

Reflection on A Boy Broken by Douglas Engleman

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Douglas Engleman's *A Boy Broken* is not a book that skirts around pain. It looks straight at what it is to love someone who is seriously struggling with their mental health and to be part of a family that is trying to hold itself together through that pain. Reading this book hit close to home for me because I've seen what happens when mental illness enters a family. It doesn't just affect one person. It changes everything; the way people talk, how they act, how they feel about each other, and even how they see themselves.

Engleman's story about his son made me think a lot about my own brother. He's struggled with serious depression for years, and it hasn't been a quiet struggle. There have been multiple suicide attempts. There have been nights when everything felt like it might fall apart. There have been stays in psychiatric wards, moments of fear I'll never forget, and stretches of time where our family felt like it was barely holding itself together. As in Engleman's book, the pain in our house wasn't just my brother's pain; it became everyone's. My parents were scared, tired, and not sure what to do. My dad hadn't had to handle much mental illness before all of this, so he was learning along with us. That meant not just learning about hospitals, meds, or symptoms, but learning how to sit with something that doesn't have any easy answers.

When one of us is hurt, the whole family feels the pain. My brother's pain did not stay his own; it invaded the way the rest of us lived. My parents' relationship was strained. There were many fights that were not really about each other but about fear. My mom and dad handled things differently. My mom had to talk about everything and hold on to things. My father was more subdued at first, as though he didn't know what to term what he was feeling. As time passed, he had to adapt, to learn how to be there in the life of someone whose mental illness he didn't quite understand. Engleman describes the same sort of learning in his book. A father who was suddenly and unexpectedly propelled into the world of mental illness, trying to learn, to assist, and not lose himself in the process. That resonated. I watched my dad slowly change over the years. I think the possibility of losing my brother compelled him to change in ways he never thought possible.

With a family like this growing up, there is a lot that goes unspoken. When someone in the house is struggling with something as heavy as depression, everyone starts walking on eggshells, even without realizing it. You start to try not to say anything incorrectly, not to bring any more stress. Sometimes you do not say anything at all. There were moments when I felt like I had to be the "good" one, the one who did not cause trouble, who did not add to my parents' stress. Reading about the emotional toll on Engleman's family, I saw my own. When tragedy is happening to someone you love, you start compartmentalizing parts of yourself to make room for their pain. It's not something people tell you to do. You just do.

One of the most powerful things in the book was how Engleman describes holding on to hope. Hope sounds easy to have, but when you're in a situation like this, it's anything but that. It's hard. You're constantly hoping this time things will be different. That the treatment will work. That the phone won't ring in the middle of the night with devastating news. That your family will finally get a break from the hold of mental illness. I know that weight. When my brother was in the hospital, there was this mix of hope and fear that existed in all of us. It was exhausting to keep hoping and, at the same time, be ready to be disappointed. I saw how my parents were exhausted from holding that hope too. It did not necessarily equate to the fact that they no longer cared; if anything, they cared so much that it hurt. But it wore all of us down.

Reading about a family experiencing so much also made me consider the other end of it, the guilt of being the person in the hospital. I had my own inpatient stay for anorexia. It was a hard, scary process, and even though I was trying to survive my own battle, a part of me couldn't help but think about how it was affecting my parents. I remember being in the hospital bed and thinking about how my mom was probably at home, blaming herself, and my dad was probably trying to be strong and act like he was fine when he wasn't. That guilt stayed with me. Even while I was getting help, I felt like I was making more problems for them. It's something that Engleman's book depicts so perfectly, not so much guilt on the part of the one struggling, but the reality that families are all intertwined in a manner where one person's pain always pulls on the others.

When mental illness comes into a family, relationships change. Some bonds grow stronger; others are tested. I've seen my parents fight in ways they probably wouldn't have if they weren't carrying so much pain and stress. I've seen my dad be shut down emotionally because he didn't know how else to handle everything. I've seen my mom break down because she felt helpless. And I've felt my own role shift between being a sister, a supporter, and at times, someone struggling myself. Engleman doesn't sugarcoat this reality in *A Boy Broken*. He shows how love can exist alongside exhaustion, frustration, and fear. That felt honest to me. Love doesn't disappear when someone is sick, but it gets tested.

Another thing the book gets right is the quiet form of grieving that families do. It's not always necessarily about losing a person physically, though sometimes it is, but losing how life used to be. Life wasn't always easy before my brother got sick, but it didn't have the fear factor underlying it. When depression took over his life, it took something from the rest of us as well. There is grief in watching someone you love lose themselves to their illness, even when they are standing physically in front of you. There is grief in knowing that your family will never quite be what it used to be again. I saw my parents change. I changed too.

There is another important element to this story, the guilt that lies in each and every person's heart. My father was guilty for having no clue how to handle mental illness. My mother was guilty for not being able to fix everything. I was guilty for being both a part of the family trying to cope with the pain of my brother, and, at one point, the source of my parents' further worry with my own issues with mental illness.

Engleman speaks of his paternal guilt, of what he could have done differently. That kind of guilt is one that I comprehend, not just secondhand from my parents, but firsthand. I do know what it is like to feel like a burden, even when people tell you that you are not. I know what it is like to want your pain not to cause pain for the people who love you. What struck me about the way Engleman writes is that through everything his family goes through, they never stop attempting to learn and grow. My family has done the same thing. My dad, with no mental health experience, learned little by little to talk about it. He learned to ask more questions. He learned to sit in the lack of control. It wasn't perfect, but it was progress.

I've also learned to talk about things I once kept secret. I didn't tell people for a long time what was going on with my brother or with me. I thought silence would make all of it easier. It didn't. What I've learned is that families can't navigate pain like this alone. It takes learning, support, and a great deal of painful honesty.

Reading *A Boy Broken* was not simple as it mirrored so much of my life. It made me understand, though, that these stories need to be told. Mental illness is not just a personal battle; it's a family story. It touches every member of the family. It tests love but also shows how deep that love goes. The book also reminded me that hope, pain, and guilt can exist together. It's not tidy, it's messy, but it's real. And even though the pain may never go away, families can evolve and change as a result of it.

When mental illness enters a family, nothing is the same again. I've lived it. I've seen my brother battle depression and survive more than once. I've seen my parents work to stretch themselves to the breaking point to hold everything together. I've lain in the hospital myself, bearing both the weight of my own illness and the guilt of what that did to the people that I love. Engleman's story is so deeply personal, and yet it's not just his story; it's a story with which so many families connect, mine included. It shows the devastation, the learning, and the love that still holds on even when it's tested to its limits.