



JELL-O Girls: A Family History

Allie Rowbottom

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A memoir that braids the evolution of one of America's most iconic branding campaigns with the stirring tales of the women who lived behind its façade - told by the inheritor of their stories.

In 1899, Allie Rowbottom's great-great-great-uncle bought the patent to Jell-O from its inventor for \$450. The sale would turn out to be one of the most profitable business deals in American history, and the generations that followed enjoyed immense privilege - but they were also haunted by suicides, cancer, alcoholism, and mysterious ailments.

More than 100 years after that deal was struck, Allie's mother Mary was diagnosed with the same incurable cancer, a disease that had also claimed her own mother's life. Determined to combat what she had come to consider the "Jell-O curse" and her looming mortality, Mary began obsessively researching her family's past, determined to understand the origins of her illness and the impact on her life of Jell-O and the traditional American values the company championed. Before she died in 2015, Mary began to send Allie boxes of her research and notes, in the hope that her daughter might write what she could not. JELL-O GIRLS is the liberation of that story.

A gripping examination of the dark side of an iconic American product and a moving portrait of the women who lived in the shadow of its fractured fortune, JELL-O GIRLS is a family history, a feminist history, and a story of motherhood, love and loss. In crystalline prose Rowbottom considers the roots of trauma not only in her own family, but in the American psyche as well, ultimately weaving a story that is deeply personal, as well as deeply connected to the collective female experience.

JELL-O Girls: A Family History Details

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From Reader Review JELL-O Girls: A Family History for online ebook

Cathie says

I was looking forward to this read about the history of jell-o for my food writing blog. However, my expectations were cut short as I began to read. This is more of a memoir about a family stricken with illness in its many forms. It was a bit too depressing for me.

There are bits about jell-o: marketing efforts including the Crosby scandal, and where jell-o has and is today, for example, in the hospital setting. There's always jell-o on the menu...

I wasn't expecting a huge portion of the book to be devoted towards the family curse and cancer. Perhaps I could've read the blurb, that it is more about the curse...even though it was prior to the family buying the patent.

Thank you Little Brown for the ARC. Wished there was more about jell-o, but this is more of a memoir. And one memoir readers would enjoy.

Leslie says

The book contains shocking, often poetic, imagery to describe the anguish that the author, her mother, and her grandmother endured due to the constraining culture of a "Jell-O" family. But here's the problem: what works as poetry, works less well when writing a memoir/autobiography, because events, locations, descriptions need to be accurate. There are a lot of things here that are inaccurate, begging the question: what really is true? Because I live in LeRoy (the setting for this book), there is a lot that I know about its institutions, buildings, and history, and because of that, I went on searches to validate other things about the book. From the description of how Jell-O was made in LeRoy to the ending of America's first women's college, there are glaring errors. My full review is here: <http://www.thedailynewsonline.com/bdn...>

Jessica says

This is less about the history of Jello and the struggles of feminism and more about the many woes of a wealthy and destructive family. Blaming all misfortune on a "curse" and the patriarchy came across as dull and self indulgent. I found myself rolling my eyes more often than not. I had to skim the last 50+ pages. The writing was repetitive and lacked self awareness. No recommendation from me.

Vara says

As a born and bred Mississippian and feminist who was practically raised on Jello in its myriad forms - and is thrilled by its presence in little old lady salads on my rare trips home - I eagerly anticipated this book.

I was incredibly disappointed.

This could have been an engaging and successful essay in Vanity Fair complete with family photos. This did not need to be a book.

I normally check books out of the Brooklyn library to save money. I actually bought a hardcover copy because the author had a scheduled reading at Books Are Magic. By that time, I was 3/4 of the way through and couldn't have sat through it without critiquing the work so I skipped out.

The author is a decent wordsmith, but the book is disjointed and jumps from place to place. It felt very (and I'm saying this as a "basic white chick") poor me, I'm a rich heiress and I feel bad about how my family got its money but I don't have much wisdom to pass on and I'm not going to give up the privilege it gives me. No knocking using family money - don't we all wish we could have that these days - but seriously, I don't need to read an uninteresting book about your oppression by men. Yes, these women were placed in crappy situations by men but arguably their wealth prevented them from being put in even crappier, more oppressive places like the average female Jello consumer.

