



# Sickened: The Memoir of a Munchausen by Proxy Childhood

By Julie Gregory

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## Sickened: The Memoir of a Munchausen by Proxy Childhood By Julie Gregory

A young girl is perched on the cold chrome of yet another doctor's examining table, missing yet another day of school. Just twelve, she's tall, skinny, and weak. It's four o'clock, and she hasn't been allowed to eat anything all day. Her mother, on the other hand, seems curiously excited. She's about to suggest open-heart surgery on her child to "get to the bottom of this." She checks her teeth for lipstick and, as the doctor enters, shoots the girl a warning glance. This child will not ruin her plans.

### Sickened

From early childhood, Julie Gregory was continually X-rayed, medicated, and operated on—in the vain pursuit of an illness that was created in her mother's mind. Munchausen by proxy (MBP) is the world's most hidden and dangerous form of child abuse, in which the caretaker—almost always the mother—invents or induces symptoms in her child because she craves the attention of medical professionals. Many MBP children die, but Julie Gregory not only survived, she escaped the powerful orbit of her mother's madness and rebuilt her identity as a vibrant, healthy young woman.

**Sickened** is a remarkable memoir that speaks in an original and distinctive Midwestern voice, rising to indelible scenes in prose of scathing beauty and fierce humor. Punctuated with Julie's actual medical records, it re-creates the bizarre cocoon of her family's isolated double-wide trailer, their wild shopping sprees and gun-waving confrontations, the astonishing naïveté of medical professionals and social workers. It also exposes the twisted bonds of terror and love that roped Julie's family together—including the love that made a child willing to sacrifice herself to win her mother's happiness.

The realization that the sickness lay in her mother, not in herself, would not come to Julie until adulthood. But when it did, it would strike like lightning. Through her painful metamorphosis, she discovered the courage to save her own life—and, ultimately, the life of the girl her mother had found to replace her. **Sickened** takes us to new places in the human heart and spirit. It is an

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*By Julie Gregory*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The first of its kind, this compelling memoir recounts the story of a childhood affected by Munchausen by proxy disease, a.k.a. MBP, a psychological disorder in which caretakers, usually themselves the victims of traumatic abuse, "make an otherwise healthy child sick" as a way of gaining attention and approval. Set in towns of rural obscurity, Gregory's memoir movingly describes how, as a "sick" child, she believed that her constant feelings of exhaustion and lethargy were caused by some illness in herself rather than by her mother's complicated and abusive rituals. When her mother feeds her handfuls of pills, withholds food or instructs her to "act sick," Gregory does as she is told because she wants to please her. Then, undernourished and doped up on drugs for problems that don't exist, Gregory is dragged from hospital to hospital in search of "answers." Interspersed throughout Gregory's narrative are real medical records that show the efforts of dozens of doctors, procedures and surgeries to "heal" her, efforts which instead become the source of new illnesses. Not until adulthood, when she hears a professor describe MPB during a lecture, does Gregory realize what the real problem is. Gregory's impressive and disturbing memoir uncovers the truths of this elusive and disturbing form of child abuse that is often overlooked and misdiagnosed. 22 pages of b&w white photos.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-Gregory's childhood was marred by a particularly insidious form of child abuse. Her mother used a combination of malnutrition, overwork, and prescription drugs to keep the girl in a perpetual state of ill health. They spent their spare time visiting pediatricians and heart specialists, with her mother ratcheting up the symptoms and possible cures, even begging a doctor to perform open-heart surgery. Ironically, when Gregory did need medical care after breaking a wrist, she was ignored for hours by her mother, who insisted that the injury might just be a sprain, even though the bone was poking out from the skin. It was not until the young woman moved away from their isolated family home and attended college that she was able to piece together the events of her childhood and move forward with her own life. She relays her story not as a victim but as a strong survivor. Her narrative style maintains the child's inner voice, necessary to help readers remember that she was too young to realize that she wasn't really sick. By the time she began to grow suspicious, she had a lengthy paper trail of symptoms that kept the medical profession convinced that she really was sick, despite her growing protests. The author currently serves as an advocate for other Munchausen survivors. As well as being a fascinating read, this book could give others in similar situations a lifeline back to health.-*Jamie Watson, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore*

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From [Booklist](#)

In the early 1950s, Munchausen syndrome emerged as a new mental illness. Named for an eighteenth-century baron who told wildly embellished tales, the illness describes people who invent sickness in order to get attention. Munchausen by proxy (MBP), the disease's newer cousin, describes those who inflict or invent illness in others, often family members. The author, an advocate for MBP victims, grew up in a household with a certifiably schizophrenic father, a grandmother who staged car accidents, and a mother who used her little girl to get attention. Gregory recounts, in sometimes excruciating detail, frequent visits to doctors (her mother would coach her on how to act sick), near-constant emotional abuse, and, most distressing, her mother's strategies to induce illness in her daughter. (Her revelation that she was fed matches as though they were lollipops--"my mouth waters when I see their shimmery crimson tips"--is particularly disturbing.) A

deeply unsettling portrait of a bizarre and frequently fatal illness. *David Pitt*  
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#### **Barbara Clarke:**

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