

Winnie: My Life in the Institution

Jamie Pastor-Bolnick

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Jamie Pastor-Bolnick : Winnie: My Life in the Institution before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Winnie: My Life in the Institution:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I had read this book previously but wanted to do ...By Deborah W. Seigman I had read this book previously but wanted to do so again and could not find it new. When I was finished with my second read this time, I passed it on to a now retired school and family counselor who went on to become a teacher of special needs students on the high school level. I am grateful that book was available and that it arrived so promptly. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Nancy G. It was a gift for my sister and she LOVED it! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Mary B Heckrotte Beautifully written!

Winnie Sprockett was just six years old in 1938 when she was committed by her foster mother to a state institution for mentally retarded females, where she remained most of her life. Despite her isolation and some harsh -- and, in a few instances, cruel -- treatment, she grew into a compassionate and generous woman. Among the remarkable things about Winnie, one stands out: though she received barely a fourth grade education in the institution, and her IQ was approximately that of a nine year old, she wrote her autobiography.

From Publishers Weekly At the core of this book is an account written by a woman who, committed to a state institution (unidentified here) at the age of six, spent her life in a struggle for selfhood. Her poignant writing, originally

attempted to nullify a relative's taunt that she was retarded, is supplemented by interviews with and reflections of : freelance journalist Pastor-Bolnick, whose interest in Winnie (Gwynna Sprockett) whom she first met when she was 12, developed into friendship. Winnie's own words open to the reader the stratified world of retarded men, women and children. Following her death in 1976 at the age of 44, professionals evaluating her case concluded that Winnie, the victim of societal rejection when her parents died, would not have been institutionalized today. A tragic book, full of Winnie's wonderful zest, that often got her into trouble, but makes her memorable on these pages. November 20

Copyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal In the late 1930s, six-year-old Winnie was committed to an institution for the "feeble-minded and incorrigible." She was only mildly retarded, and people who worked closely with her over the years believed that her problems were caused primarily by a severely deprived childhood. Today she would probably be placed in a group home, but she remained institutionalized for the rest of her life. Winnie wrote her "book," 20 handwritten pages, in the mid-1960s. Pastor-Bolnick interviewed her at length, and expanded her story, using Winnie's irrepressible voice. The result is a convincing account, devoid of interpretation or apology, of what life was like for Winnie (who died in 1976, at the age of 44) and the other inmates. For specialized collections. Margaret B. Allen, M.L.S., formerly with Bennington Free Lib., Vt. Copyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc. [Winnie] was a natural storyteller, dropping easily into dialogue and recounting events expressively. This is a portrait of a damaged but exceptional mind. --The New York Times Book , Lillian Thomas Reading this book makes one's life seem, suddenly, infinitely precious. --Joyce Maynard, Mademoiselle A book worth more than many textbooks on mental retardation and on human relations... This book should be read by anyone working with people. --Gisela Konopka, Doctor of Social Work, Readings: A Journal of s Commentary in Mental Health Winnie and "her book" give us a chance to see ourselves--our passions and prejudices--from the perspective of someone on the inside looking out. --Psychology Today, Patricia Long, Twenty years ago, a woman who had lived her life in a mental institution wrote a book to prove she wasn't retarded. Jamie Pastor Bolnick read the handwritten, 20-odd-page manuscript and decided the story was worth telling. She interviewed the woman and pieced the transcripts together with the original manuscript, changing names and a few details. Of below-average intelligence, Gwynna Sprockett was orphaned as an infant, treated badly by foster parents and committed to an institution at the age of 6. She was brutalized by some of the attendants, but a teacher encouraged her to read and write. She struggled with a mind able to sense its limitations but often incapable of overcoming them. She later died, still in an institution. Winnie Sprockett's voice gives life to this familiar story. Although she could not remember the number of weeks in a year or how to tell time, she had an uncanny memory for details of her life. She was a natural storyteller, dropping easily into dialogue and recounting events expressively. This is a portrait of a damaged but exceptional mind. - Lillian Thomas --The New York Times Book , December 1, 1985 Consider a 6-year-old girl who is committed to an institution for the mentally retarded, who upon admission cannot wash or dress herself, speak clearly, read or write. Then consider one other fact: After about 25 years of being lied to, ignored, virtually forgotten by her foster parents, tutored and sometimes abused by her caretakers, this "retarded" girl decides to write an account of her life. In Winnie: My Life in the Institution, journalist Jamie Pastor Bolnick has taken Winnie's original 20-odd-page "autobiography" and expanded it with hundreds of hours of interviews that Pastor Bolnick conducted with her. Winnie's insights and longings reveal the demeaning, as well as the humorous, side of institutional life. When yelled at for taking things that do not belong to her, Winnie's logical response is, "Well, what can I take? Nothing is mine!" Winnie yearns to be like Cinderella, but in a rare moment before a mirror retreats in horror as she sees what she actually looks like: "My hair's too short, it makes me look retarded." Winnie died at age 44 while still in the institution, remarkably having retained her dignity and sense of purpose through her long confinement. In retrospect, many of the staff believe her retardation stemmed only from an extremely deprived childhood. Despite the tragic implication of this, Winnie and "her book" give us a chance to see ourselves--our passions and prejudices--from the perspective of someone on the inside looking out. -Patricia Long --Psychology Today, February 1986 A book worth more than many textbooks on mental retardation and on human relations. The story is in Winnie's own words as told to the author. Winnie was abruptly dumped by her mother into an institution at six years of age, and left there without having been told why or that she would have to stay. For years Winnie had practically no visitors. Reading this book, Winnie's rage becomes our own: at the unfeeling, cruel disregard of her emotions and at her total situation which was relieved only occasionally by the kindness of two professionals, a teacher and a social worker. Winnie is only borderline retarded and today probably would not be institutionalized. Still, much of the arrogance and disregard of human dignity by those in power persists inside and outside institutions. This book should be read by anyone working with people. -Gisela Konopka, DSW --Readings: A Journal of s and Commentary in Mental Health, March 1986 I want to mention another book that arrived in my mailbox the very day I was heading to the post office to mail this review. It's called Winnie, My Life in the Institution, and though the writer responsible for putting the book together is Jamie Pastor Bolnick, the voice--throughout this funny, wise, heartbreaking book--is that of a woman named Gwynna (Winnie) Sprockett, deposited in an institution for the mentally retarded at the age of 6, left there for years, and then transported to another where she died at the age of 44. Jamie Pastor Bolnick spent her childhood summers in the town where Winnie lived, and returned there after college to work in the institution. She and Winnie became friends, and several years later, she returned again to help

