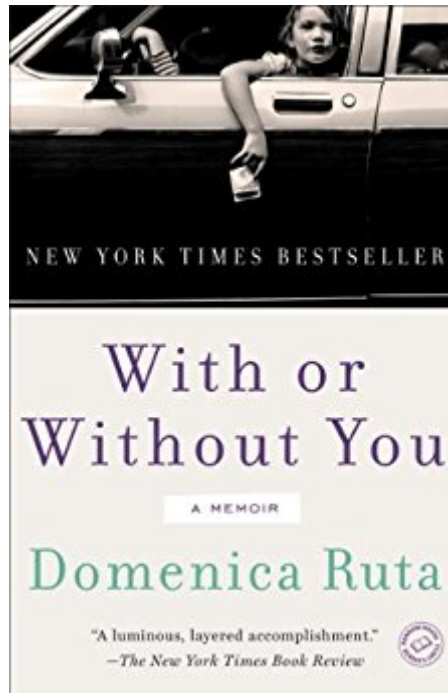




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# With Or Without You: A Memoir



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST NONFICTION BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY A haunting, unforgettable mother-daughter story for a new generation • the debut of a blazing new lyrical voice • Look for special features inside. Join the Random House Reader's Circle for author chats and more.

Domenica Ruta grew up in a working-class, unforgiving town north of Boston, in a trash-filled house on a dead-end road surrounded by a river and a salt marsh. Her mother, Kathi, a notorious local figure, was a drug addict and sometimes dealer whose life swung between welfare and riches, and whose highbrow taste was at odds with her hardscrabble life. And yet she managed, despite the chaos she created, to instill in her daughter a love of stories. Kathi frequently kept Domenica home from school to watch such classics as the Godfather movies and everything by Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen, telling her, "This is more important. I promise. You'll thank me later." And despite the fact that there was not a book to be found in her household, Domenica developed a love of reading, which helped her believe that she could transcend this life of undying grudges, self-inflicted misfortune, and the crooked moral code that Kathi and her cohorts lived by. *With or Without You* is the story of Domenica Ruta's unconventional coming of age • a darkly hilarious chronicle of a misfit 1990s youth and the necessary and painful act of breaking away, and of overcoming her own addictions and demons in the process. In a brilliant stylistic feat, Ruta has written a powerful, inspiring, compulsively readable, and finally redemptive story about loving and leaving. Praise for *With or Without You* "A luminous, layered accomplishment." • The New York Times Book Review "A singular new coming-of-age memoir traces one girl's twisting path up from mean streets (and parents) to the reflective life of a writer. . . . The burgeoning canon of literary memoir . . . begets another winner in Domenica Ruta's searing *With or Without You*. . . . [A] gloriously gutsy memory-work." • Elle "Stunning . . . comes across as a bleaker, funnier, R-rated version of *The Glass Castle* and marks the arrival of a blazing new voice in literature." • Entertainment Weekly "Valiant and heartbreaking." • Bustle "Powerful . . . Ruta found an unconventional voice, a scary good mixture of erudition and hardened street smarts. Her writing is also, as they say in Danvers, wicked funny • though in her case wicked is more an adjective than an intensifier. . . . [With or Without You] hums with jangled energy and bristles with sharp edges. . . . Ruta writes with unflinching honesty." • Slate "Bracingly funny and poignant." • The Boston Globe "Exceedingly

powerful. •Booklist

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As someone who grew up in somewhat similar circumstances, Ms. Ruta's memoir rang so real and true that it ended up making me angry when I came back and read customer reviews after I finished the book that suggested there wasn't "enough there there", or it was "boring", or "she was lying".

