History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life
Reviewed by: William Feigelman, Ph.D.

Jill Bialosky’s aptly titled book, History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life, details the life and death of her younger sister Kim, who killed herself in 1990, at the tender age of 21, by running her mother’s car in the enclosed garage of the family home. Suicide survivors like the author are often presented with the sense-making challenge of trying to understand why a family member would end their life in a flash, without signs of prior suicidality. Survivors are also left with unbearable guilt, often feeling the death could have been prevented if they had they paid closer attention to subtle signs. Suicide survivors are also confronted with the challenge of rearranging their lives, accepting their loss, and making the best of living without their treasured loved one. Bialosky thoughtfully examines these issues in her beautifully written book.

Bialosky’s background presents all the necessary skills for writing this memoir; she is an accomplished author of fiction and poetry and an editor for a leading publisher. The author’s chronicle of her family’s life leading up to Kim’s death and the aftermath is interwoven with many literary examples including Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Herman Melville, William Shakespeare and others that fit well with her story, without overtaking it. Bialosky has done a creditworthy job digesting the body of suicide scholarship and applying it appropriately to the facts of her family’s life. She was aided in learning even more about her sister’s death in 2003 with the marvelous opportunity of a psychological autopsy conducted by master suicidologist Edwin Shneidman. These experiences sharpened Bialosky’s focus as she reflected back on her early memories of her sister and family, examined Kim’s private journal entries and school work, interviewed other significant figures in Kim’s life and examined other public documents.

It may seem odd that Bialosky waited twenty-one years before she could assemble her thoughts to complete this work. Yet, this is a stark example of the toll of grief. Sometimes it gets frozen in the survivor’s mind and it needs time to thaw out. Bialosky and her husband struggled with a series of personal tragedies before she regained sufficient emotional strength to confront the demons of suicide and depression within her family.

Unfortunately, the Bialosky family was no stranger to death and loss. Mother and the three eldest daughters lost their husband/father to a sudden heart attack before the girls reached four years old. Kim was last born to a different father, who she lost following an early divorce and his subsequent estrangement. While each suicide has its own unique causal forces, other survivors may find some parallels from Kim’s short life: an emotionally overwhelmed mother encourages her children to take early flight from the parental home. The last born child, mired with feelings of worthlessness, becomes tethered to the home, and seeks the self-medicating comfort of drugs. Family attempts to engage Kim in drug rehabilitation fall on deaf ears, as Kim remains distant and unaware of her psychological fragility. Tragically, Kim’s struggles were revealed only after her death, when her dark, private journalings became available to the family.

Bialosky captures it all: rumination over of the ever-vivid details of the death and burial circumstances that never fade from a survivor’s mind in the search for meaning, the reflections upon all the treasured memories of growing up with the lost loved one and the-ups-and-downs of lived family life. It’s all there, in insightful detail and Bialosky deserves great credit for her frankness and bravery in putting her family’s life on a dissection table, allowing readers to see how the family lived before, during and after the loss. This book should appeal to all survivors, and not simply those who lost siblings. I would expect that for a long time to come, many survivors will find this book very helpful to their healing even though their loss experiences may diverge greatly. Bialosky did an admirable job representing her younger sister’s short but meaningful life.