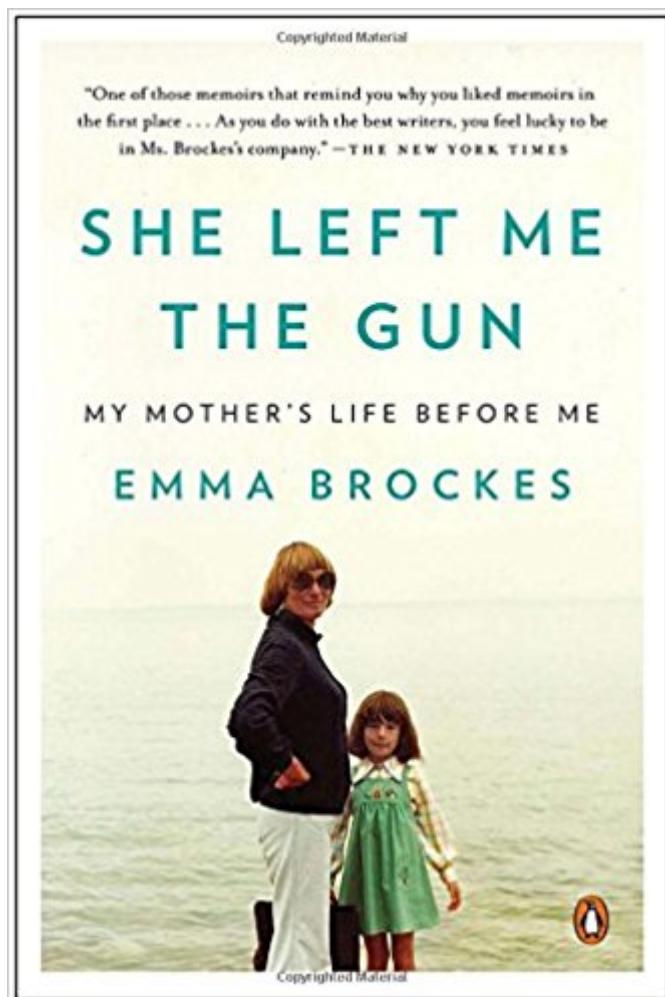


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She Left Me The Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me



Synopsis

"One of those memoirs that remind you why you liked memoirs in the first place... It has the density of a very good novel... As you do with the best writers, you feel lucky to be in Ms.

Brockes' company." --Dwight Garner, The New York TimesA chilling work of psychological suspense and forensic memoir, *She Left Me the Gun* is a tale of true transformation: the story of a young woman who reinvented herself so completely that her previous life seemed simply to vanish, and of a daughter who transcends her mother's fears and reclaims an abandoned past. "One day I will tell you the story of my life," promises Emma Brockes' mother, "and you will be amazed." Brockes grew up hearing only pieces of her mother's past stories of a rustic childhood in South Africa, glimpses of a bohemian youth in London and yet knew that crucial facts were still in the dark. A mystery to her friends and family, Paula was clearly a strong, self-invented woman; glamorous, no-nonsense, and frequently out of place in their quaint English village. In awe of Paula's larger-than-life personality, Brockes never asked why her mother emigrated to England or why she never returned to South Africa; never questioned the source of her mother's strange fears or tremendous strengths. Looking to unearth the truth after Paula's death, Brockes begins a dangerous journey into the land and the life her mother fled from years before. Brockes soon learns that Paula's father was a drunk megalomaniac who terrorized Paula and her seven half-siblings for years. After finally mustering the courage to take her father to court, Paula is horrified to see the malevolent man vindicated of all charges. As Brockes discovers, this crushing defeat left Paula with a choice: take her own life, or promise herself never to be intimidated or unhappy again. Ultimately she chooses life and happiness by booking one-way passage to London but not before shooting her father five times, and failing to kill him. Smuggling the fateful gun through English customs would be Paula's first triumph in her new life. *She Left Me the Gun* carries Brockes to South Africa to meet her seven aunts and uncles, weighing their stories against her mother's silences. Brockes learns of the violent pathologies and racial propaganda in which her grandfather was inculcated, sees the mine shafts and train yards where he worked as an itinerant mechanic, and finds in buried government archives the court records proving his murder conviction years before he first married. Brockes also learns of the turncoat stepmother who may have perjured herself to save her husband, dooming Paula and her siblings to the machinations of their hated father. Most of all, *She Left Me the Gun* reveals how Paula reinvented herself to lead a full, happy life. As she follows her mother's footsteps back to South Africa, Brockes begins to find the wellsprings of her mother's strength, the tremendous endurance

