



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

*Emma Brockes*

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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.

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

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Author : Emma Brockes

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Memoir

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# From Reader Review *She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me* for online ebook

## Karol says

This was a difficult book to read on several levels. First, it describes the worst imaginable situation for children in a highly dysfunctional family; there were many things in it that just plain made me sick.

Style-wise, the book jumped around a bit as the author embarked on a journey of discovery about her mother's life before having a husband and child of her own. There were so many different people involved in the story, and so many different accounts of what happened that I had difficulty following it at times.

Still, the author's journey to understand her mother's "before" life before was engaging and illuminating in some ways.

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## Carol says

"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." -- NY Times Book Review

Mesmerizing, with sharp and precise writing and a fascinating woman (the author's mother) at the center. Skillfully avoids being excessively grim despite the subject matter.

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## Laura says

*From BBC Radio - Book of the Week:*

*Warm and moving memoir in which the author uncovers dark family secrets.*

Books of the Times Family Ghosts, Kept at Bay - NYT review.

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## Antje says

Journalistin zu sein und ein schreckliches Familiengeheimnis auszugraben, bedeutet nicht automatisch ein lesenswertes Buch auf den Markt zu bringen. Die Autorin hätte besser daran getan, ihre Recherchen zur Vergangenheit ihrer Mutter und deren Familie in Südafrika, nur für sich selbst niederzuschreiben oder als Teil einer privaten Familienchronik.

Dass es Emma Brockes nach dem Tod ihrer Mutter beschäftigt, warum diese nach ihrer Emigration nach England nie wieder in ihre südafrikanische Heimat zurückgekehrt ist und warum sie stets zur ihrer Lebzeit seltsame Andeutungen machte, sie müsse ihrer Tochter eines Tages ihre Familiengeschichte erzählen, ist verständlich. Dass sie deshalb Kontakt zu Geschwistern aufnimmt und schließlich nach Südafrika reist, ist die logische Folge. Welche lähmende und schockierende Wirkung ihre Recherchen auf sie selbst haben

musste, kann ich ebenfalls verstehen. Wieso sie jedoch diese veröffentlichen musste, wird sich mir nie erschließen.

Wenn es ihr zumindest gelungen wäre, ihrem Buch Struktur und einen zeitlich logischen Aufbau zu verleihen. Noch fataler wirkt sich die fehlende emotionale Distanz der Autorin auf das Lesen aus. Sie springt von einer Anekdote zur nächsten. Dazwischen fügt sie neue Erkenntnisse, Gedanken, Einfälle ein oder gar uninteressante Dialoge mit ihren Verwandten. Ich wurde das Gefühl nie los, dass die Autorin keinerlei Konzept hat, sondern stattdessen, sich ihr Leid von der Seele schreibt. Wenn es diesen therapeutischen Effekt in ihr ausgelöst hat, freue ich mich aufrichtig für sie. Aber als Leserin gibt mir das Buch überhaupt nichts. Schade!

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## Kate says

Full disclosure: I received an ARC through the Amazon Vine program. Before that I had marked this one as 'to-read' but the chances of that happening were minimal, had I not received a free copy.

I thought I was done with memoirs; they had all been following the same dusty and worn path through the same family dysfunctions, the same foreign vistas, the same unhappy marriages. The same redemption through therapy or backpacking or child-rearing or organic farming. It must be difficult writing one's memoirs, I thought. Sorting through all of those memories, digging up all of that pain, only to have some old lady like me, who devours three books a week finish yours feeling bored and listless, because, frankly, lady or dude, you have no problems that aren't mirrored in one of my family members, let alone fifteen other memoirs currently in print and sitting on the front table in Barnes and Noble right now, paperback cover curled up from the bottom, flapping in the breeze as latte-customers exit through the doors. You have taken no drastic steps towards fulfillment that can't be read about somewhere else, that can't be dug up over Manhattans with a co-worker or grandmother or old friend. Not much is new under the sun.

This isn't to say I'd given up hope on memoir in general - I just didn't know how a person could possibly write one of interest, unless they were already well known and/or respected for some other accomplishment. Curing cancer. Being an artist. Writing books that aren't about themselves.

