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Book Review: The Empress Has No Clothes

by Natalie Sympson

Introduction

Joyce M. Roche, with the help of Alexander Kopelman, wrote *The Empress Has No Clothes; Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success*. This book, published in 2013, is a very modern piece addressing the anguish of self-doubt through what is now recognized as the imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome (aka the imposter complex), as defined by Roche, is “a distortion in the way we see ourselves” (2013, p. 1). Roche grew up in a large, separated, and impoverished family in the deep south during the 1950s. As a young African American woman, this was neither an accepting place nor an encouraging community to be surrounded with.

Throughout the book, we get an in-depth account of Roche’s life, plagued with the imposter syndrome, as she progresses through life from a difficult childhood, to graduating from prestigious universities such as Dillard, Columbia, and Stanford, to becoming the Vice President of Avon, the president of a leading international hair care company focused on black consumers, and ultimately the CEO of Girls, Inc., a national nonprofit. To date, she has received numerous accolades and continues to be praised as one of the most successful African American women to climb the corporate ladder while empowering others, making lists like *21 Women of Power and Influence in Corporate America*, *40 Most Powerful Black Executives*, and most recently receiving the *Legacy award at the Women of Power Summit* in 2007.

The book’s argument is to increase awareness of the imposter syndrome through Roche’s story, and through short guest anecdotes of other highly

successful people. Roche’s self-proclamation as reason for authoring this book was to be honest about her own experiences in order to extinguish the subject’s current taboo nature and to therefore effectively educate her readers on how they can be more privy to defeating their own self-doubt for the betterment of their own successes.

Summary

The focus of the book, defining the imposter syndrome, is made clear at the beginning but quickly becomes muddled between the excessive details of Roche’s autobiography, her guest-authors’ tales, the reflection points made in an attempt to relate everything back to the imposter syndrome, and the subsequent notions of advice she gives for readers who find themselves in similar situations. The book’s overall arrangement is consistent throughout: insight, self-reflection piece of the author’s life, relation to guest, guest’s anecdote, and brief response to anecdote that drives home the chapter’s lesson. This repetition took some time to catch onto, but then helped in making the book slightly easier to follow, facilitating knowing what form of information the author was attempting to disseminate in each part. There is an evident argument of the book on account of the imposter syndrome, and Roche absolutely has a story to tell of her own; however, these two points create a very complex book, which is hard to digest, and leaves the reader wanting more in both components.

Evaluation/Analysis

As was addressed in the preface of *The Empress Has No Clothes* (Roche, 2013), the idea of the

imposter syndrome is very much in its formative years in terms of a researched and recognized topic; we are still learning what the causes or triggers are for having the imposter syndrome, how we can identify it, and how we can learn to move beyond it. Consequently, there are only a handful of existing books written specifically about the imposter syndrome, at least under this defining term.

The Empress Has No Clothes (Roche, 2013) is classified under the domains of Business and Self Help, and appears to be covering both of those topics; however, it reads more like a confessional narrative or an autobiography with deeper reflections alluding to the struggles of the imposter syndrome. This is different from other business or self-help books in that there are only notions of guidance for a reader's internal reflection, and minimal advice for how to deal with the conundrums they face. Other books in the same realm, like *Overcoming Imposter Syndrome* (2011) by Elizabeth Harrin, or *Beating the Imposter Syndrome* (2014) by Portia Mount and Susan Tardanico, are more goal driven than narrative driven, and are therefore laid out in simple points of how to adjust your actions to overcome your challenges.

This book is structured in such a way that Roche's life story is presented chronologically from cover to cover, ending with her final career prior to the book's publishing date. It is subdivided into twelve chapters and bookended by a flattering foreword, a preface setting up the structure and an afterword reclaiming all of the pieces of advice Roche wants to drive home. Each chapter has a general theme of lessons learned at that point in her life, which are further entrenched with anecdotes from other very successful industry professionals explaining how they encountered and overcame the same lessons in their own lives. The lessons learned are built up through each section and are concluded

very succinctly at the end of each chapter, but in such a way that it seems nearly the same point is being made time and again.

