

# My Parent's Keeper

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Adult  
Children of the  
Emotionally  
Disturbed

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Eva Marian Brown, M.S.W.

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**Edited by Nina Sonenberg**

## Publisher's Note

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“When I think about my childhood, I always think, ‘Highway robbery!’ I just feel robbed. I feel strongly that no child should ever go through that.”

-An ACMI

“I still feel really sad at what happened to both of us. She should never have been left alone to take care of me. She should never have been left alone at all. We were both victims.”

-An ACMI’s mother



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## Preface

This book is written for and about the many people who grew up with parents with severe emotional problems. Throughout the book, I use the term “ACMI”—Adult Children of the Mentally Ill. This term refers to adults who grew up with a parent suffering from a serious psychological impairment that profoundly affected the functioning of both the parent and the family. Some ACMIs had a parent who was diagnosed and treated for a mental illness such as schizophrenia or manic-depression. Others had a parent whose disturbance was not tended to, but who was violent or erratic in his or her behavior, or who showed symptoms of severe depression or anxiety. While ACMIs share many problems with other children of dysfunctional parents, such as Adult Children of Alcoholics, they also have had a set of experiences which is unique to them as a group.

In selecting the acronym “ACMI” for the adult survivors of troubled parents, I chose the term “mentally ill” rather than the more general (and sometimes euphemistic) term, “emotionally disturbed.” In doing so, I want to challenge the stigma associated with mental illness by helping to put the term into more common and open usage. I also would like to encourage a shift in our perception of mental illness. Instead of approaching it as a strange and scary phenomenon, I wish to help bring it into the more manageable and even hopeful realm of treatable disease. Just as alcoholism has recently come out of the closet, mental illness, which touches millions of families, needs to become an openly addressed fact of life.\*

The book is organized in such a way that the initial chapters will give you a description of the background

and problems confronting the ACMI. The later chapters will talk about ways of overcoming the problems many ACMIs face as adults.

It is my hope that ACMIs will find this book a source of support and encouragement when dealing with the inevitable wounds resulting from growing up in a dysfunctional family. My intent is to provide you with some tools for tackling your issues on your own. I don't, however, intend to imply that deep-seated hurts can in all instances be satisfactorily healed with these methods. While this book will help you identify some important themes in your life, some of you will find that you want or need some professional guidance. A dialogue with a therapist can offer support for a deeper exploration and understanding of your history, emotions, and current behavior.

The quotations in this book are taken from the transcripts of many hours of interviews with ACMIs. The ACMIs whom I interviewed generously shared the details of their experiences in the hopes of helping other people who grew up in similar circumstances.

Eva Marian Brown  
Oakland, California  
May, 1989

\*The subtitle of this book was changed from "Adult Children of the Mentally Ill" to "Adult Children of the Emotionally Disturbed" on the advice of the book distributors, who felt they'd be unable to present it to the bookstores with the original title. Apparently the term "mental illness" would only be well received in a title intended for mental health professionals. This is an example of how mental illness is viewed as a problem discussed only by the professionals who treat it, not by those whose lives it affects.



