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'Good Girls' Review: When the Body Is a Battleground

Other body-related disorders and alterations are now in the headlines, but anorexia has never gone away—and deserves a re-examination.

By Sally Satel

April 30, 2023 4:35 pm ET

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Hadley Freeman. PHOTO: LINDA NYLIND

Anorexia is not a desire to be thin—it's a desire to look ill, an esteemed psychiatrist told Hadley Freeman many years after she'd left the hospital. Why young girls, why Ms. Freeman herself, would want to be ill is the gripping question at the heart of "Good Girls: A Story and Study of Anorexia."

Ms. Freeman tells us that she and her family moved from New York to London in 1989, when she was 11. Though she adjusted well to the move, soon after her 14th birthday she underwent a change. She "suddenly stopped eating, that most basic of human activities that even infants can do."

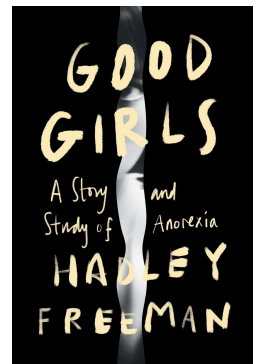
The impetus was a stray remark by a thin classmate. The young Ms. Freeman had asked her if she had trouble finding clothes, and the classmate's response—"I wish I was normal like you"—set off a cascade of devastation. "A black tunnel yawned open inside me," Ms. Freeman writes. "Normal was average. Normal was boring. Normal was nothing." From that moment on, she became hyper-attuned to messages in the media "telling me to make myself as small as possible"—that is to say, to make herself not normal, exceptional.

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Good Girls: A Story and Study of Anorexia

By Hadley Freeman

Simon & Schuster



Next came a run of hospitalizations, consuming more than two years of her life. She was constantly tired, cold and ravenously hungry. In the hospital, where anorectic girls were housed together, they competed to see who ate the slowest, weighed the least and burned the most calories. At one point Ms. Freeman weighed 70 pounds; her bones were porous; and her hair fell out in clumps. Her doctor told her mother to prepare for her death. "I didn't die," she writes, "but I didn't recover for a long time."

The anorexia epidemic, as we may remember, reached the height of its public awareness not long before Ms. Freeman's experience in the mid-1990s. "Good Girls" is a renewed attempt to make sense of the condition—and a reminder that it has never really gone away, though these days other forms of body-centered disorders and alterations capture the headlines. Social contagion—that is to say, the influence of peers—plays a role in all such maladies, but there is much more to it than that, as Ms. Freeman makes clear.

The remark by the skinny classmate was a catalyst, not a cause. "Anorexia was a bomb inside," Ms. Freeman writes, "just waiting for the right time, the single flame, the trigger." But what set the stage? A craving to be special was part of it. Deep into her illness she told herself that if she starved herself to death, people would be "a bit sad," but they would "also feel some

awe.” Her final diagnosis, concerning her own case, is this: Anorexia was about “trying to stay a child, running away from the terrifying complications of adolescence.”

Ms. Freeman is struck by the mythology swirling around anorexia: that it is supposedly a self-indulgence limited to the daughters of the wealthy; that it can be cured by just feeding the patient; that it is a response to social preoccupations, such as pressure to excel academically. All wrong, she says, refuting each claim with data. She was herself given scores of reasons for her problem, among them: Her parents were too strict, or too lenient; they cared too much about her academic achievements, or too little; her school was too rigid, or too flexible.

The disease is better understood now than it once was. There are plausible hypotheses, Ms. Freeman says, that link anorexia to metabolic factors, to hormones that control appetite, to insulin, to serotonin. Personality traits may play a part, too, such as introversion, perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive impulses. There may be a link to autism.

In a fascinating passage, Ms. Freeman quotes an expert who believes that gender dysphoria is the latest manifestation of “self-loathing” among teen girls, part of a sequence that begins with anorexia, which was itself followed by bulimia, which was followed by self-cutting—not that each subsequent stage obliterated the one before it. “There’s a golden thread between all these conditions: punishment to the body, sexual repression, self-loathing and a rejection of self,” Ms. Freeman writes. “These kids feel all wrong, and they want to be someone different. Anorexic and gender dysphoric kids were always good kids.”

And the solution? No one seems to know. Nor can they predict who will recover. What is known is that anorexia is among the most lethal of all psychiatric conditions, with a mortality rate of up to 10%. For Ms. Freeman, the path out winked open during her last year in the hospital, when she witnessed a 32-year-old patient melt down over buttered (too caloric!) toast. “I will not be having temper tantrums over toast when I’m thirty-two years old,” Ms. Freeman thought. “This will not be my life.”

Fortunately, she liked schoolwork, which she had maintained in the hospital. This affinity, paired with her revulsion at the woman’s outburst, “made me think that there might be a little more to me, maybe.” A year later, at age 17, she went off to boarding school.

It still took years for her to get free of anorectic ideas and habits, but she ate, went to Oxford, became a journalist, used too much cocaine to help her socialize (she felt she had lost a decade of social maturation thanks to anorexia), had three children—and eventually wrote “House of Glass,” a multigenerational account of her Jewish family’s fraught history.

Though there is no shortage of memoirs about anorexia, the sharp storytelling, solid research and gentle humor in “Good Girls” make it especially appealing. And Ms. Freeman has some good advice for parents. “Get professional help as soon as you can, and don’t become her caregiver.” Do not allow the family’s life to be swallowed up by a child’s anorexia. She reminds us that anorexia has to do with unhappiness and anxiety. Body image is simply “the way it’s expressed.” Most important: No matter how hopeless life may seem in the depths of misery, “things can get unimaginably better.”

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