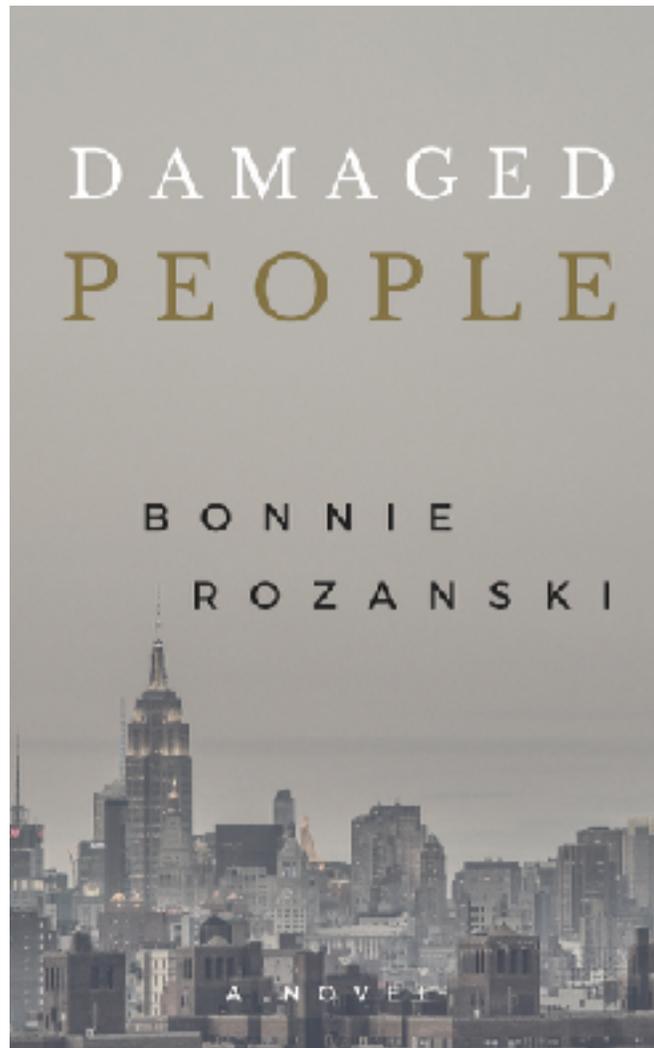


# Damaged People



by **Bonnie Rozanski**

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# About The Novel

## Quick Pitch:

*Damaged People* is not your mother's family saga.

Like *The Corrections*, it is literary, edgy and character-based. Like *We Are Not Ourselves*, it is a moving multi-generational novel. Unlike them, however, *Damaged People* has a premise founded in cutting-edge science: that powerful environmental conditions routinely leave imprints in our genetic material, short-circuiting evolution and passing along new traits in a single generation.

*Damaged People* tells of three generations of a New York City family wounded by a single tragedy that ricochets from person to person:

The young father, Joe, who, out of his mind with grief when his wife dies unexpectedly from a blood clot after giving birth, cannot bear to touch his newborn son.

The young boy himself, who grows into a titan of finance, wildly successful in business but ruthless and paranoid with people.

Then there's Russ' only son, Jack, who is overcome with an anxiety he cannot understand or resolve, but one that seems only to have been passed on from his father's early experience.

## Description:

Jack is a good guy—decent, smart, and loyal. And if it weren't for his persistent anxiety, he might go on to live a successful, somewhat dull, but conflict-free life. But mysteriously—for no one else in his family does—he has anxiety disorder. The only possible clue is his relationship with his father Russ, a titan of finance, wildly successful in business but controlling and overweening in his personal life.

At 18, Jack goes off to college in Canada, trying to get out from under the long reach of his father. There he meets the blue-collar Katrina at the pizza counter where she works. Things move quickly, and Katrina moves in with him. Trina, too, is a damaged person, neglected among a throng of siblings. Though Trina seems carefree, underneath she behaves like her namesake hurricane, spreading damage wherever she goes.

When Trina tells him she is pregnant, Jack decides to “man up” and marry her. They come down to NYC to live. Though anxious, Jack forms one of the first automated trading companies and locates it in the World Trade Center. Jack begins to make big money. A baby girl is born. 9/11 happens.

Backing up a bit, the story reverts to Russ’ birth in 1946. A young wife dies unexpectedly after giving birth. Her husband Joe, out of his mind with grief, cannot bear to touch his newborn son. His brilliant sister Grace, a science teacher in a progressive girls’ school, takes the baby into her own apartment. Unfortunately, the daytime nurse she hires to care for the child leaves him alone and crying while she goes out. At last, baby Russ is brought back home. Joe meets Vivian at work and they marry. All seems at peace, but trouble is brewing below the surface. Russ bonds deeply with his grandfather Mel, but then Mel dies, and the boy is devastated. The moment you trust someone, Russ decides, they are gone forever.

Russ goes off to college and begins to dabble in penny stock, eventually parlaying this into his own hedge fund and fabulous wealth on Wall Street. Russ meets Maggie on the subway and marries her the next day. Their son Jack is born. At first there are his sleeping problems, then anxiety and depression. His mother Maggie insists no such symptoms have ever shown up in either family.

