

# DAUGHTERS OF “MAD” MOTHERS

BY SUE CORRIGAN

As a young adult, Catherine Camden-Pratt did not leave the home she grew up in, on Sydney's lower North Shore. "Home," she says, "left me."

The details of her life in that place are almost unbearably painful to hear, let alone to have personally experienced. Soon after Catherine was born, the youngest of six children, her mentally ill mother tried to kill her and as a result, was sectioned in a locked ward of a Sydney psychiatric hospital. It was to be the first of numerous admissions, almost always involuntary. Catherine remembers numerous painful visits to see her mother, starting from when she was just four years old.

Catherine's father was an alcoholic who sexually abused her. When she was 13, he killed himself, falling out of a moving train. Two years later, with her mother in a psychiatric ward once again and the grandmother who had cared for Catherine and her siblings admitted to a nursing home, she and an older sister were left alone to fend for themselves.

"I'd won a Commonwealth secondary scholarship and attended a selective girls' high school, but I rarely went to school for the last years, because there seemed no point", she recounts. "When I'd make a rare appearance, teachers would ask for a note to account for my absences. So I'd just write one myself on the spot and hand it to them. Now I realise this was a cry for help."

Yet, she recounts with some pride, more than 35 years later, "I still topped English and modern history exams". She put herself through university, became a teacher and then decided to do a Masters in social ecology. "In my initial research, I went looking for my mother. I was interested in the social causes that can lead women to be classified as mentally ill. Sometimes, actions and behaviour that cause women to be labelled as "mad" are not the result of



Catherine Camden-Pratt

a biological mental illness, but a response to excessive trauma such as ongoing domestic violence or sexual abuse. When it was completed, a supervisor said that one key element was missing – the voices of the children of women labelled mad."

She says this further research was confronting, as the literature suggests that the prognosis for people who do not have a nurturing, caring mother to

whom they can properly attach and bond is very poor. So Catherine went on to research a PhD, gathering together 14 women ranging in age from mid-30s to early 60s, three of whom were her own sisters, to talk specifically about the impact of mentally ill mothers on daughters, and to "explore its legacies".

The result was a thesis entitled *Daughters of Persephone: legacies of maternal 'madness'*, which Catherine then turned into the book *Out of the Shadows: daughters growing up with a 'mad' mother*, published in 2006 by Finch.

Now 54 and an academic at the University of Western Sydney, Catherine's book is a raw, unsanitised account of the challenges for females whose mothers are incapable of providing the love, care and maternal nurturing all children need. She says that while many experiences are of course common to both males and females alike, daughters are left with a number of gender-specific issues to deal with.

"For instance, the onset of severe depression or a mental illness such as psychosis among women is often related to the birth of a child, so it is really challenging for daughters

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when it comes time to consider having babies themselves. There is a great deal of fear that childbirth or child-rearing could also tip them into mental illness, or that their own children could be genetically susceptible.

"The behaviour and suffering of a person labelled 'mad' is usually so dramatic, it captures nearly all the attention. Not a lot of thought has gone into what happens to their children, the vast majority of whom find themselves having to be their parent's carer from a very young age."

She also points out how difficult, if not impossible, it is for anyone to talk about life with a mentally ill mother. "Where do you talk about it? Over lunch at school? At dinner parties? Even when children have grown up, their instincts are to be protective of their parents. I felt guilty talking about my pain, even after my mother died when I was 29. While the issue is discussed more openly these days, there remain large numbers of silent people."

She says counselling can help – as long as the counsellor is capable of understanding the impact of a mentally ill mother on a child – but believes such pain can never be fully "healed".

"You live forever," she says, "with a sense of unreconciled grief." 🌀

Read an excerpt from *Out of the Shadows* by Catherine Camden-Pratt on page 34