



## Detour: My Bipolar Road Trip in 4-D

*Lizzie Simon*

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By all appearances, Lizzie Simon was perfect. She had an Ivy League education, lots of friends, a loving family, and a dazzling career as a theater producer by the age of twenty-three. But that wasn't enough: Lizzie still felt alone in the world, and largely misunderstood. Having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder as a teenager, she longed to meet others like herself; she wanted to hear the experiences of those who managed to move past their manic-depression and lead normal lives. So Lizzie hits the road, hoping to find "a herd of her own." Along the way she finds romance and madness, survivors and sufferers, and, somewhere between the lanes, herself. Part road trip, part love story, *Detour* is a fast-paced, enduring memoir that demystifies mental illness while it embraces the universally human struggle to become whole.

## **Detour: My Bipolar Road Trip in 4-D Details**

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Author : Lizzie Simon

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## **From Reader Review Detour: My Bipolar Road Trip in 4-D for online ebook**

### **Margaret says**

Just what I was looking for -- someone writing about bipolar success stories and what it takes to be healthy with bipolar. After reading so much gloom and doom this book soothed me with honesty and humor.

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### **Sarah says**

There are a lot of memoirs about bipolar out there and if you are looking for a really good one, this book is not it. Some of the aspects of bipolar were oversimplified a little too much in my opinion. "Madness" by Marya Hornbacher is an excellent read about bipolar as is "An Unquiet Mind" by Kay Redfield Jamison. There are also two well-written, realistic accounts of bipolar written by Patty Duke. I would recommend those before "Detour."

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### **Jamie Lynn says**

I have read this book 3 times each time a have discovered something new. The first time I was a young just out of HS college freshmen and found the book in our school bookstore and randomly picked it up and read it in a day, the next time I was in my mid 20s and struggling with life so I picked the book up and got lost in it again, I am rereading it again for the third time now and I have noticed things I didnt before. This book is one of the few I continue to reread even though my unread book pile is my be bigger than ever before.

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### **Cari says**

As a memoir of self-discovery and mental illness, Detour is a stand-out in the genre, better by far than Marya Hornbacher's maddening and self-indulgent Madness.

As for the author's stated goal, which is splashed across the back cover, she failed. To present Detour as one woman's journey to present a cross-section of other individual struggles with bipolar and a search for commonality across the U.S. would be a wretched disservice to the book. (In fairness to the author, about 3/4 of the way through the book, she blatantly gives up, saying as much and recognizing that she won't achieve the incredibly ambitious goal she set for herself.)

The original intent of the book was brilliant: travel the continental U.S., searching out and interviewing other young bipolar success stories in order to discover a sort of extended, supportive family. This book doesn't present that, although I find that to be a shame. I think Simon could have succeeded in her goal if she had planned better and had not depended so much on sheer luck in the beginning. Without keeping in mind that privacy laws would end up preventing medical professionals and even leaders of support groups and mental health associations from speaking with her, except for in the most general of terms, Simon handicapped her own project from the start. Beyond that, her system of contacting support group and health associations had,

in my opinion, an unforeseen drawback: the success stories, the type of people she was looking for, probably would not be found in those kinds of settings. She eventually faced all this through the process of trial and error, and the reader realizes pretty quickly that this is not the story of her project, this is the story of Simon becoming more comfortable with herself and with her illness.

(Someone should still try and complete the task Simon outlined in the book, however. I think it's brilliant, and I think, if carried out properly, it could touch a lot of people who really need it.)

There are only two things about Detour that I found to be jarring, even distasteful, and perhaps a little hypocritical, and neither of those are the "failure" of the stated project.

First, Simon limited herself to a very tight, very elitist definition of success. She wanted young people who were in the spotlight, who were doing amazing things, who were creative and pillars of their communities. She wanted highly function, highly successful bipolar stories without relapse, without multiple failures. All this is fine, but she failed to take into account other types of success: those who managed to treat their illness and contribute to their greater communities, be a positive influence in their families, manage a social circle and life outside of their illness, and who were able, despite their own mind and body's rebellion, to have jobs and careers and be self-supporting. None of that is the glamorous side to success Simon was looking for, but to many, many people with mental illness, just having a regular life, complete with family, friends, a career, and the stability all that brings, is an incredible amount of success. And I think, sadly, Simon forgot that in her search to find these brightly burning stars of the bipolar universe. In fact, she even, at times, seems to sneer at those who saw their 8-to-5 jobs and personal responsibilities as success; the only time she comes close to realizing how amazing that level is for many people is during the final interview with Sara, who stated as much. Success is knowing what you can and cannot do without falling apart again, and Simon doesn't seem to take that into consideration.

