

# Dolores Brandon: Transforming Emotion into Art

By Mary Harmon

When Coop member Dolores Brandon wrote *In the Shadow of Madness*, a memoir about growing up with a mentally ill father, she hoped to transform her childhood pain into an expression of art.

"On the highest level I'd like my book to be read as literature," says Dolores. "On another level I hope the story itself can be a voice for compassion and forgiveness."

Dolores explains that it was her art that helped her cope with the challenges of

life colored by the unpredictable extremes of mental and physical abuse, helpless depression and maniacal euphoria that marked her father's bipolar disorder. His illness pulled and plummeted Dolores' mother and three sisters through a tunnel of irrational decisions (he moved the family 15 times before Dolores reached the age of ten) and paranoid delusions (at one point he believed his youngest daughter was about to be kidnapped by the FBI); in

consequence, the family's emotional life became as stormy as the seeming emotional tornado that battered Alvin Brandon's psyche.

## More than Memoir

*In the Shadow of Madness* began in the 1990s as a fictionalized account in the form of a play.

"I was working on it in a writers' group," says Dolores. "It was a fiction rooted in reality, but it allowed me to take a lot more license than I could take with a memoir.

Somewhere along the line it shifted to a memoir. Living in our family was such a deeply emotional experience. I wanted to use art as a kind of alchemy to transform that experience into something healthy—a thing of beauty—in a way that allows readers to feel my emotion."

Dolores, an accomplished Off-Broadway actress who once played Antigone, compares this to the way an actor helps audiences to learn about the play's subject matter by actually feeling the emotions themselves.

## Feeling The Feelings

I raced through the first half of *In the Shadow of Madness*, but then felt so uncomfortable I had trouble continuing. I see this as a measure of Dolores' success in accomplishing her goal. Her writing is so compelling, it's hard not to feel a jumble of panic, terror, anger and guilt as the family was beaten, threatened and berated through her father's harrowing manic depressive cycles. Throughout, there was an unmistakable and unwavering undercurrent of love—an emotion that Dolores' parents conveyed toward their daughters and Dolores, as a writer, successfully conveys between the lines.

"To me, the book is an allegory," says Dolores. "While the foreground of the story is about bipolar, it's also about domestic violence and intolerance."

## Not A Journalistic Account

*In the Shadow of Madness* is not written in the style of most memoirs: it's a unique creative blend of poetry, prose, lyrics and photographs—interspersed with oral history accounts from Dolores' mother, Jeanne Julienne Gagnes.

The beauty of poetic expressions like, "...I'm alone with an image held tightly in the heart's fist" left me feeling a child's confused pain at being denied a history of friendships, as she was constantly uprooted from

schools, neighborhoods and friends.

But Dolores does not convey bitterness or blame. Throughout, she demonstrates compassion for her father's struggle ("His life was a mental purgatory. He was a prisoner of his own mine field.") and admiration for the qualities that shone through the haze of his illness (He regularly brought home fellow patients from the psychiatric hospital who had no families).

## Another Story

The book is multi-layered in more than one sense. When the painful emotions of childhood ended with Dolores' adulthood, another anguish began. In the book's last portion, Dolores talks about her marriage and the pain of her mother's rejection because her husband, Jim Thompson, is black. She was estranged from her mother for many years, a wound that began to heal only after Dolores began phoning her mother to elicit input for her book. Through their conversations, a closeness formed. Dolores found her mother had a deep need to tell her story, which she shared openly and willingly. Dolores saw that her mother's rejection was rooted in her concern that her daughter not also suffer through a painful marriage.

## Future Hopes

Dolores hopes that her book will inspire readers to be more compassionate and tolerant toward the mentally ill. For her, writing the book was a life-changing act: "When you take an experience and make it into something else, you take charge and you're no longer in a victim place. Maybe that's what it really means to move on. Maybe that's what closure is."

*In the Shadow of Madness*, published in 2000 by Sky Blue Press is available for sale at the Coop. For more information, log on to [www.skybluepress.com](http://www.skybluepress.com) and click Dolores Brandon on the home page. ■



Dolores Brandon and her dog Shep, November '01