



She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me

By Emma Brockes

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"One of those memoirs that remind you why you liked memoirs in the first place... It has the density of a very good novel... As you do with the best writers, you feel lucky to be in Ms. Brockes's company." --Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

A chilling work of psychological suspense and forensic memoir, *She Left Me the Gun* is a tale of true transformation: the story of a young woman who reinvented herself so completely that her previous life seemed simply to vanish, and of a daughter who transcends her mother's fears and reclaims an abandoned past.

"One day I will tell you the story of my life," promises Emma Brockes's mother, "and you will be amazed." Brockes grew up hearing only pieces of her mother's past—stories of a rustic childhood in South Africa, glimpses of a bohemian youth in London—and yet knew that crucial facts were still in the dark. A mystery to her friends and family, Paula was clearly a strong, self-invented woman; glamorous, no-nonsense, and frequently out of place in their quaint English village. In awe of Paula's larger-than-life personality, Brockes never asked why her mother emigrated to England or why she never returned to South Africa; never questioned the source of her mother's strange fears or tremendous strengths.

Looking to unearth the truth after Paula's death, Brockes begins a dangerous journey into the land—and the life—her mother fled from years before. Brockes soon learns that Paula's father was a drunk megalomaniac who terrorized Paula and her seven half-siblings for years. After finally mustering the courage to take her father to court, Paula is horrified to see the malevolent man vindicated of all charges. As Brockes discovers, this crushing defeat left Paula with a choice: take her own life, or promise herself never to be intimidated or unhappy again. Ultimately she chooses life and happiness by booking one-way passage to London—but not before shooting her father five times, and failing to kill him. Smuggling the fateful gun through English customs would be Paula's first triumph in her new life.

She Left Me the Gun carries Brockes to South Africa to meet her seven aunts and

uncles, weighing their stories against her mother's silences. Brockes learns of the violent pathologies and racial propaganda in which her grandfather was inculcated, sees the mine shafts and train yards where he worked as an itinerant mechanic, and finds in buried government archives the court records proving his murder conviction years before he first married. Brockes also learns of the turncoat stepmother who may have perjured herself to save her husband, dooming Paula and her siblings to the machinations of their hated father.

Most of all, *She Left Me the Gun* reveals how Paula reinvented herself to lead a full, happy life. As she follows her mother's footsteps back to South Africa, Brockes begins to find the wellsprings of her mother's strength, the tremendous endurance which allowed Paula to hide secrets from even her closest friends and family. But as the search through cherished letters and buried documents deepens, Brockes realizes with horror that her mother's great success as a parent was concealing her terrible past—and that unearthing these secrets threatens to undo her mother's work.

A beguiling and unforgettable journey across generations and continents, *She Left Me the Gun* chronicles Brockes's efforts to walk the knife-edge between understanding her mother's unspeakable traumas and embracing the happiness she chose for her daughter.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Emma Brockes

Q. What made you decide to go in search of your mother's life before she had you?

A. When I was growing up, my mother was always dropping hints that something terrible and dramatic had happened in her past. But she had never been terribly specific. When I was 27, she died, and I felt compelled to find out all the things she hadn't been telling me. When a parent dies, your relationship with their history changes; it becomes your own and all the things you were avoiding, it seems imperative, suddenly, to confront. Deciding to write about it was easy; it's an amazing story. Secrets like this were meant to be written about.

Q. What did you find when you went looking into your mother's past?

A. I knew she had moved to England from South Africa in 1960 and never really been back. So after her death, I flew to Johannesburg for the first time, to meet some of her seven siblings and ask them the questions I hadn't dared ask her. It turned out she and her siblings had been involved in a high profile court case, in which their father was the accused, and in which he had defended himself, cross-examining his own children in the witness box and destroying them one by one. It also turned out that my mother had tried, and failed, to kill him.

So, some fairly lively discoveries.

Q. You explore the ultimate question: how well do we know someone? Do you feel like you know your mother better now than before learning about her childhood trauma?

