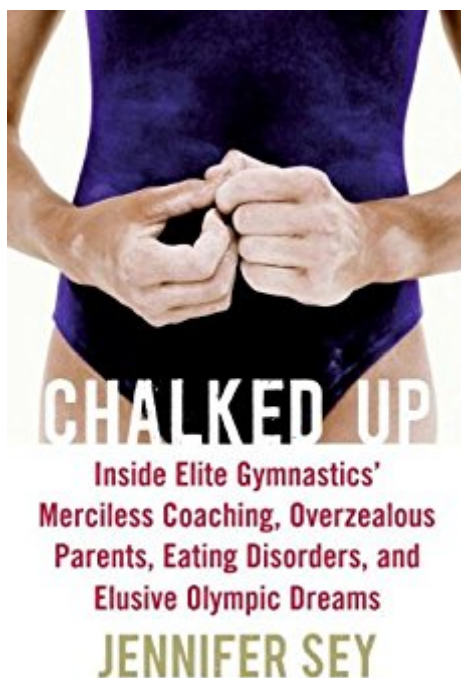


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Chalked Up: My Life In Gymnastics



Synopsis

Fanciful dreams of gold-medal glory led Jennifer Sey to the local gymnastics club in 1976. A natural aptitude and a willingness to endure punishing hard work took her to the elite ranks by the time she was eleven years old. Jennifer traveled the country and the world competing for the U.S. National team, but the higher she set her sightsâthe world championships, the 1988 Olympicsâthe more she began to ignore her physical and mental well-being. Jennifer suffered devastating injuries, developed an eating disorder, and lived far from family and friends, all for the sake of winning. When her parents and coaches lost sight of her best interests, Jennifer had no choice but to redefine her path into adulthood. She had to save herself. Chalked Up delivers an unforgettable coming-of-age story that will resonate with anyone who has ever felt not good enough and has finally come to accept who they were meant to be.

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Customer Reviews

I know nothing about the world of competitive gymnastics. I found this book an addictive read. Was

it always enjoyable? No. Was it sometimes difficult to read of Ms Sey's experiences? Yes. Was Ms Sey always an admirable and likable character? No. In fact she still seems full of self loathing and may be presenting herself in the worst light. However, I found her journey compelling. For those who are looking for an expose of the seamy side of gymnastics this is not it. She makes it perfectly clear that the things that happened to her were her decisions, at least until her last year when her mother wouldn't let her quit. She was willing to accept her coach's behavior in her desire to be the best. Should her parent's have interfered at some point? Maybe but if they had we would probably be reading a story of how her parent's ruined her life by interfering with her dreams. It is best approached as one woman's account of her life without any real agenda but to tell her story.

I just finished reading "Little Girls in Pretty Boxes," and "Chalked Up" is written in a similar vein. Both books are withering attacks on the gymnastics industry and its emphasis upon winning at all costs. However, whereas "Little Girls in Pretty Boxes" serves as a call to action, having been written with an eye towards reform, "Chalked Up" is a memoir with no apparent aim other than personal catharsis. It is Jennifer Sey's story of her years as an elite competitor, an experience which left her with ambivalent feelings about the sport and a lasting and "profound sense of inadequacy." Jennifer Sey was the 1986 U.S. National Gymnastics Champion. To attain that goal, she sacrificed any semblance of a normal adolescence, spending seven hours a day in the gym and alternately starving herself and downing laxatives to keep her body in a state of prepubescence. She had few friends outside the gym. Her friendships with gymnasts "centered on trading weight-loss tips" and were marked by "a cloaked but vicious competitiveness." Sey's family also made sacrifices - too many sacrifices, some might say. Whenever Jennifer advanced in her skills and "moved up" to a new gym, her brother was forced to switch schools and gyms (he too was a gymnast, but perennially in his sister's shadow). When Jennifer became a member of the Parkettes, a prestigious gymnastics squad based in Allentown, Pennsylvania, her mother drove the children two hours each way to the gym, five days a week. After a while, the commute became too onerous, so Jennifer's mother and brother moved to Allentown, leaving Jennifer's father alone in their home in New Jersey. Jennifer's mother took a job working in the front office at the Parkettes' gym and her life came to revolve entirely around her daughter's gymnastics career. Although Jennifer's father ultimately sold their dream home in New Jersey and joined the rest of the family in Allentown ("this godforsaken town"), the years of living a separate life from his wife and children had done their damage; years later, Jennifer found out that he had been having an affair with his office manager. Sey is acutely aware of the heavy toll her years in gymnastics exacted on her family. Sey was unable to derive any

