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By: WENDY THOMAS 9/15/2009

Mandel's memoir is as riveting and gut wrenching as any piece of thriller fiction I've read. Once I started, I couldn't put this book down until I reached what I knew would be the inevitable unavoidable disaster that had been the reason for the author's existence.

On January 22, 1952 American Airlines flight 6780 fell to the ground incinerating the apartment where Mandel's mother and two young sisters had been passing a pleasant evening. In a decision as painful as any *Sophie's Choice*, the mother managed to save the severely burned 2 year old toddler first and then was prevented from going back into the house to save her trapped 7 year old daughter who ended up dying in the flames.

Years later, unable to cope with the guilt, pain, and grief, the young family is counseled to have another child as a way to give them hope and encouragement for the future. A child born under such circumstances is called a "replacement child" for the one lost.

With tremendous introspection and compassion for every member involved Judy Mandel pieces together the reasons why she had always felt like an outsider in her family. Why her parents would never call her pretty out of respect for her burned and disfigured sister. Why a father continued to grieve a daughter gone yet not appreciate another given who happened to look very similar to the one perished. And why a mother, racked with guilt could not give herself fully to a fortunate un-maimed daughter when another had to make yearly trips to the hospital in order to have skin grafts done on her scarred and yet growing body.

With deft skill and no self-pity, Mandel examines her family's reaction to the devastating accident, its aftermath and the impact these experiences had on her identity. She makes insightful connections about some of her more destructive behavior (like marrying men who are incapable of demonstrating affection) to her family's behaviors as a direct result of the shock and grief.

Throughout the story as Mandel works backward in her life, she chronicles the events of the pilot and planes' last few hours moving forward until it culminates in the fiery crash. One is tempted when reading the book to keep an imaginary hand on the plane's breaking system or at least attempt in some way to reach out through the years to warn the family of impending disaster.

An impressive, thoughtful memoir, Mandel manages to make us clearly understand that while a devastated family can try to pick up the pieces to move on after tragedy often they discover that some of the important parts are forever left behind and lost in the aftermath.