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# Master Mind

*I'm Telling the Truth, But I'm Lying*

By Bassey Ikpi

New York, NY; Harper Perennial, 2019, 272 pp., \$15.99, paperback

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*Reviewed by Heather Hewett*

In 2012, women's and gender studies scholar Charlotte Pierce-Baker published a memoir, *This Fragile Life: A Mother's Story of a Bipolar Son*, which explored the experience of mental illness and addiction in an African American family. It was a book that was needed, given the social stigma and silence surrounding bipolar disorder—a hush that has muffled the lives of many people, particularly people of color in the US. Even though I knew very little about bipolar at the time of its publication, I was very interested in Pierce-Baker's book and moved by it; as a scholar working on motherhood memoirs, I'd encountered few authored by black mothers. Although I did not know it then, five years later, one of my own sons would be given a diagnosis of bipolar. Looking back, I can only conclude that her book helped spark a nascent recognition that would take time and the help of a psychiatrist to bring to light.

Thanks to the courage and advocacy of countless individuals, the shame around mental illness no longer suffocates to the same degree. Over the course of writing this review, I've counted nearly two dozen bipolar memoirs—a fascinating number in its own right—and yet very few of them have been penned by writers of color. Melody Moezzi wrote about her experience, as an Iranian American, in *Haldol and Hyacinths: A Bipolar Life*, published in 2013. Two memoirs by North American indigenous authors have followed—Elissa Washuta's *My Body Is a Book of Rules* and Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries: A Memoir*—as well as a book penned by theologian Monica Coleman, *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith*. Given this scarcity, Bassey Ikpi's *I'm Telling the Truth, But I'm Lying* is a welcome addition. For while African Americans experience bipolar in the same numbers as other groups, they are far less likely to get diagnosed. (When Ikpi finally receives her diagnosis of rapid cycling bipolar two disorder, she observes, "I had never heard of it. Never heard of any Black people

with it, so unless I was the first there had to be some mistake.") It's no wonder that Ikpi offers a shout out in her acknowledgements to Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, a fellow West African immigrant writer who published a groundbreaking memoir about her own struggles with depression in 1998 (*Willow Weep for Me*).

Born in Nigeria and raised in Oklahoma, Bassey Ikpi creates a life in Brooklyn immersed in spoken word and performance despite her struggles to function like other adults, to live with the unnamed "thing" that rules her life, and to come to terms with her "brokenness." She divides her story into chapters that read like individual essays—each one different in form yet linked together by theme and organized chronologically. This approach allows Ikpi to convey the fragmentation of her existence and to narrate her experience despite uncertainty about what happened and when. For example, in an essay about how she and her classmates watched the space shuttle Challenger explosion in 1986, she notes that she remembers it "as part of 1984, the year it all began to fall apart, so I will tell it the way I remember it. With the faces and people who stain my memory. What is truth if it's not the place where reality and memory meet?" This epistemological uncertainty, a symptom of her illness, becomes her subject. How can she write her story when she only remembers "fragments" of her life? How can she uncover what happened when truth has always been tainted by denial and desire, by the lies she has told herself and others, and by the lies that her family has told her? Ikpi uses the tools of poetry—repetition, rhythm, visual format—to provide structure for these fragmented memories. The result is a powerful, if at times elliptical, exploration of the disordered "order" of living with bipolar.

Each essay attempts a piece of her story, switching back and forth between perspectives—mostly first and second person, and occasionally third. Her essays in second person ("And so, for



four months, you stay away") create a distance between Ikpi the writer and her former self, which allows her to recount the most traumatic episodes of her past and represent the dissociation that she experienced. These moments are simultaneously burned into her psyche and riddled with uncertainty, particularly experiences from early childhood. Why did her grandmother take her to a healer as a young girl? What happened behind the closed door when she hears the "man's voice," and what does the drunk, "dog-toothed" uncle do to her after she pours out his beer? Why is it that her own mother "loves and hates and heals and hurts with the same hands"? What "broke" when she jumped off the roof? The absence of answers to these questions haunts the author. She struggles to understand the gaps in her memory, to reconstruct how it could have been possible, for example, that she crashed into the garage door while parking the car. This particular anecdote has become a family joke. But Ikpi cannot successfully recreate the sequence of events leading up to this accident; she cannot tell the story.

Ikpi excels at describing the disordered "order" of the moods that have been a part of her life since childhood. While watching the space shuttle take off, she recognizes its "surge," similar to the "whirlwind that overcame me on nights I couldn't sleep." In one essay that takes place over the course

of twenty-one hours, she describes in detail the mania, insomnia, and exhaustion that leave her unable to function:

I'm so tired that I can't sit still. I don't understand this. If I sit, I shake so much that I need to stand, and when I stand, I need to move until I'm tired, but no matter how tired I get I still can't sleep. [...] Nothing is fast enough. Not the pacing. Nothing. Only the words dancing circles inside my head. The thoughts running and racing faster and faster. Until I'm begging for my skin to slide quickly off my bones. I spin around a few times, searching for something that will make this stop. Maybe I'll tire myself out. I'll have no choice but to collapse from exhaustion. Maybe my heart will explode from beating so fast. Maybe this time I won't wake up.

