

White, W. (2010). Foreword. George Jensen, *Some of the Words Are Theirs*. Springfield, Missouri: Moon City Press.

Foreword

“Your father is a good man. He just has a disease.”

George Jensen’s *Some of the Words Are Theirs* will find many appreciative audiences. It is far more than the grown tale of an abandoned seven year old boy whose alcoholic father went on to drink himself to death. Those whose lives have been touched by alcoholism will explore the subtle ways parental alcoholism shapes personal development and find clues on how to give up life-shaping family myths. They will discover how one man forged his own healing narrative. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous will be particularly moved by this book. In his search for missing parts of his life story, George Jensen found answers from men who offered what his father could not. Men and women in Alcoholics Anonymous may in turn find a surrogate son in these pages whose growing understanding of alcoholism followed a path to acceptance and love. Readers of biography and memoir will find in *Some of Their Words Are Theirs* an engaging narrative of self-discovery cast in the shadow of local culture and global events. The section on the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor is a particularly fascinating example of how a rich personal story can be constructed from only fragments of available detail. Readers who are interested in the role of story and storytelling in personal identity are going to be particularly pleased with this book.

This work can also be read within a rich American history of alcoholic and alcoholic family memoirs dating from the dramatic increase in alcohol consumption following the Revolutionary War and the birth of the American Temperance Movement. Temperance literature, works such as *The Drunkard*, *One Cup More*, and *The Doom of the Drunkard*, portrayed the way in which alcoholism ravaged the family through violence, economic hardship, abandonment, and death. These morality tales were stories with an agenda: the prohibition of the sale of alcohol. As such, they focused more on the evils of alcohol than on an intimate portrayal of family experience. When inebriate homes and inebriate asylums dotted the American landscape in the late nineteenth century, the professional inebriety literature referred to spouses and families only peripherally or portrayed the family as a potential cause of alcoholism or a source of sabotage to recovery.

It wasn’t until the late twentieth century that the focus shifted from alcohol, the “disease of alcoholism,” and the alcoholic to the impact of alcoholism on the family. The resulting body of literature tended to portray family members as being as “sick” as the alcoholic and in need of sustained therapy. This pathologization of the alcoholic family crested in the late 1980s via such concepts as “para-alcoholism” and “co-dependency.” Memoirs of alcoholic families in this era were heavily influenced by popular depictions of highly predictable role adaptations that unfolded within families through the progressive insults of alcoholism. Children and adult children of alcoholics were portrayed as uniformly suffering and in need of treatment in their own right. To the family’s rescue came a plague of pop psychologists and pseudo-therapists whose

proclamations triggered their own backlash movement in publications like *The Codependence Conspiracy*, *I'm Dysfunctional*, *You're Dysfunctional* and *The Diseaseing of America*.

The memoirs of adult children of alcoholics in the late twentieth century contained stories of alcoholism-shaped family life, but complexities and layers of meaning were often missing from these portrayals. Fueled by anger, sadness and loss, such tales conveyed the impression that the protagonist's life would have been idyllic but for the insults of alcoholism on his or her family. Missing were tales of greater depth and nuance and stories, not of psychopathology and psychotherapy, but of natural resilience, maturation, and wisdom. That tide may be turning with the publication of *Some of the Words Are Theirs*.

Jensen's memoir is a lesson in how lives are shaped more by attitudes than by events. In this richly layered and evolving story, Jensen finds a way to shed his own personal myth (all the problems in my life resulted from my father's alcoholism) and the sorrow and loss that permeated it. The life story at the end is very different than the opening life story. On a journey through anger, resentment, and grief, he achieves a state of maturity and wisdom—the recognition that removal of alcoholism and abandonment from his story would not have produced a perfect life, but a life with other issues that would have similarly challenged his development as a person.

There is a sense of liberation at the end of this book that most readers will find very comforting and personally empowering. I think some readers turning the last page of this book will be open to new possibilities and will have found their own life story becoming less about events and more about meanings.

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