



The Glass Eye: A Memoir

Jeannie Vanasco

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The night before her father dies, eighteen-year-old Jeannie Vanasco promises she will write a book for him. But this isn't the book she imagined. *The Glass Eye* is Jeannie's struggle to honor her father, her larger-than-life hero but also the man who named her after his daughter from a previous marriage, a daughter who died.

After his funeral, Jeannie spends the next decade in escalating mania, in and out of hospitals—increasingly obsessed with the other Jeanne. Obsession turns to investigation as Jeannie plumbs her childhood awareness of her dead half-sibling and hunts for clues into the mysterious circumstances of her death. It becomes a puzzle Jeannie feels she must solve to better understand herself and her father.

Jeannie Vanasco pulls us into her unraveling with such intimacy that her insanity becomes palpable, even logical. A brilliant exploration of the human psyche, *The Glass Eye* deepens our definitions of love, sanity, grief, and recovery.

The Glass Eye: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review The Glass Eye: A Memoir for online ebook

Helen Zuman says

I read the first few pages of The Glass Eye a few days ago; then, a couple nights later, I took it to bed with me and stayed up way too late to finish it. Yup, it's gripping.

Initially, I didn't expect this book to be a page-turner, thanks to its many section breaks and its pauses for meta-narration. But, despite its gentle fracturing, the story hews to a strong chronological through-line (the protagonist's journey through her father's death and her consuming grief to a degree of peace), and has clear stakes: the protagonist's health and sanity, her mother's trust in her father's honesty, the protagonist's access to the truth of how her sister died. Also, Vanasco's clear, spare, flawless prose makes for a smooth ride, free of linguistic speed bumps.

Like another reviewer, I wondered, while reading, whether Vanasco was contesting her diagnosis of mental illness; part of me wanted to know exactly where she stood on the subject. However, I also see the value of letting the reader make her own judgments, and leaving room for the kind of ambiguity that arises when we allow ourselves to question our basic assumptions about mental health and mental illness (I remember reading an interview in The Sun magazine in which the interviewee said that the proper response to someone who hears voices is to ask that person what those voices have to say). What I get from Vanasco's approach is a desire to shed light on all facets of her protagonist's complex and whirling consciousness, without condemning any of them as needing to be cut out.

As a fellow memoirist (and former MFA student), I was especially interested in Vanasco's portrayal of her MFA experience - to which, it seemed to me, she applied the same agnosticism with which she treats her mental illness. At one point, she lists a number of criticisms (of her work) received from fellow students - just lists them, without comment. Are they helpful? Ridiculously off base? It's unclear. Maybe they're simply fascinating objects of study, for a mind that constantly files, dissects, combines, and recombines.

Michael B Tager says

I loved this book. So sad and beautiful and fascinating to read. A mixture of grief and memory and honest depiction of mental illness. The meta-narrative absolutely worked for me. It's a weird catharsis to read someone else's catharsis, which is, I suppose, part of the memoir genre.

But whatever. I can't recommend this book highly enough. Vanasco is the real deal.

Mike says

A deeply affecting chronicle of grief and obsession, written in lucid, graceful prose.

Stephanie says

This book took my breath away. I read it in one sitting; I didn't want to turn away. I keep returning to the

scenes, the sentences, the words and marveling at what Jeannie Vanasco has accomplished. I feel privileged that she shared her father's story - and her story - with the world.

Jenny says

Wow. This isn't a book I would normally pick up since I don't love memoir, but I have had such an awesome experience with Tin House's Galley Club that I gave it a go. So glad I did. Tin House strikes again. This is a beautiful book about grief, mental illness, and resiliency.

Claire Fuller says

I loved this memoir about Vanasco's grief which spirals into mental illness after the death of her father. Although, perhaps the mental illness was there all along, it just took the death for it to properly manifest itself. This is something that Vanasco discusses in a wonderfully round-about way. The book is broken up into many very short pieces, all of which build and gather to give a really intimate view of what life is like for the author, and how she becomes obsessed by her dead half-sister whom she was named for. I often felt like I was right inside Vanasco's head as she works things out on the page, and also right inside her present time, as she even grapples with editing her book (shout out to Masie Cochran from Tin House!). Highly recommended.

Kristin Boldon says

Blew me away. I read parts aloud to my husband. Such a complex story, told in a fascinating way, alternating among topics. Funny, scary, sad, and enthralling.

Barbara (The Bibliophage) says

3.5 strong stars.

Jeannie Vanasco bares her soul in *The Glass Eye: A Memoir*. There were times it made me squirm with discomfort. But it also touched my heart and made me appreciate her willingness to be vulnerable.

The narrative thread is more of a spaghetti-like jumble of disparate elements. Vanasco illustrates both her writing process and her mental illness by jumping around thematically and chronologically. And yet, she finds a way to move forward in the memoir and life.

