

Jacki Lyden Publishes Memoir



"I have tried to fix her on these pages, so that wherever I go I can say to her, "I had you there, then. I caught you, forever."



By Laurie Atwater

I have enjoyed many a driveway moment listening to the silk and sand voice of Jacki Lyden on NPR. Radio listening is oddly intimate in that way. You can come to feel linked to these disembodied voices—like they were actually part of your own life—and it is comforting in the afternoon to listen to the stories of America and the world on *All Things Considered*

LEXINGTON READS:

Telling Our Stories

Sunday, April 5

2:00 p.m.

JACKI LYDEN

Senior NPR correspondent and author of *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*

Cary Memorial Hall, 1605 Massachusetts Avenue
Book sale and signing

in her familiar voice.

On April 5th Lyden will be in Lexington to kick-off *Lexington Reads*, Cary Memorial Library's annual community reading project and you can listen to this famous voice in person. This year the library has chosen "Telling Our Stories" as their theme. Lyden's memoir *Daughter of the Queen*

"I knew my sisters and I were growing up like bumper cars in an arcade—the brakes applied harshly and erratically here, and no brakes or direction at all there... Growing up in Ping-Pong trajectories that no one else could follow, perversely desirable because our experience would protect us in dangerous situations."

Excerpted from *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba* by Jacki Lyden

of Sheba has been chosen as the community book this year.

"This theme will focus on memoirs, autobiographies, genealogy, oral history... all the many ways that people can tell their story," according to Library Director Connie Rawson, "Our hope for this year's *Lexington Reads* is that we will be able to create programs that touch people in a personal way. We want to provide participants with opportunities to think about the importance of stories in their own lives, to tell their own stories, and to appreciate and enjoy the stories of others."

Lyden's professional life has been rich. Nationally known broadcaster, war correspondent; Jacki has interviewed many foreign leaders, was the first on the scene for NPR after 9/11 and has received numerous journalism awards.

Yet, the most compelling and life-altering story in Lyden's life is the personal story of her relationship with her mother who was mentally ill throughout her childhood and early adult life.

As a little girl Jacki bears witness as her mother increasingly escapes into a world of fantasy and delusion. Dolores, like many women in that time, was never really diagnosed. She eventually had the euphemistic "nervous breakdown," but an official

diagnosis of manic-depression or bipolar disorder was not made for many years.

The story of Dolores' mental illness is not only a tale of a woman who is delusional and manic, but it is also the story of a certain time in American life when women had few options and when their fates were determined by the men in their lives. More importantly it is a story of mothers and daughters and the claim that this powerful relationship makes on our hearts. Lyden's is the very personal tale of living with Dolores and her mental illness and how living with her fabulous mother shaped her own personality and her choices.

As a young girl Dolores was smart, but she thought only fleetingly about college. Instead her father found her a job in a bakery and promptly matched her up with local boy Patrick Lyden. Dolores later says that she "was buried" in the marriage that her father arranged. But Dolores had a certain flair. She was different, dramatic, adventurous and glamorous. She didn't look or act like other moms. She was special.

Dolores made the best of her married life for a while dancing, staging fashion shows and telling fabulous stories. Lyden describes these early days with affection and humor and a gift for language that deepens as the memoir progresses. At her

mother's vanity, Lyden and her two sisters were introduced to the magic of imagining. Dolores would excitingly dress up in costumes, model for the girls, make up stories and empower their young imaginations to stretch.

Lyden writes:

Her dreams infused mine in front of the vanity, protean dreams with a hypnotic beat, like an oracle leaning down to say, "Whatever there is, is out there. It's not here. Not here."

After Patrick Lyden loses his hearing in an accident, he becomes more isolated and distanced from the family. Dolores decides to divorce him. After a short period of happiness, Dolores meets a local wealthy doctor and remarries. The relationship turns abusive.

Lyden's prose beautifully describes the eerie denial of her mother, the subtle and perverse cruelty of her new stepfather and his "rules" and the blossoming of her own caretaker role. She deftly draws the reader into life in the 60s. She recalls *The Rifleman*, *Make Room for Daddy* and *Queen for a Day* and she begins to write and to make up stories in her "Famous Book" as an outlet for her anger. Finally the doctor goes too far, physically abusing young Jacki in front of her mother and

her sister. "After that night," Lyden writes, "the Doctor looked neither

mother needed to be protected. As the reader you wonder right along

The memoir is both touching and torturous with the author trying to carve out her own life, take

the same sentence a million times on a million different press junkets. She stops, she thinks, she listens, she laughs. Her personality radiates through the telephone just as it does across the airwaves. She is warm.

year. "We're still looking for a director. It's hard to get movies set-up with female leads. With Amy we're closer than we've ever been, but we're still not where we need to be."

Lyden on Libraries

"Libraries were my childhood. sanctum sanctorum. I loved losing myself at the library and I would ride my little bicycle with the wire basket down there in the morning and I would stay there all day. I would look for books with the *Newberry* medal. Our library had views on both sides. It was beside a stream. It was like an old German type of mill. I can remember the librarians I remember reading in the basement—National Geographics, the classics shelf. I can remember the way it was decorated and the way it smelled."

at me nor at Kate, nor at Sarah, nor really at my mother, ever again. He never came near us and we stayed out of his way."

