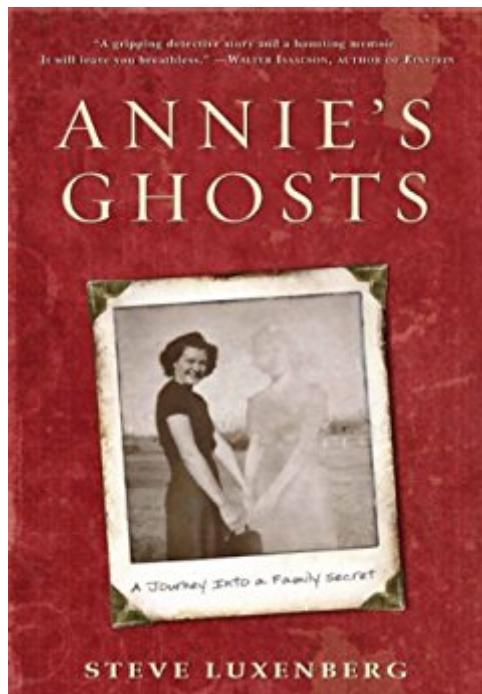


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Annie's Ghosts: A Journey Into A Family Secret



Synopsis

The Great Michigan Read 2013-14 Michigan Notable Book for 2010 A Washington Post Book World's "Best Books of 2009," Memoir Beth Luxenberg was an only child. Or so everyone thought. Six months after Beth's death, her secret emerged. It had a name: Annie. Steve Luxenberg's mother always told people she was an only child. It was a fact that he'd grown up with, along with the information that some of his relatives were Holocaust survivors. However, when his mother was dying, she casually mentioned that she had had a sister she'd barely known, who early in life had been put into a mental institution. Luxenberg began his researches after his mother's death, discovering the startling fact that his mother had grown up in the same house with this sister, Annie, until her parents sent Annie away to the local psychiatric hospital at the age of 23. Annie would spend the rest of her life shut away in a mental institution, while the family erased any hints that she had ever existed. Through interviews and investigative journalism, Luxenberg teases out her story from the web of shame and half-truths that had hidden it. He also explores the social history of institutions such as Eloise in Detroit, where Annie lived, and the fact that in this era (the 40s and 50s), locking up a troubled relative who suffered from depression or other treatable problems was much more common than anyone realizes today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

At what point do you stop controlling a secret and find that it is controlling you? That's one of the questions at the heart of Steve Luxenberg's utterly compelling first book, "Annie's Ghosts" Annie's Ghosts: A Journey Into a Family Secret. Part memoir, part biography and part investigative reporting, this book humanizes a subject that probably touches more of us than we might realize. Luxenberg's journey begins as a son's quest to learn why his mother turned her sibling from younger sister to lifelong secret and expands to become an exploration of a particularly moving era in recent American history. Several months after Luxenberg's mom died, the cemetery where her parents were buried sent the family a letter containing a simple question that was to lead Luxenberg and his siblings on a journey through their family's past. "Spring was around the corner," Luxenberg writes, "and the cemetery was offering to plant flowers on the grave sites." The solicitation wasn't for two sites, however, but for three. Suddenly, this whisper of a woman had a name, Annie. Her burial certificate answered some questions, but led to others that took Luxenberg deep into the dynamics of his own family as well as the evolving nature of health care in the United States during several key decades of the 20th century. He soon found himself part of a wave of thousands of family members seeking information about relatives who'd been institutionalized--relatives they'd never known they had. "I couldn't write about all the 'forgotten people,' but I could write about one," Luxenberg writes of his decision to ferret out Annie's tale.

The subject matter here is fascinating: the stuff of Hollywood films or interesting novels. After his mother's death (and not from a "deathbed confession" as the book's current blurb claims), journalist Steve Luxenberg learns something startling -- He has an aunt. Or rather, had. A letter from a cemetery asking about routine maintenance for a grave helps Steve begin to coax this particular family skeleton out of the closet. See, his mother's sister, Annie, was institutionalized. And as much as Steve might try to justify the obvious shame and embarrassment (even hatred? resentment?) that his mother felt, his difficulties in rationalization increase when he discovers this wasn't some sister his mom barely knew, locked away as a child, or dying young -- Annie was institutionalized when Steve's mother was in her early 20s. His mother had spent a significant portion of her life living with Annie, and Annie didn't die young. She lived into her 50s. She must have been a fixture around the neighborhood. How had his mother kept this secret all these years, and why? A journalist by trade, Steve begins investigating his own family history, immediately discovering the difficulties

that even the state throws in the way of those who would like to learn more about its former wards. As Steve struggles to obtain records and interview family and friends, some of whom are dying before he can speak to them, the reader is along for an exciting ride. Steve's careful research on the institution Eloise, Annie's contemporaries' views on mental illness, and how a physical handicap (malformed leg) might have affected Annie, absolutely shine.

I won't repeat a synopsis of Annie's Ghosts - the "Product Description" does a good job of that. I will tell you what went through my mind as I read through this remarkable book. As the blurb says, Luxenberg made good use of his journalistic skills to dig into the mystery that was his aunt, Annie. I was amazed at the resources he was able to make use of, not the least was the welcome cooperation of government clerks who went out of their way to look for information. He also was able to locate and get the cooperation of relatives and friends of his mother, many of which he had never known or not seen since childhood. What I wasn't expecting, from what I had heard of this book, were the side stories; about the history of how we treated the mentally ill in the early 1900s and how things would be different today for Annie, and about the Holocaust and the Russian execution of Jews. This last resonated with me because, like Luxenberg, I am the child of Jewish immigrants who fled the Holocaust and pogroms. I was amazed at the connections he was able to make and his luck, really, in not doing this even a few years later when many of his best sources would have likely been dead. It made me regret not learning more about my own family while I still could. As the book progressed, and more and more secrets were revealed, it seemed to me that Luxenberg's quest was really more about him and desire to know as much as he could about his family. There's a lot of introspective prose which at times feels like filler. I also tripped over some places, mainly early in the book, where he quotes someone, a few paragraphs later repeats the quote, and then repeats it again on the next page.

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