

Allison Gappa Bottke's Book Corner

A Review of

My Other Body

*A Memoir of Love,
Fat, Life, and Death*
by ANN PAI

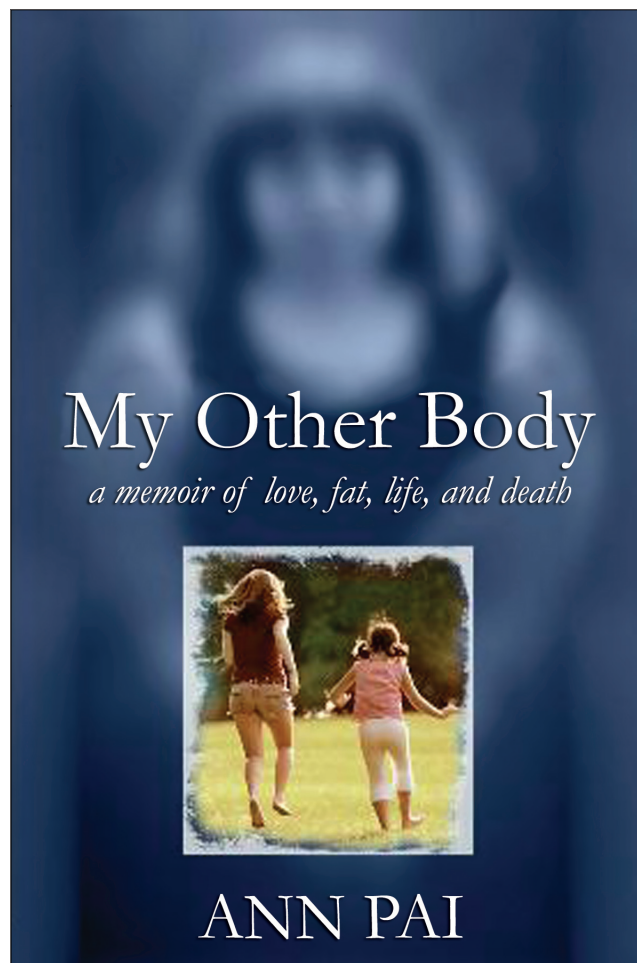
“**P**owerfully written and bittersweet, *My Other Body* follows Ann Pai and her sister, Joyce, through the intimacy of sisterhood, a fatal battle with morbid obesity, and a brutal confrontation with compulsive eating. In this extraordinary memoir, a family

learns the depths of love as two women fight, in their own ways, for survival.”

While piquing my interest, this quote from the back cover couldn't begin to describe the book that I devoured for a fifteen-hour stretch of time. Rarely has the pathology of obesity been illustrated with such painful candor. Like one exposing the proverbial skeleton in the closet, Ann Pai weaves decades of life threads into a curtain that at last can be thrown wide open—revealing the dark side of what we know as morbid obesity.

Joyce's actual weight—which, when finally disclosed, leaves us shaking our heads in incredulity—and the host of illnesses that have hospitalized her are only part of a story that defies all rationale.

Woven throughout this sometimes painful-to-read decline of a life half-lived is Pai's own battle with a destructive eating disorder. Pai's narrative commentary of her own struggle while participating in her sister's delicate dance of death is profoundly insightful. Pai invites us into the world of someone hanging on for dear life and willing to make the changes needed to live.



With a prophetic eye toward the finish line, Pai harbors no delusions as to the inevitable outcome of her only sister's hospitalization. Yet her need to understand the incomprehensible takes readers on a profound journey. Interspersed throughout are “Search Terms,” a clever tool used to share Pai's Internet explorations into the growing list of medical terms, tests, and diagnosis that form Joyce's experience.

Early on we see how Joyce influenced the author as a young girl: “But when I am a toddler, she is my private narrator, my vocabulary, a taskmistress yanking me by the hand through a thicket of nouns and verbs. Her patter is as constant as wearing clothes. If I'm with her, she's telling me what I see, what she's doing. It's not that she enjoys talking. She hates waiting for me to catch up... she trains me as a companion.”

In later years when Pai declares her relationship with her sister to be like “falling in love with a prisoner,” we ache for her and for her family.

Often propelled more by language and imagery than by answers to questions that are still lurking, Pai is able to lead us down a path few have ever tread. *My*

Other Body is clearly a labor of love and loss, filled with enough poignant sunlit moments to counteract the dark glimpses into a sibling relationship that is both tender and disturbing. Equally disturbing is a detailed and perplexing picture of the power of denial and its effect on all everyone it touches.

At fourteen and ten, young Joyce and Ann are baptized together, a tender entrée into a deeper life of faith. It's their mother's response to an outpouring of love on Ann's part that screams in its simplicity: "I cross to her and hug her waist, pressing my head to her breast. She pats my shoulder. 'Okay, there,' she says, 'I'm real proud of you. That's enough, now. That's enough.'"

When is enough really enough? When is there enough food to be satisfied? Enough answers to feel knowledgeable? Enough empathy to empower others? Enough love to heal the broken places in our hearts? Enough time to make changes? Enough strength of spirit and body to fight?

For Joyce, there was never enough. But for Ann, the journey was of life-saving proportions, as it may also be in the lives of countless readers who will be touched by this transforming tale of love and forgiveness. If books such as *My Other Body* are to be learned from, then

surely the lesson contained within these pages is that of unconditional love. Love for those who have hurt themselves and us. And love for ourselves when we reach the bottom of our own pit of self-hatred.

Lawrence W. Smith, Ph.D., in a most fitting tribute to this stunning debut novel, writes: "While Ann Pai's *My Other Body* is a magnificent monument to a beloved sister who struggled, ultimately, with life itself, it is much more than that. It is a generous gift of empathy to everyone who has ever struggled with the limitations of being a fallible human being. Readers will thank Ann Pai for understanding the difference between a problem and a person. *My Other Body* is an advanced course on love, not the easy kind that some feel while riding a wave

of good fortune, but the hard kind, that loves more deeply as what is most precious slips away." ♥



Allison Gappa Botke is a best-selling author of 21 non-fiction and fiction books and the editor of the acclaimed *God Allows U-Turns* compilation series. A successful WLS post-op, Allison's story was featured in a 2005 OH cover article. Contact her at editor@godallowsuturns.com or visit her Web site, www.godallowsuturns.com

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