

The secrets her family album masks

NEVER TELL OUR BUSINESS TO STRANGERS, by Jennifer Mascia. Villard, 383 pp, \$26.

BY ZACHARY LAZAR
Special to Newsday

Let's say, hypothetically, that your father was a drug addict, an alcoholic, a thief; that he had a previous family that he'd abandoned; that he was unable to hold down a job; that he moved you from place to place, bankruptcy to bankruptcy, living on "busted out" credit cards, welfare and food stamps. Let's say also that he did drugs, that he slept with your mother's sister, that the pair sold cocaine and painkillers. Let's say, finally, that he was a murderer — that he killed people. He kept almost all of this a secret, and you loved him. Your mother loved him. Everyone in the family was fiercely loyal in their love for one another.

Now you're in your early 30s, and both your parents have died slow, agonizing deaths from cancer. The se-

crets have come out. How do you square your anguish with what you've learned? And if you tell your family's business to strangers, how can you persuade those strangers not to sit in judgment?

I've given away many of the surprises in Jennifer Mascia's memoir, "Never Tell Our Business to Strangers," because surprise is not the essence of this story. The essence is something more painful and important: Mascia wants to give us her parents' secrets in all their squalidness and make us sympathize with them, anyway. She writes, "I just wish that the 10 percent I knew of them, the good, legitimate part, could compensate for the rest."

The "good, legitimate" 10 percent is what we get for more than 200 pages, a family album of affectionate moments, minor squabbles and then harrowing deaths by cancer. We follow Mascia's family through the ups and downs of life in Florida, California and New York, the father ostensibly a carpet cleaner or a house painter, the mother an intelligent but impulsive housewife who dresses up their

lives with designer clothes, housewares and gourmet food.

"Joan & David shoes were her favorite extravagance," Mascia writes, "honorable mentions included . . . three Louis Vuitton purses with a matching wallet, and a Vuitton checkbook holder, which I inherited."

Readers will either see this as endearing in a "you go, girl!" kind of way, or they will detect a vein of romanticization — perfume covering up a bad smell. These readers will struggle to feel the magic when the shopaholic mother offers as life wisdom the old Loggins and Messina song: "Even though we ain't got money, I'm so in love with you honey."

The adults in Mascia's memoir have a rebellious sense of fun, but they're also foolish, greedy and dishonest (and this is before we know their darker secrets). We can't help but blame them for their own choices. But we might still feel sadness for their daughter, who has to endure the consequences. The trouble is that the adult Mascia is still not able to look too closely at her parents' crimes. Her book is the senti-



Jennifer Mascia

PHOTO BY ERWIN WILSON

mental remembrance of a young woman still sorting out her loss. The writing is not only colored by grief, it's limited by it.

People may forget that the much beloved memoirist Frank McCourt had a pitiless eye — it was his harshness that paradoxically gave him his enormous sympathy for human frailty. Terrible secrets emerged in Mascia's life. When she doesn't flinch, her book is a grievous struggle with what happened and what it cost.

Friday
Bestselling author Jodi Picoult returns to Long Island to sign copies of her latest novel, "House Rules" (Atria). At 7 p.m., Huntington High School auditorium, Oakwood Rd., Huntington. Advance tickets (\$30.42) required; ticketholders will receive a copy of the book. Purchase by phone, 631-214-1442, or at Book Revue, 300 New York Ave., Huntington.

Saturday

Children's author Ellen Weiss reads "The Taming of Lola: A Shrew Story" (Abrams). At 10 a.m., Best Bargain Books, 217 Centereach Mall, Centereach. 631-737-7777, bestbargainbook.com



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