The Legacy of Anne Sexton

A review of

**Half in Love: Surviving the Legacy of Suicide: A Memoir**
by Linda Gray Sexton
$25.00

Reviewed by
Alma H. Bond

*Half in Love: Surviving the Legacy of Suicide: A Memoir* by Linda Gray Sexton lives up to its title, giving a clear and in-depth portrait of what it is like to attempt to take one’s own life and the ghastly legacy such an action leaves the bereaved family. For anyone who wishes to understand what drives a person to kill himself or herself, *Half in Love* brings a deeper understanding of the illness than anything short of feeling the urge to commit suicide oneself. The title alone, which is taken from John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” tells the story:

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Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death (p. vii)
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Linda Gray Sexton, the daughter of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Anne Sexton, inherited her mother’s illness along with a touch of her talent. Like Anne, who ultimately succeeded in taking her own life, Linda tried many times to kill herself, even though as a daughter, mother, wife, and sister, she knew firsthand the pain her act would cause those who loved her.

Sexton writes,

> From my own experience as the daughter of suicide, I knew, intimately, how many people—especially family and friends—thought of this quintessential act of self-destruction as a self-indulgent, self-involved, selfish choice, but now I saw the reality of it: interior pain, urgent, could indeed pressure you to take your own life. (p. 5)

“Depression is a country with no borders,” she writes (p. 67). “What once I had tried so hard to avoid and push away with such determination for over forty years, suddenly seemed natural, and I ached to surrender to it” (p. 5).

Anyone who doubts the inherited tendency to suicide should take a look at Anne Sexton’s family history. The length of the list of suicides is incredible. The whole family on both sides was peppered with mental illness, alcoholism, and the wish to commit suicide. Linda’s father spent many mornings in the kitchen speaking to Linda of his own suicidal feelings. His aunt had succumbed to the family illness and lived out her life in institutions. After Anne died, her oldest sister and her father’s sister killed themselves. Did her cousins feel the same urge? Linda wondered. Was the cause genetic, a chemical imbalance in the body, the influence of living with someone suffering from the illness, or all of the above? What about her future children? she ruminated. Would they suffer from the same illness? Should she even have children?

This was despite the fact that Anne Sexton’s ancestors had arrived on the Mayflower and become prestigious citizens of Plymouth; one even became the governor of Maine. Anne was very proud of her heritage, especially of her grandfather, who was a literary man and the editor-in-chief of the *Lewiston Evening Journal*, a prominent Maine newspaper.

With this family background, it is no surprise that Linda Sexton was overwhelmed with suicidal wishes of her own. But Linda didn’t succeed, as her mother and other family members had done, at least in part because she found it more difficult to take her own life than she had imagined. She stood in front of her mother’s portrait and said with admiration, “You really knew how to do it! You got it right! . . . Pills easily vomited, hanging gone awry, monoxide poisoning interrupted at the last minute” (pp. 4–5). After taking us on a roller coaster of self-destruction, bipolar illness, and numerous hospitalizations, Linda, with the help of therapists, medication, and loving children, confronted deep-seated issues in herself and her relationship with her mother, which seemingly has terminated the haunting cycle of suicide she appeared destined to inherit.
Linda writes with satisfaction, “I had lived to see my sons surpass the age I was when my mother took her own life. I had not abandoned my children as I had been abandoned. I was a mother who lived, despite it all” (p. xiii).

When the author was told by the coroner that her mother was dead, she hoped upon hope that Anne had died in any way but by her own hand. “I longed to hear that she was dying of an incurable cancer. . . . I fantasized I would hear suspicions of murder” (p. 26). But no, she learned that her worst nightmare had come true when she was informed by the police that her mother indeed had killed herself. It took most of Linda’s life to get beyond the horror of her mother’s act.

She was plagued for years by questions about Anne’s death, such as, Does it hurt to die by carbon monoxide? Did she choke on the gas, trying to catch her breath? Did Anne try to yank the door open, after it was too late? Anne had tried to call Linda the afternoon before she killed herself. Linda would never forgive herself that she hadn’t answered the call. Would her mother still be alive if she had answered? she ruminated. Is it my fault she is dead?

From the time Linda was three years old, she was waiting for her mother to die. One day at that early age, she found her kitten buried in a snow drift. Her parents tried to reassure her that the kitten would live on in her heart, but Linda took no comfort from that. She knew that the kitten was dead and would never nestle in her lap or purr again. By the time she was nine, she realized that if her mother succeeded in killing herself, she would disappear from their lives forever, just as her kitten had done.

Anne Sexton may have been a great poet, but she was a terrible mother. She informed Linda that it was her fault that she, Anne, was sick. At other times she would go into a trance and wake up to find herself actually choking the baby in her crib to stop her from crying. As a small child Linda poignantly asked her mother, “What does ‘nuts’ mean?” (p. 59). Not until Linda read her mother’s transcripts as an adult did she realize that, during her childhood, it wasn’t until many weeks or even months had passed after her mother was released from her hospital stays that she came to pick up her daughter at her Aunt Alison’s house; getting her hair and nails done and going to poetry classes were a higher priority. “I huddled in the wind of these repeated abandonments” (p. 51), Linda writes.

Anne had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals since Linda was three years old. By early adolescence, Linda’s moods already were dominated by a deepening sense of sadness that was to plague her for years to come. She spent all her time composing melancholy poems reminiscent of those of her mother and Sylvia Plath.

Linda’s descriptions of her feelings of illness are extremely revealing. For example, she writes, “Never before had I encountered anything that so totally engulfed me, and under its obliterating presence, I felt that I had ceased to be [emphasis added]” (p. 215). At one point after a suicide attempt that was nearly successful, Linda wrote a note to the kind policeman who had saved her life. He answered that he had always considered suicide to be a selfish act, and it had never occurred to him that it could be driven by intense pain. Her
letter had helped him see that terrible aspect of the act, he continued. Linda thought that to have helped even one person to understand suicide made her feel infinitely more useful. Thus, the seeds were planted to write *Half in Love*.

Although Linda Gray Sexton is no Anne Sexton, she is an honest, often beautiful, writer. I recommend *Half in Love* to readers who love Anne Sexton’s poetry and would like to know more about her life and death. The book, which gives an accurate and in depth description of mental illness, also should interest mental health specialists and the families of suicidal patients. Although I am a longtime lover of Sexton’s poetry and was well aware that she had committed suicide, I had no idea that she had spent so much of her life in mental institutions and/or buried beneath her blankets. What a tribute to the muse of creativity that despite her tragic illness Anne Sexton was able to write such magnificent poetry!