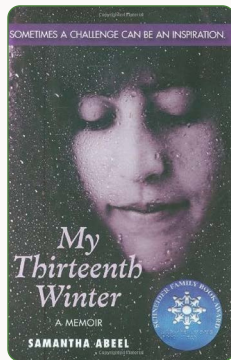

Book Review— *My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir*



Marcie Habell, MA, ET/P®

Samantha Abeel
My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir

Scholastic (2005)
203 pages, \$9.99 (paperback)

My Thirteenth Winter is a revealing glimpse at the life of a young girl who struggles with feeling different and withdrawing into herself until a turning point comes in the form of teacher who sees something in her that she does not see in herself. Though the teacher's encouragement sparks a change, Abeel continues to wrestle with navigating the world with her learning disability, mental health concerns, and her gift for the written word.

BOOK REVIEW

“We all come in unique packages with strengths and weaknesses, and somewhere there is a precious gift in all of us” (p.202). While this insight is where author Samantha Abeel arrived on her journey almost twenty years ago, it is most certainly not where she began. This poignant memoir, *My Thirteenth Winter*, commences with the then twenty-five-year-old author revealing that she cannot tell time and that she struggles with counting money, following directions, and understanding distances. She has dyscalculia, a learning disability that makes it difficult to understand math concepts, from basic to complex. It can also affect the individual's sequencing whether with numbers, letters, instructions, or otherwise.

Abeel describes her school experience, beginning as an inquisitive kindergartener followed by the increasingly excruciating years of feeling she was different, not being able to do what her classmates could do, and retreating further into her creative and deep-thinking mind. All the while, she expanded the time she spent in self-imposed isolation and apart from a social life with her peers. Her sixth-grade year was a turning point. Under the careful guidance of a thoughtful teacher, Abeel discovered her

love of writing. This made all the difference. Writing flowed through her as she began to understand that the ideas would come when she focused less on the details of spelling and grammar and allowed the process to unfold.

Despite her newfound outlet, Abeel continued to experience tremendous anxiety and panic attacks, both in school and out, especially as she transitioned to middle school. It is during this tumultuous period, plagued by ever increasing somatic and mental health challenges that now accompanied her daily experience, that she finally learned what was at the root of her academic struggles: a learning disability in math. Some relief came from having an explanation, yet the question of what to do remained. She was not failing academically, so the school resisted providing services; however, in the end, Abeel's mother persisted and fought for the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that would support her placement in special education math class and provide much needed relief from her constant anxiety and panic attacks. Toward the end of eighth grade, Abeel became a published author when her poems were paired with the watercolor paintings of her mother's friend in a book entitled *What Once Was White*.¹ During one high-school summer, Abeel was sent on a multi-city tour, giving book talks and interviews for TV, radio, and newspapers. She began to understand the impact her book had on others as attendees described how they or someone they knew was just like her and how her book had given them hope.

After struggling through the next few years of high school, Abeel made it to college. She arrived excited to attend Mount Holyoke. Abeel looked forward to the wealth of possibilities that lay ahead during the college years; however, her crippling anxiety and panic attacks again returned. Her self-imposed social isolation was as prominent as ever. All the familiar feelings had returned. Toward the end of her grueling freshman year, Abeel began to acknowledge to herself that she had been pretending not to have a learning disability and had been trying to keep pace with her peers, something that was no longer tenable. At home during the summer between freshman and sophomore year, as the panic attacks began to diminish, she landed a job as an art instructor for a summer camp and also participated in an educational conference at Stanford University. Both of these experiences that summer boosted her confidence in feeling competent and helped Abeel to find herself again.

Upon returning for her sophomore year of college, revived and determined to approach her academics differently, Abeel advocated for herself: she needed a proofreader, she needed to take three classes instead of four. She worked to get these accommodations with the help of the learning disability (LD) advocate at the school. Using a planner to manage her time and track assignments became a crucial tool in providing a sense of relief so she could finally see where she had blocks of free time to relax and not feel as overwhelmed. Upon returning home

¹ *What Was Once White* was subsequently published under the title *Reach for the Moon*.

from a semester abroad in the second half of her junior year, Abeel was urged by her mother to talk to her doctor about the possibility that she was depressed. Indeed, Abeel realized that she had likely been depressed most of her life. When she found an antidepressant that helped, she began to feel more comfortable doing the usual things of life that she had previously avoided: driving her car, shopping, and participating in social activities. Slogging through her final year, Abeel was ready to put college behind her but remained unsure about the future. She just knew that it would not include struggling to get homework completed, taking tests, and getting passing grades.

Throughout Abeel's story, we peer into the mind of a bright, creative young woman who struggles with her own identity. She feels her creativity and her bright mind, and at the same time, she grapples with her limitations at demonstrating all that she knows in the same way that her peers do. Rampant anxiety and panic attacks permeate her life. Feelings of inadequacy and confusion are the norm. Locked in the cycle of vacillation between identifying as a gifted writer and a failed math student at the same time, Abeel lives the twice exceptional life. Things improve when she learns to advocate for the academic support she needs in college. She acknowledges the depression that has likely been present her whole life, perhaps as a result of not fitting in and feelings of inadequacy linked to her learning disability.

This touching account of one woman's life journey as a gifted student with a learning disability includes not only the details of her academic struggles but also glances into her innermost thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The author includes commentary emanating from her perspective of the events she endures and musings about why seemingly "normal" tasks are so difficult for her. Along the way, Abeel's mother becomes increasingly more fierce in advocating for what her daughter needs. They push back against the school that is resistant to the idea that a seemingly gifted student could also have a learning disability. Abeel takes heed from her mother's advocacy and learns to do the same for herself when she gets to college.

Twice exceptional individuals will relate to the way in which Abeel contends with feeling both gifted and learning disabled. Parents of twice exceptional individuals will appreciate the glimpses into the mind of a student who grapples with that identity. All readers can procure tips for advocacy in their own lives whether for themselves, a child, or a student in their care. A compelling and thought-provoking read for anyone with a twice exceptional individual in their life.

While educational therapists could include Abeel's memoir as recommended reading for both students and parents, it could be worthwhile for ETs to read the book along with their clients to discuss the reality of navigating the world as a twice exceptional individual.

REFERENCES

- Abeel, S. (1993). *What once was white*. Village Press Publications.
- Abeel, S. (1994). *Reach for the moon*. Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers, Inc.
- Abeel, S. (2005). *My thirteenth winter: A memoir*. Scholastic Inc.

Marcie Habell, MA, ET/P®, is a professional educational therapist in private practice in Pasadena, California. She provides relationship based, individualized academic support for students in kindergarten through college with learning disabilities, those with high academic potential in combination with learning disabilities (known as 2E or twice exceptional) as well as those with co-occurring mental health challenges. She also offers executive function coaching for students and adults to support them in reaching both short-and long-term goals. Marcie has a bachelor's degree in human development from Pacific Oaks College, a master's degree in educational therapy from California State University, Northridge, and is currently a doctoral candidate for a degree in Cognitive Diversity in Education at Bridges Graduate School.