
Reviewed by Liz Bryant, Kraków, Poland

In *The House on Crash Corner and Other Unavoidable Calamities*, Mindy Greenstein, in a series of essays, explores some deeply personal issues including her upbringing as the child of immigrants and subsequent struggles to fit into American life, her experiences as a mother, her work, her struggle to identify with her parents, and her battle with breast cancer. Though these are heavy topics, throughout this work Greenstein addresses them with poignancy and humor, which leaves readers not feeling sorry for her, but rather connecting with her on an emotional level, and perhaps most importantly, reevaluating their own lives and values.

Divided into four parts, Greenstein’s book begins with reminiscences about her childhood in Brooklyn, New York. Here she acknowledges how Judaism shaped her life, especially since both of her parents were observant Jews who only spoke Yiddish at home. She learned English from watching TV, and says that her background made her feel as if she could never really be accepted at school, especially since her parents were heavy gamblers, leaving the family in dire financial straits. Her drive to prove herself, and get out of the economic uncertainty of her childhood, led Greenstein to focus on her education, culminating with her earning a PhD.

Though this desire to break away from her family seems harsh initially, as the essays develop it is clear that Greenstein is ultimately able to reconcile herself to her family’s past, though not until she is well into adulthood with children of her own and is forced to rely more on her parents, especially her mother. Once she learned what her mother went through as a child, Greenstein, though not able to fully forgive all of her mother’s transgressions, had a better understanding how her mother developed into the person she became. While the two women still did not see eye-to-eye, Greenstein had greater empathy and was able to let go of some of the anger from her childhood. Greenstein also came to realize that even though her mother had only a first grade education, she also had the benefit of life experience, which was sometimes more valuable than Greenstein’s PhD. The sense of superiority she felt over her mother slowly began to dissipate with this knowledge.
The second and third parts of Greenstein’s book are by far the most powerful. Building on the essays in the initial section of this work, Greenstein discusses her career as a psycho-oncologist, where she recounts some of her most memorable patients, focusing on their lives, their treatment, and often their death. By sharing their stories, Greenstein has her readers questioning what choices they might make if in a similar situation. Would they stubbornly continue to smoke through their lung cancer? Would they embrace denial as a coping strategy? Or would they fight like hell for their lives? Listening to her patients soon makes Greenstein realize what is truly important in her life and she makes the decision to resign from a job she loves and take one that is less prestigious in order to spend more time with her son. Though this was a difficult choice for her, for Greenstein’s identity was largely wrapped up in her work, she came to recognize that enjoying the simple pleasures of everyday life was more important than a fancy title.

It is also in these sections that Greenstein divulges that despite all of her cautiousness and screenings, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. From her work, Greenstein is familiar with the statistics surrounding her disease, and approaches her cancer as pragmatically as one can, though still surrendering to feelings of hopelessness, sadness, anger, and even a gallows humor. Forced to undergo a double mastectomy, she recalls thinking “--- maybe Rob was initially attracted by the rack, but hopefully, he married me for my ass (124).” While discussing her diagnosis and treatment, Greenstein ensures that readers are not left feeling sorry for her or her circumstances. Instead, she draws on her past experiences and is forced to confront the same concerns she previously had about her patients. Did she want to hold onto past grudges or would she choose to move forward enjoying life?

Ultimately, *The House on Crash Corner* has readers confronting issues of life and death, generational conflicts, and everyday life in a smart, humorous, poignant way. This is a well-written book designed for non-academics, and though a quick read, will leave Greenstein’s audience pondering the issues presented long after they finish. As Greenstein poignantly writes, “between the beginning and the end, our lives are but a series of moments. They can be overwhelmed by fear or filled with a sense of purpose. Sometimes we spend our time wondering what our purpose is, and sometimes we just know (113-114).” Greenstein’s essays emphasize the importance of not taking life for granted and counting one’s blessings, which in today’s busy world is a lesson which we all need reminding.