I would have preferred a book by the African-American nanny's children who (likely) felt neglected as their mom had to work round the clock for the Jello children. That would have been a far more interesting perspective.

I can't. So relieved it's over and wondering why I make myself finish every book. Ahhhh.

Nancy says

What the heck is going on here? This book is all over the place. I gave up.

Cynthia says

I really liked the first quarter of this book, and then I started to lose interest. My opinion will be in the minority, I'm sure, but it just didn't work for me. Bummed.

Aja Gabel says

This book is an utter phenomenon. You will start it and be unable to put it down. What Rowbottom accomplishes here is seamless: heartbreaking confession and cultural history, exacting personal observation and important feminist text for our times.

Erin Farmer says

Do not recommend. I love a good family drama, but this was snoozeville. This is the actual story of the Jell-O dynasty apparently. The women are "cursed." ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ The author also did the narration

and nearly put me to sleep. If you read this one, I don't recommend the audio.

Sherrie says

This contains very little about Jello but does include every gory detail about the author's grandmother and mother suffering through cancer, turning this into the saddest book ever. DNF

Janelle says

Many thanks to Little Brown and Company for my free copy of JELL-O GIRLS by Allie Rowbottom - all opinions are my own.

This is such a complex and fascinating memoir. Yes, it's about Jell-O, but it's so much more! The book covers three main topics: the history of the company including how it was founded, the plethora of health issues that ravaged Rowbottom's family, and of course, the Jell-O curse! Jell-O was purchased in 1899 for \$450 then sold twenty years later for \$67 million dollars. This left a legacy of wealth, prestige, and privilege to the maternal side of Rowbottom's family, but it appears this legacy is more of a curse than a blessing.

Rowbottom tells her family's story as she sees it and it is beautifully written. I was captivated from beginning to end and pleasantly surprised by the lyrical and poetic writing style. Oddly enough I really enjoyed the historical chapters on Jell-O as a cultural icon and, of course I was totally engrossed by the family's history of alcoholism, suicide, and cancer. The imagery and descriptions are vivid and you get a front row seat of what happened with the original Jell-O heirs. Is it really a curse? I don't know, but I love the different ways Rowbottom explores these theories, mainly focusing on her mother and grandmother. You see how passionate she is about understanding what and how these ailments occurred. Also, the memoir touches lightly on feminism and how women were sometimes coerced into being homemakers instead of pursuing their dreams. JELL-O GIRLS is an intelligent, interesting, and thought-provoking memoir full of fun facts and nostalgia. Highly recommended!

Elaine says

After reading *Jell-O Girls: A Family History*, I think the author and her mother were victims of what is known as a *self fulfilling prophecy*.

The author's mother, Mary, was told about a curse that befell the men in the family. Naturally, when bad things happened to her, she became convinced it was due to the curse.

Not because she was surrounded by predatory men and perverts. Not because she was too afraid to speak up and acknowledge her muteness and lack of initiative.

We all make mistakes. We're human. No shame in that. But I can't sympathize with a person who is unable or unwilling to acknowledge the mistakes and/or choices she or he made of their own volition and fail to hold themselves accountable.

The author spends an egregious amount of time trying to convince us that Jell-O is to blame for the misfortunes her mother and grandmother suffered that I began to wonder if she was really trying to persuade us or herself?

Blaming the rigid conservative community in which they lived and grew up in, their patriarchal values and ideals and being forced to conform to them even as Mary and, later the author herself, continually sought a man for approval, validation and to boost their lack of self esteem.

Repetitive dialogue about the patriarchy and how Jell-O marketing contributed to those conformist beliefs yet Mary has no problems being an artist and living off the proceeds of her inheritance.

Mary is stricken with cancer and blames the curse because she's obviously never heard of BAD GENETICS. YOU HAVE THEM.

The prose slogs and tended to sound self-indulgent, almost self-serving at times, as the author kept trying to remind the reader that “*Jell-O is evil* even though we made *Scrooge McDuck* money off it and lived quite well on it.”