Second, every time she made an appointment to shadow a support group meeting, I cringed. She states throughout the book that she's trying to fight the stigma attached to the mentally ill, that she's trying to dispel all the stereotypes, and yet...her own mentality is one full of both. To sit in a support group meeting and mock (mentally, in writing, or to their faces) the people there is horrendous and enormously hypocritical. Her reactions to the people at the support group and her anger that they aren't the "type" of people she's looking for reads as much more a reflection on Simon's state of mind than on the people who were kind enough to try and help her. While not uncommon, it did take away considerably from the impact of the book, at least for me. Furthermore, though this is certainly not a big part of the book, her casual dismissive attitude regarding unipolar depression is somewhat irksome. When referring to regular depression as opposed to bipolar, she actually writes, "...she was just unipolar." Seemingly unimportant, but jarring to anyone who knows unipolar depression is anything but "just."

However, despite a shallow and half-assed attempt at the stated goal for the book, Detour is not a failure. In fact, I wish it had been longer, and I wish she had delved more into her own thought processes. Not just the cycles she went through or the causes of the illness, but why she had come to her beliefs regarding bipolar, how her opinions about the illness were formed, etc. When she stopped focusing on the external and turned inward to her own struggle, she found her niche and wrote a fresh, honest memoir. Brutally honest, stripped down, and unflinching, her descriptions of her illness, of her thought processes, and even of her own journey through bipolar are some of the most poignant writing on the subject I've read. Several times, she described thoughts or feelings that had me nodding, having felt exactly the same way. Simon is not a shoddy writer, and her staccato style was effective in moving the narrative along. Really well done, especially, as I said before, it's quite obvious from early on that this was *not* about presenting bipolar illness as a society. Detour was, as it should have been, about Lizzie Simon. There is nothing wrong with that, and when she realized it,

the book really caught fire.

I just wish she had realized it earlier. Detour is good, but it could have been so much more. I wish she had delved deeper, but still, not a bad read, and certainly not a bad start.

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### **Nancy says**

This lady has taken the bull by the horns, and faced and dealt with a chronic lifetime illness with imagination and compassion. One of the best books I have read about bipolar illness. She has used interviews with other people who suffer from the same thing to give a wide perspective of this problem, and the different ways people have of dealing with it. In this way, she also learns how to cope with her own illness, as well as a deeper understanding of the human side to a textbook illness that can, at times, devastate a human life.

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### **Kitty Jay says**

This book is almost shockingly bad. It began with Simon's story. Everyone who has been diagnosed with a serious mental disorder has a "story". That moment when they first realized something was wrong, the moment when the doctor told them, "This is what's happening," and the subsequent relief, judgment, and struggles that come after. My own came when I was in college, only a few years older than Simon herself was when her story unfolded. Simon's story, however, began to irk me. She runs through a brief history of her family life, including the almost universal adoration she enjoyed as a child, and then proclaims that she was tired of the snobbish people at her prep school and scampers off to France to finish her last year of high school, apparently unaware of the blatant ignorance of her own privilege. I nearly choked. France? For the last year of high school? I was lucky to be able to go into town to the movie theatres during a weekend. Unfortunately, this ignorance of her own privilege would be a recurring theme in the book.

Mildly annoyed, I figured if I could just soldier through what comes across as a self-absorbed, privileged girl whining about other people being snobbish, I could get to the interviews, which I was looking forward to.

First, however, we have to wade through more of Simon's atrocious writing (she includes what I think is a poem - and I use that word loosely - that she wrote which is absolutely cringe-worthy), and her subsequent whirlwind love affair with a multimillionaire mogul who refuses to take his medications, has frequent breakdowns and violent outbursts, and is clearly an alcoholic. Bafflingly, Simon falls in love with him – I think. Her writing makes it hard to determine, but it appears that they're exchanging soppy "I love you's" in the space of less than a week. She makes constant excuses for his behavior ("He's just drunk", because that's much better) while encouraging him to seek help. There's an element of glory to it. The man is clearly cycling through depression and mania and is so unlikeable in the dialogue Simon allows him that I was honestly confounded why on earth she wanted to be with him. It becomes clearer, however, as the book continues.