Two books of late have reopened the possibility of memoirs as a genre to me: Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* and *She Left Me the Gun*. *Wave*, I've reviewed elsewhere and will only mention here that it turned the disaster survival and grief memoir subgenres on their heads, for the clarity and honesty of the prose and the grace with which it is written in the face of such a terrible life story.

*She Left Me the Gun* is not so remarkable for its story, which is given up in the book's blurb. It stands out because it was written like a novel. A young woman's mother dies, leaving her with a crust of a family story and a few addresses and like that young woman is off in search of adventure and her history in a new land, knowing from the crust of what she knows that what she'll find isn't pretty. There isn't the 'ooh - look at me!' flash and bang that other memoirs succumb to when the writing runs out. There is no obnoxious autopsychanalysis to stretch this book from 125 pages to 300. There is good prose, a solid story peopled with lively characters, and like all good stories about people, some small reflection of your own self in them. Despite what the graphic artist who did the cover and Nora Ephron, who apparently developed the title, would have you know, the gun plays only a small role in the narrative. This is more of a tribute to an indomitable woman, Paula Brocke, by her daughter who wanted to finish that one last conversation with her mum.

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## Sunny says

What an intense read! She merges two storylines very effectively: her mother's horrific story of childhood abuse and her own story of uncovering it.

As someone who teaches genealogy professionally, I care a lot about WHY people are compelled to trace their family stories, especially when they know what they find won't be picture-perfect. I also care a lot about the process they use. Emma does a fantastic job of communicating the "why," mostly by letting her see inside her last days with her mother before she passes away. And she gives just enough description of the research process in old court records to show she's really done her homework--without boring those who don't care very much about the documents used to reconstruct the past.

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## Vicky "phenkos" says

I became interested in this book when I read a newspaper article by the author about her mother's death and how difficult she had found having to spend a night on her own in her deceased mother's house. Despite lacking any belief in ghosts, the soul or the afterlife, I've had a very similar experience myself, so when I found out Brockes had written a book about her late mother I couldn't wait to get my hands on it.

The title is extremely interesting and intriguing. 'She left me the gun'. What kind of gun was that, I wondered. A real gun or a metaphorical one as when we mean to say something about mother-daughter connections, matrilineal lines or loaded relationships? The first few pages got me sucked in. The book begins with a story about the narrator's grandmother in South Africa who married a man that was a 'talented carpenter, a talented artist, a convicted murderer and a very bad poet'. Just putting the words 'convicted murderer' amongst the others makes for a very exciting first paragraph. What was the murder he had been convicted for? Did the grandmother know about this? Did he commit another one? The picture of that grandfather on page 1 - a tall, slim man with fine features and smart clothes - does not belie any murderous inclinations.

Alas, the grandmother dies two years after she gives birth to a baby girl - the narrator's mother - and we get to know a few bits of family history. That the family on the grandmother's side lost touch with the baby; that the grandfather remarried; that when that girl grows up she goes to London where she marries and has a daughter (the narrator); that she doesn't talk very much about the past and only tells her daughter a few stories 'about her childhood, her work, her friends'. And then comes the crucial bit: 'When she was in her mid-twenties, she said, she'd had her father arrested. There had been a highly publicised court case, during which he had defended himself, cross-examining his own children in the witness box and destroying them one by one. Her stepmother had covered for him. He had been found not guilty'.

Bang! Shock and awe! That woman, Brockes, sure knows how to draw one in! Another murder? Theft? Incest? Probably the latter as young girls do not normally get their fathers arrested except when they've done something horrible to the family. Who did he do it then, herself or a sibling?

This court case of an evasive crime becomes the backbone of the book. Unfortunately, there is a problem

here as Emma Brockes weaves two different threads, a journey of discovery about her mother's past and a detective story that needs to get resolved. It should be possible in principle to integrate these two threads successfully but I found myself skipping bits of the 'discovery' part to get to the 'detective' part. Was it indeed incest as we suspect at the beginning? If so, who was the victim? What happens when the father is declared 'not-guilty'? Does he turn against the daughter, and if so, does she have to flee? Is that why she leaves for London?

