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Gripped by Gambling

Roberta Boughton

Role: MEd, MA, NCGC

Affiliation: Problem Gambling Service, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, ON, Canada

By Marilyn Lancelot. (2007). Wheatmark Inc.: Tucson, AZ. 232 pp., ISBN: 9781587367700. Price: \$18.95 USD (paperback).

As very few first person narratives have been written about women's experience of problem gambling, *Gripped by Gambling* by Marilyn Lancelot is like a flower blooming in a desert. The opening words, "Please, not in front of my grandson", spoken to the police as they are about to handcuff her, capture the anguish and pain that Marilyn's few short years of gambling have created in her life. With candor and clarity Marilyn takes her readers through years of struggling with multiple addictions, putting each to bed only to have another pop up like a weasel in a midway game. The book unravels a childhood history of family alcoholism and abuse, her empty marriage, alcoholism, life as a single mother, the tragic loss of her second husband, and a series of relationships over the years. The book takes us with her into a two-year prison sentence, at the age of 60, for embezzling \$300,000 from her employer.

The narrative flows beautifully, weaving together events and the healing brought about by Marilyn's dogged attendance at Gamblers Anonymous, at a time in GA's history when women gamblers were most often treated with indifference, dismissed and sexualized, and driven away by chauvinistic attitudes such as "any monkey can pull the handle on a slot machine". The story captures much of women's experience of problematic gambling: the denial and rationalizations, the secrecy, the manipulation, the fear, the lies and financial desperation, the gradual progression from gambling as entertainment to gambling as compulsion and torment. And Marilyn draws on the power of other women's stories in Gamblers Anonymous to bring home both the variety, and commonalities, in women's struggles. It is a powerful and important resource for both women gamblers and professionals wanting phenomenological insight into problem slot machine play.

As a clinician I am, however, struck by a couple of elements that are unusual. The reaction of family members to the dramatic and sudden consequences of Marilyn's arrest, and to the loss of their home and disruption of their lives, is described by Marilyn as unfailingly supportive and loving. Missing are expressions of anger, hurt and betrayal — very normal and understandable grief and rage reactions that often necessitate a healing of relationship, regaining trust, and learning to forgive. In fact, the addiction that Marilyn describes in her children, and the fact that her daughter reported the ongoing theft to her boss long before she was actually fired for an “unrelated” misuse of the company credit card, do suggest the possibility that some turbulent feelings surged below the calm waters of the family functioning. This missing element is of concern in that it fails to communicate to readers the devastating impact of gambling on others. Moreover, it could imply to family members reading this account that they should sublimate negative responses and be all-loving.

Related to the missing sense of emotional pain is a limited sense of remorse, guilt and shame expressed by Marilyn herself — either towards her boss whom she called after her arrest to ask “How could you do this to me?” or towards loved ones impacted by her years of gambling. Although there are hints that these feelings are present, the reporting lacks emotional authenticity. Given that shame is the overriding emotion expressed by women in recovery, the omission is curious. In some instances, the book is missing a self-reflective quality that might reconcile some confusing contradictions. For example, there is a contrast between the extreme and disabling shyness she describes as a child (leading to isolation and friendlessness) and the spunky defiant behaviour she describes in calling “bingo” after only a few of numbers (drawing the ire of the adults around her), and also of spending the money given to her by her violent alcoholic father on rides at a fairground rather than on the clothes she was sent to buy. These fascinating anomalies are perhaps survival strategies developed in response to the addiction and dysfunction in her family system. It would be interesting to understand these anomalies better. This same defiant energy perhaps plays out in her description of smuggling a pencil into the prison (a risky venture), and one somewhat at ethical odds with her incarceration for theft.

Marilyn is a gutsy, determined woman. It appears that she used the stolen pencil to good ends, documenting her crime and healing journey so as to nurture and encourage other gambling women worldwide to seek help and make changes. She offers hope, inspiration and the tools for change. Her book is well worth reading.

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