Back in the present, Russ has managed to destroy most of his old relationships. He becomes obsessed with a foreign-born stripper, divorces Maggie and disowns Jack. The stripper tries to have Russ killed, and is arrested, but Russ decides he can’t live without her. He hires a big name lawyer to defend her and marries her as soon as she is through with her four months incarceration at Riker’s Island.

Meanwhile, Grace has developed Parkinson’s disease and retires, her old students coming to visit their beloved teacher. One, inspired by Grace to become a scientist herself, describes how the environment leaves imprints on our genes, short-circuiting evolution and passing along new traits in a single generation. Grace wonders if Russ’ early experience has been written into Jack’s genes.

Trina has two more children, despite the fact that Jack is crazy with anxiety over his burgeoning family, and then threatens divorce. Jack reluctantly agrees to move back to Canada if that will help them stay together for the children’s sake. Up in Canada, Trina dumps him, takes the kids, and moves out.

Jack, depressed, struggles but is a good father to his children. Trina, meanwhile, has been moving from man to man. After Peter the drug dealer walks out, Jack finds her dead body beside an empty bottle of pills. The funeral is held at the church on the hill overlooking town. Jack has an anxiety attack and spends most of the funeral outside, reflecting. He decides that Trina’s problem was that she never got enough love. He thinks back to his father, and how as a baby he was left crying and alone. A child who gets no love early enough may never get enough of it, Jack

decides, and wonders whether he has showered his children with enough love to compensate for all the chaos they've already had to bear. When his children come out looking for him, Jack encircles them in his arms.

## About Bonnie Rozanski



### **Short Bio:**

Bonnie Rozanski currently resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but has lived all over the United States and Canada. She has degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Adelphi University and the University of Guelph, and worked in both academia and business, before deciding to return to her first love, writing. Since then, Bonnie has written nine novels and five plays, with scientific issues generally informing the plots.

## **Longer Bio:**

Bonnie Rozanski currently resides with her husband in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but has lived all over the United States and Canada. She has an undergraduate degree in Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, and master's degrees in computer science and business from Adelphi University and the University of Guelph.

After some years in academia and business, Bonnie decided to return to her first love, writing. Since then she has written nine novels and five plays, often in different genres but invariably with scientific issues informing the plots. Science, she says, raises all the big universal questions about what it means to be human.

Bonnie's play "Still-Life with Dog" won the Eileen Heckart Competition at Ohio State University in 2002; *Borderline*, her second novel, was shortlisted for Foreword's Book of the Year in 2008 and received a silver medal at the Independent Publishers' Book Awards of the same year.

## Q&A

### **What made you write this book?**

Some time ago I'd heard about children who suffer from anxiety disorder, despite the fact that there seemed to be no inkling of it in any of the generations before. It was a mystery I couldn't get out of my head.

How could it be caused by nurture? These children were certainly loved, and not deprived in any way. But how could it be nature? That would entail independent mutations of the same gene in different people.

Research led me to epigenetics, the study of changes in organisms caused by modification of gene expression rather than alteration of the genetic code itself. From what I read, a single traumatic event might set off changes in the genome, changes that could percolate down through generations.

Intriguing, I thought. I pictured a brilliant, temperamental, somewhat damaged New York family in the aftermath of World War II. Perhaps a wife died in childbirth, and her husband, grief-stricken, could not bear to touch the baby.... And the rest followed from there.

## Why is this book different from other family sagas?

There are family sagas with a science theme—some that incorporate scientists such as *The Signature of All Things*, or those that include family members with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, such as *We Are Not Ourselves* and *The Corrections*. But unlike them, *Damaged People* has a premise founded in cutting-edge science: that powerful environmental conditions routinely leave imprints in our genetic material, short-circuiting evolution and passing along new traits in a single generation.

This is how nurture does its work: by acting upon the genes. And it is a fitting theme for a multigenerational saga, where a single unintentional act can mark not only one's child, but generations beyond.

## Describe the main character and his traits—how can an average reader relate to him?

Jack is a good guy—decent, persistent, loyal—one of the more rational characters in *Damaged People*. And, if it weren't for his persistent anxiety, he might go on to live a conflict-free life. But mysteriously, he has anxiety disorder, and there is the conflict. Jack has to go about his life, dealing with all the things that everyone else does and more, but in his case, through a haze of panic. Nevertheless, he manages. Jack makes a living and becomes a good father to his three children, despite his condition, demanding family members and the tragedy of 9/11.

Anxiety, it seems, has become more and more prevalent in today's society, especially in younger people. I expect that almost everyone today either has anxiety disorder, or knows someone who does. It's part of the culture. Any average reader should be able to relate to that.

## Who would enjoy this book?

*Damaged People* is more than a family saga. It's a moving, multi-generational story about a family, the individuals within it, the reasons they act the way they do, and all the family dynamics between them. It should appeal to readers who like historical, literary, contemporary, or science-based fiction. Or anyone who just likes a hell of a good story.

Author and/or publisher is available for interviews, guest blogs, readings, etc.

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