

<https://www.wantedonline.co.za/voices/2020-08-07-mothers-madness-and-memory-three-new-books-give-real-faces-to-mental-health/>

WANTED ONLINE 4 SEPTEMBER 2020

Mothers, Madness and Memory: Three New Books Give Real Faces to Mental Health **by Michele Magwood**

Mothers and mental illness loom large on the bookshelves this month, and though their publication date would have been set in motion last year, the books ride in on a wave of anxiety around mental health.

[Note: Of the three books reviewed, only the section on *my mother, my madness* is reproduced here.]

...

Colleen Higgs is a poet and the dauntless founder of Modjaji Books, a small publishing house specialising in women writers. She was, however, utterly daunted by her mother Sally, who had suffered an appalling psychological wound. At just seven years old, she was given away to a childless aunt and uncle and was only reunited with her biological parents when she was 38. Higgs writes: "My whole life has felt like a long, deeply unsatisfying love affair with my mother. She is the beloved who doesn't love back."

my mother, my madness (Deep South) is Higgs' diary of her mother's last 10 years, spent in a "Luxury Retirement Resort" near Century City. It takes courage to be truthful about the frightfulness of a parent, but Higgs writes with frankness and the tale is tender and compelling. Sally sees out her days in a recliner, smoking three-and-a-half packs of Rothmans and drinking at least two litres of Coke a day. The walls are yellow with nicotine and the carpets grey with fallen ash. She looks, says Higgs, like a bergie – dank hair, crumpled clothes, and long toenails. She had been diagnosed with bipolar syndrome and early-onset dementia, but often doesn't take her meds. Her teeth fall out. She flushes away her soiled broekies and Higgs is constantly buying new ones, along with the monthly Cokes and smokes, four packs of nine double-ply toilet rolls, snacks, and *You* magazines.

"I'm the receiving station, a clearing house for all of Sally's problems and troubles, claims and payments, woes and needs, complaints, sadnesses, despair, discomforts and small pleasures," she writes. At the same time, Higgs is mothering her own young daughter and drifting apart from her husband. Her insight and resoluteness are admirable.

"When you have a mother like Sally, how do you recover?" she asks. "How do you make something of your life that isn't all about suffering, reluctance, resistance, bushels and hiding under them? Sally is what there was. She was my mother, the roots that fed me as I grew."
