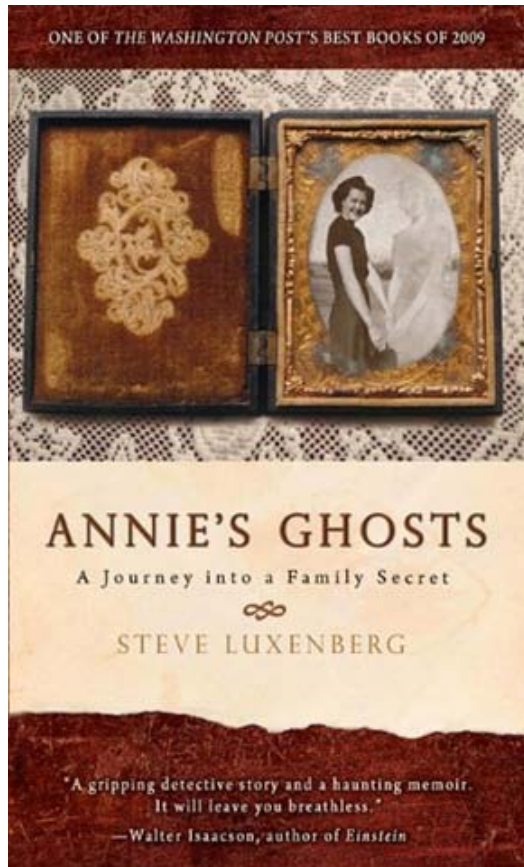


Annie's Ghosts

Steve Luxenberg



*2010 Neighborhood Library Association
Community Read Book*

Michigan Notable Book for 2010

Best Books of 2009, The Washington Post

“The book’s first lines hint at the magic that Luxenberg will weave with his tale, **a story as compelling as anything found in fiction.** . .

—Sienna Powers, January Magazine

“Annie's Ghosts...**is a great non-fiction read for genealogists.** Steve Luxenberg used the skills he learned as a news reporter to discover all he could about Annie [and the secret]...When you think you have the right family but it doesn't match what you have been told, how do you dig through the layers to find the truth?”

—Jan Alpert, president
National Genealogical Society

“Annie’s Ghosts is an exhaustively researched, often **moving testament to the ties that bind families together**—including connections we aren’t even aware existed.”

—Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun

“Most books can be described in a word -- **mystery, biography, memoir, history, travelogue.** Steve Luxenberg's "Annie's Ghosts" is all of these and more... For me, the word to describe this book: Unforgettable.”

—Javan Kienzle, The Detroit Free Press

About the Book

My mother was an only child. That's what she told everyone, sometimes within minutes of meeting them. When I heard that my mother had been hiding the existence of a sister, I was bewildered. A sister? I was certain that she had no siblings, just as I knew that her name was Beth, that she had no middle name, and that she had raised her children to, above all, tell the truth.

Part memoir, part detective story, part history, *Annie's Ghosts* revolves around three main characters (my mom, her sister and me as narrator/detective/son), several important secondary ones (my grandparents, my father and several relatives whom I found in the course of reporting on the book), as well as Eloise, the vast county mental hospital where my secret aunt was confined—despite her initial protestations—all of her adult life.

As I try to understand my mom's reasons for hiding her sister's existence, readers have a front-row seat to the reality of growing up poor in America during the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when the nation's "asylums" had a population of 400,000 and growing. They will travel the many corridors and buildings of Eloise Hospital, a place little known outside Detroit but which housed so many mentally ill and homeless people during the Depression that it became one of the largest institutions of its kind in the nation, with 10,000 residents, 75 buildings, its own police and fire forces, even its own dairy.

Through personal letters and photographs, official records and archival documents, as well as dozens of interviews, readers will revisit my mother's world in the 1930s and 1940s in search of how and why the secret was born. The easy answer—shame and stigma—is the one that I often heard as I pursued the story. But when it comes to secrets, there are no easy answers, and shame is only where the story begins, not ends.

Whenever the secret threatened to make its way to the surface, Mom did whatever she could to push it back underground. Just as Annie was a prisoner of her condition and of the hospital that became her home, my mother became a virtual prisoner of the secret she chose to keep. Why? Why did she want the secret to remain so deeply buried?

Employing my skills as a journalist while struggling to maintain my empathy as a son, I piece together the story of my mother's motivations, my aunt's unknown life, and the times in which they lived. My search takes me to imperial Russia and Depression-era Detroit, through the Holocaust in Ukraine and the Philippine war zone, and back to the hospitals where Annie and many others languished in anonymity.

About the Author

Steve Luxenberg, an associate editor at The Washington Post, has worked for more than 30 years as a newspaper editor and reporter.



Steve's journalistic career began at The Baltimore Sun, where he worked for 11 years. He joined The Post in 1985 as deputy editor of the newspaper's investigative/special projects staff, headed by assistant managing editor Bob Woodward. In 1991, he succeeded Woodward as head of the investigative staff. Post reporters working with Steve have won several major reporting awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes for explanatory journalism.

From 1996 to 2006, Steve was the editor of The Post's Sunday Outlook section, which publishes original reporting and provocative commentary on a broad spectrum of political, historical and cultural issues.