The purpose of her road trip is ostensibly to find successful young people who have been diagnosed with bipolar in order to fight the stigma of mental illness and give hope to those who suffer from the disorder. Sounds marvelous, doesn't it? Except Simon's definition of success seems to be remarkably narrow; those who hold regular 9-5 jobs, who raise kids and families, who are friendly neighbors and good sons and daughters, are not successful to Simon. They're failures, as far as she's concerned. Far from taking away

from stigma, she manages to add to it. “To you teenagers and twentysomethings, standing on the cusp of a new life and experience, who are newly diagnosed, scared, alone, let it be known that it’s not enough that you do okay. You need to do amazing things like me,” is her apparent sermon. More importantly, stigma is often attached to the less advantaged. While it’s admirable when a celebrity comes out as suffering from a mental illness, it does a lot more to find out that your best friend has one. And there’s where her whirlwind, multimillionaire boyfriend comes in. She manages to glorify mania and bipolar disorder in general.

While Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Touched by Fire* points out that there are several highly successful composers, poets, and artists who probably or definitely did suffer from bipolar disorder out there, she never claims that bipolar is something to be glorified. It’s a disorder, one that makes people suicidal, or causes them to alienate their friends, lose their money, and destroy their families. Simon happens to have met one person who somehow gets away with his behavior – the rest of us, I would like to interject, would be fired and homeless if we did half the things he does – and so therefore he’s a “success”. And again, we have the problem of her unacknowledged privilege coming into play. Her boyfriend, she states, clearly came from money in the first place. She herself apparently came from a wealthy, supportive family. She seems completely ignorant of those who were born into families that couldn’t afford therapists, or psychiatrists, or medication. Into families that think mental illness is “made up” and think a manic episode is just a person “acting out” or “faking it”. She seems woefully ignorant that she started out on the top, and so looks down on all the people who are just managing to crawl their way out of the pit.

Additionally, she must realize that she’s an exception – not because she’s somehow a magical snowflake, but because of a fluke of genetics that allow her to be diagnosed almost immediately and respond well to the second medication she tries. One would hope she did research into this, which should have enlightened her to the fact that most people with bipolar disorder go years without being properly diagnosed and doctors often have to take a shotgun approach to medication until they find something that works. Other people find that no medication will ever work. Rather than finding this moving, to know of others’ struggles, she seems dismissive, as if her “herd” has failed her in some sort because they were born resistant to modern medications or because they cannot afford to try expensive medication after expensive medication and be constantly frustrated by their lack of effectiveness. But to ask her to find compassion for these people who are fine with living the lives that make them happy, instead of destroying themselves trying to meet her expectations of “success”, presumes too much on Simon’s capacity for empathy.

Finally, there’s the writing, which is abrupt, amateurish, and gimmicky. It feels more like a teenager’s effort than the twenty-three year old successful adult that she claims to be. There are parts that are muddled and confused not for effect, but because her writing lacks clarity, and others that she clearly wants to be muddled and confused because that’s “edgy” and thematic. While there are some authors who are talented enough to get away with this, other authors feel that having a “gimmick” makes up for the lack of talent; Simon is among the latter. Kay Redfield Jamison’s other book, her personal memoir, *An Unquiet Mind*, provides a startling contrast. Jamison’s book is fluid, elegant, and shows that you don’t need a gimmick if you’re a talented author. Simon’s just highlights her own deficiencies as an author.

The last few pages provided some sort of saving grace; after interviewing about five or six people, realizing that her boyfriend is dangerous, she has an epiphany wherein she realizes that the real purpose was to find out that her diagnosis didn’t set her apart from people as she had imagined. Her “herd” was not those who struggle with mental illness, but her family, and she needed to make the steps to rectify that.

Which is all well and good and very touching, but rather disingenuous. I picked up a book wanting to hear people’s stories, as the book bills itself to be, not one self-absorbed girl’s attempts to finally wade through her own ego to find the truth. In the end, her realization of the truth is too little, too late.

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### **Sarah says**

I don't feel like this is so much a journey into what it's like to suffer with a mental illness as what it is to be a privileged, self absorbed individual commercializing their mental illness. Her measure of "success" is extremely narrow minded, revolving primarily around making her feel better about her life. She classifies herself as being able to live a "successful" life, but it's a life that goes from being obsessed with work to completely blowing everything off to go on some inane road trip...not my idea of success. She downplays individuals she encounters who, while they may not be out running production companies, have reached a point where they can overcome their bi-polar illness and lead a normal life filled with family and friends. She is so focused on the idea that to be successful you have to attain some sort of measurable accomplishment...maybe it's just me, but I feel like she should have been spending a little less time trying to prove something to the world and a little more time on building stronger relationships with those in her personal life. I don't see this as a healthy reference for those who are coping with bi-polar to turn to for support.

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### **Amy says**

Very honest account of life with bipolar when it takes one by surprise. Proactive about seeking support and understanding from other young people with the same struggle Lizzie is lead to embark on a meaningful tour. The experiences of which she wholeheartedly and compassionately shares with her readers in hopes that it will help someone else. What a beautiful book; what a gift to the world of bipolar!

