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One Of These Things First



Synopsis

One of These Things First is a wry and poignant reminiscence of a 15 year old gay Jewish boy in Brooklyn in the early sixties, and his unexpected trajectory from a life behind a rack of dresses in his grandmother's bra and girdle store, to Manhattan's fabled Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, a fashionable Charenton for wealthy neurotics and Ivy League alcoholics, whose famous alumni include writers, poets, madmen, Marilyn Monroe, and bestselling author Steven Gaines. With a gimlet eye and a true gift for storytelling, Gaines captures his childhood shtetl in Brooklyn like an Edward Hopper tableau, with all its dramas and secrets: his philandering grandfather with his fleet of Cadillacs and Corvettes; a trio of harpy saleswomen; a giant, empty movie theater, his portal to the outside world; a shirtless teenage boy pushing a lawnmower in front of a house on Long Island; and a pair of tormenting bullies who own the corner candy store whose taunts drive him to a suicide attempt. Steven Gaines also takes the reader behind the walls of Payne Whitney, the "Harvard of psychiatric clinics," as Time magazine called it, populated by a captivating group of neurasthenics who subtly begin to change him in unexpected ways. The cast of characters includes a famous Broadway producer who becomes his unlikely mentor, an elegant woman who claimed to be the ex-mistress of newly elected president John F. Kennedy, a snooty, suicidal Harvard architect, and a seductive young Contessa. At the center of the story is a brilliant young psychiatrist who promises to cure a young boy of his homosexuality and give him the normalcy he so longs for. Through it all, Gaines weaves a tale that delights and disturbs with his trademark raconteur panache.

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Customer Reviews

I read Steven Gaines' memoir during the hottest August I can remember - perhaps a parallel to his description of the August he spent in a famous NYC psychiatric facility. It made me feel a certain closeness to this sad young man, obviously brilliant, yet alone, scared and at odds with what he knew to be true. Mr. Gaines bares his soul and an awful lot more in this striking and touching memoir. It will take me a while to digest the full meaning of the disclosures and emotions of this book, but it's very honesty and openness is a gift. Bravo, Steven, and thank you for sharing this extremely intimate story of your life.

Author Steven Gaines' *ONE OF THESE THINGS FIRST* is one of the most compelling, beautifully written, gems of a memoir to come along. As a Jewish child growing up in Brooklyn in the 50s, Gaines is troubled from the get-go. He is aware that he is "different" and feels overwhelmed by the feelings that he has but too ashamed to admit to his family what is going on. After a botched attempt at suicide and an unfortunate experience with a not-so-understanding psychiatrist, he finds, on his own, the place where he needs to be. Thankfully, a family member, who has the means to take care of the cost and an understanding of what he needs to get on the road to recovery, helps him out. Gaines encounters some unique characters while in the hospital and it is here that he meets the person who will give him the power, albeit not necessarily at the time with the intention that he needs, but it was a different era, to move forward. Gaines is able to release what has been troubling him "that he is a homosexual" which has been burning inside him at the young age of 15. This memoir so eloquently portrays a family that is not only dysfunctional but probably not that different from many at the time who are struggling. Gaines is brutally honest not only about his own young feelings but reveals a great deal about his parents' relationship, his maternal grandparents and how he was treated as seen through the eyes of a young boy who was not accepted in society. The great pain that he must have been in is heartbreaking but the strength that he mustered and what he learned when he went to the hospital shaped the man he was to become. He navigated a world around him that was foreign to him, yet he knew it through the many movies that he saw, as the neighborhood theatre was his escape and place of comfort. Where there is pain, there is also humor as he relates everything to the cinema. The end of the memoir has a satisfying full circle moment that gives you hope and a feeling of wanting to hug Gaines, knowing that his 15-year-old self is ok.

The surprises start in the first chapter. Steven Gaines is 15. On this day in 1962, he's in the back of his grandparents' ladies' clothing store. At a window, he rolls up his

sleeves. And then with all my might I punched through the two lower window panes of glass, one fist through each, one fists, two fists. and I sawed my wrists and forearms twice back and forth across the shards. But there's more to this book than the reality TV set of grim facts, followed by struggle, ending with redemption. Context is everything. And the context of this story is: Jews in Brooklyn, in the last era when life meant family and traditional Jewish values. And here was a kid who didn't fit in. Who couldn't fit in. The title wasn't chosen casually. It's the title of a song by Nick Drake, who died, at 24, of an overdose of an anti-depressant. The lyrics? All the things he might have been. The Steven Gaines story is its opposite, a primer about a man who could not be who he was, but who grew up to succeed at that most important thing: self-acceptance. Steven Gaines wanted to die because he couldn't live with himself "because he was gay. It was his shame. It was not his secret. Some kids in Borough Park, the cognac of Brooklyn, imitated his walk and his nervous whistle. His parents worried about his obsessive habits. He had a brief triumph when he was cast as a student on a local television show, but he had an ersatz English accent and was widely hated. He compulsively swiped a few things, touched certain objects too many times for that to be ignored. When he was fired, he retreated to the back of his grandparents' store, where he hid in corrugated boxes. After the suicide attempt, he's going to be sent to a mental hospital? I figured it would be an adventure. A lark. Then he realizes that a mental hospital is anything but. He sees a news report about Marilyn Monroe. She'd spent time at Payne Whitney. Hey, maybe he could go there: I dreamed Payne Whitney would always be my home, and that I would live forever above the F.D.R. Drive with the rich and neurasthenic. A loving relative comes up with the money. And suddenly Steven is among the swells. Now begins a story with two strands: Steven and his fellow patients, Steven and his doctor. With the patients, he finally has a breakthrough: They were intending to hate me, but they took me under their wing. These were people who were from a different world and they opened it up to me. Especially Richard Halliday, a theater producer who was married to Mary Martin, famed as Peter Pan on Broadway. Halliday was a major turning point; he told Steven how to dress, what to read. Another patient took him on forbidden expeditions. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was never like this. His Freudian psychiatrist, Wayne Myers, gave him hope. Alas, not realistic hope Myers believed homosexuality was a disorder and that it could be reversed. And for the next 12 years, he and Steven had sessions devoted to that possibility. At the end of the book, decades have passed. All these years later, Steven Gaines the adult, the writer, the gay Jew is clear-eyed; he gets the joke, pierces the pretense, finds the brightness beyond

the cloud. So he visits the old neighborhood, drops in on his psychiatrist. Nostalgia is usually a prelude to sadness. Not here. He recalls the lives of others, the life he had with them. He knows what they meant to him. And who he is. You want to cheer.

One Of These Things First is fascinating, funny, heartbreaking, and inspiring. I laughed out loud more than once! This is not your usual memoir. It features larger than life characters from movie stars to salesgirls in a bra and girdle store who all play a part in shaping the author as he negotiates his way from life in 1960's Brooklyn to the halls of a posh psychiatric clinic. Absolutely a must read for anyone whom has ever questioned the life they're leading and the lives they could have led.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. As someone who grew up in Brooklyn around the same time (though in an Italian neighborhood) (which, by the way, ain't much different) I thought he really captured what it was like. His experiences with psychiatrists and the mental health system made compelling reading. Things have sure changed in fifty years.

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