

The Sitting Swing: Finding the Wisdom to Know the Difference

Irene Watson

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Reviewed by Tyler R. Tichelaar for Reader Views (8/08)

Childhood trauma. Honesty about one's personal faults. A dramatic recovery program. These elements all add up to make Irene Watson's "The Sitting Swing: Finding the Wisdom to Know the Difference" an eventful, meaningful, and poignant tale of one woman's struggle to overcome her repressive family background, the anger that arises from her treatment in childhood, and her own deepest inner faults, so she can become whole, successful, positive, and ultimately a resource of help to others.

The story begins when the author, Irene Watson, attends Avalon, a recovery center. As a practicing therapist, Irene goes to Avalon to learn more about addictions and codependency. She wants to help her clients, but she has no idea how the experience will help her personally. When she arrives at the center, she soon realizes she will be spied upon by cameras, the counselors are aggressive and in her face, and she has issues she did not want to admit before. This unexpected situation causes her to question why she has come at all. The narrative then flashes back to Irene's memories of her childhood to explain what ultimately brought her to Avalon.

Irene begins telling her story by detailing her family background. Her parents and grandparents were Ukrainian immigrants to early nineteenth-century Canada. Their culture and language make Irene isolated when she begins to attend an English-speaking school. She tries to melt into the crowd by befriending the other children, but her family continually stands in her way when she tries to have a "normal" childhood.

Irene's biggest struggle is with her over-protective and irrational mother. Irene's brother, Alexander, died before she was born. The loss of this child and her mother's sense of guilt over his death cause Irene to live a protected life. The memoir's title refers to the swing Irene could barely move because of the rose bushes surrounding it. This forced confinement is a metaphor for her life with a mother who denies her playing with other children or even allowing her to be herself.

As Irene reaches her teenage years, the narrative becomes quite frightening since the very real possibility exists that Irene could have become a juvenile delinquent, and some of the angry actions she contemplates taking toward the narrow-minded people of her town could have had irrecoverable consequences. Fortunately, Irene had one friend, Margie, to confide in and who helps her see the irrationality of some of her proposed actions. I found this section painfully honest because it

suggests how badly children need attention and role models and the consequences to a society that mistreats its children. Eventually, Irene finds the strength to stand up to her mother when she falls in love and gets married. However, even when she has moved out of her parents' house, the trauma of her childhood continues to haunt her.

Irene's experiences at the Avalon Center are told with equal frankness. She finds herself forced to confront her deepest shortcomings, realize she must forgive her mother, and take responsibility for herself, rather than blaming her past. She also finds the courage to make changes to her marriage. The final chapter of the book is not a warm and fuzzy conclusion but rather a very honest and realistic summary of how she has grown from the frightened and repressed little girl she was into a mature woman.

"The Sitting Swing" is an inspiring story. Readers will empathize with Irene, and they will be motivated to begin their own spiritual journeys of recovery. While the path is not easy, Irene is proof that serenity is achievable. More than anything, readers will be impressed with Irene Watson's honest voice and her straightforward colloquial writing style that makes us realize we are a lot like her, and consequently, if she could recover from her past, then anything is possible for us as well.

This revised edition of "The Sitting Swing" also includes a new afterword and appendices to provide additional resources for people seeking to recover. Anyone, whether a recovering addict or co-dependent, or victim of abuse, will find strength in this narrative. "The Sitting Swing: Finding the Wisdom to Know the Difference" is highly recommended!