I think the problem is that with the court case and insinuation of incest Brockes has such a strong story on her hands that the interest of the reader gets channelled to that at the expense of the other elements (process of self-discovery and identity formation). On the plus side, the writing is excellent and one does get to see a mother-daughter relationship as it unfolds and develops over time.

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### **Bettie? says**

*[BBC BLURB: When journalist Emma Brockes was ten years old, her mother, Paula, said "One day I will tell you the story of my life and you will be amazed." Growing up in a tranquil English village, Emma knew very little of her mother's life before her. She knew she had grown up in South Africa and had seven siblings. She had been told stories about deadly snakes and hailstones the size of golf balls. There was mention, once, of a trial. But most of the past was a mystery.*

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### **Julia says**

Not exactly the work of chilling suspense promised in the blurb - but that's OK. What I enjoyed about this book was the way in which the author conveyed that disconcerting feeling that your parents are both people you know and, at the same time, historical characters with a whole life before you existed.

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### **Lauren says**

Brockes' mother Pauline left South Africa as a young woman and it is not until Brockes is an adult and her mother has died that she finds out the full story of her mother's family. In some ways, this is an incredibly disturbing book - Pauline's father was a violent and sexually abusive alcoholic and the stories about him are truly horrific. But it is just as much about the ability to create a life worth living out even out of the most difficult of surroundings. Also, Brockes has a very light touch - I found myself laughing a number of times, though granted the humour was very dark.

It's amazing what people live through.

An excellent book.

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## Nicole says

I'll preface by saying that I read the advanced uncorrected proof and a good edit might make a huge difference, but as it stands the description of "a chilling work of psychological suspense" is inaccurate. This isn't a mystery or a crime novel, it's a memoir and you understand early on exactly what happened.

Regardless of the misleading description, I have mixed feelings about this book. On one hand I love that Brockes is so awe struck by the strength that her mother had in leaving behind an abusive childhood to not only find her place as a strong woman in the world, but to give her child a safe and loving home. I think that each and every one of us is humbled by such acts of courage and would love to find an opportunity to pay tribute to the quiet heroes like Paula. So for that, I applaud Brockes.

However, this book was as much travelogue for Brockes as it was tribute to her mother. While I understand that you could only tell so much of Paula's struggle to build a new life without Paula as a source, the mundane details of her travels such as Brockes's drinking parties or her apathy toward work were not of any interest to me.

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## Katharine Ott says

"She Left Me the Gun: My Mother's Life Before Me" - written by Emma Brockes and published in 2013 by Penguin. This book is the featured suggestion of a book club newly formed by Lisa Louise Cooke's The Genealogy Gems, so the family history focus is a given. Author Brockes realized, upon the death of her mother Paula, that she knew very little of her mother's early life in South Africa, which likely included some dark secrets. This well-paced novel explores that life through many conversations with friends and family, and some helpful paper-trail research - "That the numbers in my notepad might correspond with a physical object in this building or in the vaults under it seems to me as improbable as stumbling on a message in a bottle which, when unfurled, has your own name upon it. Not just your name, but your family's darkest secrets, typed up by a third party and signed by witnesses."

Brockes spends a lot of time in South Africa, resulting in some amusing episodes, and there she sees direct evidence of the "racial pecking order." At one point, she and a black friend stop for a drink, "...where the barman sends over free drinks; mixed-race parties, even British ones, look good for business..." I love her description of stories her mother told, "dazzling set pieces" that she heard over and over. A cast of lively personalities fill the book, as Brockes bravely tries to open closed doors. She is a sharply observant writer.

In the end, the book tells a fascinating story of Brockes's mother - "I imagine her a little like the Enigma machine, ticking over for months and years, trying every possible mathematical combination until she cracked a way to live." Those early years are revealed, and you have to nod and agree with Paula when she says, "It's not for sissies, this life."

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## **Tiffany Wacaser says**

Warning: this review references accounts of sexual abuse and violence.

I heard about this book from Genealogy Gems, a family history podcast I listen to. They had a brief interview with the author and the story intrigued me.

