Blue Genes: A Memoir of Loss and Survival
By Christopher Lukas
Reviewed by: Judy Raphael Kletter

Christopher Lukas authored this book eleven years after the suicide of his brother, Tony, a two-time Pulitzer-winner. Tony, who was being treated for depression, ended his life in 1997. Christopher Lukas, himself a writer-producer-director in television, wrote this book in the hope of coming to an understanding of his relationship with his brother and with whom he had difficulty finding “common ground.” Lukas writes:

“Still two things pain me: Am I -- should I have been – my brother’s keeper? And after all is said and done, should I be able to forgive him for killing himself? In the end I have decided no -- on both counts.” (p. 243)

Christopher was six and his brother Tony was eight when their mother Elizabeth, died by suicide after having slashed her wrists and throat on the property of her psychoanalyst following an appointment with him. She had made two prior attempts to end her life.

Lukas writes about the turbulent relationships that existed within his family, touching on his parents’ unhappy marriage, the tension between his father and maternal grandmother (who fought over the proper medical/mental health treatment for Lukas’ mother), his fear of his father, and the feelings of disconnect with his brother Tony. The family history is saturated with emotional turmoil and despair caused by depression and bipolar disorder. This is evidenced in the numerous suicides within his family: maternal grandmother, uncle, uncle’s wife, and father who died from alcoholism which Lukas views as a form of suicide. The reverberations of these suicides have impacted his entire life.

Throughout their lives neither brother was pleased with their accomplishments. They were always striving for more; looking for the approval, love, gratitude and the applause they received at a young age from their mother, instead of the abandonment Christopher felt throughout his life. He recalls his happiest childhood memory:

“The most important part of our early life was the little dramas Tony and I staged on the window seat in the dining room. There at the ages of six and four, my brother and I began to play out our feelings, making up plays to express ourselves through mime or dialogue. This was at the urging of Mother, the actress and budding educational psychologist. Mother applauded, encouraged, critiqued and supported our little theater company. It was a result, I later realized, not of our mother’s desire to have us express ourselves but of her inability to ask us directly how we felt about things - to connect with us.“ (p. 69)

Mr. Lukas is “concerned about life” and authoring this book is his attempt to integrate his past with the present. While his writing is, at times, a bit disjointed, this appears to reflect the honest outpouring of thought and feeling from the author. In his daily battle, working through his depression, he finds hope in the midst of despair. As he states in the epilogue:

“The question then becomes: If Tony was only the latest in a long line of family members who killed themselves, will I be the next? Hard as it may be to believe, in my adult life I have not had a single day when I felt wholly well—physically or emotionally. Still, with full confidence, I know that I will never go into a room at the end of a day and kill myself. For I am a perennial survivor. I have managed to live in the shadow of my legacy of suicide through connectivity and family and psychotherapy, among other blessings.” (p. 245)

An emotionally touching outpouring on the part of Christopher Lukas, Blue Genes, is a poignant and touching memoir of loss and survival that is powerful and insightful in its naked truth about the impact of suicide and to those who persevere through the abyss of suicidal desire.