At eighteen, Vanasco agreed to write a book for her dad as he was dying. They were extraordinarily close, since she was born when he was older and had more opportunity to be her caregiver. Because of this strong bond, Vanasco suffers from a long and complicated grieving process. Her father also experienced horrible grief when his 16 year old daughter died in a car accident. Vanasco was given the same name (spelled slightly differently) as her half sister. Now add into the mix the author's mental illness, and you can see the complexities of this memoir.

Jeannie's deepest grieving moments felt like a kick in the chest, yet my reaction was to feel so much compassion for her. I can't imagine processing all this grief at such a young age.

The Glass Eye isn't a long book, but it took me a long time to read it. I'd read for a while, and start to feel overwhelmed with sadness. So I'd put the book down, and pick it up when I could face the pain again. But after a week or two of this, I decided to take a day and power through the last 100 pages. I'm glad I did, because that's where the beginnings of resolution appear.

I applaud Vanasco for her persistence in getting this book and her experiences on paper. She chose an incredibly difficult topic and handled it with skill. I'd pick up more of her work in the future, since I can't help but feel some maternal instincts towards her. Although to say I enjoyed this book would be a stretch—that's mostly due to the content not the writing style. I hope it gives Vanasco closure and the impetus to continue moving forward.

I received a copy of The Glass Eye from the publisher in exchange for my honest review. Thanks, Tin House Books.

Also published on TheBibliophage.com.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I wanted to read this because of the connection to grief and fathers. It took a long time to read, but it isn't particularly long - I think the way everything is in fragments, the way the events and thoughts cycle and repeat, and the way Jeannie stops and steps back and considers what she has written on a pretty frequent basis - all these elements make the book feel longer than it probably needs to be.

The element of mental illness is rough to read, because even now I get the impression that the memoirist is not as aware of her own mental illness as everyone around her is, including, now, the reader. She insists to every concerned family member and every therapist/psychiatrist that this is the grief causing this behavior, this isn't mental illness. But anyone who knows about mental illness (and something I learned from reading *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*) knows that a major catastrophic event can trigger the brain into a cycle of mental illness that is then impossible to escape. It is clear that this is the case for Jeannie. She is obsessive and out of control, self-harming and manic. It is frightening to read about, and for me, I almost felt party to it, by continuing to read the book, the book she insisted on writing despite the advice to the contrary.

In that sense there is no overarching feeling of perspective, and I think that's why it feels so repetitive. The author reflects or hones in on specific details, checking her memory with her mother's memory, keeping all her old drafts and journals and recordings to verify, because her mental illness confuses those details. But it feels like she is somehow not seeing it from the perspective the rest of us see it. I can't decide if this is brilliance in writing and structure (and therefore deliberate craft) or if this is illness spilled onto a page. The discomfort it causes for me as a reader makes it hard to rate.

Thanks to the publisher for sending me a copy in exchange for an honest review.

Leslie Lindsay says

A dark and gripping memoir about the intricacies of grief, obsession, madness, and more.

When I came across a write-up of **THE GLASS EYE: A Memoir**, in a recent-ish POETS & WRITERS magazine, I knew I had to read it. And I'm so glad I did.

Jeannie Vanasco's father died when she was an 18-year old college freshman. It's this catastrophic event that sends her into a spiraling tailspin, triggering her mental illness. Jeannie becomes obsessed with her father's death, but also a dead half-sister who shares her name. Years ago, Jeannie's father was married to someone else. They had four daughters, one of those daughters died in a horrific car accident when she was only 16.

All along, Jeannie has made a promise to someday write a book for her father. This wasn't exactly the book she had in mind, but it's the one she wrote to better understand herself, her mental illness, her relationship with her dad. Told in a slightly fragmented series of vignettes, **THE GLASS EYE** reminded me a lot of the style and structure used in Rachel Khong's **GOODBYE VITAMIN**. Some may find the headings, 'MOM,' 'DAD,' 'JEANNIE' and 'MENTAL ILLNESS' slightly distracting, but there's a reason for them, as the author points out.

Some reviewers mentioned the tendency for redundancy, and have to say, I think this was all part of the structural scope. **THE GLASS EYE is much like grief in that sense; it's cyclical.** Each time Vanasco mentions something again, it's with new clarity or insight.

I loved her forays into mental illness, not because I wish that on anyone, but because it was handled with such raw authenticity that I truly appreciated. It's not anyone could bare their soul as eloquently as Vanasco, well done.

THE GLASS EYE also incorporates many aspects of the writing life, home, mothers, and memory that makes it a truly unique read. Those who read and enjoyed **PIECES OF MY MOTHER** (Melissa Cistaro) will also enjoy **THE GLASS EYE**. Stay tuned, too for the forthcoming **THE ART OF MISDIAGNOSIS** (Gayle Brandeis).

