactics of an abuser.

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1. In her Author?s Note, Michelle opens from a zoomed-out perspective, pointing readers to the ?staggering number of women who survive domestic violence only to face State violence,? and references the ?abuse to prison pipeline? --- including stats like, ?In 2005, 67 percent of the women in New York State prisons who killed someone close to them were abused by the victim of their crime,? and ?According to the ACLU, as many as 94 percent of the nation-wide women?s prison populations have a history of physical or sexual abuse before incarceration.? What prior knowledge did you have of this phenomenon of criminalized survival? Were you surprised to learn that our system has a long history of punishing abuse victims who defend their lives and act out of survival?

2. In the Author?s Note, Michelle writes, ?We don?t want to accept that the societal systems around us often fail at keeping victims safe, and so we defer to the authority of police and district attorneys.? What is your reaction to this statement? What assumptions or experiences did you bring to the book, around how our system helps victims of abuse?

3. Throughout the book, Michelle shows exactly how the district attorneys? offices of Dutchess and Putnam County responded to the evidence of abuse and chose to further criminalize Nikki. How do you think the system would have responded if Nikki had been killed?

4. Michelle walks us through the entire criminal process --- from hiring private attorneys, to grand jury, to plea deals, trial and sentencing. Did anything surprise you while reading the book? What was your reaction to the legal series of events?

5. What evidence in the book can you find for Michelle?s statement that our jail and prison system replicates an abuser, particularly around power, control, coercion and intimidation?

Blindness to Reality

?What happened to my family is not unique. As a society, we tend to look away. To avoid. To deny.?

1. Michelle writes candidly about not seeing the ?red flags of domestic violence? until Nikki?s arrest, and spends the first part of the book untangling her memories and putting them into a new context. In the Author?s Note, she asks, ?Why didn?t I see? Was some part of my subconscious unwilling to take in information that would challenge my belief in a safe and just world? Was my desire to keep the peace stronger than my curiosity to find out the truth?? Have you had any experiences where you were blindsided by a reality you didn?t see in front of you?

2. ?Blindness is a well-traveled path of self-preservation.? (p.29) What does this sentence mean to you? How have you seen this show up in your own life? Where have you avoided an uncomfortable truth, because it was easier than confronting it head-on?

3. ?Nikki and I were not raised to believe that we could face the truth, or that the adults could, either. The grown-ups around us used lies and omissions as a protective shield.? (p. 59) Were you raised in a similar culture? How?

4. ?It wasn?t exactly denial, because I wasn?t presented with cold hard information that I had disregarded or rejected as

untrue. It was more like misinterpretation. I had come up with more palatable explanations. I?d accepted excuses without further questioning. I?d filled in the blanks with my own version of reality.? (p.30) This is a similar sentiment to when, on page 93, Dr. David Crenshaw tells Michelle that, in the absence of truth, children will fill in the blanks with their imagination. And toward the end of the book, readers see how prosecutors filled in the blanks of Nikki?s story with their own version of the truth, retelling her life in a way that didn?t happen. If this filtering of reality through our own thoughts and biases is a common human experience, how can those assumptions and misinterpretations be disrupted?

Domestic Violence & Consent

?Sarah gave all of the reasons that Nikki didn?t think she could leave --- because she loved him; because she didn?t want to split up the family; because all she wanted, above all else, was for life to go back to normal and for the abuse to stop; because she was terrified of the fury it would unleash in him; and because she feared that no one would believe her. ?

1. Much of what Michelle learns about domestic violence is unveiled by Nikki?s support system, and experts in the community --- facts like, domestic violence escalates over time, that domestic violence homicides can be predicted and prevented, and that the most dangerous time for a victim is when they are leaving or after they have left. What are some of the domestic violence stereotypes that were challenged through your reading of this book? What new knowledge are you taking away?

2. Intimate partner violence often occurs in private with few witnesses and little external corroboration. Nikki?s case was an anomaly, in that her abuse was documented in real time by her therapist, midwife, medical professionals, police and friends. And the abuse was posted online and witnessed by both law enforcement and the assistant district attorney tasked with prosecuting. If Nikki had that kind of evidence and still wasn?t believed, what does that mean for the vast majority of victims? What does it take to prove abuse in a court of law?

3. We live in a nation where three women die every day at the hands of a current or former intimate partner, where we average 11 murder-suicides a week. Women are dying in droves. Were you aware of this epidemic prior to reading the book? Had you regarded domestic violence as a ?private matter,? rather than what it actually is --- a monumental public health crisis? Why do you think people aren?t talking about this more?

