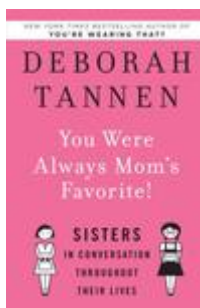


## Sisterhood: Bonds and Transference

A review of



**You Were Always Mom's Favorite! Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives**

by Deborah Tannen

New York, NY: Random House, 2009. 234 pp. ISBN 978-1-4000-6632-2.

\$26.00



Reviewed by

[Ilene Serlin](#)

Reading Deborah Tannen's book was an extremely personal experience for me, and my review is written from a personal perspective. *You Were Always Mom's Favorite! Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives* is dedicated to Tannen's sisters. So were her first two books; her sisters are a "cherished" (p. 6) part of her life.

Like Tannen, I just lost my mother, to whom I was very close. I also am one of three sisters, as is she. We are both the youngest, but I am a triplet and the youngest by only 4 minutes.

I resonated, therefore, with her approach throughout the book. She says, for example:

My family is my foundation. My adored sisters, Mimi and Naomi, have a special place this time. If I didn't have them as sisters, I would not have been able to write this book, nor would I have wanted to. They have been generous, patient, and insightful in answering my

questions and in allowing me to turn their lives into material along with my own. And my debt to them has been set in relief by another circumstance: This is the first book I have completed, and therefore the first acknowledgments I have composed, for which my mother and father are no longer alive. My parents' absence from this space, as from my life, is yet another reminder of how precious is my sisters' presence in it. (p. 211)

And, like Tannen, I am also a Jew, from a family who came from Eastern Europe to New York during the early 1900s. There is a particular poignancy in the warmth, wisdom, and disappearing shared customs as the generations change.

As a child, I was also fascinated with the patterns of interaction and language that informed our little family and community. Two of us sisters became psychologists, and we are both sure that it comes from growing up in analytic, Jewish, normally neurotic families (Serlin, 2005). Because Tannen draws her descriptions and analyses directly from her subjects' own words, they take on a power and ability to communicate easily with both professionals and lay people. Her work is eminently readable and will resonate with many readers. It would be interesting to see whether her book affects men compared with women, as Tannen's work continues to enlighten the field about gender differences.

Tannen's method of narrative analysis is also consistent with increased interest in the use of narrative and a powerful tool for psychologists. It also fits within the contemporary psychology scene as a needed corrective to what I have always felt was an overemphasis on the role of parents as significant others and from the perspective of transference and countertransference.

As a psychotherapist, I have often wondered at the intensity and importance of the sibling bond in the therapeutic relationship, and have even thought that the mother/child (vertical) bond has been emphasized at the expense of the sibling (horizontal) connections. There has been a lot less written about sisterhood in attachment, developmental, and Freudian theory, so I was delighted to see Deborah Tannen's book.

Second, the book comes at a time when narrative and stories are being used for therapy and research (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). In this way, *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!* makes family dynamics accessible from tangible and observable patterns.

Third, the book comes out at a time of renewed interest in gender differences in brain structure, language, and ways of knowing (Gilligan, 1982; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996). It therefore contributes a particularity of sister discourse situated within a context of women's ways of knowing and communication.

## What Is a Sister?

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants series of books and other writings use the terminology of sisterhood. What are sisters, and why is their study important?

Tannen defines sisters in a very approachable way. Her approach is conversational rather than academic as she describes linguistic patterns in everyday events with which most clinicians and family members can identify. Familiar patterns of conversation include simultaneous bonding and competition.

She analyzed transcripts of recorded conversations and interviewed over 100 women about their sisters. The women came from a broad range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual and marital statuses. They spoke what one of them called “sisterspeak” (p. 10).

Tannen’s goal was not only to understand their relationships by analyzing conversation, but it was also to use conversation as a way to help women make healthy changes. Most sisterhoods, she notes, are like marriages, with a real mix of comfort and pain. They can be very intense and passionate: “No matter how difficult my sister is, she is still part of me, part of my past, my present, and my future. . . . Love her or hate her, I can’t imagine life without her” (p. 7). Sometimes sisters keep each other alive, as in the case of Anne Frank who waited until her sister Margot died to let go herself.

Sisterhood can be dark and dangerous, as stories like Cinderella show us. The figure of Cinderella shows up cross-culturally; the first appearance of a Cinderella figure appeared as Yehsien in a Chinese story from about the year 850. The stories of Rachel and Leah, as well as stories found in folk music, show us the inevitability of one being more beautiful, more desirable, or more able to bear sons. Most stories exemplify the basic human dimensions of connection and comparison.

Sisters bring us back to early developmental states of being; we remember smells that bring back memories of summer nights, the family dog. Sometimes the sharing is so profound that sisters cannot remember which event happened to whom.

In an interview in the *New York Times Magazine* (Solomon, 2009, p. 16), Tannen says that she grew up in Brooklyn as the youngest of three girls. Her first linguistics book, based on her dissertation, was a study of New York Jewish conversational style.

For Tannen, a sister is someone she knew growing up and observed keenly for many years. Further investigations should explore cross-cultural differences and similarities in the sisterhood language/relationship structures.

## Reflection

Tannen is a linguist and not a psychologist. Although she attends to language and cognition as a psychologist might, she still skims over the role of attachment and competition in her analysis. Being a linguist, her assumptions are that language forms behavior; thus, she understands that making patterns explicit can also change behavior.

As a dance therapist and psychologist, I find that patterns exist in the body as preverbal echoes of early development. Language does not only shape behavior, but it also reflects and even disguises it. My own experience is that these behavioral patterns are closely connected with nonverbal rhythm, space, and boundary dimensions. I think that Deborah Tannen's analysis would deepen if she added nonverbal dimensions to her study.

## Conclusion

However, this book is important for families and therapists in helping them to become familiar with "sisterspeak" and begin to find ways to understand and use it in the therapeutic hour. As such, the book does accomplish what it sets out to do and has been used by both professionals and laypeople to better understand family dynamics. In my own consulting room, I have lent Deborah Tannen's books to my clients, and they have reported that the books have helped them better understand their own situations. It is difficult to write books that enlighten both professionals and the lay public; in *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!*, Deborah Tannen has done just that.

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