Winnie tell her story. Based on a 20-page diary Winnie called her "book" (and hours of taped interviews), Winnie... is a story of unspeakable injustices and cruelties,... [but] also contains an almost incomprehensible optimism and good cheer. A stepmother who could have come straight out of Hansel and Gretel abandoned her in an institution where they chopped off her braids and placed her spaghetti dinner on the floor with instructions to eat it like an animal. Yet somehow Gwynna managed to remain a generous, affectionate woman, curious and eager to learn, hungry for any sort of human connection. Unsentimental, wonderfully comic and also unbearably sad, this is not a book only for people interested in institutions or mental retardation. (The speculation of the writer and Gwynna's social worker, in fact, is that Winnie was only "functionally" retarded--her IQ diminished not by any physical defect, but by neglect.) This book is simply the story of a woman who managed to grow and even thrive with about as much nourishment and care as a weed gets growing through the crack in a sidewalk. To her, a particular source of joy was opening a window and looking at an apple tree. I'm looking out my own window at the moment, seeing the apple tree in the field beyond my house, and realizing that, unlike Gwynna Sprockett, I could go out there and climb it right now, if I wanted to. It's not often that people remember to value freedoms that basic. Reading this book makes one's life seem, suddenly, infinitely precious. -Joyce Maynard --Mademoiselle, February 1986

Gwynna Sprockett was placed in an institution by her foster parents when she was six. What becomes painfully clear as you read Winnie's original preface is that an institution was the last place she belonged. But there she lived and there she died 38 years later. Winnie's book originally was little more than 20 longhand-written pages in a black copybook. Author Jamie Pastor Bolnick expanded Winnie's work based on months of taped interviews. To verify Winnie's many stories and dates, Bolnick also interviewed institution personnel and social workers who had dealt with Winnie. What results is a moving, yet delightful first person account of Winnie's life in an institution. The word delightful may seem out of place, but despite the feelings of loneliness and abandonment that Winnie felt, she always kept an incredible optimism, sense of humor and determination. That perspective was Winnie's most amazing virtue. The sadness you feel as you read "Winnie" isn't so much a sadness for the trials she went through, but for the opportunity that was lost--the opportunity for a rich and feisty personality to be free and contribute to society. It was determined that Winnie had an IQ of 65 and, according to Bolnick, her retardation was the result of an extremely deprived childhood. The author was 12 when she first met Winnie, talking to her and other clients over a hedge that ringed the institution in which they lived. Eventually, Bolnick moved away and it wasn't until 15 years later that she met Winnie again and remembered who she was. By this time, Winnie's 20-page book had become known among the institution's staff. One of the institution's psychiatrists had used it in a lecture and it had been duplicated for social work graduate students in the local university. Winnie's greatest dream was that her book be published. She asked everyone she met if they could help her do that. When she met Bolnick again she didn't hesitate to ask her, too. Winnie's view of the institution changed with time. She eventually came to compare it to a college saying, "I'm here to learn stuff." Learning to read and write were two of her aspirations. She felt it would prove to her family--to the world--that she wasn't "stupid," just a little slower. Winnie always claimed that her real mother (her parents died when she was a baby) would have never put her away. Most probably she was right. Fortunately for all of us Winnie never lost her dreams and because of those dreams she pushed herself to learn. Her greatest gift is the book she, with Bolnick's help, left us and the hope it holds for people with mental retardation to someday fulfill her longing for freedom. Put simply, it is a joy to read, walking a delicate line between poignancy and humor. -Dick Collier --The ARC: Official Publication of the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States, Volume 35, Number 1, Winter/Spring 1986