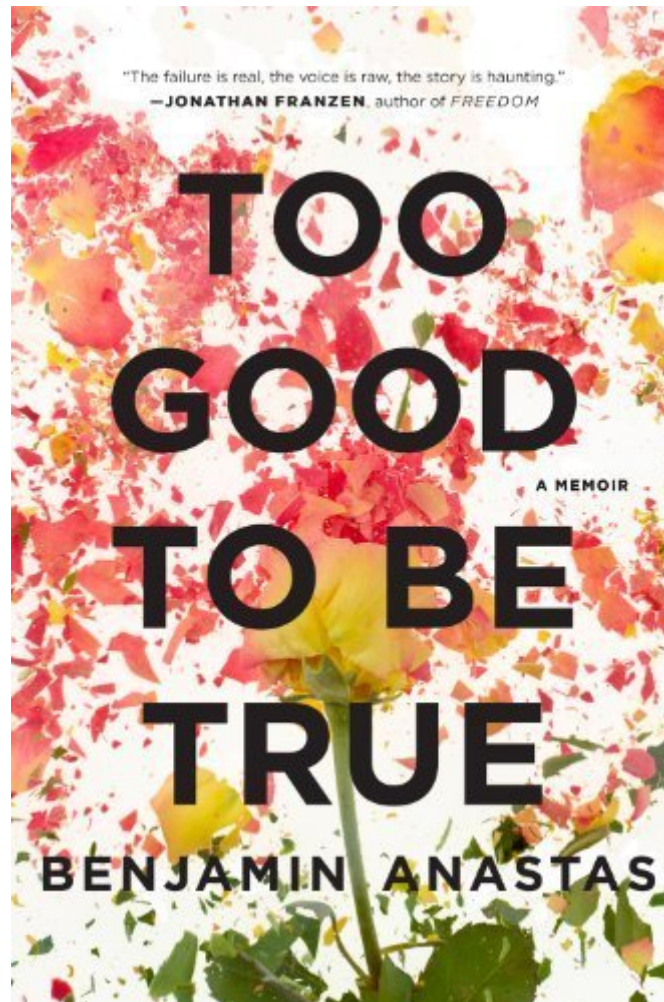


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Too Good To Be True: A Memoir



Synopsis

When he was three, in the early 1970s, Benjamin Anastas found himself in his mother's fringe-therapy group in Massachusetts, a sign around his neck: Too Good to Be True. The phrase haunted him through his life, even as he found the literary acclaim he sought after his 1999 novel, *An Underachiever's Diary*, had made the smart set take notice. Too Good to Be True is his deeply moving memoir of fathers and sons, crushing debt and infidelity—and the first, cautious steps taken toward piecing a life back together. "It took a long time for me to admit I had failed," Anastas begins. Broke, his promising literary career evaporated, he's hounded by debt collectors as he tries to repair a life ripped apart by the spectacular implosion of his marriage, which ended when his pregnant wife left him for another man. Had it all been too good to be true? Anastas's fierce love for his young son forces him to confront his own childhood, fraught with mental illness, divorce, and the fumes of hippiedom. His father's disdain for money might have been in line with the '70s zeitgeist—but what does it mean when you're dumping change into a Coinstar, trying to scrounge enough to buy your son a meal? Charged with rage and despair, humor and hope, this unforgettable book is about losing one's way and finding it again, and the redemptive power of art.

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Customer Reviews

I have to honestly say that I hated this book for the first fourth of it. I thought that Anastas was whiny and frankly the kind of guy I would warn my daughter against. His career as a novelist was in free fatal, and he was broke. In a nice piece of writing, he discusses his humiliating world of taking coins to Coinstar to buy groceries. He was with one woman who would like him to stabilize his life, and to whom he is lying about his debts. His firstnwife had left him while pregant with his son. He had cheated on her just before the wedding, but they had thought they had gotten past this betrayal. At this point, the book is filled with rage, self hate, and envy of those who are succeeding. I tend to finish my books, and it grew on me. I can see the pain he endured as a child, the casualty of the great 60's experiment, and a dreadful psychiatric hospital. We hear more about his efforts to salvage his marriage. In the second part of the book, he widens his focus to include his understanding of the pain he really has caused. We see a more balanced man. I began to like him better. One can only love a man who is in love with his son. The focus began to shift from the wrongs done to him, to the ways he could pull his life to a place where he could be productive agai, maximize his life with his son, and attempt to save his relationship with honesty. The writing is indeed clear and evocative. Read it and see what you think.

