



Brother Broken

Cecile Beaulieu

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Brother Broken is a powerful memoir about family love and the tragic impacts of mental illness and suicide.

Shared with humanity, dignity, and wit, Cecile Beaulieu's memoir *Brother Broken* is about the devastation of mental illness and suicide, though it also recognizes the beauty of life and interpersonal relationships.

In the 1950s, Beaulieu and her six siblings grow up in Makwa, a farming village in Northern Saskatchewan with a population that seldom surpassed a hundred people. Denis, John, Cecile, and Mitch are the story's primary focus; through them, it documents the family's joys and sorrows as they navigate youth, adolescence, and adulthood. Mental illness plagued the family, manifesting itself in alcoholism and the suicides of Beaulieu's three brothers.

"So, this is what I will do: I'll be your voice," Beaulieu writes, struggling with perceived wasted opportunities to assist her troubled brothers. "I'm going to bring you back to life." She does, in fact. Alternating chapters introduce and build on Denis's, John's, and Mitch's lives, following as they reach and surpass a slew of milestones: school, jobs, moving out of the family home, marriages, having children, and, in some cases, moving back in.

The siblings are developed as complex and intricate individuals; they play various roles in the family dynamic. Recurrences of events deepen the audience's understanding of each man, humanizing them before revealing their decline and subsequent decisions to end their lives. The reasons for these decisions are not made explicit; they can be deduced from the incidents covered as well as from some named diagnoses. There is a late disclosure in the book regarding Beaulieu's father's molestation by a priest, as well as a shared hunch that maybe her brothers experienced the same.

"Each morning I realize anew what I've lost, and the grief bites me with the savagery of a rabid dog," Beaulieu writes. Her book works toward a musing conclusion—the personal realization that she must return to the world, and that suicide can no longer be considered a "Plan B": "There is a better solution, and I'm going to find it—because this family deserves a break." Once her tale is over, the epigraph and the first chapter about Beaulieu herself become even more important to read again.

Ending with the bittersweet suggestion that loss fuels hope, *Brother Broken* is a powerful memoir that weaves lighthearted memories from an eight-member family with reflections on the tragic impacts and consequences of mental illness and suicide.

JOANNE HUMPHREY (March 8, 2023)

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