

Cold Vein

by Anne Tonner

Reading Notes

Gripping from the start, Anne Tonner's memoir *Cold Vein* lays bare the hold anorexia took on her daughter, her family, and her marriage. Never sentimental, yet utterly compelling and heartbreaking, this raw account traces the lengths one woman, one family, will go to save their daughter Chloe; and the girl they know is still within.

Anne is taken to the brink over and over again. Fighting an invisible opponent that won't release its grip on her daughter, anorexia almost brings both her family and her marriage down with her daughter. Through her writing, we experience something of her torment, her agony, her pain - but her growth and ultimate victory too.

Completely eye-opening to those unfamiliar with the experience and treatment of anorexia, or indeed the warning signs, Anne's openness, courage and tenacity will not just shake the stereotypes, but by mapping her own heart and struggles, we navigate our own compassion and understanding of others and ourselves. A truly deserving Finch Memoir Prize Winner.

1. Anne Tonner grabs you right from the start. By the end of the first page she has laid her story bare, but still we keep reading. What is it about the story, or Anne's writing, that makes this book so hard to put down? Were you expecting it to end as it did?

2. There are distinct periods in Chloe's illness - and her family's understanding of it - that we journey through. Some we can all relate to as normal family life with children and teenagers, some we can only hope we never experience. How has Anne's experience changed your understanding of anorexia and other eating disorders? Are you more understanding as a result?

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3. 'That was the first time I saw a face within my daughter's face, gloating and preening. With a defiant up-yours expression, it slammed down its cards. "Look at what I can get her to do!" it shrieked at me. "You don't stand a chance!"' Why are eating disorders such an issue for our youth, and why is it becoming so much more prominent in our young boys? What can we do to help children and teenagers at risk? Would you know what to do if you had concerns for your child or another's?

4. 'Your job is to keep her alive.' The correlation between eating disorders and suicide is truly frightening, with research identifying suicide as a major cause of death for people with an eating disorder. If anorexia is a hidden, silent disease, at least until it has a firm grip on the sufferer, how can we recognise the signs earlier, and reduce this staggering statistic?

5. 'The [school] said all the right things, but I couldn't help feeling that they were scrutinising us as though we were some unusual type of life form. We were specimens of parents for whom things had not worked out; parents to be pitied.' Was it just the school who treated the family in this way? Why was anorexia such an isolating experience for this family? Is this a common experience?

6. 'I thought of the girl in the photograph on my corkboard at work. The girl with the pink headband who shimmered in the sun, who stood on the rope bridge and smiled at the world. The girl who had anorexia, but who also had a name. "Chloe! Her name is Chloe!" I heard myself bellowing.' Do we depersonalise our health system too much?

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7. 'The idea [behind the Swedish program] was to reward non-anorexic behaviour, rather than punish anorexic behaviour. It made sense.' Was Chloe right to turn her back on the Australian health system and pursue treatment in Sweden? Have you experienced the Australian system or are you able to comment on its effectiveness? Are there changes we might make to improve our health system deal with anorexia? How might these changes come about?

8. 'It was enough for me to walk into the arms of my husband and to let my head fall onto his chest. It was like landing on the soft, warm earth.' Anne's relationship with her husband was under huge strain, and while it faltered at times, they managed to not just tag-team, but stay together throughout. Why did anorexia not push them completely apart? How did they manage to do this as a couple? Do we come to understand this?

9. 'Jack said that he thought "anorexia" was a bully that "took over Chloe's mouth" and made her say and do bad things. Ryan said that Chloe would never normally do the things anorexia got her to do. "Chloe's not like that," he said, loyally. Alice said very little - she just looked lost and sad.' Chloe's anorexia has a profound effect on her siblings, with Anne and her husband often torn between their need to help Chloe, and give their other children what they need. Did they manage to do this successfully? How?

10. As parents, we all have an innate sense of when our children are not quite right, not quite themselves. Anne, and her son in particular, hold on to this essence of Chloe, catch glimpses of her, and loyally wait for her to return. As Ryan says, 'I know I'll say hello to the Chloe I know.' What made Anne and Ryan so sure she would return to herself, and them?

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11. Anne admits at the beginning of the book to being a slightly irritated, dissatisfied career woman. But towards the end she reveals that she was different. She says, 'I was no longer terrified of anorexia. I didn't blame myself for Chloe's illness. I had discovered an inner core of strength.' Is it merely circumstance that changes Anne's sense of self? What kind of woman is she at the end? What kind of mother?

12. "I have to give my anorexia a name - a really bad name - to show how much I hate it," she said. "Then I can start to fight it." From that day, we called Chloe's anorexia Cold Vein.' How effective was giving anorexia a name in defeating it?

13. 'Sophia explained that if a patient leaves one grain of rice one night, the next night it will be two, and after that three, and so on.' Reprimanding her sick daughter was not an easy task, and setting limits is something that parents can struggle with in general. Being able to say no to her daughter and her illness was a turning point for Anne. Why was this so important not just for Chloe, but for Anne too? And indeed for all of us when navigating our children's behaviour?

14. 'Why hadn't I [seen this relapse coming]? ... Mothers are supposed to keep their children safe.' Guilt. All mothers do it. But should we? Could Anne really have known? Even her daughter doesn't blame her, so why do we do it to ourselves? And why, when self-compassion is proven to be more effective than guilt and self-criticism, do we find it so hard to treat ourselves like our own best friend?

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15. 'It's not hard to remember the time of ice and fear. Despite the years that have passed, it's never far away. Perhaps now I've written about it, this will start to change.' Do you think this might be so, or will it always be there? What role do you think journalling, and later writing her memoir, played in Tonner's ability to cope, and later, make sense of anorexia's hold on her daughter?

16. How do you explain Anne's vision of her daughter with her hair in a bun, 'smiling, as if to say, "This is me. I always told you that you would see me one day,"' materialising into a reality?

For further information on eating disorders, visit thebutterflyfoundation.org.au. If you're worried about yourself, someone you care about, or if you just need to talk, you can phone them on 1800 33 4673. Alternatively, you can call 13 11 14 for Lifeline's 24-hour Crisis Support Line. If your life, or someone you know, is in immediate danger, call Emergency Services on 000 (triple zero).

If you would like Anne to attend your book club, please get in touch with her at annetonner.com or email anne.tonner60@gmail.com