which allowed Paula to hide secrets from even her closest friends and family. But as the search through cherished letters and buried documents deepens, Brockes realizes with horror that her mother's great success as a parent was concealing her terrible past—and that unearthing these secrets threatens to undo her mother's work. A beguiling and unforgettable journey across generations and continents, *She Left Me the Gun* chronicles Brockes' efforts to walk the knife-edge between understanding her mother's unspeakable traumas and embracing the happiness she chose for her daughter.

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Customer Reviews

Q&A with Emma Brockes Q. What made you decide to go in search of your mother's life before she had you? A. When I was growing up, my mother was always dropping hints that something terrible and dramatic had happened in her past. But she had never been terribly specific. When I was 27, she died, and I felt compelled to find out all the things she hadn't been telling me. When a parent dies, your relationship with their history changes; it becomes your own and all the things you were avoiding, it seems imperative, suddenly, to confront. Deciding to write about it was easy; it's an amazing story. Secrets like this were meant to be written about. Q. What did you find when you went looking into your mother's past? A. I knew she had moved to England from South Africa in 1960 and never really been back. So after her death, I flew to Johannesburg for the first time, to meet some of her seven siblings and ask them the questions I hadn't dared ask her. It turned out she and her siblings had been involved in a high profile court case, in which their father

was the accused, and in which he had defended himself, cross-examining his own children in the witness box and destroying them one by one. It also turned out that my mother had tried, and failed, to kill him. So, some fairly lively discoveries. Q. You explore the ultimate question: how well do we know someone? Do you feel like you know your mother better now than before learning about her childhood trauma? A. No, strangely. I think I always knew her at mineral level, the stuff I found out was merely an extreme expression of characteristics that were clearly present in my mother while I was growing up. The thing that amazed me most — the one out-of-character detail — was that she managed not to talk about it. My mum was the world's worst keeper of secrets. Anyway it's something I worried about before starting the book; that whatever I found out would change my view of my mother and I would pathologise her in some way. As it turned out, I think there is only so much the imagination will let one do with one's parents; who they were to you when you were little, is who at some level they will always be. And so, while I admired my mother for the things I found out - how she stood up to a maniac; how she tried to protect her younger siblings; above all, how she rebuilt herself after it all went wrong - it didn't alter what was to me her basic mum-ness. When I see her in my mind's eye these days, it's as I always saw her, sitting in the kitchen by the sink, peeling carrots or potatoes, looking out of the window at the garden and turning to smile at me as I come through the door. Q. You mention in the book how some aspects of your own childhood started to make sense once you learned what had happened to your mother. Do you think her experience had some psychological or emotional effect on you? A. Very hard to measure, but I'm sure that it did, given the extent to which my mother's character was moulded by all this. She managed to put a positive spin on problematic impulses; so, when I was a kid, she was convinced I was going to get kidnapped and murdered, but instead of scaring the bejesus out of me, she managed to turn it into a comedy routine that assuaged her fears (a little) and didn't traumatize me. She was so bonkers about my exposure to risk, it has probably made me blasphemous; it's a great luxury, to have someone else do all your worrying for you. After my mother's death, when I found out exactly what she'd been withholding, it struck me that she had made a moral, practical and aesthetic choice to be a certain way in relation to her past and I have definitely been influenced by the example she set. It's mainly a good thing; I don't see the point in going on about everything all of the time; although I probably tolerate discomfort longer than I should. (That might just be a British thing.) Q. Your relatives in South Africa seemed to be at odds with one another, yet all were eager to connect with you. Are you still in touch with your family in South Africa? A. Yes. I've been back to South Africa once, last year, and I speak to my aunt Fay on the phone occasionally. It's so far away that realistically, we're never going to operate like a regular family. But it feels important to me to

