



## Hidden Lives: Stories of mental illness forge understanding

BY TRACY SHERLOCK, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 26, 2012

The writers who tell their stories in *Hidden Lives: Coming Out on Mental Illness* have either experienced mental illness first-hand or through their relationship with a close family member. The collection of 26 true stories is as riveting as any fiction, if not more so.

Included here are such stories as Montreal writer Joel Yanofsky's experience of finding out his son is autistic, or Vancouver Sun columnist Douglas Todd's story of growing up with a father who spent time in Essondale hospital.

The book includes stories about, and written by, people who have experienced schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative identity disorder.

Vancouver physician and author Gabor Mate writes the foreword, while writers Lenore Rowntree and Andrew Boden, both of whom have siblings with mental illness, are the editors. In the introduction, written by Rowntree, she says Health Canada statistics show 20 per cent of all people will experience a mental illness at some point in their lifetime. "If you add to this number all the family members of those affected, it means virtually every Canadian is or will be touched by the issue."

And those who are affected have courageous and at times heartbreaking stories to tell. There are stories that seem to mimic news headlines: stories of suicide, of bullying, of increasing anxiety and depression. There are stories of parents who are stunned and heartbroken to discover their child's mind is not working properly.

There are stories of drug addiction and self medication and there are stories of hospitalizations and jail sentences that, despite being quite harsh and bleak, may have saved the lives of some of the subjects. But there are also stories of hope.

Some of the people in these stories are professionals — doctors and professors — who try to keep it all together as long as they can. As Mate writes in the foreword, "That perceived need to cover up, to hide the self from the gaze of others and from the feared judgments and opprobrium of society, magnifies the torment endured by the sufferer."

Some of the stories are told once by a relative and then again by the person going through the mental illness, which adds dimension to the reader's understanding.

Rowntree writes in the introduction to *Hidden Lives* that she hopes the anthology will "help lift the veil of mystery, to begin to remove the stigma, to normalize the issues around mental illness. We hope the illness can start to become just another part to life."

Mental illness touches all of us — we'd all benefit from reading this book and gaining some insight and understanding into the lives of those who are experiencing it firsthand.

At minimum, these touching stories show that it's always necessary to look beyond the surface to understand the chaos and turbulent nature of a life that includes mental illness.