



Fatherless Daughters: Turning the Pain of Loss into the Power of Forgiveness

By Pamela Thomas

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A moving, elegantly written, impressively researched book about what it means to lose a father to death or divorce, with advice for fatherless daughters on how to cope.

- An important topic: many books have been written about parental loss—specifically mother loss on daughters and father loss on sons—but few have explored the profound emotional, intellectual, and physical effects of father loss on girls. These effects can be devastating, coloring a fatherless daughter's attitudes on love, marriage, parenting, career, and physical and emotional well-being. *Fatherless Daughters* brings this problem out of the shadows and helps women clearly see how father loss has affected their lives and what they can do about it.
- A mosaic of perspectives: Pamela Thomas, whose own father died when she was ten years old, interviewed more than 100 women who have lost their fathers in a variety of circumstances—through death, divorce, and abandonment—and at every age, from birth to late teens. Each story is unique (and many of them are included here, including the author's own), but the common threads that run through them will inspire both recognition and relief in readers.
- Prescriptive and supportive: Divided into four sections—"Fathering," "Shock," "Aftershock," and "Coming to Terms"—*Fatherless Daughters* traces the experience of growing up without a father from the initial trauma of losing him, to the reverberations years later that reflect the impact of his loss. Thomas offers advice on ways women can come to terms with their loss, including getting to know one's lost father, even if he has passed away. Filled with wisdom, *Fatherless Daughters* guides readers through their pain to a place of strength, hope, and grace.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Book editor Thomas was ten years old when her father died, and she's struggled to make sense of that loss for more than 50 years. Weaving theory and testimony into a diagnostic text with a general prescription for healing, Thomas examines women coping with the loss of a father, through death or divorce. In four sections—"Fathering," "Shock," "Aftershock," and "Coming to Terms"—Thomas confronts the idealization of the father, resentment toward his loss, the reaction of family members and potential impact on future relationships, among other angles. Aside from her own story and the work of psychologists, analysts and social scientists, Thomas's primary research material comes from interviews she conducted with more than 100 grown women. Unfortunately, the similarities among Thomas's subjects (affluent and middle-class women of a similar age) and the insularity of her sources limit readers' exposure to the true spectrum of loss. Relying on familiar narratives of pain and recovery, Thomas may offer some comfort and counsel, but fails to capture the issue's full dimensions.

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About the Author

Pamela Thomas has been a writer and book editor for many years and is currently a children's book editor at Sesame Workshop. She lives in New York City.

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Introduction

"My mother died when I was nineteen. For a long time, it was all you needed to know about me...a kind of vest-pocket description of my emotional complexion: 'Meet you in the lobby in ten minutes -- I have long brown hair, am on the short side, have on a red coat, and my mother died when I was nineteen.' "

This is how writer Anna Quindlen described herself, and the impact of her mother's death, a few years back in her "Life in the Thirties" column in the *New York Times*. Her description is imbued with irony, but her bittersweet humor brings a lump to my throat. Clearly Anna, or anyone who has endured the untimely death of a parent, knows that the loss is not so much an abridged edition of an emotional life story as it is a line of existential poetry. In one phrase, you've said it all.

My father died when I was ten. My situation was a bit different from Anna Quindlen's. I lost my father, not my mother. I was a child about to embark on puberty, not an adolescent emerging into adulthood. But the end result was the same: my dad's early death and the fact that I was brought up without his influence shaped my life in every way, and forever.

Nothing traumatizes a child more than the death of a parent. Hope Edelman, in her thoughtful book *Motherless Daughters*, speaks movingly about the death of her mother when she was seventeen. Edelman believes that the death of the mother is the worst death any girl can, and probably ever will, endure, and I agree. For boys and girls alike, our mother is our first love, our primordial source of sustenance and care. If we are lucky, Mother is the one -- and perhaps the only -- person in our lives who will love us unconditionally. Her loss, especially if it occurs at an early age, is absolutely devastating.

But I believe firmly that the death of a father, especially if you're still a child, is almost as dreadful. Although

the effects of the loss of your father are perhaps initially less obvious, the pain runs just as deep. The loss of a father on a daughter is particularly and exquisitely affecting. (I hasten to add that the loss of a father on boys is equally traumatic; however, the impact is psychologically different and deserves a study of its own. Although I grew up with three brothers who were as affected by our dad's death as I was, and I talk about them frequently here, I don't address issues of father loss on sons to a great extent in this book.)

For most of my life (I am now in my early sixties), describing the consequences of my dad's death was rather like trying to define the perimeter of a void, or opening a file in my computer labeled "Influence of My Father" and finding it empty. I simply could not find the words to articulate the nothingness I felt.

In recent years, however, I began to see that my dad's death produced not so much a void but a cluster of deep, rigid emotions that have profoundly influenced my life. Without quite knowing it, I was absolutely terrified of these feelings; as a result, I denied them, bringing the whole emotional morass full circle, hardening those emotions into a place I called nothingness or a void. I began to think that perhaps my father's loss was even more crushing than I had initially imagined.

Which brings me to this book.

I began writing down my memories of my dad more than twenty years ago. Around the same time, I also began reading books about fathers, fathering, and father loss. In retrospect, I realize that I approached the topic in a rather intellectual, almost clinical way. Again, I suspect those scary feelings were at work, preventing me from really experiencing what all this abstract research had to do with me.

Coincidentally, as I was delving into father research for my own private reasons, the subject of fathering began to receive a tremendous amount of public attention. Indeed, by the early 1990s, the issue of fatherlessness and the importance of a father's influence on a child had become central to any discussion of American family values.