maintain contact. Most importantly, a generation on, we don't seem to be hampered by the fraughtness and baggage that dominated my mother's relationships with her siblings. Q. How has this experience changed you? What has it taught you? A. It has thrown my own childhood into a more idyllic light. Held up against the worst alternative, all the things you take for granted start to look like incredible good fortune. (Not that it has stopped me complaining. But still). It has also given me a shift in perspective. Here was the mother I had known, living a mild existence in a village in Buckinghamshire, meanwhile somewhere in her system was the memory of all this unbelievable trauma. In light of what I discovered, her achievement seemed remarkable. The one thing she couldn't do was talk about it, which is so often the case with abuse histories. Intellectually, I understood that nothing bad would happen if I wrote all this down and published it, but emotionally, that took a very long time to be the case. So the most profound change has been publishing this book and seeing for myself that the sky didn't fall in. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Most regular tourists want "to look at places where great historical events occurred and drive to areas of natural beauty and feel uplifted by things that are bigger than we are." But for British journalist Brockes, her journey to South Africa after her mother's death is to uncover bitter family secrets and to find out what drove her mother to emigrate from Johannesburg to London. There is a lot Brockes does not know, "groping for a language to talk about the things we'd never talked about." Does she want to know? With a mixture of sorrow and wry wit, she mocks those who find excitement in the scenic and the political as she uses her journalistic skills to access the national archives and discovers horrifying family abuse in her grandfather's 1950s court case. But just as heartbreaking are the revelations of the tenderness in her struggling white working-class family. The close-up personal story will hold readers who want to understand the history tourists neither seek nor find. --Hazel Rochman --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I really feel like I was suckered with the book. Reading the blurb and a couple of reviews I was psyched. Described as "a chilling work of psychological suspense and forensic memoir" this book promised great things, but sadly it just didn't deliver. When her mother dies, Emma Brockes is left not only with an aching sadness, but also a lot of questions about her mother's early life. Born in South Africa, her mother endured a childhood trauma that took her through the courts and eventually inspired her to leave Africa altogether and flee to London. She never returned. Over the

years her mother hinted at what it was that she left behind, but she never got around to telling the story and Brockes never really asked. In the wake of her mother's death, Brockes decides to travel to South Africa to discover the truth for herself. Given the pretext and the reviews I expected a book that would have me on the edge of my seat waiting to see what she uncovered. Instead, her mother's secret is revealed within days of her arriving in South Africa. (To be honest if she'd really wanted to know she could have just asked her father as there is a fairly strong suggestion that he knew all along.) And even when the secret is revealed it hardly comes as a surprise. There were enough signposts along the way to give you a pretty fair idea of what had happened. The bulk of the story is not therefore a 'forensic memoir' but rather an exploration of how a family deals with a crisis and what the ramifications are for the individuals, their children and their own relationships. To summarise a couple of hundred pages - this is a sad book. I really had the feeling that the marketing department at the publishing house wanted to make this into something that it isn't. It's not a thriller it's a raw exploration of how some families comprise horrible people who do bad things to those they are supposed to love and take care of. It is a story of how some people escape and others don't, of how some survive and others implode. Even the title is misleading. Brockes' mother did not leave her a gun. She actually surrendered it years earlier during a gun amnesty. For me this though is symbolic of what the book is and isn't. Brockes' mother survived her childhood, and the gun was a symbol of part of that process. But ultimately her mother had thirty years or so to deal with that childhood and it seems that to a certain extent she was able to go beyond it - geographically, psychologically and physically. She didn't leave Brockes the gun, she left her stories of the gun and all that it stood for. Brockes is coming to those stories much later and is having to process not only the stories but her own reaction to them. And this experience doesn't take place within a neat story telling arc. It is messy and complicated and sad. And to be honest, I never really got the sense that Brockes knew what to do with all that she learned. The other thing that is missing from this book is an attempt to contextualise events within South African culture or society. Her mother was growing up in an incredibly turbulent period in South African history and yet there is no mention of how that impacted on the family. Whilst this shouldn't be a political story, I think it's impossible to consider the events in a vacuum and ignore the broader social context. Towards the end of the book there is a passing reference to culturally acceptable behaviour that may have been relevant to explaining her own family, but this is never really explored in any detail. If you really enjoy memoirs of complicated families, then perhaps this would be a worthwhile read - but maybe borrow it from the library rather than buy it.

