

Riding The Roller Coaster - Living With Mood Disorders

Marja Bergen's book published in 1999
- a review by Bruce Saunders - MOVIE MONDAY

This slim volume, 154 pages trade paperback, was highly recommended by a member of my support group and, being the group's ad hoc librarian, I am always looking for helpful additions. Here is a book as important as Kay Redfield Jamison's **An Unquiet Mind** and Patty Duke's **A Brilliant Madness** for people with bipolar illness.

I was thrilled to find such a wonderful take on the manic-depressive experience. Marja has struggled with the condition for over 30 years and has much to share about living well in spite of it. She is an award-winning photographer and freelance writer in Vancouver, Canada.

In this book I see a kindred spirit using her hard-fought knowledge, gleaned from "riding the roller coaster" of mood disorders, to make the way a little less precarious for fellow travellers. It is a friendly book that many of us keep on our bedside table, a book that reflects back to us what we know, what we need to remember, what we are.

Riding The Roller Coaster is constructed of brief quotes from many sources, personal accounts and insights of Marja's own bipolar experience, and bite-sized essays on its many aspects. It is brimming with wisdom, forgiveness, acceptance and practical advice. Because of this format, one can easily pick it up and read just a page. Sometimes that's all a depressed or racing mind can focus on.

I especially appreciate the "we" tense used throughout (sections titled "When We Are Depressed" or "...Manic") and just plain good sense things that often get overlooked in the battle with the pathology ("Supportive Relationships", "A Spiritual Source of Strength", "Building Confidence")

Most books miss the positive acknowledgment of the good things about a condition that can be portrayed as a hopeless and relentlessly awful illness. Marja's essays describe the help she has found personally in finding expression for the creative drive that so many of us thrive on, but included are gentle reminders of the folly of letting that urge take us too far. "Sometimes we become so totally consumed by the creative process, by the power we feel in what we're producing, that everything else in life becomes secondary. We often forget to eat and sleep. We put responsibilities on hold." She follows with some practical suggestions on strategies besides medication to curb that tendency.

I asked Marja to come to Victoria to speak to my audience and fans of her book during Mental Illness Awareness Week. I got to know her a little during our dinner out before the show. With my family and her husband there, and later at the presentation, she was completely candid about

her illness and treatment and driven, as I am, to help people overcome the stigma and ignorance that keeps sufferers from getting back on track.

Marja Bergen has produced an invaluable tool from her life experience with a challenging condition. A great deal of anguish for sufferers and their families, as well as time and money for the mental health system, would be saved if this book was standard issue for all people diagnosed with manic-depression. I'd like to see all those engaged in psychosocial rehab reading this book to understand mood disorders better and to recommend it to their clients.

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