Steve has given talks and workshops about journalism issues and nonfiction writing at universities and discussion forums, and has made occasional guest appearances on radio and television shows to discuss the media. In February 2008, he joined six others at Baltimore's "Stoop Storytelling Series" for a night of stories involving family secrets. Listen to his story, drawn from Annie's Ghosts, [here](#).

In his current role as a Post associate editor focusing on special projects, Steve has directed coverage of in-depth stories on the causes and consequences of the financial crisis that unfolded in the fall of 2008.

He grew up in Detroit, where Annie's Ghosts primarily takes place. He is married to Mary Jo Kirschman, a school librarian. They have two grown children, Josh and Jill

Discussion Questions

1. A secret stands at the center of *Annie's Ghosts*, a secret potent enough to change lives even as it remained buried for nearly 60 years. But the book isn't just about that secret. Steve Luxenberg has said that the book is also about freedom and identity. What do you think he meant?
2. *Annie's Ghosts* revolves around three people: Steve's mother, Beth; Steve's secret aunt, Annie; and Steve himself, the journalist-son who pursues the secret. Why do you think the author chose "*Annie's Ghosts*" as the title rather than "*Beth's Ghosts*"? Why does the title refer to multiple ghosts rather than to a single ghost?
3. Learning about Annie forces Steve to abandon his image of his mother's childhood. He finds this hard. "In my mind's eye of life on Euclid, I had no space for Annie, no idea of where she fit," he writes (p. 17). What importance do you place on what your parents told you of their younger selves?
4. At the end of Chapter One, Steve describes his relationship with his mother as close. Pursuing Beth's secret, he says, wasn't a way "to settle any scores or revisit old arguments" (p. 25). Does Steve succeed in remaining non-judgmental in his quest to understand his mother's motivations? Do you think it's possible to be non-judgmental when it comes to writing about one's own family?
5. Social worker Mona Evans, describing Annie's mother, Tillie, wrote in a 1940 report: "She is a poorly dressed, middle-aged Jewish woman. She talks in a complaining, whining voice, expressing a great amount of antagonism toward the Welfare, various hospitals, etc." (p. 45). Discuss how and why Tillie might have felt this way. Did her immigrant status shape her views? If so, how?
6. As Steve pursues the secret, he finds people are eager to tell him the hidden stories of their families. He calls himself a "collector of other families' secrets" (p. 47). How and when do you think it is appropriate to tell a secret? Which secrets are better not revealed? Do you think Steve would have written *Annie's Ghosts* if Beth were still alive?
7. Steve calls *Annie's Ghosts* part memoir, part history and part detective story. The book doesn't fit neatly into any one of the traditional nonfiction genres. How does the book differ from other memoirs you have read?
8. Steve and his brother Mike don't agree on pursuing the secret. Mike tells Steve he doesn't understand Steve's quest. "We can't stand in their shoes," he says (p. 105). He also warns Steve that digging into the past might lead to other secrets, and asks Steve whether he is prepared for what he might uncover. Would you want to know more about a family secret if one came out? How would your family react?

9. Steve sprinkles the narrative with multiple memories of his parents, always in italics. Several themes and emotions pervade these vignettes. Discuss how these vignettes add to the portrait of Beth and Jack. How does the author try to establish the trustworthiness of his recollections? Why does it matter in this particular story?

10. Beth and her cousin Anna Oliwek, a Holocaust survivor, argue about the secret sometime in the early 1950s. Steve's attempts to understand each woman's point of view enmeshed him in Anna's story of pretending to be German and getting a job as a translator for the Wehrmacht during World War II. Do you reject Beth's decision to hide her sister's existence, as Anna does, or do you see her more sympathetically? What would you have done if you were in Beth's shoes, at that time and in that place?

11. The nature of memory is a recurring theme in the book. For example, in recounting his frustrations in interviewing Anna Oliwek about the details of her argument with Beth, Steve writes: "Those nuances lie beyond my reach. I cannot wrest them, undistilled or unvarnished, from Anna's memory" (p. 131). What do you think he means? Why is that important?

12. Annie's 31 years at Eloise span two strikingly different eras in the treatment of the mentally ill. In 1940, the state of Michigan viewed treatment as an obligation but patients had few rights; today, patients generally cannot be forced into treatment if they object, but serious mental illness goes untreated more often. Discuss the tension between care and civil liberties. Have we struck the right balance with today's laws?

13. Hospital records provide the only way for readers to hear Annie's voice, and the author has only a small portion of those. Steve writes (p. 212) that he tries to "inhabit Annie's world" through interviews and visits to places where she spent time, including her school. How does Annie's anonymity change the nature of the storytelling?

14. Changes in federal and state laws over the past 25 years have emphasized privacy over disclosure, in part to protect living patients from abuse and discrimination. That trend puts obstacles in the way of telling stories like Annie's. Have we gone too far in protecting the privacy of patients long dead? Discuss the conflict between privacy and history.

15. Gravesites serve as an important continuing locale in the story. What is the relationship between the Jews killed in the Radzivilov massacres during World War II and the former residents of Eloise Hospitals buried in the potter's field. What role do the three burial sites in Annie's Ghosts play in preserving or obscuring identity?

16. An online reviewer observed that the book "is not a true story that reads like fiction (a description that has fallen under suspicion these days), but is, in the best sense, a true story that reads like a true story." What do you think she meant? Do you agree?

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