At times, it's hard to read about Ikpi's search for relief—in the arms of a man who is a serial cheater, in the nearly fatal use of ecstasy, in overdoses of Ambien. What's even harder are essays that detail the depth of her denial (one particularly painful essay narrates her breakdown on tour with HBO's Def Poetry Jam), her dislike of medication, and her resistance to being in a psychiatric hospital, where she "pretend[s] to be normal" by telling them "what they want to hear." Again and again, she comments that she feels "broken"; and while she never manages to make herself whole, she eventually seems to find a way to live with the "many-sided creature" of bipolar. "Some days are fine," she writes, even though each day brings with it another cycle, another jumble of moods that "crawls" through her body and pulls with the force of a "hurricane."

Since the publication of psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* in 1995, authors working to craft their own stories about living with bipolar have mined a diverse and highly individual range of experiences. Increasingly, they have also made use of a wide range of forms, resulting in a bestselling graphic memoir by Ellen Forney (*Marbles*) and experimental lyric essays in memoirs by Elissa Washuta (*My Body Is a Book of Rules*) and Jeannie Vanasco (*The Glass Eye*).

The lyric essay pulls away from logical thinking and invites in imagination, poetic language, and formal invention. This form works better for the author in some essays than others. Parts of *I'm Telling the Truth, But I'm Lying* seem written to fill in the gaps of chronology, to fulfill the reader's desire to understand how Ikpi got from A to B, and these essays do not carry the same weight or thematic resonance as others. Ikpi's story follows a familiar narrative of mental illness, which is exhausting; like her, I felt wearied by the time she was in a psychiatric hospital. As well, given that chronology provides the order of the book, I found myself confused at moments that dwelled in the realm of the suggestive when I wanted something more concrete. Surely the "grapefruit-turned-cantaloupe" growth in her body must be a pregnancy (something I might have missed, save the fact that she emerges in the next essay as the "the mama" of "the baby boy"), but why does she never lay bare this metaphor? And why the depersonalization of the article

"the," as if this last and most recent chapter of her life is too much to process and incorporate into her narrative?

I've been witnessing this journey long enough to know that bipolar does not lend itself to easy narrative closure, so I'm willing to set aside my desire for her "broken" life to be made whole. After all, as she makes clear, her life narrative is full of gaps that can never be reined into the tidy order of narrative. On the other hand, I wanted to hear more from the author about storytelling and language, some insight about the relationship between bipolar and poetry, particularly given her affinity for word play, communication, and creativity. Ikpi seems to have set aside the performative demands of the stage for the more intimate act of writing, and I have to wonder what this has been like. How does this shift in art form affect the narrative of her life, the possibilities of what can be spoken or written about, and how?

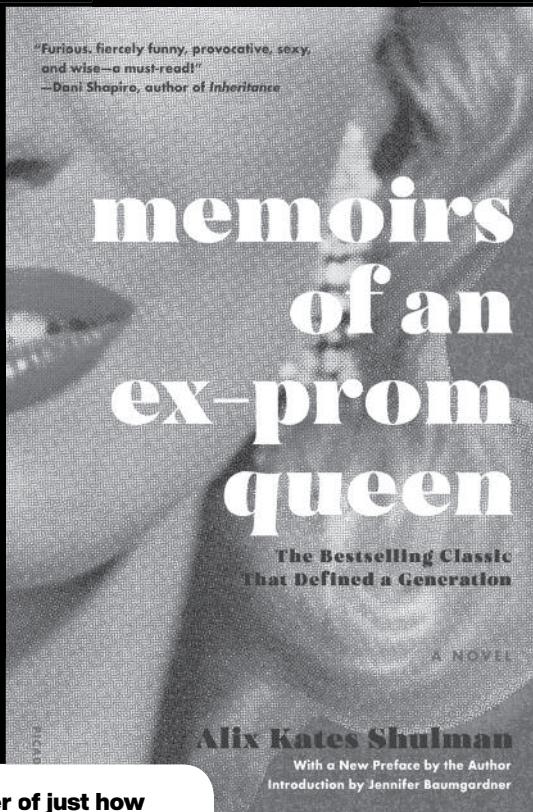
Despite the ways that her memoir neglects these questions, Ikpi's courage and candor in committing her story to narrative helps illuminate the complexities of her experience with a visceral and powerful intensity. "This bipolar. This many-sided creature. This life of mine. This brain I was gifted. This brain that drains," she writes. Maybe it's too much to hope that writing brings wholeness or healing. But maybe it brings some measure of intelligibility, to the narrator and also to others. Somewhere, I like to think, another reader will recognize something of herself in Ikpi's story. 📖



Bassey Ikpi

Heather Hewett last reviewed Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* for *Women's Review of Books*. Her most recently published lyric essay "Dressing Up" appeared in the Spring 2019 issue of *Minerva Rising*. She is an associate professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

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