In 1993, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a sociologist from the Institute for American Values, published a controversial article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Dan Quayle Was Right." Vice President Dan Quayle had publicly criticized the popular television program *Murphy Brown* (and its star, Candice Bergen) for glamorizing the lifestyle of the single mother. Dan Quayle had, in turn, been blasted by the liberal press for being too conservative and out of touch.

In her article, Whitehead argued that Quayle was right and the writers of *Murphy Brown*, as well as many members of the liberal establishment, were wrong. According to Whitehead, choosing unwed motherhood was neither noble nor desirable, especially from the child's perspective, since the absence of a father fueled everything from delinquency to drug abuse.

This skirmish marked the beginning of a new wave of battles over American family values, especially on issues involving marriage and parenting. Since then, the subject of fatherlessness has come up repeatedly as a primary contributor to many of our society's ills. In recent years, countless magazine and newspaper articles and several important books, particularly *Fatherhood in America: A History* by Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherless America* by David Blankenhorn, *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters* by Meg Meeker, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* by C. Mavis Hetherington, and several books by esteemed sociologist Judith Wallerstein have been published on the subject. Virtually all of the experts agree with Whitehead: a father's influence is essential for bringing up healthy children, and his absence can be devastating.

Still, although I found this material informative, in the end, none of the books I read really spoke to my yearning to know precisely how my own father's loss had affected me personally. Ultimately, the books seemed rather academic and abstract, so I decided to try to research and write the book I wanted to read. I

wanted my book to serve two purposes.

First, I hoped that the act of researching and writing a book on father loss would be a personal journey for me, a pilgrimage to better understand myself in relation to losing my father. I hoped writing this book would allow me to answer particular questions: Did the fact that Daddy died when I was still a child affect my relationships with men? Did it help that I was raised with three brothers? How did my mother's behavior, and the fact that she was a relatively young, single woman throughout my adolescence, influence my life? Would things have been different if Daddy had lived? Would life have been better?

Second, I wanted to write a book that would serve as a guide for other women seeking answers to their own issues with father loss. I am not a professional sociologist or a psychologist; I am a longtime book editor and a writer, so I approached this book as an investigative journalist tracking down a complex story. Toward that end, I rather arbitrarily decided I would interview 100 fatherless daughters -- a goal that seemed substantial but not overwhelming. Ultimately, I interviewed 106 fatherless daughters: 66 women who had lost their fathers through death and 40 who had lost their fathers through divorce. (In addition, I interviewed nine men, all fathers of daughters, and have incorporated many of their insights into this text. I also consulted with five psychotherapists for professional viewpoints.)

I debated with myself about including women whose dads disappeared from their lives as a result of divorce or conscious desertion. In the end, I chose to include them because so many women, especially those born after 1960, were fatherless as a result of divorce, and I was curious as to how their experiences with loss differed from my own.

I defined a fatherless daughter as a woman who lost her father between birth and age eighteen, though many women who lose their fathers after age eighteen consider themselves to be fatherless daughters. In her book *Fatherless Women: How We Change After We Lose Our Dads*, Clea Simon addresses issues of father loss among adult women, explaining that a father's death for a woman in her twenties, thirties, or even forties is, indeed, often life altering. However, I was interested in exploring the effects of father loss on women who were raised from childhood without the influence of their dads and how this absence affected their development.

The women I interviewed ranged in age from nineteen to ninetyfour. Not surprisingly, because of the broad range in their ages, these women experienced father loss in decidedly different ways, in part because of the nature of the society in which they were raised. Mores, particularly attitudes toward death, divorce, and the rights of women, changed dramatically during the twentieth century, and this strongly colored each woman's experience of father loss. Most of the women were American, although I also talked to women from Canada, Mexico, England, and Japan. They ranged across the board geographically, ethnically, socially, and economically.

To my surprise, I had no trouble finding women who would agree to be interviewed. Early on, I considered putting ads in newspapers, magazines, and online to find potential subjects, but I found more than enough appropriate women simply by word of mouth, and most of the fatherless daughters I met were as interested in exploring their experiences with father loss as I was.

I found all of these women's stories utterly fascinating and came to feel that it was important that I share as many of these biographies as I possibly could. Therefore, in addition to my research and observations, I have included vignettes of women whose experiences cast a special light on a particular issue. (To insure privacy, some of their names and details of their lives have been changed.)

Finally, I was deeply moved by the intensity of the emotion virtually all of the daughters expressed about their dads. Only rarely did I encounter a woman who expressed hateful feelings about her father -- indeed, I

can think of only two or three...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lisa Christopher:

Information is provisions for anyone to get better life, information presently can get by anyone on everywhere. The information can be a expertise or any news even a problem. What people must be consider any time those information which is within the former life are challenging be find than now's taking seriously which one is acceptable to believe or which one the resource are convinced. If you have the unstable resource then you understand it as your main information there will be huge disadvantage for you. All of those possibilities will not happen with you if you take Fatherless Daughters: Turning the Pain of Loss into the Power of Forgiveness as your daily resource information.

Michael Palmateer:

The book Fatherless Daughters: Turning the Pain of Loss into the Power of Forgiveness has a lot info on it. So when you make sure to read this book you can get a lot of help. The book was published by the very famous author. Tom makes some research previous to write this book. This particular book very easy to read you can find the point easily after perusing this book.

Joan Beverly:

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