I was a little worried about reading the book because I knew it would deal with domestic violence and sexual abuse and that always troubles me. In fact, I tend to avoid books with abuse in it because it is really hard for me to cope. I was definitely bothered by what happened, but the author did such a good job of emphasizing the strength and tenacity of her mother that while you feel sorry for her, you can't pity her because she transcended the tragedy of her young life.

This book is a rambling memoir of journalist, Emma Brockes, attempt to discover the past of her mother in South Africa. Emma Brockes's grandfather was a convicted murderer who served a minimal jail sentence and then charmed a young woman into marrying him, Emma's grandmother. Emma's grandmother dies when her daughter, Emma's mother, Paula, is only two. Paula is then raised by a very young stepmother, who is also at the mercy of the abuse of a very violent husband.

Emma Brockes never had the courage to ask her mother for the details of her life, so when she dies, Emma goes to South Africa to ferret out the truth through court records, newspaper articles, and interviews with Paula's half siblings-several brothers and sisters who all were seriously affected by the chaos, abuse, and tragedy of their childhoods. What follows is the story of a young woman who had strength to try all in her power to protect her younger siblings and family, even taking her father to court.

Eventually, Paula was able to break free of this vicious family cycle and moved to England, where she married and raised a daughter. Her strength in being able to raise her daughter, Emma, in a healthy way is remarkable considering the extreme dysfunction of her childhood.

This is the kind of book I would share with people who downplay the long-term effects of child abuse. Very powerful read.

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## **Teri says**

I'm kind of unsure what to say here. Its not that the writing is bad, it's not, but...it is kind of all over the place and there were times when I found things kind of hard to follow.

It made me feel bad and disgusted and angry. At the same time, I wasn't really interested in some aspects of this story that seemed to have veered off. I know this is the author's journey and her family and discoveries...but I was...I don't know.

Also, I don't think this should be at all advertised as a "chilling work of psychological suspense" because it's not.

I think the reality is maybe this just isn't my kind of thing to read.

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## Chrissie says

Although the author expresses herself well, the book needs editing. Too many events are thrown in in an unclear fashion. The author's family is large and I could not keep everyone straight, other than the author's mother's seven half-siblings, at least when they were identified with their given name. A "mother" is spoken of and you wonder is that the author's mother or her mother's mother or.....which mother?! There are wives and cousins and friends and enemies galore. Few had the same opinion about a given event. The whole story becomes confusing, and it is unclear what information is reliable. Squabbles and drinking influence everyone's story. And yet, in any family, don't we all have different versions of the given events?

Life in South Africa is also thrown in, with some brief sections on Nelson Mandela and a few other political figures, but what is the purpose of this book? Is it to relate how historical events affect families? No, I don't think so. Is it the author's attempt to understand her mother and her own family? She says that is why she is writing it, but then why does she say she will return but doesn't?

Or is this simply someone writing a memoir about their family? Ahhhh, this will make an exciting book! I've got a story to tell. Everyone nowadays wants to write their own memoir. The basic story here is about a dysfunctional family, about alcoholism and sexual child abuse, and yes, the events are shocking. My guess is that the author needed to work through her own loss of her mother after her death. That IS reasonable, and it IS great to hear of her mother's strength of character, but I see this as a personal story, not one that I can empathize with. Maybe that is my fault rather than the author's, but that is how I reacted! Maybe the author through writing the book reached closure, but do you write a book and publish it when you are doing this for yourself? I, the reader, am left confused and without closure. This book will perhaps be more appreciated by one who has dealt with child abuse and alcoholism in their own family..... for them, this may be a helpful book.

In the audiobook the author reads her own book, and she does this very well. She has a British accent, since her Mom had her after she had immigrated to England. England was her home if never really her mother's. It is interesting: kids should realize their parents have had a whole life before they ever arrived on the scene and often we know very little about that previous life. Do we ask and do our parents tell us?

I did like this book, but it should have been better organized, made less confusing and cleaned up a bit, so for me it ended up just being OK. Often, but not always, I did like how she strung together her words. How an author writes is important to me. Some authors have such a talent and others just don't. I do think I would try another book by this author.

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