

NEW FRAME 17 AUGUST 2021

**The madness that is my mother
by Megan Ross**

What began as an anonymous blog to document the daily realities of caring for her demanding, eccentric and elderly mother has, a decade later, become Colleen Higgs' memoir, *my mother, my madness*. Published by Robert Berold of Deep South publishers in 2020, the book is a pared down, almost ascetic mix of wry humour, sadness and Higgs' longing to have been mothered better.

While Sally lives in a retirement home, her demands are constant. Higgs is tasked with maintaining her supply of Coca-Cola, cigarettes and toilet paper while trying to shield herself from her mother's nature. A neglectful mother throughout Higgs' childhood, she is no different in old age.

"My mother does not remotely come close to being 'Granny'. She is a sad old lady with not much going for her," writes Higgs, detailing the unrelenting mundanity of caring for her mother while being an unparented adult.

The "madness" in the book's title is far more than her mother's bipolar disorder. "It's my way of owning that word, in a way. Of claiming back my own mental illness. It's kind of a container for the whole thing," says Higgs. If we take "madness" to act as a container of sorts, we can see that madness is very much the path of an indie publisher in South Africa, where selling 300 books of poetry or 1 000 copies of a debut book constitutes a bestselling title. In her own words, "it was a sort of hubris" that led Higgs to leave her job at the Centre for the Book and start Modjaji Books, mixed with the difficulties of being employed by someone else while having to attend to the needs and extramurals of a small child in primary school.

Publishing, much like writing, can be thankless in South Africa. It's not financially rewarding; Higgs has to come up with R40 000 a month to pay printers. Neither is care work. The state provides little in the way of support structures for elderly and disabled people or those with mental health impairments, while small to medium-sized businesses endure the staggering costs of tax and value-added tax, often with little return.

Being an indie publisher sits at the nexus of a struggling creative economy with little government support, and an ingrained culture of underfunding and lack of support for the arts. As a feminist publisher championing the voices of women in southern Africa, Higgs was a pioneer of sorts, but she wouldn't do it over again. "I suppose I have succeeded with Modjaji in some aspects, but financially it has definitely not been a success." When we speak about Modjaji, Higgs is self-critical but in a sanguine way that suggests she is becoming less hard on herself.

Communal care

Because care and unpaid labour in South Africa is feminised, affecting Black, working-class and impoverished women more, we associate it with mothering. This politicisation of the role of the mother, while not new, is particularly odious in this country, where the mother as parent, caregiver, breadwinner and person receives little to no social or financial support.

In her criticism of her mother, and of how much responsibility falls on her, Higgs suggests that we expand our concept of mothering to people outside one's immediate family. In this sense, she writes

against the ingrained, Western model of the family and towards a decolonial, communal mode of sharing the burden of care, which is certainly not the default setting for traditional white families.

“Sometimes I wonder what it must be like to have a mother who could help me, who could babysit, a mother who could fetch Kate. It might feel a bit like today felt, only perhaps I wouldn’t appreciate it as much, because I would probably take it for granted in the way that the well-mothered do,” she writes in the book.

Mothering is at once exhausting and healing, and Higgs herself looks to be mothered and also mother better. “There are so many alternative good parents out there to allow into one’s heart. Bit by bit it repairs the damage. The best repair has been to figure out and learn to be a good mother to myself and to Kate, and to forgive myself when I make mistakes.” In a way, Higgs defines the ideal “good mother”, describing a friend who “praises me, notices me, sees me, encourages”, acts of care that are not dissimilar to Higgs’ professional expectations.

Life in parallel

Higgs, whether consciously or not, draws parallels between the personal and the professional, highlighting the difficulties of being caretaker in multiple roles in her life, while longing to be cared for herself. As a reader, you are reconciled with the ordinariness of the story. And of course it isn’t always pretty, which is what Higgs gets down so well: “I feel like crying tonight. Sometimes my life feels full of loss and grief and tears.”

She conveys the great heaviness of care, how often a visit to Sally brings on a migraine, or compels Higgs to take a nap. There is trauma here, and while the weight of a troubled childhood is felt, it isn’t so heavy that one becomes bogged down. Instead, Higgs leads one to the next item on the list, the following day, another excursion or encounter.

Her language is characteristically sparse and pared down – as we see in Higgs’ short story collection, *Looking for Trouble* – and Berold’s excellent editing shows what an asset a good match between editor and author can be.

“I feel guilty that I haven’t phoned my mom and that I won’t and nor will I see her soon. But not so guilty that I actually pick up the phone.”

Scenarios and scenes may feel familiar to any South African sandwiched between caring for a child and a parent with little energy left for keeping finances afloat, let alone attending to personal needs.

Additionally, Higgs must still run her publishing company, which involves nurturing her writers and their books.

“More than I can chew”

Modjaji began in a similar way to many businesses created by mothers – as a means of building a career that doesn’t require being away from one’s child. Yet motherhood can also awaken painful (and pleasant) memories of one’s own childhood. Parenting can bring up things one wishes their parents did – or didn’t – do. Higgs wonders if she is “a good mother, a good enough mother”.

She is honest about how “juggling madly” Modjaji, Sally and being a mother is too much of a struggle. “Today I’m wishing I didn’t have such a complicated and demanding job. Today I wish I could lie in bed and read. Today I wish I could be a child, and not have so many responsibilities.”

Higgs is aware of where she falls short as a publisher. In her memoir, she levels this same criticism at herself: “I’m sure there are hundreds of things I’ve forgotten to do, but so be it.”

Forgetfulness is a common thread. Forgetting to play tooth fairy, forgetting to buy her “mom the extra Cokes she needs” or forgetting a deadline. So are the minutiae and milestones that constitute the mighty mother’s list, compounded on either side by the pressures of work and pressures of additional care.

Despite Sally’s slightly abusive, transactional nature (“cigarettes are a form of currency”), Higgs writes no heroine’s journey. She does not descend into self-pity or eulogise her mother. She is critical and fair and unfailingly human. The breadth of her honesty and the extent to which she details the mundanity (the cigarettes are currency, sure, but they are also symbols, weight) is extraordinary and deeply refreshing in a culture that exalts the girl-boss-milf-makoti hybrid of the mother-whore complex.

In her quiet, uncomplicated retelling of this season in her life, Higgs seems to read the minds of a million dutiful daughters. Her sentiments resonate in her descriptions of her trauma responses – “Sometimes just the thought of seeing my mother makes me need a long lie-down instead. I suddenly feel exhausted, wiped out, sleepy.” – and how she survives.

Instead of chastising herself, she offers other daughter-readers a similar reprieve. It’s okay to fail. To fall. To forget. In her words, it’s “okay – will do tomorrow. A resolution.” As strangely fragile, tumbled and resilient as sea glass, *my mother, my madness* is beautiful, too. It points to the broader socioeconomic ramifications of living in a country that supports neither its artists nor its caregivers, and even less so when they are working-class and impoverished women.
