

BOOK REVIEW

A Book of Light: When a Loved One Has a Different Mind by Jerry Pinto (2016)

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A Book of Light: When a Loved One Has a Different Mind is a powerful and deeply personal anthology compiled by Jerry Pinto. Following the acclaim of his semi-autobiographical novel, *Em and the Big Hoom*, which explored his own experiences of growing up with a mother who had bipolar disorder, Pinto broadens the scope in this collection. This book brings together a diverse range of narratives from individuals who have lived alongside loved ones battling various mental health conditions.

Mental health remains a subject often clouded by stigma, particularly in cultures where psychological struggles are either dismissed or spoken about in whispers. Through this anthology, Pinto fosters an open and compassionate dialogue, shedding light on the realities faced by caregivers and family members. Rather than offering solutions or guidance on dealing with mental illness, the book provides an unfiltered and deeply human account of their experiences. It highlights the resilience, patience, and love required to support someone with conditions like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, and other psychiatric challenges.

Themes and Analysis

A central theme in *A Book of Light* is the far-reaching impact of mental illness—not only on those diagnosed but also on their families, friends, and caregivers.

The book shifts its focus beyond the individual's struggle, highlighting the experiences of parents, siblings, children, and partners who find themselves navigating an often overwhelming and emotionally exhausting reality. Through these narratives, the anthology explores the complexities of caregiving, shedding light on the love, helplessness, frustration, and even resentment that can emerge in such relationships.

One of the book's most compelling aspects is its refusal to romanticize suffering. Stories about mental illness often fall into extremes—either dramatising the condition or portraying it as a journey that ultimately results in personal growth or redemption. However, *A Book of Light* resists these simplifications. The contributors share their experiences with raw honesty, capturing moments of warmth and connection but also exposing the painful, unpredictable, and sometimes destructive nature of mental illness.

Another critical theme in the book is the stigma surrounding mental health. Many of the authors describe the reactions of their families, communities, and even medical professionals, revealing the widespread lack of understanding and the systemic shortcomings of mental healthcare. The anthology raises an important question: Why is mental illness treated so differently from physical health conditions? If a loved one were diagnosed with cancer or heart disease, they would likely receive empathy and support. Yet, when it comes to schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression, families often find themselves isolated, forced to deal with the challenges in silence.

Identity, Agency, and Emotional Boundaries

The book explores complex questions about identity and agency, particularly in the context of severe mental illness. When someone undergoes drastic behavioural and personality changes due to their condition, their loved ones are often left grappling with difficult questions: How do we differentiate the person from their illness? At what point does caregiving turn into self-sacrifice? These dilemmas are at the heart of many narratives in *A Book of Light*, making it more than just a collection of personal experiences—it is a profound exploration of relationships, emotional boundaries, and resilience.

Writing Style

Jerry Pinto's role as the curator allows each contributor's voice to remain authentic and emotionally resonant. The book does not impose a singular writing style, yet the stories flow seamlessly, creating a sense of unity. The deeply personal and reflective tone, often resembling journal entries or heartfelt letters, makes the narratives feel intimate and engaging.

Despite tackling difficult themes, the book remains accessible. It steers clear of technical jargon and clinical descriptions, instead focusing on lived experiences that are easy to comprehend but emotionally profound. Some accounts are deeply painful, providing an unfiltered look at the realities of mental illness. However, there are also moments of tenderness and resilience, illustrating that love and hope persist even in the darkest times. The book's ability to balance sorrow with strength makes it a powerful and thought-provoking read.

These moments emphasise that even amid hardship, there is room for understanding and acceptance. However, the book also presents a sobering reality: love, no matter how deep, is not always enough to "heal" someone struggling with mental illness. This is a difficult truth that many caregivers must come to terms with. At times, the most compassionate choice is to prioritise their well-being while continuing to support their loved one in the ways they can.

Impact and Relevance

Beyond its literary value, *A Book of Light* holds significant social importance. In India, where discussions about mental health remain limited and often stigmatised, works like this help challenge taboos and encourage open dialogue. The country's inadequate mental health infrastructure, coupled with societal prejudices, frequently leaves individuals and families feeling isolated in their struggles. By sharing these deeply personal stories, Pinto and the contributors not only create awareness but also offer validation and solidarity to those facing similar challenges.

The book also reinforces the idea that mental illness does not define a person. Many of the narratives capture moments of joy, humour, and deep connection between caregivers and their loved ones, reminding readers that these relationships are not solely shaped by struggle. Additionally, *A Book of Light* underscores the importance of mental health advocacy. It sheds light on the shortcomings of India's mental healthcare system, highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms, improved psychiatric care facilities, and greater public awareness. While the book does not directly position itself as a call to activism, its emotional depth naturally encourages readers to reflect on these critical issues.

Final Verdict

A Book of Light: When a Loved One Has a Different Mind is a powerful, thought-provoking, and essential read for anyone interested in mental health, caregiving, or human relationships. It is not a book that offers easy answers or uplifting conclusions—it requires emotional engagement from the reader and presents the realities of mental illness with unfiltered honesty. However, it is precisely this rawness that makes it so impactful.

Jerry Pinto, through this book, proves his ability to bring attention to experiences that are often overlooked or misunderstood. This anthology is not only valuable for those who have personally dealt with mental illness in their families but also for anyone who seeks a deeper understanding of love, resilience, and the complexities of caregiving.

