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Book Review: Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus: Inside the World of a Woman Born in Prison

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Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus: Inside the World of a Woman Born in Prison
2011. Deborah Jiang Stein. SAGE Studies in International Sociology.
188 pages. Paperback (\$11.80). ISBN 978-1-887345-50-7

Reviewed by Sharonrose Sefora¹

Deborah Stein's, *Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus: Inside the World of a Woman Born in Prison* is a memoir of a woman born to a heroin-addicted mother in prison. Stein describes this memoir as a piece of her story, of the "ravages" which were a result of shame, secrecy and stigma. This book is about courage, curiosity, resilience and about a woman's journey towards self-actualisation. "Freedom came with finding courage, curiosity and purpose in life and doing good things for others" (Stein 2011:11). Stein reflects that in her freedom, she learnt to appreciate and find the deeper meaning in small things; like a tutu; which for her, became not just a rustle of tulle but a symbol of discovery, curiosity and liberation (Stein, 2011:12)

The reader is taken through the 'journey' in 21 short chapters. In the 1st chapter where she found the 'letter' and discovered she was born in prison, one realizes that indeed one small event or word can change your whole life course. For Stein, discovering the truth about her birth mother led her on a path of self-discovery, to her struggle with the 'tutu', a rather intriguing concept. Throughout the chapters, the reader soon realizes that Stein does not sugar-coat her life or her 'journey', but interestingly the reader receives a cutting, raw, honest, page turner.

Each title of each chapter takes the reader stage by stage though the 'journey': 'The letter'; 'Battle of the Tutu'; Lucky; On the Edge; Go to your Corner and Come Out Fighting; The duets; From the Back of the Bus; BFD; On the Fast Track; Act Normal; Gnawed; The End Before the Beginning; A White Knuckle Ride; Another Secret; Mother and Daughter, At Last; Weeping Mother; Full Circle; Lost and Found, then Lost Again; On Stage; Break on Through to the Other Side; and the last chapter Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus.

The reader learns of her adoptive parents who were Jewish, academics, and unprepared for the wild, rebellious, risk-taking, brown-skinned, Asian-eyed stranger in their orderly life and home. Deborah was weaned off of heroin, but at a very young age she got hooked again, on other drugs. Throughout her teens and twenties 'trouble', was her middle name; she ran away, she acted out, she played on the fast track life; gambling her own welfare and her deepest yearning of love and acceptance. She never let herself out of the emotional prison she created for herself, which took her again to find courage to be loved. "The deeper my mother digs in the dirt the more hatred dredges up in me...I hate her for adopting me, and hate myself for being adopted" (Stein, 2011:32-33).

In chapter 3 (Lucky), Stein recalls how she found out she was adopted, how her cousin raced up to her and told her she's lucky. "My mother told me you were chosen said you're lucky because they had to take me just because I was born to them" (Stein, 2011:27), for Stein, being adopted and being lucky did not fit in the same sentence. Instead, she felt sick in her stomach, "tight inside like a rubber band ball the size of a bowling ball" (Stein, 2011: 28). The reader learns of Stein's longing of the unknown, her glamorisation of her birthmother, her first home; prison memories.

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Mother and daughter At Last; chapter 15, tells of a reconnection with her health and relationships. However, there are still unanswered questions that still haunt her; who she is and what her race is. As she tries to push these questions away and stay healthy physically, socially and emotionally, a call changes everything. Her adopted mother has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, as Stein swims in a pool of emotions and while the doctors explore her mother's cancer, mother and daughter bond, and grow closer. "At last we both embrace the bond, saddest of all; it's toward the end of her life" (Stein, 2011:125). As a reader you empathize with Stein's struggles, but then gain only someone born in prison to a heroin addicted mother could fully understand Stein's pain—a pain that led her to a risky, troublesome and destructive behaviour from childhood through her young adult years. Nearing the end of the book, one can read the softness that was evident in Stein's voice when she finally felt and expressed love for her birth mother, adoptive mother and children.

The reader may see a bit of their lives whether it be the light, dark, or in between of life described so frankly by Stein. ***Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus: Inside the World of a Woman Born in Prison*** captivates you from the first page and does not let go until the last full stop on the last page.

The use of autobiographical work provides authenticity, originality and depth to this book. The use of both figurative and literal meaning of the tutu concept to illustrate similarities and differences with being a "tough girl" is also commendable. The language Stein uses is fairly accessible to anyone reading this memoir. Overall, ***Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus: Inside the World of a Woman Born in Prison*** is a rich, educational reading material for those interested in life, love, courage, faith, curiosity and finding one self.

References

Stein, J.D. (2011). *Even tough Girls wear Tutus: Inside the world of a woman born in prison*.