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“The Looking Glass Brother’ tells a tale of mental illness, family dysfunction, pain and love.”

By DONNA SEAMAN

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Lewis Carroll’s “Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There” is a fantastic tale of doublings and the endless riddles and obstacles we face on the way from childhood to adulthood.

“The Looking Glass Brother” is a portrait paired with a self-portrait, a tale of two brothers, each named Peter von Ziegesar. The book has the makings of an imaginative, cautionary fable about how easily a life can be forced off course, how fractured a family can become, how divided one’s self can be. But it is a true story told with candor and care.

Filmmaker, multimedia artist and arts writer Peter von Ziegesar, the memoir’s author, was “wallowing in the newfound debaucheries of suburban youth culture” after being kicked out of boarding school when he met his new stepbrother, Little Peter, a pampered, cute and lively 5-year-old musical prodigy. Big Peter felt protective toward his little stepbrother, and his father’s second marriage also provided him with a half-sister, Cecily von Ziegesar, future author of the young adult “Gossip Girl” series.

But the marriage was doomed, and as an adolescent, Little Peter was seized by schizophrenia, a mental disorder that set him on a path to jail, rehab, halfway houses and homelessness.

The two Peters lost touch for many years. Then, in 1995, just as Big Peter was about to become a father, Little Peter re-entered his life and forever changed it.

Peripatetic, occasionally violent, Little Peter briefly found sanctuary among a group of artists in Montana, but his usual mode was to wander the country, living off the land and city streets. Inevitably, he got into all kinds of trouble and even passed out drunk in a wheat field, where he was run over by a combine and almost killed.

The more Big Peter found out about his stepbrother’s life, the more he realized that “the story of the perambulant American schizophrenic” needed to be “truly told.” He began to chronicle his stepbrother’s “thousand and one mad adventures” and even accompanied him to New York City’s “Homeless Hilton” under the West Side Drive and to a rusty, DEA-confiscated containership colonized by “the most impoverished and desperate of Miami’s homeless.”

Von Ziegesar could have concentrated on Little Peter’s epic survival strategies, derailments and rebounds. Instead, he also reveals his own struggles with depression and drugs, his own long search for purpose, thus creating a vivid, dramatic and resonant narrative of two men born to privilege who end up far from where they began.

As a boy, Big Peter spent the summers at Peacock Point, a sweeping Long Island estate built by his maternal great-grandfather, Henry P. Davison, a colleague of J.P. Morgan. Von Ziegesar summons his keen cinematic eye, psychological acuity, ability to bend time and enrapturing internalized storytelling as he describes this enclave of “insular luxury and reactionary politics,” eccentric elders, a “brainless flock of platinum-haired” cousins, alcoholism, traumatic secrets and hushed-up suicides.

When his mother remarried, von Ziegesar, an “anorexic slacker,” found himself dwelling in Connecticut with his two sisters, four motherless cousins, four stepsiblings and a steady stream of runaways. He attended the Kansas City Art Institute for one year and lived in squalor and confusion in Chicago and New York’s East Village.

Eventually he returned to Kansas City, where he began to write with conviction as a freelance art critic and book reviewer for The Kansas City Star, and he found his guiding light, Hali Lee, now his wife and mother of their three children.

Overcoming dismay, dread and fear, von Ziegesar has patiently, generously and respectfully stood by his stepbrother while dealing with society’s failure to genuinely embrace and provide for those coping with the profound and harrowing mysteries of schizophrenia.

This provocative looking-glass tale of two nonconformist brothers, one thriving within a nurturing family circle, the other a perpetual outsider because of mental illness, shines with emotional veracity, sensory precision, cosmic absurdity, all kinds of pain and steadfast love.

Donna Seaman is a senior editor for Booklist in Chicago.

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