lasting satisfaction from her win at Nationals. As she makes clear in her book, it's the nature of the elite gymnast to always be looking towards the next thing: the next skill to be mastered, the next competition to be won. No sooner had she won Nationals than she began anticipating with dread the training that awaited her in preparation for the 1988 Olympic games. Even on the day of her triumph, there were whispers that she hadn't really deserved it, that she had only won because other competitors fell, that the real victory belonged to the junior champion, Kristie Phillips, who had put in a spectacular performance that day. Having battled serious injuries, an eating disorder, and mental agony to claw her way to the top, she realized that she lacked the desire to continue -- but no one would let her stop. So, she began eating. As Sey writes, "I used my body to assert control over my life...I proclaimed my adulthood by gaining weight." Reaction was immediate and vitriolic: "My mom lost control, threatening imposed starvation. `I won't let you eat! I'll lock the cabinets! You're not going to throw this away after all the time and money we've spent!'" Her coach, Donna Strauss, owner of Parkettes, laid on the guilt: "I can see the fat on you! Can't you see yourself? After all this. All we've done. You're gonna give it all away. You're nothing!" As an aside, one of Mrs. Strauss' favorite mantras was: "I don't coach fat gymnasts!" To inspire her gymnasts to remain emaciated, she would belittle those who had gained weight over the intercom system at the gym: "Hi, everyone! Look at Lisa there on the mat. She gained two pounds today. Lisa, at this rate you'll look like your mother in no time. Is that what you want?" Click. (Lisa's mother, who was morbidly obese, sat in the balcony during this tirade and said nothing.) I liked this book much better the second time I read it. The first time, I was put off by Sey's personality. She comes across as so critical, so self-absorbed, so shallow and grasping. Also, as she tells the story, her victory at Nationals does seem like a bit of a fluke. She had not been a consistent top-ten competitor prior to that event, hampered by injuries and nerves. However, upon re-reading, Sey becomes a more sympathetic figure. This is an autobiography, after all, and it's written by a person who is filled with "boundless shame" and "a colossal sense of failure." Sey's less-than-flattering depiction of herself reflects the years of being berated by her coaches, of equating self-worth with performance at competitions. Even as an adult, she carries a "self-eradicating, desperate need for recognition with me in everything that I do." She is critical of others because she was trained to view every peer as a potential competitor. She is self-absorbed and grasping because those are the traits it takes to make it to the top. She is shallow because she never knew a world outside of gymnastics until she was twenty years old. Sey goes out of her way to highlight her adolescent selfishness, which may be a form of atonement: it's clear that she harbors bitterness towards her "emotionally neglectful stage parents," especially her mother, but it's equally clear that she feels guilty about having such

bitterness. In the end, the portrait of Jennifer Sey that emerges in these pages is poignant, revealing as it does the long-term emotional damage that the world of elite gymnastics can inflict.

I greatly enjoyed reading this personal account of Jennifer Sey's experiences in gymnastics. When I read 'Little Girls in Pretty Boxes' some years ago, what stuck out to me the most from all the tales of abuse was a quote by Betty Okino where she argued that no one ever forced her to train and that being the best was something she, and mostly she alone, wanted at all costs. Jennifer Sey makes much the same argument for herself and in the process deep insight into what goes on inside the elite athlete's mind and how this can translate into placid acceptance of debilitating injuries and verbal abuse from coaches on the part of both the athlete and parents. Jennifer comes across as just about as objective and fair as humanly possible, and no, this book doesn't come across as self-indulgent at all. I think this would make great reading for anyone, athlete or not.

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