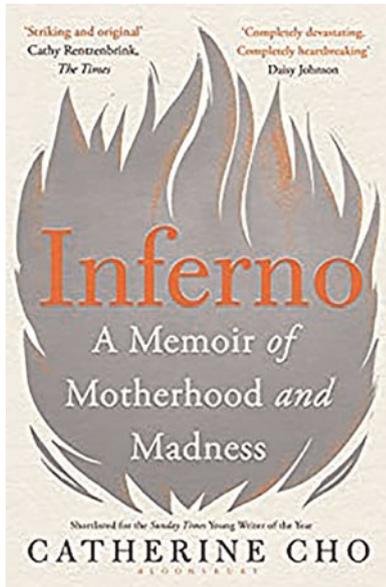


Book review

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode



Inferno: A Memoir of Motherhood and Madness

By Catherine Cho
Bloomsbury, 2020. £16.99
(hb). 272 pp. ISBN
9781526619082

I expected that *Inferno* by Catherine Cho would be a difficult book to read. It is her personal story of postpartum psychosis and, as such, was bound to be harrowing. My own past experience of perinatal illness meant that it sat next to my bed for a while before I could bring myself to read it, but, when I did, I found it captivating. Her descriptions of psychosis are devastating, but the book is so much more than this.

It is beautifully structured, alternating chapters about her experience in a North American psychiatric ward with nostalgic and intense memories of her childhood and youth, and with much reference to her Korean heritage and background. She then

describes falling into an abusive relationship, something that seems to affect her identity and view of herself. She manages to extricate herself from this, and meets her husband, going on to tell their love story.

When she has her baby son, the strands of the book start to merge, as they travel from England to visit friends and family in the USA, an exhausting trip that may well contribute to her psychosis. But what struck me most at this point was what I can best describe as her focus on both the content and context of her illness. She describes insomnia and anxiety prior to becoming acutely unwell, but somehow this is still placed within the story of her life. It is an illness, but is also part of her, perhaps not making sense, but neither is it merely dismissed as a malfunctioning brain. Her psychosis is short-lived, but very acute in nature, and must have been terrifying to experience, not only for her but also for her husband and family.

The enforced separation from her baby is distressing to read about, as are her subsequent difficulties relating to him. Her psychosis may be brief, but her recovery is long, and her account of the short time she spends in hospital is notable for her lack of interest in her baby. The book ends movingly, when she describes how at last, after recuperating back home, she 'remembered him'. This may have been part of her illness, but one can't help wondering about the role of the separation. Her description of having to express her milk is almost as sad as the vivid and frightening account of her psychosis, which is, admittedly, shocking. I very much hope that the existence of mother and baby units means that this would not happen in the UK.

This is a story about psychosis, but told within the author's life, love and culture, which somehow also makes it a book about hope.

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Declaration of interest

None.