Haven't read a book this compelling in a long time and I read a lot. Writers especially will devour it but I think anyone would love it. I bought this on my kindle after I read the favorable review in The New York Times. I just had a baby a week ago and went back and forth between staring at my son's face and reading this book - was just too compelled to put the book down. The writing is beautiful and just excellent, the story of the author's failed marriage and career drives forward with incredible energy and intelligence, and there is so much heart and soul, especially around his son and his childhood. Really made me want to read more from this author. I am going to buy his first novel and I am also going to buy TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE in hardcover because it's the kind of book I know I will want to reread. Just loved it and can't recommend it highly enough.

This is a great book. I can't remember having read anything so quickly, in fact, and with such passion. Perhaps that's because it's a book about failure--which is something that I have lived often enough and yet continue to dread. In part, it's the story of how and why Anastas was driven to cheat on his wife, and how his doing so--coupled with a number of factors largely out of his control--ruined

his life. But on a deeper level it's a story about his own struggles to be a son to his hippie parents and a father to his young son. I found it to be very well-written throughout, with language that is elegant, thoughtful, and deeply moving, even as it depicts scenes that will make you cringe, sob, and fume. It's an honest book, and, in a sense, a book about learning to be honest: By the end, Anastas learns that he does not have to be "too good to be true"--that it was by trying to be better than he was that he was driven to fail to begin with. This could seem a very cheesy lesson, were it not for the longing behind Anastas' lifelong struggle to learn it. If you've experienced longing, you will love this book. I recommend it without reservations.

"Too Good To Be True", a new memoir by Benjamin Anastas, has a continual feeling of Wobegon without the lake. Depressing as his life sometimes seems, I found the book to be largely compelling without feelings of either rancor or empathy toward the author. He is down (on his luck) and out (of money) but not out of a reasonable future. The book tends to be uneven. It's a rather slow, dull beginning with the best chapters being the last two. They tie things together in a strong, almost tender way. It is here that author Anastas really shines and why "Too Good To Be True" is certainly worth the read.

I didn't realize this book was a memoir until, with a jarring sense of recognition, Anastas mimicked the debt collectors phone calls asking for "Benjamin Anastas" in robotic automation, and recognized the authors name. I had no idea that there were others like myself out there, but now suspect many who hear this story will say "me too." This book was funny, sweet, and deeply resonant in ways that I could not have explained until Anastas gave them words. It ended so beautifully too, humility and appreciation for the space in life we find ourselves is what true contentedness is. I think I'll start an "Anastas Fan Club."

Anastas is a talented writer, and this book contains many passages that I thought were powerful and almost moving, although these are almost invariably about his son rather than himself or any of the adults around him. But what I found disappointing about the book was his tendency to devolve into whining and score-settling. I was hoping for a story of a once successful author who, finding himself entering early middle age broke and flailing and adrift, manages to pull himself up through pluck, good humor, and aplomb. What's on display rather is someone who makes suspect financial and personal choices but fails to give others in his life sufficient credit for having legitimate motivations and purposes of their own. It seems that he believes that a little frank acknowledgment

of his own sins allows him to assume the mantle of sanity and rationality in this story, while others' reactions and behavior becomes inexplicable or even unforgivable as a result. Although I'm sure it must have been pleasurable and cathartic to write about his former wife and her lover in unflattering terms - and give the readers clues so that they can be easily identified - he comes off in my mind as a somewhat diminished figure, although perhaps he may not have cared. In any event, it would have been a better book if he'd had been more fearless in examining himself, even though I grant it must have been hard to get his writing career re-started with this rather unpleasant self-portrait.

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