4. One of the most harrowing aspects of Michelle?s book is the realization that many people had been trying to help Nikki leave an unsafe home, and couldn?t. Friends like Elizabeth and Sarah, and professionals like police and social workers, were unable to utilize our system?s help, because the system relied on Nikki to make the difficult and complicated choice to permanently leave. But leaving is complicated, and often deadly. We?re left with the unresolved question of how we, as a community, can help victims trapped in a cycle of intimate partner abuse, without infantilizing or forcing them. When an abuser is holding the power and control over a situation, and staying is often safer than leaving, the question remains: How could Nikki have had the ability to choose freedom, when our current system couldn?t guarantee her safety?

5. Have you known a friend or relative trapped in an abusive relationship? What did you do?

6. The concept of ?consent? is explored through the book: Was Nikki capable of giving her full consent to a police

officer in a position of power who was holding a safe house and resources over her head while she was young and vulnerable? Did Nikki?s unresolved childhood sexual trauma complicate her ability to fully understand consent as an adult? What was your reaction to the judge telling Nikki that she ?reluctantly consented? (p.311) to the abuse and torture? Is ?reluctant consent? an oxymoron? How?

Ripple Effects of Incarceration

?Kids serve prison sentences, too.?

1. We often talk about the effects of imprisonment on people within prisons and jails, and less about the effects on the children left behind. Through intimate scenes with Nikki?s children, Michelle shows the emotional and physical toll that Nikki?s incarceration has inside the home. What struck you the most in those scenes?

2. As a way to mitigate the effects of their separation, Dr. Crenshaw offers to give play therapy sessions inside of the jail --- and readers learn that children process trauma through their natural language of play, where kids ?[turn] the passive into the active? and ?gain mastery of a painful situation through numerous repetitions.? (p.198) Did the play therapy scenes cause you to reflect on your own childhood or the experience of raising children? How?

3. ?Recent statistics show that there are more than 380,000 children in foster care in the United States, and while children often enter the system for multiple reasons, parental incarceration is estimated to account for around 40 percent of foster placements.? (p.91) What can we, as a community and society, do to better support these children?

4. Children aren?t the only ones affected by incarceration; it impacts everyone in the incarcerated person?s orbit, especially financially. Have you or anyone you know been affected by the prison system?

5. Do you think our jails and prisons keep the public safe? Do you think people are any safer after serving their sentences?

Crying Wolf

?A liar will not be believed, even when he tells the truth.? ?Aesop Fables, The Boy Who Cried Wolf

1. This idea that children lie for attention is deeply rooted in our cultural stories, particularly in ?The Boy Who Cried Wolf,? a well-known teaching story utilized by generations of parents. Why do you think Nikki?s mom told her that story? How do you think that lesson informed Nikki?s decisions from that point on?

2. While combing through hindsight, Michelle reflects on the various ?personality quirks? in Nikki that were more likely trauma responses. ?Now, looking back, I wondered if someone looking for help looks an awful lot like someone looking for attention.? (p.24) What does this mean to you? How have you potentially misjudged people or situations in the past?

3. On page 257, Michelle questions, ?What if she had never been a shepherd --- or a sheep, or a wolf --- but was instead a scapegoat, destined to be led into the proverbial woods with society?s guilt and the sins of men heaped on her back,

sacrificed to absolve the system for not acting sooner and failing to protect us all?? Reflect on that idea, knowing how the story ends.

Pornography, Sexual Exploitation, & Misogyny

?These were graphic images of women, and also girls, pinned down. If you could see the woman?s face?she was usually crying or screaming, mascara smeared from tears, eyebrows scrunched in pain or disgust?These images looked like they had been shot on cell phones propped up in the corner of a living room, or on the dash of a car, or in a bathroom. They looked like crimes.?

1. Within hours of Nikki?s arrest, Michelle is advised to hire a legal team ?with an understanding of sex trafficking and its psychological effects.? (p.34) She then learned that her sister was being raped, filmed, and the videos were uploaded to a mainstream pornography site, PornHub, for others to consume. How do you think the filming and distributing of your rape would compound your trauma? How might it contribute to you staying silent and hiding the abuse --- knowing humiliating videos could be shown to the people you love, to your children?

2. Later, while going through the ?discovery? files seen by the prosecutors and defense attorneys, Michelle sees that the PornHub print-outs had thumbnails of other similar #forcedsex videos, with different women appearing to show pain and disgust. Prior to reading this book, did you assume that all of the videos uploaded to PornHub were consensual? How could you tell?

