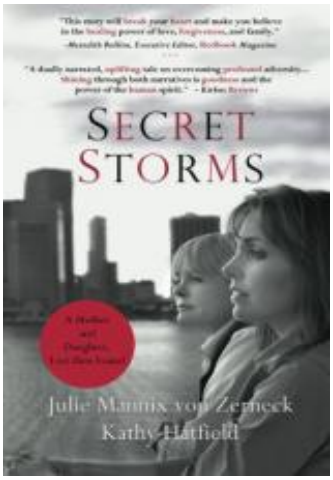
Secret Storms: A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found

by Julie Mannix von Zerneck and Kathy Hatfield



About the Book

A pregnant, upper class nineteen-year-old Philadelphia Main Line debutante is confined, against her will, to a state mental hospital. She spends her pregnancy surrounded by the mentally challenged and the criminally insane. On April 19, 1964, she gives birth to a child, whom she is forced to give up for adoption.

A loving middle-class couple adopts a month-old little girl from Catholic Charities. She is adored and cherished from the very beginning. It is as though she is dropped into the first chapter of a fairy tale?but we all know how fairy tales go.

This is the story of a mother and daughter. Of what it is to give up a child and what it is to be given up. Of what it is to belong, what it is to be a family and what it is to yearn deeply, and to never lose hope?because anything is possible.

In this exquisite memoir, Julie Mannix von Zerneck and Kathy Hatfield recount the stories of their lives. Deliciously strange, surprising and sweetly funny, this tenderly written book takes us on a wild and frightening journey. Written in two distinct and deeply expressive voices, their stories seamlessly meld together in a breathtaking ending.

Discussion Guide

1. Does SECRET STORMS: A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found (or any part of it) remind you of another book? Why or why not?

2. What are your thoughts about these two quotations?

I was simply a child who wanted more than anything to be a saint. Being a saint, after all, meant you were loved by everyone. (p. 39).
?Yes,? I whispered back. ?If you had been my child, I would have loved you very much.? (p. 59)

Text-to-Self Connections

3. In what way(s) do you personally connect to SECRET STORMS: A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found?

4. What message(s) do you take away from the book?

5. If you were able to speak or write to teenaged Julie or Kathy, what would you say?

6. What do you want to say to the families in this story today?

7. In your life, have you had unlikely heroes or heroines?

8. Have you or someone you know ever had to overcome hardships such as those that Julie, Kathy, and their families experienced?

Text-to-World Connections

9. Could a child whose only issue was pregnancy be institutionalized today?

10. What message would you give to today?s parents whose daughters were in similar situations as Julie?

11. Where could a present-day Julie get help? Where could a present-day Kathy get help?

12. Have you ever given much thought to the adoption process before? If not, what are your thoughts about it now? Have your views on adoption changed since reading the book?

Literary Connections

13. Explain the ways in which the book structure is used to advance the story.

14. What motifs or symbols stood out to you in the book?

15. What literary devices are the writer of this quotation (Julie) using when she writes the following:
Life is funny. Life is strange. Life just makes you shake your head sometimes in wonder. (p. 163)

16. Compare Julie and Kathy?s writing styles.

17. What do you see that is alike or different in their personalities?

18. Do you see any similarities between Julie?s childhood animal menagerie and her teenage human menagerie in the institution? How or how not?

19. Some reviewers have said SECRET STORMS: A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found is a book that ?exudes humanity?. Literary characters, even characters based on real people, can be measured by the following:

What they say
What they do
What others say about them
What others do to them

Using one or all of these as points of reference, identify moments where this humanity is revealed in Secret Storms: A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found?

20. What do you consider to be other themes of the book?

21. Read the following quotations and discuss them in whatever context is appropriate (in terms of meaning, literary techniques, symbolism, and life in general).

It turned out Mafia Whore would make herself my protector in the months to come. She was my bodyguard, in fact. There were some very rough characters on the ward and never once while I was there did any one of them get within a foot of me without Mafia Whore appearing suddenly at my side from nowhere. She never talked to me, never even made eye contact with me, but she took care of me from the moment my baby and I entered that ward on November 22nd until we were finally discharged. (p. 30)

My doubts fall away and leave me weightless and whole. I turn. I look. I see the frame of my face in another?s. I see my eyes staring back at me. It?s her. It is her. She is lovely. She is delicate. She is a familiar mix of me. (p. 301)

They?re expecting Aimee. I?m not Aimee. I can?t be anything like the Aimee they imagined me to be, I worried. What if I?m not as easy to love as the baby they gave away? What if this doesn?t work out? What will I tell my daughters? What will I tell myself? (p.295)

It was a relief to talk about myself as an aspiring actress and not about the other self that was a Main Line debutante. There was freedom in not being the self that grew up with a menagerie of wild animals that everyone always wanted to ask questions about. It was liberating not being the daughter of adventurers who traveled the world for half a year at a time, the writers of books. To him, it was just who he saw. (p.76)

Gloria wasn?t all bad; she did have days that made me want to nest in her arms and surrender to her care. The truth is, I very much wanted a mother, and most of the time I wanted her to be my mother. (p.179)

I would have been good. I would have behaved. Eaten my vegetables, cleaned my room, said ?please? and ?thank you.? I would have made you love me. Somehow. (p. 297)

We have taken our time getting to know one another. Our relationship has had the luxury of a gestation period?a block of time that nature affords to every mother and her offspring. (p. 323)

?If only?? I started, but tears stopped me. He held me as I cried, rocking me. ?If only,? I managed to go on, ?I?d known you were waiting for me all this time. If only I?d known there was a chance. If only I?d known there was a possibility. We would be a family now. If only?? (p. 137)

It had never happened before, this mother and I thing. Now that I?d had my first taste I was ravenous for more. I didn?t want it to be over. If only time could stand still. If only the past could disappear. (p. 142)

?I wonder why I wasn?t stronger. Why didn?t I say no??

?Why didn?t you??

?I was too weak.?

?You were too weak to say no.?

?Yes, I was.?

?Why??

?Because I was just a child myself.?

?Children say no.?

?Yes, they do. But I didn?t. I never did. I never did say no.? (p.169)

22. What other quotations in the book would be valuable for discussion?

Author Bio

Julie Mannix von Zerneck was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. She traveled with her parents, living in Paris, on the Isle of Capri and in several boarding schools around the world, before settling down at Sunny Hill Farm at the age of nine. There, she lived with a menagerie of animals, including a cheetah and eagle and her very own baby spider monkey. After attending the Neighborhood Playhouse in NYC, she became an actress on Broadway, had running roles in three soap operas and guest starred on many TV series. She is married to the TV producer, Frank von Zerneck. They have three children and four grandchildren and reside in Toluca Lake, California, where, for 26 wonderful years, they were the owners of Portrait of a Bookstore. She is a lifelong collector of antiques and antiquarian books.

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