

In unsafe hands

Growing up with an unstable poet mother who partied with Warhol was a traumatic affair

MEMOIR

Lynn Barber

AN ABBREVIATED LIFE A Memoir
by **ARIEL LEVE**

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From 2005-10, Ariel Leve wrote a column for the Sunday Times magazine that was always the first thing I turned to. Called Cassandra, it was a weekly howl of outrage at all the horrible things that had happened to her.

Nothing ever came right for Cassandra; her glass was always half empty and her pessimism was always justified. It was the ultimate feel-bad column, but, of course, it made a hugely cheering read: whatever bad patch you might be going

erupting from her bedroom to complain about the noise. She says she never once spent a day alone with her mother.

Her father, Harvey, a diplomat, was a much more stable character but he escaped to Thailand when Ariel was five. She would fly out to join him in the summer holidays but, on her first visit, the nanny accompanying her died of a heart attack on the plane and Ariel stopped speaking for six months. Her father wrote her letters every day, but still he wasn't around.

So it was just Ariel and her mother locked in daily combat. Suzanne was always telling Ariel she loved her but she had funny ways of showing it. One was a game called Being Born, when she would lie on the bed and tell Ariel to curl up between her spread legs while she told the story of her pregnancy culminating in "the happiest day of my life". At this point she would puff and pant and pull the bedcovers off and Ariel would lie on her belly while Suzanne smothered her in kisses. Ariel enjoyed the game, but when, years later, she mentioned it to her therapist, the therapist put her into a recovery programme designed for post-traumatic stress victims.

This book is exquisitely written, but at times feels like an account of Edina Monsoon written by Saffy. One can sympathise with the daughter, but it is the mother who captivates. An old school friend recently told Leve that: "Going to your house was like going to Disneyland." She remembers once complaining that there was a bug in her drink and Suzanne shooting back: "Don't worry, it won't drink much." To the friend, she seemed "such a fun, playful parent". But Ariel, who knew Suzanne's tantrums, her neediness, her drunkenness and broken promises, could never agree.

Leve escaped to London in her thirties, and refused to give her mother her phone number. Now she has escaped even further, to Bali, where she lives with a diving instructor and helps raise his twin daughters. She has cut her mother out of her life and claims to feel better for it. Her mother recently told *The Guardian* that she'd read this book and found it beautifully written, but of course it was all thanks to her: "If I wasn't famous, who would care about Ariel Leve?" **B**



Her mother was a monster Ariel Leve, aged seven

through could never in a million years be as bad as Leve's.

I used to wonder how Leve got to be like that, where her black vision came from. Now she has written a memoir that provides the answer: she claims her mother was a monster.

Leve is an only child, born in 1968 and brought up in an expensive apartment in Manhattan's Upper East Side with a Cy Twombly on the wall. Her mother, whom she calls Suzanne in the book though Wikipedia identifies her as Sandra Hochman, is a famous Pulitzer-nominated poet whose friends included Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer and Andy Warhol. She was exuberantly social, talking on the phone all day and holding impromptu salons at night. A typical evening would consist of Suzanne and her friends carousing loudly in the sitting room with Ariel periodically