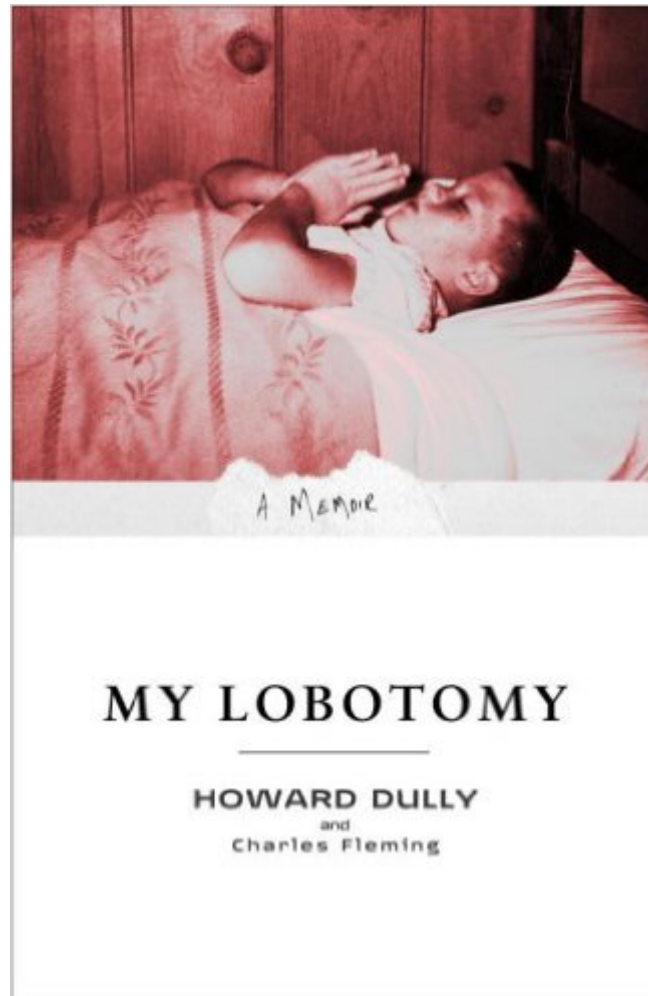


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My Lobotomy: A Memoir



Synopsis

At twelve, Howard Dully was guilty of the same crimes as other boys his age: he was moody and messy, rambunctious with his brothers, contrary just to prove a point, and perpetually at odds with his parents. Yet somehow, this normal boy became one of the youngest people on whom Dr. Walter Freeman performed his barbaric transorbital "ice pick" lobotomy. Abandoned by his family within a year of the surgery, Howard spent his teen years in mental institutions, his twenties in jail, and his thirties in a bottle. It wasn't until he was in his forties that Howard began to pull his life together. But even as he began to live the "normal" life he had been denied, Howard struggled with one question: Why?

October 8, 1960. I gather that Mrs. Dully is perpetually talking, admonishing, correcting, and getting worked up into a spasm, whereas her husband is impatient, explosive, rather brutal, won't let the boy speak for himself, and calls him numbskull, dimwit, and other uncomplimentary names. There were only three people who would know the truth: Freeman, the man who performed the procedure; Lou, his cold and demanding stepmother who brought Howard to the doctor's attention; and his father, Rodney. Of the three, only Rodney, the man who hadn't intervened on his son's behalf, was still living. Time was running out. Stable and happy for the first time in decades, Howard began to search for answers.

December 3, 1960. Mr. and Mrs. Dully have apparently decided to have Howard operated on. I suggested [they] not tell Howard anything about it. Through his research, Howard met other lobotomy patients and their families, talked with one of Freeman's sons about his father's controversial life's work, and confronted Rodney about his complicity. And, in the archive where the doctor's files are stored, he finally came face to face with the truth. Revealing what happened to a child no one—not his father, not the medical community, not the state—was willing to protect, *My Lobotomy* exposes a shameful chapter in the history of the treatment of mental illness. Yet, ultimately, this is a powerful and moving chronicle of the life of one man. Without reticence, Howard Dully shares the story of a painfully dysfunctional childhood, a misspent youth, his struggle to claim the life that was taken from him, and his redemption.

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Customer Reviews

This is not a whodunit. We know whodunit. It was Lou Dully, Howard Dully's stepmother. She engineered a lobotomy for twelve-year-old Howard in 1960 because she hated him and found him irritating. Howard's mother died of cancer when he was five. This death may well have contributed to Howard's less than stellar behavior as a child. Also likely impacting Howard's behavior was his father, Rod, who was a cold, sometimes cruel, man. In the years before his lobotomy, Howard seems to have been rather slovenly and a bit insensitive. The child probably just needed the love and affection that his parents wouldn't give him; instead, he got an ice pick in the brain. If Howard "needed" a lobotomy, so did the majority of the country. Actually performing the surgery was Walter Freeman. He performed some 2,500 (one source says 3,500) lobotomies from 1936-1967. It is a shameful reflection on the medical community/the government/society that Freeman could slice brains for so long. Many of Freeman's patients (the book indicates fifteen percent) died as a result of the operation. Many survived as "vegetables." Others lived out their lives in a passive state, not "vegetables," but unable to survive independently. Many showed no long-range change in the behavior that had led to the lobotomy. Enough showed improvement in their (usually depressed or aggressive) behavior to lend credibility to the procedure. The lobotomy severs the connection between the frontal lobe and the rest of the brain. This seems to block the development of strong emotions that can lead to depression, defiance, and aggression. After the operation, Howard drifted about for decades.

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