Perhaps partly this is more a reflection on the "Vine" program than anything, though, as it seems to be a prerequisite for membership that one be incapable of understanding anything deeper than a puddle, with some notable exceptions. This memoir is well worth the read and may stay with you for a long time after, especially if you can relate personally at all from your own childhood. I read memoirs and biographies almost exclusively, so have read hundreds, and few compare to this one, not even Glass Castle, in my estimation. Perhaps that is because what interests me is not the telling of the linear elements of the story, which are merely secondary to me, but rather the emotions and the processing of all of the assailments in the mind of the child. I am much more interested in how

those things are internalized and the influence they have over the self-narrative of that person's life than whether she wrote the thing in a purely linear manner that explained in minute detail all the elements to me, as if I was incapable of understanding what was before me. I found Ms. Ruta's memoir to be both powerful and respectful of its readers, having the confidence that the reader is sophisticated enough not to need a picture drawn for them. Rather, she rightfully concentrated on delivering the actual relationship between Kathi and herself and the destruction that her mother left in her wake, allowing the readers to draw their own conclusions.

I could not put this book down. Ruta's use of the English language is incredible. I consider myself a polished writer, but many times I had to re-read a sentence or paragraph to take in its true meaning. It was like concerto being played of a life that on first blush has little value and meaning. The cast of characters, including the author, are hard to digest and even like, but Domenica (through her writing) has managed to lift them into a prosaic pattern of a piece of history truly her own.

Having grown up in an alcoholic family, I thought I knew something about dysfunctional families, but it seems I didn't have a clue. Ruta's matter of fact narrative took me right into a world unknown. She doesn't ask for or need pity for her story, apparently. It just happened, and she needs to tell it. As a teacher who wants to understand others, I thank her for the insight. Tough to read and tougher to put down.

This is a dark, dark story that is very well written, but slow and dreary. The artful use of language and irony gave me just enough energy to keep reading all the way through, but there was not enough pleasure to say I enjoyed this honest and realistic book.

I belong to the author's mother's generation and that is one of the factors that led me to purchase this book. Also, I read a lot of recovery stories including James Frey, Augustan Burroughs, and Mary Kerr. This book stood up to the quality of those. She reports in a clear eyed, almost objective manner, her childhood, adolescence, and then quickly through her twenties when she reaches sobriety near 30. I loved the description of the settings: Danvers, Massachusetts of course, but also Austin Texas. I only wish she could have seen her mom again.

You might think that, after years of working as a family therapist in Lowell and Lawrence, I would be tired of the theme of growing up poor and/or dysfunctional in Massachusetts. On the contrary, I read

everything I can find on the subject. I've read Augusten Burroughs, Andre Dubus III, Scott Brown, Mark Vonnegut, Caroline Knapp, Patrick Tracey, Michael Patrick Macdonald, Susanna Kaysen, Nancy Rappaport, and Bobby Martini. I guess I could even count Jane Franklin (as told by Jill Lepore) and Louisa May Alcott. Anyway, Domenica Ruta can play in this league, and her story is unusual. She also has a great sense of humor. My favorite sentence: You can't go around telling people you're a millionaire and then lose it all without having a steamy shovel of schadenfreude flung back in your face.

It's difficult to imagine coming through a childhood like the author's and managing to accomplish all that she has, even through she went through her own troubles with alcoholism. I'm guessing her mother may have been bipolar, although I don't think she actually states that, but one of the fascinations for me was the positives that her mother managed throughout a life of terrible parenting. All of the adults in Ms. Ruta's life had more problems than mere eccentricities, the lifestyle her mother provided was horrendous, but along with providing the drug-addicted lifestyle, she still fought to get her daughter into the best schools, for instance. Perhaps Ms. Ruta's story shows that even with the most atrocious family life, love can still give a child enough to survive. If they make a movie, I'm guessing there might be some competition for the role of mom.

Domenica Ruta's memoir is right up there with Mary Karr's *Liar's Club*, Jeanette Wells *Glass Castle*, and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*. Written with, humor, and angst, *With or Without You*, is a deftly crafted memoir. Ruta is a poet at heart - and there are countless sentences you will read again and again, thinking, "That is one of the most beautiful yet haunting things I've ever read." Writers like this don't come along often, and I thank the stars that Domenica Ruta found sobriety, so that we could be lucky enough to read her.

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