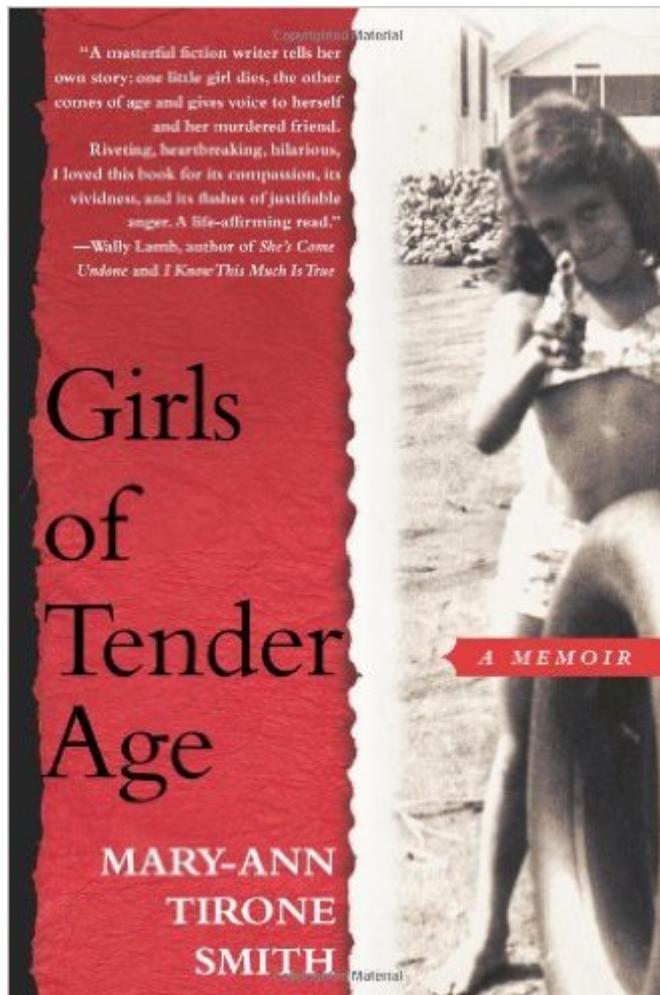


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Girls Of Tender Age: A Memoir



Synopsis

In *Girls of Tender Age*, Mary-Ann Tirone Smith fully articulates with great humor and tenderness the wild jubilance of an extended French-Italian family struggling to survive in a post-World War II housing project in Hartford, Connecticut. Smith seamlessly combines a memoir whose intimacy matches that of *Angela's Ashes* with the tale of a community plagued by a malevolent predator that holds the emotional and cultural resonance of *The Lovely Bones*. Smith's Hartford neighborhood is small-town America, where everyone's door is unlocked and the school, church, library, drugstore, 5 & 10, grocery, and tavern are all within walking distance. Her family is peopled with memorable characters -- her possibly psychic mother who's always on the verge of a nervous breakdown, her adoring father who makes sure she has something to eat in the morning beyond her usual gulp of Hershey's syrup, her grandfather who teaches her to bash in the heads of the eels they catch on Long Island Sound, Uncle Guido who makes the annual bagna cauda, and the numerous aunts and cousins who parade through her life with love and food and endless stories of the old days. And then there's her brother, Tyler. Smith's household was "different." Little Mary-Ann couldn't have friends over because her older brother, Tyler, an autistic before anyone knew what that meant, was unable to bear noise of any kind. To him, the sound of crying, laughing, phones ringing, or toilets flushing was "a cloud of barbed needles" flying into his face. Subject to such an assault, he would substitute that pain with another: he'd try to chew his arm off. Tyler was Mary-Ann's real-life Boo Radley, albeit one whose bookshelves sagged under the weight of the World War II books he collected and read obsessively. Hanging over this rough-and-tumble American childhood is the sinister shadow of an approaching serial killer. The menacing Bob Malm lurks throughout this joyous and chaotic family portrait, and the havoc he unleashes when the paths of innocence and evil cross one early December evening in 1953 forever alters the landscape of Smith's childhood. *Girls of Tender Age* is one of those books that will forever change its readers because of its beauty and power and remarkable wit.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In a very bad week for memoirs, I picked up Mary Ann Tirone Smith's haunting, Girls of Tender Age. I, too, grew up in Hartford in the fifties and sixies, very close to her neighborhood. Our paths surely must have crossed at Hartford Public High School, in the same corner stores, parks, and churches, though we didn't know each other. Every page rings a bell, sometimes a mournfully when she grieves the loss of a murdered childhood friend; the deaths of so many much-loved relatives; the death of her very own childhood as the sister of an autistic brother. But many joys ring out in her book--the local Italian club; her uncle's one-night only bagna cauda sending its garlicky, and forbidden perfumes through her house; an elevator her mechanically-minded brother hijacked in Fox's Department Store; the way Lincoln Dairy ice cream could make you forget the hurts of the day. Mary Ann captures that time when adults assumed we knew more about certain things than we did and less about what we weren't supposed to know--their secrets.