A. No, strangely. I think I always knew her at mineral level, the stuff I found out was merely an extreme expression of characteristics that were clearly present in my mother while I was growing up. The thing that amazed me most – the one out-of-character detail – was that she managed not to talk about it. My mum was the world's worst keeper of secrets.

Anyway it's something I worried about before starting the book; that whatever I found out would change my view of my mother and I would pathologise her in some way. As it turned out, I think there is only so much the imagination will let one do with one's parents; who they were to you when you were little, is who at some level they will always be. And so, while I admired my mother for the things I found out - how she stood up to a maniac; how she tried to protect her younger siblings; above all, how she rebuilt herself after it all went wrong - it didn't alter what was to me her basic mum-ness.

When I see her in my mind's eye these days, it's as I always saw her, sitting in the kitchen by the sink, peeling carrots or potatoes, looking out of the window at the garden and turning to smile at me as I come through the door.

Q. You mention in the book how some aspects of your own childhood started to make sense once you

learned what'd happened to your mother. Do you think her experience had some psychological or emotional effect on you?

A. Very hard to measure, but I'm sure that it did, given the extent to which my mother's character was moulded by all this. She managed to put a positive spin on problematic impulses; so, when I was a kid, she was convinced I was going to get kidnapped and murdered, but instead of scaring the bejesus out of me, she managed to turn it into a comedy routine that assuaged her fears (a little) and didn't traumatize me. She was so bonkers about my exposure to risk, it has probably made me blasé; it's a great luxury, to have someone else do all your worrying for you.

After my mother's death, when I found out exactly what she'd been withholding, it struck me that she had made a moral, practical and aesthetic choice to be a certain way in relation to her past and I have definitely been influenced by the example she set. It's mainly a good thing; I don't see the point in going on about everything all of the time; although I probably tolerate discomfort longer than I should. (That might just be a British thing.)

Q. Your relatives in South Africa seemed to be at odds with one another, yet all were eager to connect with you. Are you still in touch with your family in South Africa?

A. Yes. I've been back to South Africa once, last year, and I speak to my aunt Fay on the phone occasionally. It's so far away that realistically, we're never going to operate like a regular family. But it feels important to me to maintain contact. Most importantly, a generation on, we don't seem to be hampered by the fraughtness and baggage that dominated my mother's relationships with her siblings.

Q. How has this experience changed you? What has it taught you?

A. It has thrown my own childhood into a more idyllic light. Held up against the worst alternative, all the things you take for granted start to look like incredible good fortune. (Not that it has stopped me complaining. But still). It has also given me a shift in perspective. Here was the mother I had known, living a mild existence in a village in Buckinghamshire, meanwhile somewhere in her system was the memory of all this unbelievable trauma. In light of what I discovered, her achievement seemed remarkable. The one thing she couldn't do was talk about it, which is so often the case with abuse histories. Intellectually, I understood that nothing bad would happen if I wrote all this down and published it, but emotionally, that took a very long time to be the case. So the most profound change has been publishing this book and seeing for myself that the sky didn't fall in.

From [Booklist](#)

Most regular tourists want “to look at places where great historical events occurred and drive to areas of natural beauty and feel uplifted by things that are bigger than we are.” But for British journalist Brockes, her journey to South Africa after her mother’s death is to uncover bitter family secrets and to find out what drove her mother to emigrate from Johannesburg to London. There is a lot Brockes does not know, “groping for a language to talk about the things we’d never talked about.” Does she want to know? With a mixture of sorrow and wry wit, she mocks those who find excitement in the scenic and the political as she uses her journalistic skills to access the national archives and discovers horrifying family abuse in her grandfather’s 1950s court case. But just as heartbreaking are the revelations of the tenderness in her struggling white working-class family. The close-up personal story will hold readers who want to understand the history tourists neither seek nor find. --Hazel Rochman