For all my reviews, including author interviews, please see: www.leslielindsay.com
Special thanks to Tin House Books for this review copy. All thoughts are my own.

Anthony Connolly says

There's an *i* in it.

And an eye, a glass eye, of course, but it's made of plastic.

But mostly, importantly, an *I*.

And this *I* came up with an equation (eye+i=I) , and a deathbed pledge and a memoir so remarkable you may never look at memoir the same again.

The Glass Eye is a memoir about writing a memoir, a book Jeannie Vanasco promised her ailing father she would write about him. Long ago he lost his left eye to disease and it was replaced with a glass eye.

Throughout her teens, her father's health steadily declined. Just a month shy of graduation, at 18, her father would die, the father who named her after his daughter from a previous marriage - Jeanne - who died at 16 in a car crash.

"My memoir is called *The Glass Eye*," I said (to classmates while studying memoir writing), "It's about my father. I use his loss of his left eye as a metaphor for my grief. He died when I was eighteen. This book is also about his loss of his daughter Jeanne, my half sister. She died in a car accident when she was sixteen. He

named me after her, except he added the letter i to my name."

Yes: Jeannie ends up writing *The Glass Eye* over a ten year period, and ends up writing about Jeanne as well. And she loses her mind in the process.

It's a book that will never be finished. This is girl, interrupted, and interrupted and interrupted again and again by sheer incapacitating grief at the death of her father, which morphs into deep depression, into mania and numerous hospitalizations for her mental disorder. In her darkest valleys Jeannie thinks her eyes are falling out of her head; at her peaks, she's buying bulk office supplies; paint for the kitchen walls; baking supplies and color coding her life and its episode in preparation for an oncoming hurricane, and talking way too quickly.

The book was once a very long poem. Then snippets cut and pasted onto blank pages. It was inside her body. It is all she sees. It was therapy. Book as magical thinking.

And it's probably the best contemporary memoir I've ever had the privilege to read.

This is a masterful memoir that took tremendous guts to write.

Thank you Jeannie Vanasco for your temerity.

Thank you Ms Vanasco for your persistence.

Jeannie, thank you.

Y (Bookiful.life) says

It really did feel like I was on this journey with Jeannie as she struggled to write what she needed to say yet still trying to figure things out.

The small vignette style was a great way to demonstrate that struggle, while the larger blocks of paragraphs demonstrated memories, which were the only certain things Jeannie knew.

I would definitely be interested in reading more by Vanasco.

Rachel says

Grief, Jeannie Vanasco writes in *The Glass Eye*, is inexplicable. To really describe it, one must often approach it adjacently through metaphor, as Vanasco does in her attempts to piece together the story of her unravelling after her father's death. How can words adequately represent the oceans of pain that swell and drown us? How can we make sense of grief, which often renders us senseless? How does one capture the magnitude of loss?

Vanasco struggles with these questions in her memoir, the book she promised her father she'd write for him. But it's a different book than she'd envisioned; it's the story of the human mind as it attempts to cope with the illogical. It's her exploration of the devastation she suffered, the fine thread of her sanity barely holding her together. And, in a way, it's what she always meant to write: in her mourning and her struggle to cope with a new reality, we see that at the heart of it all lies a woman whose love for her father is all-consuming, is extraordinary. An experimental memoir that would make Maggie Nelson proud, *The Glass Eye* is a literary tour de force, a hurricane of language and emotions that fly off the page, a testament to love and loss and how the lexicon of grief, though universal, is always a personal discourse.

[Thank you to the lovely Tin House for the galley!]

Jamie says

An absolutely beautiful exploration of family, grief, memory, and madness, this book is OUTSTANDING.

Squirrel Circus says

So, the universe owed me a REALLY good book this week, after a few so-so choices, and The Glass Eye definitely delivered. I raced through the 270+ pages in only a few days...

Jeannie Vanasco has written a memoir that I find so incredibly moving and meaningful that I am wondering a little if I feel so strongly about it because I closely identify with her mental "unraveling" that takes places alongside of her grief over the loss of father.

What makes this memoir so, well, MEMORABLE, is Vanasco's pacing, structure, and her discerning selection of "scenes" or vignettes from throughout her entire life, as well as the life of her father. The Glass Eye never drags, and every chapter and/or smaller section (often divided by bolded headers, like MOM, DAD, JEANNE, JEANNIE, MENTAL ILLNESS) is an important piece of Vanasco's narrative.

Vanasco has done the kind of "detective" work that is so valuable to anyone searching for answers, to family secrets or to our own inner selves. Fantastic read!
