

## St. Louis Post Dispatch Review

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

### Dual memoir paints grim picture of family addictions By Amanda St. Amand St. Louis Post-Dispatch May 14, 2016

Thank goodness Mother's Day is a week past, because the mothers most prominent in "The Painting and the Piano" are not the kind who deserve flowers and gifts.

No, the mothers of the two authors, St. Louis native John Lipscomb and his wife, Adrienne Lugo, are addicts at best and atrocious mothers at worst. And they play two of the biggest roles in this dual-autobiography.

Lipscomb tells the story of his life, growing up in Ladue, while Lugo tells of her New York upbringing.

Readers who like to hear the names and places of St. Louis will enjoy that part of Lipscomb's tale. The St. Louis Country Day School alum drops plenty of names of the rich and powerful in his story. It's fitting, since he was one.

But money doesn't mean happiness for Lipscomb. His mother is an alcoholic with endless family wealth. When his parents decide to divorce, all three kids want to go with their dad. They wind up with their mom (remember, this was in the late '60s-early '70s) as she remarries and descends into an alcoholic oblivion. There are scenes like this:

"I walk down Warson Road toward Dale and Mom's house on the corner of Pebble Creek Road. In the distance there are flashing lights. As I get closer I see a police car, an ambulance and fire truck out front. Two firemen are wheeling Mom out in a stretcher. An EMT is holding what looks like a folded white towel to her forehead. The towel is stained by blood that looks oddly luminous in the flashing lights ...

"The firemen slide the gurney in and the EMT holding the bloody towel hops up behind her. She's pretty incoherent and we can't really tell what part of it may be a brain injury or the fact that she's drunk. Her breath is God awful."

Lugo's story is just as grim. Raised from infancy by foster parents, her biological parents, both drug addicts, never relinquish their rights and eventually decide they want Adrienne back.

Thus begins a long court battle that eventually leads to her return to clearly unfit parents. While her father is lazy, but mostly benign toward Adrienne, her mother veers between verbal and physical abuse.

"Elaine winds up and hits me hard, and again, and again, until her arm's too tired to swing at me. ... My arms, belly and legs are red and welted. Bruises begin to form. I take a shower, hoping it will help the pain, but purple bruises blotch my body. The skin is broken in a few places."

The bulk of the book focuses on Lipscomb's and Lugo's early struggles before it shifts into how those early years shape their adult lives and their own battles with addiction.

The story is rough and scarred, like the material. And while there is redemption at the end, it's not a perfect package tied with a bow. Nor should it be.

"The Painting and the Piano"

By John Lipscomb and Adrienne Lugo

Published by ALJ Marketing, 309 pages, \$24.95 & \$16.95. Ebook \$6.95