This isn't just the sort of book I could use words like 'evocative' and 'compelling' and 'heartwarming' about with a straight face, it's one that makes you wish you'd known the people involved. A simple, straightforward account of a life that was anything but, Girls of a Tender Age required me to stay up much too late and finish it in one sitting. Unlike many authors, Mary-Ann Tirone Smith has no time for naval gazing. Her look is outward, to the people and place that formed her, and her compassion for both is evident in every tale. It's so hard to discuss this book as part of the joy in it is discovering how she unwraps the events. While the author and I are of different generations we share an important event in our life and her exploration of that time (and it's aftermath) is simply beautiful. She does justice to those she loved and makes you love them a bit as well. Really, you should read as little about the book as possible and move on to reading it for yourself. I can't praise it enough.

this is a compelling and touching book, ringing particularly true to me because i am of the same generation as tirone smith, a child of working stiffs, and a connecticut native. words like "cloakroom"

and references to warm milk brought me right back to my grammar school classrooms. her story is generally evocative of a child's life in the 50's and 60's -- hardly an enlightened time in the working class world and specifically evocative of her own unique life. tirone smith definitely and clearly illuminates her childhood as one which is deserving of some bit of sympathy, but does not ask for that sympathy or expect (or want) it. her dad would be very proud of her.

"Girls of Tender Age" is the first book that I've ever read by this author. I really appreciate her conversational writing style and pacing. Since this is a memoir I must mention that as a reader I never felt that Mary-Ann Tirone Smith was embellishing the story of her childhood for dramatic effect but was instead matter of factly relating the unvarnished truth whether it be good, bad or ugly. "Girls of Tender Age" is nostalgic and funny and sad and once I started reading it I couldn't put it down until I had finished it.

This is the kind of book I normally buy in hardcover as soon as it is released, but when I saw it I just had the feeling that it was one more memoir in the vein of The Glass Castle, Cherry, etc. and that I could do without another one. However, when it came out in paperback I looked at the 5-star reviews on .com and decided to buy it. I am so glad I did! This memoir has a totally different bent than the other ones, and not just because of the murder mystery interspersed throughout. Mary-Ann Tirone Smith definitely has her own voice among others such as Mary Karr, Jeannette Walls, Barbara Robinette, Sandra Leigh, Jill Kerr Conway, etc. who have all written extraordinary memoirs of their own. This book deals with the long-ago murder of a childhood friend as well as a brother who has autism, and, of course, the usual dysfunctional parents. It is a story told with heart and a lot of humor, which one would have to have to get through her life as beautifully as she did. I highly recommend this book, as well as the memoirs by the authors listed above.

Ms. Tirone Smith's memoir is both enchanting and riveting. She shares with us her life growing up in Hartford in the 1950's. This book is a very fast read and works extremely well on a number of levels. Ms. Tirone Smith's older brother is autistic but nobody talks about that other than to say he's "retarded". She describes in loving detail his eccentricities - his obsession with World War II and polka music, his aversion to loud noises. Without seeking pity, she describes how this disorder has a profound effect on the functioning of the family. (This book should be required reading for family therapist's. It does a great job of describing how a "dysfunctional" family organizes around a problem. However, it also shows how functional a "dysfunctional" family can be. Illustrating this

point, there is an aside very late in the book in which she attends a support group for siblings of adult autistics. It's hillarious.) The core element of the story is the rape and murder of a classmate, Irene. Ms. Tirone Smith recounts both the events of the murder but also looks at how her family and the town reacted to it. Later in life, she also realizes that she has repressed much of what has happened. She embarks on a journey to reconstruct the case, trial and execution. All of this is set against the backdrop of a Catholic/ethnic Hartford neighborhood in the 1950's. The story is told in loving detail and can be appreciated on so many levels. (Also, don't skip the "Notes" at the end, they include a recipe for Pineapple Cream Pie.) **THIS IS AN OUTSTANDING BOOK!!!**

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