I have no doubt that the marketing for the famous brand was biased and sexist (*what a shock!*) and that the author and her family were troubled and damaged.

But you know what? So's most of us. No one comes from a Norman Rockwell painting. Every family has issues, drama, tragedy and secrets. It's how you deal with it that defines who you are, not by placing the blame on a foodstuff and ignoring the poor choices you made.

The last 70 pages of the book was an agonizing recap of Mary's relapse and her death. I skimmed it.

My advice: skip this book and don't eat Jell-O. It's full of preservatives. Eat Cheetos instead! You don't have to make it!

Tory says

Okay, so supposedly there's this curse on the family that owns the Jell-O copyright. Creepy! The men in the family all die because of...well, money? Like, they marry gold-diggers and then end up broke and commit suicide. Alrighty, sounds like less of a curse than just poor choices, but okay. Except the mother of the author of this book decides that SHE is going to be the first WOMAN that the curse affects. She's got a bad feeling about it or something. And then she gets cancer! A lot of cancer! All the time! ...but is that the curse? Because I thought money was the curse? No, no, the curse is SCARY CHEMICALS from JELL-O that CAUSES CANCER. But also it's the PATRIARCHY, forcing women into the kitchens to make Jell-O for their families, and the enforced silence of these women METASTASIZES INTO CANCER.

Lololololololol this book seriously needed to decide WHAT the curse really was. Because it started off as money, and then became THE PATRIARCHY, and CANCER, and CHEMICALS (ooooooh super spooky chemicals). Whatever. Pretty damn weaksauce. (And you are not scaring me away from my damn Jell-O. Everything will give you cancer. That's life.)

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Many of the early reviews of *The Jell-O Girls* describe it as a feminist book. I wish I could see it that way, but I don't. There are several stories here fighting for attention in *The Jell-O Girls*. The one that takes up the most space is that of the author, her mother, and her grandmother, all heirs to the Jell-O fortune. In addition to the triple biography, there's the company history of Jell-O and the social history of how Jell-O was received and how it has been used and adapted over the years. That was pretty interesting, especially in the analysis of the advertising for Jell-O. And finally, there was a third story about a group of schoolgirls in 2009 near the Jell-O factory, who came down with odd medical symptoms that could not be explained other than the usual cop-out of "mass hysteria." I found this the least compelling of the threads.

In the memoir/biography sections, the author was trying to address a family myth about a curse that afflicts the Jell-O men. She set out to show that the curse was also, or perhaps only, on the Jell-O women. The curse seemed to be poor health as well as the burden of too much money and not enough purpose. It's hard to see how these afflictions were unique to Jell-O heirs, since many people have poor health or lack purpose in life. Rowbottom decided that the curse was actually patriarchy. The women in the family were held back by the men. Well, once again, this hardly seems unique to Jell-O heirs.

So, a mixed bag with some parts more interesting than others.

(Thanks to NetGalley and Little, Brown & Company for a digital review copy.)

Melissa says

Jell-O Girls AKA *The Patriarchy Is terrible Even If You're A Rich White Lady*

I was expecting either the dark underbelly to the wholesome Jell-O company or some great family drama about the creators of Jell-O, but what I got was the story of three women who came into Jell-O money despite not ever having anything to really do with the company. Also, they were miserable because the patriarchy is terrible. The first woman had kids and didn't find motherhood rewarding. She then dies early. Her daughter believes in the Jell-O curse for a while only to discover that it's just small town oppression. She is groomed by her older cousin and loses her virginity to him, is never fully allowed to come to terms with her mother's sudden death, is cheated on by her husband, and eventually dies after many battles with cancer. Our narrator is her daughter. She is trying to figure out how to deal with all that she has inherited from these two women. Their silence, grief, secrets, and pain.

The one thing I really enjoyed was how the writer used the inception of Jell-O, and its use of advertising to act as a sort of yard stick for not only the company, but also America and the plight of women.

Enjoy this book with your favorite Jell-O creation.

Betsy Crawford says

I have been on the waiting list to read this book for a while so I was very excited to take it with me to the beach. What a complete disappointment! This is such a load of self-indulgent bull\$ht. Do not waste your time.

