

Standing in Possibility: A Memoir of Resilience and Hope

Janet Smith

FriesenPress

(230pp)

978-1-03-915012-6

Standing in Possibility is the memoir of a Canadian feminist who was involved in inspiring public service.

Janet Smith's memoir *Standing in Possibility* covers a precarious childhood, a teenage pregnancy, and an empowering career in public service.

Born in 1940, Smith grew up in homes across Canada; her father, frail of health, worked odd jobs until they settled in Alberta. Despite early challenges, her childhood was a contented one. But when she was seventeen, she got pregnant; she was sent away to give birth and put her daughter up for adoption. She put a second daughter up for adoption a year later.

Though Smith was sometimes forced to align herself with the standards of her era, she just as often butted against the status quo. She admired her mother's and aunts' tenacity, which helped her to put her ambitions at the forefront of her decisions. She subverted gender norms, earning a PhD in accounting and working for the Canadian government in several capacities across a long, successful career, including as the head of the Office for Equal Opportunities for Women and as the first woman to hold the position of assistant secretary for the prime minister's office. When she retired in 2000, she became an executive coach, encouraging aspiring women in their careers.

In addition to telling Smith's own story, the book muses on family roots and relationships. Her grandparents were European immigrants; she shares their stories, and her parents' stories, in concise terms. Further, the book addresses resilient women in the family and Smith's father's roles: he taught Smith to do traditional "boy" jobs, lessons that helped her to face different challenges in her adulthood. Its language is succinct but friendly, contributing to its easy flow and propulsive scene setting. It is sparing with its details but still conveys the emotional landscape of Smith's life well. However, those chapters that cover Smith's career in public service are too restrained with their details; the nuances of her work in the public service are underexplained.

Still, the book's self-compassion and empathy for others are contagious. When trying to reconnect with her daughters later in life, Smith avoided being forceful. The book's ending includes a heartfelt breakdown of Smith's emotional priorities (self-improvement in relationships; balancing self-control with vulnerability) that proves to be cathartic.

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AIMEE JODOIN (December 16, 2022)

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