I really liked the idea of this story when I first heard of the book, so that's why I bought it . I wish I could have given it a higher review, but it was a little hard to follow, the way it was written and the number of characters in the story . Emma was an only child, raised by a wonderful father, and a highly protective mother. Her mom seemed to be very good to her ,but was also obsessed with her child's safety . Her mother also seemed to be a larger than life type of character ,who loved to talk a LOT, but she rarely mentioned anything about her life growing up ,even when questioned. As Emma got older , her mother made a few comments from time to time about her earlier life that made her curious about what secrets her mom may have been keeping from her . She knew it had something to do with a gun, as her mom showed it to her one day. She knew her mother grew up in South Africa, but lived all her adult life from age 28 , in England , After her mother's death, Emma goes to South Africa to find the family that her mother left behind ,and find out what the real story was of her mother's childhood . It seemed to be a great testimonial to her mom, to have gone through the younger years she did, and had the courage to walk away from it all and not let it destroy the rest of her life .

The title may not be consistent with the substance of the story. Although it does have some relevance, the focus needs to remain on the uncovering of Emma's mother's life in South Africa and the tragedy of her youth. I was captivated by the story of a daughter whose mother survived unthinkable abuse and poverty to go on to become a mother, friend and wife later in her life. Paula didn't have a road map for "normal" behavior in families. Paula's intelligence, inner strength and drive transformed her life to one of love & nurturing for her family. The story moves smoothly through life in England and extended visits to South Africa. Emma captures the mood of her mother's family and her own ambivalence about "unearthing" the torrid past the family shared. During Emma's childhood, she decided or rather declined to inquire about her mother's life beforehand. At moments, she regrets this and also seems to know that her mother would likely not divulge her past. The foundation that was created for Emma as a young girl was dreamed up by her mother who would have wished the same for her. There is so much longing and unmet desire for "mother love" that it is heart breaking to read. Yet, believable by those who have experienced it.

I found this to be an intriguing read. Having no daughters of my own, I was fascinated by the drive shown by this young woman to discover more about her Mother, after the fact. There is a strong sense of self discovery displayed by the author in her quest to unearth the truths about her Mother's childhood. Why, as women, are we so reluctant to pursue forbidden topics that might lead to a

better understanding of our own personalities? It takes boundless tenacity to reveal hidden truths that can shed light on prevalent character traits. The author had a wealth of resources available to draw from, siblings, some of which were enlightened & able to share & others who were as close mouthed as her own Mother. Incest is & has always been taboo for most of us. This story allows a slight peek into the realm of a verboten topic. I feel enlightened and, somewhat relieved to know that nothing is lost in the pursuit of truth for the sake of a more clear understanding of other personalities. I was more than satisfied with this well conceived account of exploring the depths of long buried family secrets.

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