

STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

Emi Nietfeld, author of the memoir 'Acceptance,' went from homelessness to Harvard, but not without scars

By **Jenny Bartoy** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 3, 2023, 5:32 p.m.



DAVID WILSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In her compelling debut memoir, Emi Nietfeld recounts her journey from childhood with a hoarding mother, through psych wards, foster care, and homelessness, to Harvard.

“When I started writing ‘Acceptance’ seven years ago,” the author says, “I was very afraid of the truth.” Chronicling her life story helped her come to terms with it.

In the house the young Nietfeld shared with her single mother, rodents scurried among piles of discount purchases stocked ceiling-high for a rainy day. Their Minnesota home didn't have hot water for months and often lacked adequate heat. The mold and stench became unbearable, but the more Nietfeld protested, the more she encountered trouble. Her mother insisted she be diagnosed with ADHD and doctors medicated her, engendering a cycle of erasure and blame for Nietfeld. To regain control, she began to induce vomiting and to cut herself. Subsequent stays in psychiatric hospitals, at a treatment center, and then with a foster family provided escape but also a torturous loss of autonomy. Throughout, Nietfeld remained determined to attend an Ivy League school — “my only way out” — and toiled with steadfast dedication toward this goal, eventually receiving an acceptance letter from Harvard.

But applying to college forced Nietfeld to contort her life story to look like the “right” kind of disadvantaged adolescent, an individual whom universities would gladly accept. “Marketing myself as a perfect overcomer made me think about the experiences I wasn't supposed to talk about — all the messy complexities of being a teen girl and a survivor.” At Harvard, she felt like she couldn't write, because her past would come spilling out. “I didn't tell anyone about being in foster care, or my parents' mental illnesses, or getting medicated. I was deeply ashamed,” she explains. “I felt like I owed Harvard to pretend to be this pristine girl from my college applications.”

The dissonance became so intense that “if I didn't tell that full, complicated story, I was going to lose touch with reality.” To write “Acceptance,” Nietfeld collected medical records and legal documents and conducted countless interviews. This research forced her to confront the mistakes she'd made and the hardships she'd lived through. Her self-imposed theme of acceptance meant “I had to be content with everything that had happened, but that pressure made me feel miserable.” Eventually, she decided to challenge the idea that she should be made stronger by what she'd survived.

The resulting memoir is an incandescent tale of grit and rage, written in a voice resonant with heart, humor, and hope. “What if the idea that we can go through life unscathed is a

big lie?" Nietfeld says. "That became the point of the book."

Emi Nietfeld will be in conversation with author Kate Doyle at the Harvard Book Store in Cambridge on Tuesday, Aug. 8, at 7 p.m.

Jenny Bartoy is a freelance writer based in the Pacific Northwest and the editor of "Broken Free: On Cutting Ties," an anthology of essays and poems about estrangement, currently in development.

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