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The Beast: A Book Review

Thompson, T. (1995). *The beast: A journey through depression*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 304pp. \$9.95 (paperback) ISBN 0452276950

Reviewed by **Tim Bolen**

In vivid and candid detail, Tracy Thompson's *The Beast* is an honest attempt to pull back the curtain on depression. This reveal gives both clinician and layman a behind the scenes look at the destructive and debilitating effects on a life suffering with illness that the brain can't quite understand. Tracing her roots and upbringing, Thompson discloses that mental illness has always been a part of her family. As a teenager she would write the word *depression* in her journal, not knowing that the "beast" would unfortunately accompany her throughout the rest of her life. As the title suggests, this enemy would reap havoc upon her career, her self-esteem, and her most intimate relationships.

The Beast is a powerful story of a nationally recognized journalist with the Washington Post who, in spite of the cultural taboo and ignorance surrounding mental illness in the 1960's and 1970's, learned to cope with depression. Thompson's arduous and courageous battle with depression is an inspiring story of a woman who endured years of talk therapy, evolving psychotropic medications, and numerous suicide attempts. Thompson's work is not a self-help, how-to book on conquering depression. She does not give the impression that the right combination can free a person from the cage of mood disorders. Yet in unflinching honesty, Thompson invites the reader into her world of pain, confusion, and hope as she personally refused to allow depression to ruin the life that she so desperately desired.

Tracy Thompson grew up in the Deep South where religion was a mandated way of life and mental illness was not discussed. By age 14, she was already contemplating suicide. By age 37, she mustered the courage to write an article in the Washington Post about her lifelong battle with depression. Her colleagues told her it would be career suicide, be the overwhelming response of her readers assured her that her story needed to be

further documented in a book. Her contribution to the field of mental health is invaluable as it chronicles the frustrating journey of a brain that "tried to make sense of its pain" (p. 8). Thompson shares several inadvertent discoveries that put her on the road to recovery. These powerful lesson and observations continue to aid her daily encounters with the "beast" and provide insight to those who suffer from the effects of depression.

One of the overriding lessons in *The Beast* is that depression is not only conquered with a series of small steps, but also the realization that those small steps become a blue print for how to continue conquering the illness on a daily basis. Thompson does a great service to the mental health community by painting a realistic picture of an illness that for some becomes a "normal" part of daily living. Though depression is a reality for millions of people, it need not be a raging best ripping through quality of life with abandon. The "beast" can be tamed by those who seek help and are surrounded with love and support. For Thompson, depression is present in her life, but it does not have the last word.