3. When Michelle brings up these videos to Nikki?s attorneys on page 246, saying ?This wasn?t like --- normal porn,? the response was, ?Eh, it?s not that abnormal.? How does the normalization of abuse in pornography --- along with its mass availability --- contribute to a culture where people could watch a woman being raped and instinctually believe she wants it.

4. Part of the ?discovery? from Nikki?s case showed a documented obsession with violent pornography. Looking through the lens of addiction --- the compulsive consumption of something that, over time, requires an elevated dose to maintain homeostasis, despite diminishing, harmful and dangerous consequences for everyone around you --- how might pornography addiction have played a factor?

5. ?I?d soon learn from Sarah and Nikki that the burning, as well as most of the filmed videos, were a punishment. A punishment for talking back to Chris. A punishment for refusing sex. A punishment for disrespecting him, for not obeying.? (p.74) The punishments were broadcasted as a way to keep her in line. In Kate Mann?s book, DOWN GIRL: The Logic of Misogyny, she defines misogyny as ?the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women?s subordination and to uphold male dominance.? And violence is a widely practiced way to enforce those rules. In that context, the PornHub videos were less about sex and more about misogyny. Discuss how this complicates our society?s willingness to condemn this kind of violence --- particularly within a criminal justice system that conflates punishment with justice.

6. Is it uncomfortable for you to discuss pornography? Were those parts of the book hard to read? How do you think our unease contributes to the general culture of silence around sexual exploitation, pornography and rape?

Human Complexity

?Life would be so much easier if people were only one thing: good, bad, right, wrong.?

1. ?But something about categorizing Chris as a monster didn?t sit right with me. It was too easy. Chris wasn?t a mythological creature, something subhuman and ?Other;? Chris was an ordinary man. A well-liked man. A functioning member of society --- and in my most compassionate moments, I could even see him as a victim of that society, taught that men deserve sex and women should be punished for not giving it to them.? (p.245) How does that quote sit with you? What?s your reaction to lending Chris his own humanity and understanding, after reading through the ?discovery? of what he had done?

2. Prosecutors told the jury that Chris didn?t ?fit the profile of an abuser? --- yet on page 285, domestic violence expert Kellyann Kostyal-Larrier testified that ?the stereotype or myth?is that if the person was abusive, we would all know it, and my experience has been time and time again that the reason abusers are very effective at what they do is because they operate one way in the public and another way at home.? Have you seen this play out in your own life, with the people around you? In what ways, big and small, do you show up differently in public and in private?

3. Many of the people who disbelieved Nikki did so because they thought Chris was too nice, too good, to be capable of violence. It?s common to assume that our experience of a person is the same as everyone else?s. Yet Nikki experienced Chris differently than Michelle experienced Chris, which was different than how his friends did, which was different than his parents and children. Is it possible that all relationship experiences are real, that all versions of a person can exist at the same time? Have you ever disbelieved abuse allegations because it was incongruent with your own personal experience?

4. Michelle also explores the complexity in her mother. ?I was torn between wanting to hold her accountable for what I thought were epic fu--ups --- it should have been her job to keep Nikki safe, I reasoned, desperate to find someone to blame --- and knowing that I couldn?t reduce Mom to the sum of her mistakes. She was still the mom who showed up at our bedside when we were sick, saved her money to take us on trips, and was always available to talk?That version of her was real, too.? (p.60) How do you think their mom?s own traumas and experiences influenced the way she raised her daughters and contributed to her blind spots?

5. Michelle shows how the criminal justice system simplifies people down to their labels: you?re either a defendant or a victim, guilty or innocent. How do you think this complicates the issue of criminalized survival? Is there room for nuance and complexity in our system? Can we have both compassion and accountability?

Another F---ing Growth Experience

1. Throughout the book, Michelle moves toward and away from this idea that all of the events in her and Nikki?s life were happening for a reason. What?s your relationship with the idea that things happen to teach us lessons, and everything works out the way it?s meant to?

2. Michelle?s therapist tells her it?s ?another f--ing growth experience (p.88),? which triggers both a rejection and an

anger that she?d be given another ?growth experience? so quickly after the last. Have you heard this phrase used before? What does it mean to you? Do you find it as an example of hyper-positivity, or a helpful mindset to move through a hard experience?

Author Bio

Michelle Horton is a writer, speaker and advocate living in New York's Hudson Valley. Through the Nicole Addimando Community Defense Committee, she continues to speak out for her sister and the countless other victims of domestic violence criminalized for their acts of survival. DEAR SISTER is her debut memoir.

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