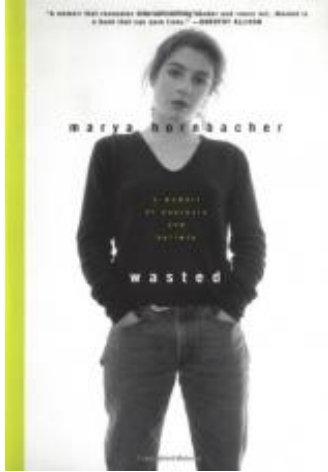


# Wasted

by Marya Hornbacher

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## About the Book

Why would a talented young girl go through the looking glass and step into a netherworld where up is down and food is greed, where death is honor and flesh is weak? Why enter into a love affair with hunger, drugs, sex, and death? Marya Hornbacher sustains both anorexia and bulimia through five lengthy hospitalizations, endless therapy, and the loss of family, friends, jobs, and ultimately, any sense of what it means to be "normal." By the time she is in college, Hornbacher is in the grip of a bout with anorexia so horrifying that it will forever put to rest the romance of wasting away. In this vivid, emotionally wrenching memoir, she re-created the experience and illuminated that tangle of personal, family, and cultural causes underlying eating disorders. *Wasted* is the story of one woman's travels to the darker side of reality, and her decision to find her way back--on her own terms.

## Discussion Guide

1. In an interview with *Elle* magazine, Hornbacher said, "The book does not end with the end of the eating disorder, it ends with a turning point." How would you describe that "turning point"? What other turning points does the author describe in *Wasted*, and what were their outcomes?
2. To what extent do you think Hornbacher, at twenty-three, has achieved an understanding of her lifelong problem? Do you think she understands some areas and issues more fully than she does others? Are there any phenomena or implications of her eating disorders that she does not confront or understand?
3. Hornbacher writes that eating disorders are "a response, albeit a rather twisted one, to a culture, a family, a self." What personal (biological and psychological), familial, and cultural roots of anorexia and bulimia emerge from Hornbacher's history of her eighteen-year battle? What phenomena does she single out as being most significant?
4. In what ways does Hornbacher maintain and expand upon her main metaphor of a looking-glass world? What

specifics of reversal and inversion give us a sense of an anorexic and bulimic young woman's world?

**5.** What role do secrecy and deceit play in the progression of eating disorders? How and why are bulimic and anorexic children so adept at concealing their behavior?

**6.** To what extent are anorexia and bulimia associated with a desire to control one's own self and the behavior of family members and acquaintances? To what extent do they spring from "a desire for power that strips you of all power" and a desire for personal autonomy?

**7.** Do you think that Hornbacher's frank account of her afflictions and other, similarly honest accounts foster an understanding of eating disorders and prevent other girls and young women from following in her footsteps? Or do they provide eating-disordered people guidance in how to "do it better"?

**8.** According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, seven million girls and women in the United States have eating disorders. Why are anorexia and bulimia so overwhelmingly afflictions of young females? Why do so few young males fall victim to these disorders? Do boys and young men in our society suffer from different but corresponding disorders?

**9.** How well does Hornbacher combine her personal account with information from doctors, psychologists, and other authorities? Do the two sets of information consistently reinforce one another, or do they ever contradict one another?

**10.** How do anorexia and bulimia relate to the "cross-addictions" to sex, alcohol, and drugs? Does Hornbacher clarify the links among all these addictions?

**11.** Is Hornbacher justified in personalizing her disorder, as when she comments "You will never find a lover so careful, so attentive, so unconditionally present and concerned only with you"? To what extent does she view her disorder as a distinct other person or as a second self of Marya Hornbacher?

**12.** What physical and emotional scars does Hornbacher carry by the end of her account? What do those scars indicate about the nature and severity of her ordeal? What does her attitude toward them indicate about her ability to vanquish her disorder? Do you think that she will succeed in overcoming her "fascination with death"?

**13.** In what ways does Hornbacher present eating disorders as involving a conflict between "the female body" and "the female mind"? What is the nature of that conflict, and how does it manifest itself in anorexia and/or bulimia?

**14.** "People who've Been to Hell and Back," Hornbacher writes (p. 131), "develop a certain sort of self-righteousness." What sort of self-righteousness does she mean? How is it displayed by her former self? Does her book display any kind of self-righteousness?

**15.** Near the end of the book, Hornbacher writes, "I want to write a prescription for culture, . . . and I can't do that." (p. 283) To what extent, however, is her book a prescription for our present culture? What would be your "prescription for culture"?

## Author Bio

Marya Hornbacher works as a freelance editor and writer and maintains her day-to-day battle with her eating disorders. She is the winner of the White Award for Best Feature Story of 1993, for her Minneapolis Star Tribune article, "Wasted," and has just received the Women of Inspiration Award from the American Anorexia Bulimia Association. After a relapse in 1994, after completing *Wasted*, she resumed her leap-of-faith battle. "It's exhausting," as she writes in *Wasted*, "but it is a fight I believe in." She currently lives in California, where she is at work on her first novel.

## Critical Praise

"A scary but tentatively triumphant memoir...[Told] with grace, sharp humor and candor."

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