



The Longest War: A Psychotherapist's Experience of Divorce, Custody, and Power

Catherine Harrington

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A confessional and vulnerable memoir, The Longest War uses a bitter divorce as a vehicle to address childhood trauma, heartbreak, and pain with candor.

Psychotherapist Catherine Harrington's harrowing but uplifting memoir *The Longest War* covers a bitter divorce and a protracted custody battle.

Harrington met the man who became her husband during her freshman year at Stanford. She ignored some warning signs about him, feeling conditioned to get married. In time, though, their marriage soured despite couples counseling. After their separation, Harrington began a high-stakes struggle over who would end up with their children. There were fights over child support, alimony, and custody during which she had to be strong, overcome trauma, and seek healing.

The prose is confessional and vulnerable, addressing childhood trauma, heartbreak, and pain with candor while also highlighting Harrington's flaws: her story starts by mentioning a "gestating fetus marinating in Old Crow bourbon and Lucky Strike smoke" and includes a scene in a doctor's office with Harrington seeking an IUD in preparation for an affair. Likewise, there are admissions of compensating for loneliness and fear with compulsive eating, putting on a false front, and prolonging a talk to enjoy the other person's company. The text includes explanatory flashbacks too.

Harrington's professional background is drawn upon for the book's thorough characterizations of others—and for its instances of self-reflection. The book calls out feigned confusion, notes that people respond to heartbreak in different ways, and observes in the heat of a contentious moment, "My voice was small, but at least I was speaking." But the book's descriptions of psychology are also sometimes too precise for general audiences, as when it lists the physical effects of specific responses to situations: a "prefrontal neocortex [resigns] its executive functions of logical thinking and clear decision-making." More affecting are its metaphors and poetic observations; the "marriage felt like deadened steel bars, parallel railroad tracks extending to infinity, never touching," while a landscape is recalled in terms of "dead corn stalks, their juicy kernels of August long withered by a gray December weekend."

Throughout the book, names are changed to protect the identities of the other parties involved. At the same time, the book is scrupulous about sharing credibility-building details, as with its clear timeline and meticulous notes regarding court dates, case numbers, and venues. Financial power dynamics related to the court proceedings are addressed with nuance. But despite its long focus on the court case, the book works toward a conclusion that emphasizes maternal love and unyielding dedication more than struggle itself.

A gripping memoir about a bitter divorce, *The Longest War* celebrates how a difficult custody struggle had strengthening and edifying personal effects.

JOSEPH S. PETE (July 26, 2024)

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