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Scarred: The True Story of How I Escaped NXIVM the Cult That Bound My Life

By Sarah Edmondson

Reviewed by Robin Boyle Laisure

San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Prism. 2019. ISBN-10: 1452184267; ISBN-13: 978-1452184265 (hardcover). 243 pages. \$5.10 (Amazon.com).

Sarah Edmondson provides us with candid insight into the lure of NXIVM, a business built on the promise of empowering members to achieve their personal goals. In the aftermath of the federal criminal trial of the organization's kingpin, Keith Raniere, we get a deeper understanding of how Raniere and his cadre of manipulators were able to entice people into believing that, by spending thousands of dollars on workshops and following the ever-changing rules of the organization, they would find success.

Sarah had a promising career as an actress, when her life took a detour as she connected with NXIVM at a *Five-Day* training program in 2005 in Vancouver, where she met its principal trainer, Nancy Salzman. Sarah had felt elated about the initial training program, proclaiming in her book, "The three months after my Five-Day had been the happiest and most productive time I'd ever experienced in my life" (p. 55).

Following the *Five-Day* training, Sarah felt "passionate about this way of being" (p. 50). She described this feeling: "On the sincerest level, I was really starting to believe it" (p. 50). She was encouraged by women leaders to enroll her friends. At first, Sarah felt uncomfortable "about the idea of making money off my friends" (p. 51). In time, Sarah understood better "NXIVM's recruitment and sales practices (and that they created a classic iteration of a pyramid scheme)" (p. 53).

With an offer of a more extensive package deal, Sarah flew to Albany, New York, to take an *Eleven-Day* training session. There, she was introduced to Nancy's daughter, Lauren, who later became Sarah's best friend and mentor. The *Eleven-Day* training focused on finding the trainee's "inner deficiency," which Sarah felt was emotionally painful as an actress whose career depended upon the approval of others (p. 61). The

Eleven-Day had been designed to strip us down to nothing. Everything we learned at this training provided a sharp contrast to the life I'd been living. Inside that intensive, I learned that none of my values were real, but were only important to me in covering up my inability to really know or love myself. (p. 59)

Sarah felt that the *Five-Day* was uncomfortable, but the *Eleven-Day* far more so: "beyond" (p. 60). Sarah noticed the attendees in the *Eleven-Day* "flying through" the worksheets and answering questions, yet she "struggled" (p. 61). After 11 days, Sarah pondered an "urge to bolt," but she was coached otherwise. At the end of the *Eleven-Day*, she had mixed emotions. She related well to its leaders, such as Lauren Salzman; but she also felt exposed: "being myself and showing vulnerability was a turnoff to people, but here I'd bared my soul" (p. 69). And besides, an annual, 10-day *Vanguard Week* retreat, honoring and named after Raniere, was soon to occur. Eventually, Sarah was asked to take on increasingly more responsibility through the *Executive Success Program*.

For readers who followed the news accounts of NXIVM and the trial, *Scarred*. . . fills out the edges of facts reported by the press. Admittedly, the public was curious about how NXIVM all looked from the inside. For those unfamiliar with the case, *Scarred*. . . explains the structure of the organization and the salesmanship tactics it used in creating multiple levels of workshops with locations in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Women at the top of the organization, including Sarah, were recruited into a secret subset called “DOS” (p. 161). Admission into DOS required nude photographs to be used as collateral, to prove their allegiance (p. 162). In DOS, Lauren would be Sarah’s master, and she, in turn, would be Laura’s slave (p. 163). Why not just leave? With an honest account, Sarah describes her desire to do good, to be an effective leader, to take responsibility, and to execute it well. Sarah enlisted hundreds of new members monthly for the center she cofounded in Vancouver as she was fueled by Nancy’s praise. “Nancy would tell our colleagues that my recruitment work was exemplary. ‘. . . if every city had a Sarah . . .,’ she’d say, and Lauren would give me an inconspicuous wink” (p. 112).

Yet, unlike mainstream organizations, it was her confidante Lauren who, hand-in-hand, led Sarah down the familiar staircase of Lauren’s home to be physically branded in a ceremony, ostensibly to show allegiance to their leader, Raniere. During the most painful moment that she had ever experienced, Sarah and the other women who also endured horrific pain were forced to say, “Master, would you brand me? It would be an honor.” The photograph of Sarah on the cover of her book, showing the scar on her left hip outlining Raniere’s raised initials, symbolizes the brutality of Raniere’s extreme demands and the evil that lurked within the organization.

Sarah’s detailed descriptions of the trainings, V-Week, her later ascent in the organization, and, in turn, her recruitment and trainings of others, provide a realistic view of how one can be pulled into a scheme that on the surface looks positive. Sarah’s detailed accounts of her impressions of NXIVM leaders, and the trust she placed in them, along with her need for their approval, helps to make this book evocative and insightful. The evil lurking in the center of the organization became more apparent to Sarah over time. Following the secret branding ceremony, Sarah was asked by Lauren to add to the collateral that NXIVM members were required to supply; this time, it was the deed to Sarah’s home but put in Lauren’s name (p. 179). Soon, Sarah’s team failed the 3 a.m. readiness drills of responding to text messages within a few minutes. The punishment, she was told, was being paddled and locked in a cage (p. 180). Sarah Edmondson’s details of her goals, triumphs, and fears contribute to our better understanding of NXIVM’s workshops, marketing, and descent of its leadership into the depths of criminality.

About the Reviewer

Robin Boyle Laisure, JD, Professor of Legal Writing at St. John’s University School of Law, lectures on topics concerning cults and the law. Her articles include “Employing Trafficking Laws to Capture Elusive Leaders of Destructive Cults” (*Oregon Review of International Law*, 2016), “Current Status of Federal Law Concerning Violent Crimes Against Women and Children: Implications for Cult Victims” (*Cultic Studies Review*, 2002), “How Children in Cults May Use Emancipation Laws to Free Themselves” (*Cultic Studies Journal*, 1999), and “Women, the Law, and Cults: Three Avenues of Legal Recourse—New Rape Laws, Violence Against Women Act, and Antistalking Laws”

(*Cultic Studies Journal*, 1998). In 2005, she received the Faculty Outstanding Achievement award from the President of St. John's University, and she is on the Editorial Board of ICSA's *International Journal of Cultic Studies*.