



## Book Review: if i had to tell it again - A Memoir

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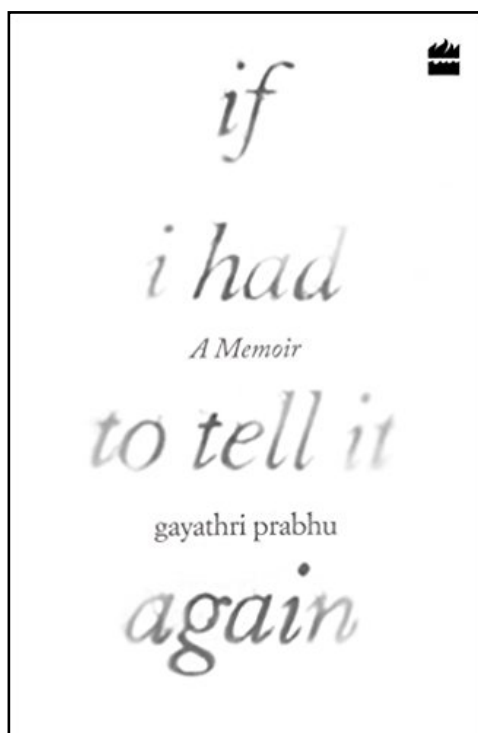
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Received: 04-MAY-2018

Accepted: 05-MAY-2018

Published Online: 06-MAY-2018



HarperCollins Publishers India

25 November 2017  
Paperback, 185 pp.

Price: INR 299

Gayathri Prabhu's 'if i had to tell it again' is a memoir about two beings who greatly influenced her life and continue to do so even after their passing - her father, SGM Prabhu, who refused to accept or name his illness (clinical depression), and Chinna, a beautiful Labrador, who helped the author identify and deal with her own depression. The cover of the book is bleak, austere - the fuzzy-edged lettering hinting at what it must be like to journey through life with depression, where everything is

Cite this article as: Dhillon T. Book Review: if i had to tell it again - A Memoir. RHIME. 2018;5:11-13.

starkly etched and centered around the oppression that permeates the soul, while anything peripheral to it is blurred, invisible, meaningless.

The title is another thing that spoke to me. 'if i had to tell it again' is an appeal, to my mind, for a second chance – another chance to have the conversation that the author and her father never managed to have before he died; a second chance to reexamine their relationship, and to reimagine it once whatever had to be said was said. I suspect that it must have taken some courage to undertake this exercise, and the decision to share the results with the world cannot have been made lightly.

I, for one, am glad that the author chose to share the story with others. The book skillfully and candidly describes the turmoil that is invariable when one is thrust into the role of caregiver to a person with depression. It highlights the terrible bleakness that ensues when one wakes up to depression in oneself.

The mood swings, dark spells and explosions of rage, the oft repeated phrase – I want to die – these are par for the course during the author's childhood. There are countless happy moments, too – cycling, reading, singing with her father, playing, learning to whistle, but, in the author's own words: "the bright spots are pushed to the sidelines" (page 92).

Depression, like any other illness of the mind, is invisible until physical signs emerge, and these can take years even as the burden of the illness suffocates the bearer. To be silent about the suffering, the author writes, is to "collude with the collective denial and discomfort about mental illness." (page 131). Through silence (here the author is referring to child abuse), "the shame is muted and

the muted stay shameful, slowly snuffing out one's spirit." (page 131).

I can totally relate to what Gayathri went through with respect to her father's depression. Anyone who has experienced a loved one's depression knows of the helplessness mingled with agony that the caregiver faces. My father, an octogenarian with early dementia, has now begun to experience depressive spells that sometimes surge even though he is on treatment. Where Gayathri's father never acknowledged his illness - "it was what he had refused to name" (page 31), my father, foggy with dementia, does not understand that it is depression that darkens his days on occasion. All I can do is watch to make sure he has not forgotten to take his medicines.

Gayathri, courtesy of her father, knew what depression looked like. She rebelled against the idea of being so much like him ["I don't want to be you" (page 107)] – perhaps this background helped her acknowledge that she had a problem and to seek help for it. She "...went to therapy, took my medication, clawed my way out, inch by inch, over many years." (page 31).

Chinna, the family's labrador, was her savior on more than one occasion, both during the early years of her illness and during her recovery, and that is why this book is a memoir to Chinna, too. When Gayathri lost yet another unborn baby, Chinna kept her from succumbing to the pain of it by showering her with attention and warmth, and never leaving her alone for even a moment. Another time, when she filled a bowl with pills and prepared to swallow them all, Chinna physically stopped her - "she fought me till the doorbell rang" (page 150).

The book is a memoir, but it is much more than that. It is a conversation

between a father and his daughter – the father with “inner storms” (page 180) but who was also a “...passionate, larger than life man.” (front flap). That he loved and that he was loved becomes evident as one turns the pages, and it is confirmed when one finds, on the back dust cover, a picture of a smiling man and his young, laughing daughter - both are evidently delighted to be together in the same frame.

The conversation is not one-sided. The father also speaks, and he speaks eloquently, his voice rising from the pages of the book as he responds to his daughter’s questions, and accusations, and statements. A particularly poignant conversation ensues during a one-act play

that the author has inserted into the memoir. The father and daughter talk about death and dying, about their darkest moments, his alcoholism and the substance abuse, their lost options, and many unmet expectations. The scenes are exquisitely laid out and the play ends on a note of hope.

“You taught me to live like a glass bowl - completely transparent, always willing to accommodate others, fragile in thoughtless hands.” (pages 61-62)

There are many similar jewels of insight strewn about the pages - this book is a must read for all, irrespective of profession and age group.