Review

"[A] **courageous, clear-sighted** book, which shifts between memoir and elegy as it examines the persistence

of family secrets and the fragile interface between innocence and knowledge ... Brockes handles her toxic material with a **lightness of touch that navigates skillfully between tragedy and bleak comedy...**

[Brockes's mother] did not need to leave her daughter a gun in the end. Her real bequest to Brockes was the psychological freedom to be able to confront the past without inhibition, and to take straight aim at it. The gun is this book." --*The Guardian* (UK)

"*She Left Me the Gun* is quite simply an **extraordinary** book. In the hands of any halfway decent author, this would be an incredible story: a mother with a mysterious South African past who arrived in England in her early twenties with a beautiful antique handgun and a mission to forget who she used to be. In the hands of a writer as gifted as Emma Brockes, it's **basically the perfect memoir: a riveting, authentic tale elegantly told.**" --*Sunday Telegraph* (UK)

"Full of intellect and feeling and dartlike expression. It's **one of those memoirs that remind you why you liked memoirs in the first place**, back before every featherhead in your writers' group was trying to peddle one. **It has the density of a very good novel... As you do with the best writers, you feel lucky to be in Ms. Brockes's company throughout *She Left Me the Gun*.** She is mugged; her car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, and swastika-wearing bikers roar up. She never loses her composure... This is a grim story, but it's also a love story." --Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

"An **exemplary** family history and immensely brave... Brockes's descriptions of South Africa and her newly discovered family (towards whom she is loyal and generously affectionate) are astute and, one feels, tempered by the tightly coiled wayward nature of the freshly grief-stricken. It makes the slow pace of the revelations all the more honourable and heartfelt. The result is **a wise, tender letter of love to a mother and her incredible sense of love and necessary self-sufficiency.**" --Helen Davies, *Sunday Times* (UK)

"**This soul-searching tale is a shocking trail of murder, violence, incest and betrayal that leaves her both shocked and proud ... Emma Brockes writes with dry humour and a refreshing lack of sentiment** as she unravels the complex family ties that have become twisted into a difficult and at times almost impenetrable web of hidden suffering." --*Daily Express* (UK)

"The **riveting** memoir about how a prizewinning British journalist reclaimed her mother's traumatic past... The story of Brockes' quest to understand her mother's past is powerful on its own, but the backdrop against which most of the narrative unfolds—a country with its own history of rapacious violence—makes the book even more **poignant and unforgettable.**"

—*Kirkus*

"This astonishing, unsettling book examines the relationship between knowledge and love. Vigorously unsentimental, deeply absorbing, and written with fierce wit, it is an unstinting look at what it means to be innocent, at any stage of life, and how obsessively we all seek and avoid the many faces of truth."

—**Andrew Solomon, author of *Far From the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon***

"A beautiful, wise book. It deals with some of the grimmest aspects of human experience, but it is also one of the most genuinely uplifting works I have read in years. Emma Brockes's superb, clear-eyed narration is an object lesson for any aspiring memoir writer. *She Left Me the Gun* deserves to become a classic."

—**Zoë Heller, author of *The Believers* and *Notes on a Scandal***

"Emma Brockes sets out on a delicate journey to uncover a secret locked in the heart of her own family's darkness. A harrowing tale of murder and incest emerges, unfolding by stages in this utterly compelling psychological memoir."

—John Berendt, author of *The City of Falling Angels* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gary Glover:

As people who live in the actual modest era should be update about what going on or details even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era that is certainly always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe will certainly update themselves by studying books. It is a good choice for you personally but the problems coming to a person is you don't know what kind you should start with. This *She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me* is our recommendation to help you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

Gary Lopez:

The book untitled *She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me* is the publication that recommended to you to see. You can see the quality of the publication content that will be shown to a person. The language that article author use to explained their ideas are easily to understand. The copy writer was did a lot of investigation when write the book, and so the information that they share to you personally is absolutely accurate. You also can get the e-book of *She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me* from the publisher to make you much more enjoy free time.

Otis Kozlowski:

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