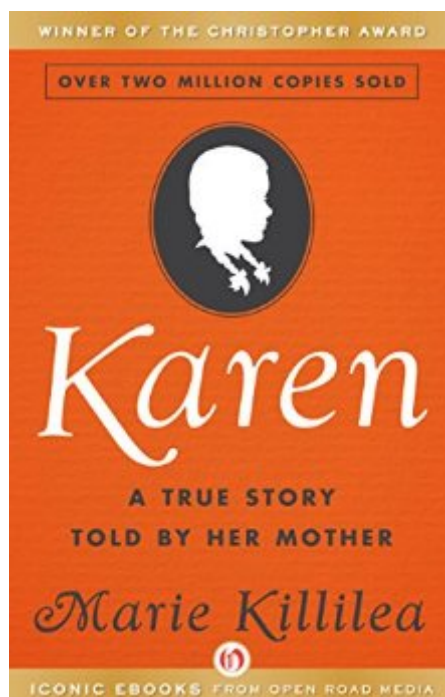


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Karen: A True Story Told By Her Mother



Synopsis

Winner of the Christopher Award: This bestseller tells the inspirational true story of a girl with cerebral palsy and the mother who wouldn't give up on her. In 1940, when Karen Killilea was born three months premature and developed cerebral palsy, doctors encouraged her parents to put her in an institution and forget about her. At the time, her condition was considered untreatable, and institutionalization was the only recourse. But in a revolutionary act of faith and love, the Killileas never gave up hope that Karen could lead a successful life. Written by Karen's mother, Marie, this memoir is a profound and heartwarming personal account of a young mother's efforts to refute the medical establishment's dispiriting advice, and her daughter's extraordinary triumph over seemingly insurmountable odds. Marie's activism spread awareness of the mistreatment of disabled people in America and led to the formation of multiple foundations, including United Cerebral Palsy. A larger-than-life story, Karen tells of a family's courage, patience, and struggle in the face of extreme difficulty. The New York Times wrote, "You'll want to read it most for Karen's own words: 'I can walk, I can talk. I can read. I can write. I can do anything.'"

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Customer Reviews

There is an online group of Killilea family fans who has done some searching on what happened to this amazing family...Marie (author) suffered from lung cancer and had a lung removed in the early 1970s. Miraculously, she survived for 22 more years and died in 1991 at age 78 of respiratory ailments. She was survived by her husband, Jimmy; unfortunately, he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and died two years later in a nursing home in Connecticut. Gloria Lea passed away in Nov. 21 and was survived by her husband, Russ, and two sons. Russ passed away just three months later. Their daughters, Mary and Evelyn, were tragically killed in a housefire in the late 1960s at the ages of 7 and 9. Marie's married name is now Irish, and she lives in Connecticut. Apparently, she visits Larchmont periodically. Karen lives in Westchester County and works for a retreat center for priests. Rory Killilea was last living in the Seattle area. Kristin Killilea Viltz was last listed as living in Tarrytown, NY.

I read this the first time as an adult. I had asked a librarian if she could recommend a good heartwarming book, and she insisted this was what I needed to read. It instantly became one of my all time favorites. The main reason I wanted to review it here, is I notice so many fellow readers complaining about the mother's approach to her daughter's disability, etc, and I want to point out, when Karen was born, the world was a different place entirely. 'Political correctness' had not been coined yet. Smoking was not recognized as the evil we now think of; in fact, it was common for doctors to smoke in their offices with their patients. Mothers were not told to quit smoking because they were pregnant. I could go on, but my point is, for the time in our history when Karen was a child, there was no Disability Rights Act. The idea to treat a disabled child with dignity and equal rights were sadly un-common, and this is not the fault of Karen's family. Like all of us, they did the best they could with what they knew how to do. I think all this P.C. talk is taking away from the underlying feeling of the book. It is a triumph of the human spirit and I see that so clearly and am left feeling good about the strength and courage inside of us that we don't know is there, unless we are forced to summon it, or learn about someone like Karen, who had no choice but to live life the best she could. I am not condoning smoking or other bad choices mentioned in the book. I am simply attempting to suggest that if that is all you are looking at, you are missing the boat. This is the kind of book that I love most; it makes me laugh and cry and most of all, it is the kind of story that makes me realize how small most of my problems are. It brings to mind other humbling people such as Helen Keller. It may not be an equal comparison, but the feeling I derive from it is the same.

I first read Marie's children's book, "Wren", while in about second grade. I started reading "Karen" and "With Love From Karen" when I was about 10. Now I've read each of them at least 6 times! The books influenced my life in many little ways, and in some big ones, too. With little or no religion in my childhood, I found the references to their strong Catholic faith somewhat mysterious--but it taught me some Latin! Now I am a Catholic, imagine that. I much enjoyed the passages about Karen and the Newfoundland dogs, our family is on our second Newfy. Additionally, I learned about courage, faith and determination, and the lessons remain with me today. A note about the family, one of my Newfy contacts mentioned meeting Karen at a dog show a few years back, and that she was in good health. She no longer had Newfies, but another smaller breed (can't remember what). Both of her parents are deceased, but no mention there of a divorce. Also, I hear that Karen works at a religious retreat not far from Sursum Corda, the family home on Long Island, I believe it was. She is a very private person, understandably. I hope she knows how many people read or heard her story and were inspired by it!!

"Karen" and "With Love From Karen" changed my life...sounds corny, I know, but true nonetheless. I first became acquainted with "Karen" as a bewildered ten year-old whose parents were divorcing. Even though "Karen" had been published some thirty years prior to the day that I first picked it up as a little girl, the book struck a profound chord within me that still resonates today. In searching for a common reason as to why these books continue to matter to so many people so many years later, the prevailing theme seems to be the against-all-odds humour that infuses the pages with such joy, and also a sense of "connectedness" to a family none of us will ever know -- perhaps a familial connection that some of us have found lacking in our own lives. The message of these books is timeless -- love your family -- work hard -- be good to animals -- help your neighbours -- be true to yourself -- and let God in your life. Like everyone else, I would love to know what Karen and the rest of the surviving family are doing now, but one suspects the reason for their silence may have something to do with a wish for privacy that should be respected. I know Marie has passed on, but I would like to thank her and the rest of the Killilea family for encouraging me and thousands of others. (and readers, if you can get your hands on "Newf", it's a beautiful children's book that adults can love too!!)

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