

The Invisible Self: Broken Childhood, Primal Healing

Michelle Taja Miller

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An expressive memoir that follows a flourishing therapeutic journey, The Invisible Self reckons with suppressed traumas with clarity.

In her psychoanalytical memoir *The Invisible Self*, Michelle Taja Miller recounts traumatic memories from her childhood that were forgotten until triggered by significant relationships in her adulthood.

Miller's grandmother didn't want her mother, and Miller's mother didn't want her. Miller spent years in foster care in France in the early 1950s. When her mother married her stepfather, she joined their abusive household; later, she escaped to Paris and found acceptance among like-minded friends fighting conventional social norms. The trust and love among her friend group, however, released repressed trauma and caused chronic health problems, for which she sought relief in California.

The book proceeds in a back-and-forth motion whose order conveys its therapeutic purpose. Most chapters include a rearward-gazing narrative followed by insights and reflections: Miller recounts being beaten, raped, and neglected and the consequences thereof. Emphasizing her caregivers' appearances, the heavy mood they set in their spaces, and the natural environments around her, the writing captures her childhood perspective in expressive, physical, and moving terms. The few bright influences in Miller's life, including a brief foster mother and a father with whom she had no contact after her toddlerhood, carried her through her travails, as did experiences in nature, running in fields, swimming, and digging in the dirt. Later, Parisian homes replete with artful furnishings and natural light were a safe space for her memories' release.

The book's sense of yearning is palpable throughout its probing into episodes from the past, expressed via eternal dialogues, with memories relived and then interpreted. Indeed, the gruesomeness of the trauma is dissolved in Miller's healing process, which is described in candid terms. Still, the pace set by the spontaneous recollection of memories and Miller's mature reflections on them is undulating and sometimes disorienting.

In part, the book reflects the approach of the therapy method that Miller used toward understanding the fruits and threats of conscious awareness and the interpretation of repressed memories. The narration also ends with Miller beginning therapy—and with a suggestion that the release of subconscious thoughts is only the beginning of healing. However, the book's explanations of the therapy method's concepts are tucked away in an appendix and not shared in the book proper.

A memoir that reflects one approach to healing, *The Invisible Self* argues that change is possible when repressed memories are expressed with abandon and care.

MARI CARLSON (November 12, 2024)

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