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### **Jane says**

This book surprised me & wasn't a bad read. The best part was I learned things about "why" I became manic when I was put on an anti-depressant. You'd think a psychiatrist would've told me that since I'd been seeing one for over 5 years, but none did.

This book may be as enlightening for others as well.

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### **Emily says**

I can't say I liked it all that much, but it is a successful woman in her 20s with Bipolar writing about her first horrible experience of mania, her job success while in treatment with Lithium, and her bits of self-discovery as she takes a road trip looking for other successful on-their-meds 20-somethings. She brings the journals she has kept since she was a child on the road trip with her, and sees signs of the illness at a very young age. The book is likely full of triggers for people with Bipolar, but its benefit seems to be the comfort of recognizing yourself (if you have Bipolar or Depression) in so much of her and the others she meets. I saw her realize and recognize that during her best times when she feels like her treatment is working and she is being successful in life, she still has trouble showering and doing other "small" self-care type things that go unnoticed by others unless they live with you, and often even then. And that this doesn't take away from her success or her joy at being someone whose treatment is working. She got a \$10,000 grant from a mental

health organization to take the road trip and write the book. She did not succeed in what she set out to do with this project, but revealing the process instead of just the lackluster results has made an entirely different book than she intended. One that is probably more real, because it gives us her inner life/thoughts over several months instead of just the answers people give to her interview questions.

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### **Carol says**

The author's willingness to reveal both herself and her illness makes this a brave book. I recently took a class focused on writing memoir and this book was a type of memoir we studied. After that, twenty-year olds wrote about their illnesses, illnesses of family members, death and other challenges. These undergrad students followed the lead of Lizzie Simon and became willing to take greater risks in writing. The ability to put transcripts on e-mail expedites sharing.

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### **Tim says**

Lizzie Simon was diagnosed as bipolar when she was 17 years old. After a few years of fits and starts, she found herself wondering what it's like to live successfully with bipolar disorder: "I have this idea," she writes, "I want to find other bipolar people like me and interview them....I want to show that people survive this illness and live full lives. I want to figure out what worked in people who are success cases, and shift people's focus away from all the media attention on destructive and violent cases" (page 41).

So Lizzie takes a road trip (as hinted at in her book's title). Along the way, she meets disappointing cases--like "Nicholas," who remains in denial about his condition, and copes with his symptoms through alcohol and drug abuse. "Everybody I interviewed for this book is diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder, between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five, on medicine, and highly functional in society" (page 209)

Lizzie grows through the course of her Road Trip. At first, she sought a "herd" of people who were "just like her" for comfort. But what she later realizes is that she had always had a "herd": "My family is, of course, the original herd. They were the herd I'd always had, and when I was done wandering, they became the herd that welcomed me back. For that I am truly blessed" (page 205)

Simon's book is studded with this and other thought-provoking insights, for instance:

"People who dedicate themselves to personal growth *do* grow, and they get to enjoy their work almost every day of their lives" (page 207)

"We do not share the same illness, for we each experience it differently. But we do share the same diagnosis" (page 210)

For insights like this, readers will enjoy Lizzie Simon's book. I zoomed through it in a few days--it's readable, absorbing, and insightful.

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### **Darcie says**

I could've read this in one sitting, but I had to sleep. So I did it in two. SO good. I love any first-person accounts of what it is like to live with a mental illness. I've read a lot of negative reviews of this book because the author (a young woman with bipolar) goes in search of successful people who have transcended their diagnosis, and according to these critics, that makes her pretentious. Do these "critics" wish to hear just another tragedy of a bipolar person ending up a chronic mental institution patient? Cuz I've read enough of those, and to be honest, I don't need to read any more. As the author states, "Everybody has read the same two or three books about this illness, because that's all that's out there." Not anymore.

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### **Sarah says**

The concept was good but she wasn't the right person for the job and she failed at it. The author is very judgemental and does not seem to appreciate the fact that "success" is measured in different ways. For most people with BP just getting up in the morning and functioning is a success story. She was only interested in people who do "extraordinary things" as she put it.

It also seems that she wasn't completely in touch with her own issues while writing the book. She was extremely dysfunctional yet was very judgemental of people who were suffering any type of BP symptom. She only acknowledges her one time in her life when she was suffering from BP symptoms-the time that she was diagnosed as BP. She was obviously still suffering long afterward though the symptoms were not as extreme.

I do not suggest this book for people struggling with BP as it is biased at best. Some people with experience with the illness may find this offensive and people with no knowledge could easily get the wrong idea.

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### **Sammy Nickalls says**

This was awfully written, but helpful for research.

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