Roche's story is riddled by her long-time struggle with believing that she is unfit for the positions she was promoted to throughout her prosperous career. She was raised by her aunt and uncle in New Orleans, in the peak of the civil rights movement, faced all kinds of adversity, much of which was based on her race, and gender, and therefore she learned to fight through every challenge. One such example was the unquestioned expectation that she would become a teacher, as Roche said, "For a black girl from a family of modest means, at that time in New Orleans, that was an ambitious goal, but an attainable one" (2013, p.32). Roche also recalled in reference to the culture of her upbringing as an African American student moving from the south to New York for graduate school: "We had grown up in a system that was separate and unequal" (2013, p.69). This ties into the core definition of the imposter syndrome, as it "questions one's ability to compete, and is also about social standing and fitting in" (2013 p.24). Throughout the book, she shows how she succeeded despite the obstacles she faced because her family instilled in her the mantra "education was the way to rise above our circumstances and succeed" (2013 p. 18).

The twelve chapters take the reader through every single promotion Roche was granted, backed by most of the actions which earned her those, and by her attempts to rationalize how others perceived her progress along the way with the undertone of self-doubt or being an imposter. One such insight of her own development was "I have learned over the years that for those of us who experience the imposter syndrome the idea of being seen as playing it safe is as great a threat as the fear of failing" (Roche, 2013, p. 51).

There are many great insights for Roche's life, and hints towards how these will likely relate to readers, but the biggest repetition of advice is the importance of getting rid of whatever self-doubt you have sooner than later. In one of the anecdotes, Susie Buffett, a fellow member on the board of Girls, Inc. exemplified one such lesson through her reflection:

Our lives tend to revolve around the need for approval and the endless labor of earning it... After a while you recognize that it doesn't matter how many degrees they [your co-workers] have or the kind of honors they received, they're all just people... Everybody's just a person. We all have our stories. We all have our struggles (Roche, 2013, p. 154).

Each of the anecdotes provided by her respected industry peers reiterates this mindset and the simple perception that life is much better enjoyed once you have learned to release your self-doubt.

The stories shared, and the details of Roche's life seem to be intended as relatable situations for readers. The use of solely high-achieving people as spectacles representing the imposter syndrome, as specifically chosen by the author, could also be inferred as an ironic sample set. Although exposing the self-perceived weaknesses of very powerful people helps to break down the taboo nature of the topic, statistically speaking, most of the people who thumb through this book are not likely to be ones in such highly established positions and therefore are not likely to compare themselves to such examples. The basis of the imposter syndrome is referring to whether or not we fit in. If a reader does not see themselves as comparable to CEOs, VPs and leading corporate personnel, they will likely not be able to relate the concepts of the syndrome to their own lives, even though they are likely to face the same challenges of self-doubt at their own levels of self-evaluation

amongst their peers.

Conclusion

Altogether, *The Empress Has No Clothes; Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success* (Roche, 2013) is more accurately about how Joyce M. Roche conquered self-doubt to embrace her own success in the past than how anyone as a reader can conquer their own self-doubt to embrace their own success in the present and future. The principles of the imposter syndrome were addressed throughout, but we never did get answers to how the fear comes about, or how we can move beyond it. For an example of precisely how one elite woman admirably climbed her way to the top of the corporate ladder and conquered her own self-doubt, this is a world class example. If, however, for something more relatable and instructive with regard to how one can embody the empress, this may not be the best written piece to fill that need. The detailed record of Roche's movement through every position from a grade school student to CEO of Girls, Inc. became so weighted in its chronicle that the enlightening lesson was overshadowed.

References

- Roche, J. M., & Kopelman, A. (2013). *The empress has no clothes: Conquering self-doubt to embrace success* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.