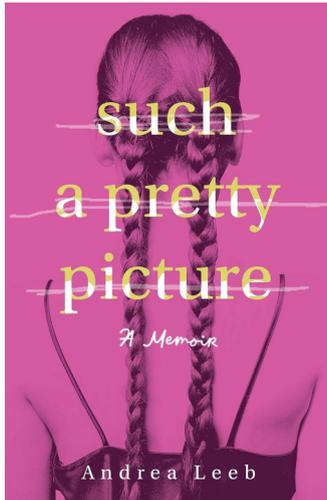


SHINING A LIGHT ON CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ASSAULT THROUGH STORYTELLING

Andrea Leeb



I was fourteen the first time I read the classic memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Random House, 1969). In that book, Maya Angelou writes about her childhood sexual assault at the hands of her mother's boyfriend.

Traumatized, seven-year-old Maya becomes mute and

does not regain her voice until she is thirteen years old, when she finally tells her mother about the abuse. Published in 1969, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was one of the earliest memoirs to break the taboo of writing about childhood sexual assault. For me, a survivor of childhood sexual assault, reading that book I realized for the first time that I was not alone—that what had happened to me happened to other children too. And although I was years away from healing, or even giving the abuse I suffered a name, Maya Angelou's book comforted me.

To understand what the book meant to me, I need to take you back in time. I was four-and-a-half years old the first time my father molested me. He was giving me a bath, and although I was young, I knew there was something strange about the way he touched me. When my mother walked in to check on us, she howled and crumpled to the floor. When she came to, she was blind. My mother's hysterical blindness lasted for weeks, but her willful unseeing lasted for decades. The abuse continued until I was thirteen. And I spent my childhood living with a shame that I was too afraid to name.

Despite it, I kept going. I went to college, then law school. I got a job at a prestigious law firm. I told myself that I was resilient. For years, I tried to convince myself that if I were educated

enough, pretty enough, and perfect enough, I could pretend the abuse away. I tried to bury my secrets, and every time the vestiges of trauma resurfaced, I pushed them down. I wanted to forget the past. At age thirty-three, after an unwanted grope on a New York City subway I could no longer remember how to forget. I had to confront my past and get help. I found a therapist and then spent two weeks in an in-patient recovery program. This was the beginning of my path toward healing and a reclamation of my own narrative.

When I got out of the hospital the first book that I read was Dorothy Allison's acclaimed autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Dutton, 1992). In that novel, Allison's protagonist, Bone, suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Like *I Know Why The Cage Bird Sings*, this narrative continued the work of raising awareness about childhood sexual assault. For me, having recently reclaimed my voice after so many





That changed in 2017, with the #MeToo movement. When remembering how crucial reclaiming my agency and my voice was in the process of my recovery, I began to think that sharing my story would help other survivors find their way toward telling their own stories. Inspired by Dorothy Allison and Maya Angelou and other authors like Sue William Silverman, whose memoir about surviving incest, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (University of Georgia Press 1999) brought the issue of surviving incest to the light — I gathered the courage to write my own memoir, *Such A Pretty Picture*.

Such A Pretty Picture was published in October of 2025. Since then, I have spoken about my story and the issue of childhood sexual abuse in bookstores, podcasts, panels and even on TV. I am constantly meeting or hearing from other survivors. People who thank me for sharing my story, allowing them hope and comfort, and the

years of silence, it gave me the hope and strength I needed to continue my healing journey.

Over the ensuing years, I shared my story with therapists, close friends, and my husband but—although I was a lifelong writer—I began to think that sharing my story would help other survivors find their way toward telling their own stories, —Still, I resisted writing about my childhood sexual abuse.

freedom to share their own stories.

I am proud that my memoir has joined the canon of survivor literature and the books that have worked to shine a light on the stigma of childhood sexual abuse by sharing personal, honest, impactful narratives detailing the trauma and repercussions of childhood sexual assault.

Andrea Leeb is a national bestselling author and advocate. She is a member of the Advisory Board of Directors for the UCLA Rape Treatment Center and a volunteer at the program's Stuart House. She dedicates her time to advocating for survivors of sexual assault, mentoring young women from post-conflict and climate-challenged countries, and writing. Find out more at <https://www.andrealeebauthor.com/> and on [Instagram](#).