Creative and independent, adventurous and daring, Dolores was trapped in an unhappy marriage in a time that offered few exits for women. "The great tragedy of my mother's life was not having a mental illness it was not having an education," Lyden states.

"She had the perfect storm going against her," Lyden says. "That is something that I've really come to realize as I have gotten older. I was angry that she married my stepfather. He just ground her down. He was a nasty piece of work."

It was during this abusive marriage that her illness begins to worsen. One day Lyden's mother appears wrapped in sheets toga-style. She had drawn symbols all over her arms and swept her hair up with a tiara. This is when she proclaimed herself the Queen of Sheba. "All of her personalities were colorful," Lyden says. She says Dolores would take on the personalities of many characters in the course of one psychosis. "My mother was really delusional. She had both audio and visual hallucinations," Lyden says.

The power of her mother's imagination and delusion mingled with the realization of her actual helplessness becomes a puzzle to be solved. "I never thought she was anything but fragile," Lyden states. In fact, from a very early age (maybe 6 or 7) she knew that her

with her—when does imagination become delusion and how do young children discover that difference? Who then is the real Dolores?

Lyden's life eventually becomes the vehicle of her mother's potential. She goes to college (despite the fact that her mother spent all of her college money), she ventures out into the world alone and fearless without a man to either validate or protect her. She becomes the daring adventuress, the traveler, the strong and powerful woman that her mother was when she was manic. She lives the enchanted life of her mother's delusions and yet always, she is drawn home by her mother's siren song.

Lyden came to realize that she loved and treasured the very part of her mom that was The Queen of Sheba, that talked directly with God and behaved outrageously? This fantastic, invented Dolores was so full of life. "I felt that I had a real duty to capture who she had been as a manic person because I took a lot of strength from that person and I feared that we would just forget her and forget that," Lyden says very seriously.

Lyden writes,

"You could say that my life as her daughter, the life of my imagination, began with my mother's visions. My sisters and I took them for our texts. Her madness was our narrative line. I am trying to decipher that line still, for its power and meaning over our past."

care of her mother and desperate to know—"to decipher"—the unknowable. Again and again Lyden dives into the past to fathom the depths of her mother's delusions and to try to understand that which will always be obscured. It's the process of reflection that is so compelling—the filtering of the experience, the search for meaning and the preservation of the memory that resonates in this memoir.

She tells of being in Iraq in 1991 right after the first Gulf War. "I was on the Iraqi/Kuwaiti border and there was this man who claimed he was Palestinian," she explains. He was being kicked out of Kuwait. "He said that he would lose all family memories for three generations," Lyden says in a voice that captures the enormity of that idea. It was then that she decided to write the book. "I thought, 'I am losing the most precious thing I have...'" and it really felt that way to me. I think I was right, because now I do have a hard time remembering her [Dolores] that way." (Lyden's mother has been stable on her medication for some time).

Lyden is used to a public life, to telling other people's stories, but exposing her own story was intimidating. "It was a huge departure for me. The whole idea of a young woman writing about herself seemed really impermissible to me. I mean, what were my senior colleagues at my august radio network going to think?"

And then Lyden laughs with a hearty pleasure that makes you feel that you have known her forever. She converses with curiosity. It never feels as though she has said

"My God, I was thinking 'What will happen if people actually read this book?' and then I realized that for the most part people read in pretty much the same way that they listen to the radio—by themselves or perhaps in a book club...they don't read standing shoulder to shoulder at one moment in time by the hundreds of thousands."

Lyden's book is circular,, weaving in and out of time and space. She is riding in a cab in Kabul and suddenly she is back in Wisconsin. She is in Damascus and hears her mother's voice; she is on the radio in Chicago and longing for her mother to hear. The winds through it all with language that is so startlingly beautiful, that it stops you dead.

"I remember that the architecture of that book really took me a long time," Lyden shares. "I feel that my journalist life demands that I be linear, and I don't feel that my writing life necessarily has to be. It kinds of drives my agents and some editors nuts. To me we *think* we live in this linear way but we really don't we're always entertaining projections of what could happen and simultaneously remembering things that did happen."

Lyden never wanted Dolores' story to be one of her radio essays. "The reason I really wanted the page as opposed to the radio was because my mother had been a writer and it felt like honoring the way she had figured herself out on the page as a manic person." In fact Lyden's mother wrote lengthy legal "briefs" in which she challenged her care at a local county mental institution as well as numerous letters.

Looking ahead, there will be a film version of *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba* and it will star Amy Adams. "This girl is perfect," Lyden says with a real sense of excitement. "She's a mensch and she gets it. She really gets it." The script has been written, by Karen Croner and Lyden hopes that the project will get started later this

Lyden seems to be enjoying this "new life" as she calls it. She is beginning work on a sequel to this book, enjoying her mother who is healthy and active at seventy-eight. "This is perhaps the happiest time of her life and I just feel so lucky that we made it," she says. Along the way they have had some health scares (a serious case of the often misdiagnosed condition, hydrocephalus), but Lyden speaks of her now with great admiration. "Now she's walking talking and reads like crazy. Funny as the day is long and a complete news junkie. She campaigned for Barack!"

Lyden concedes that Dolores doesn't really acknowledge the extent of her illness and the fascinating characters that so enthralled her daughter. "In her, there is kind of an embedded notion that if this existed at all it was just temporary," Lyden laughs. She still talks with her mom twice a day. "She's incredible I never thought we'd get here."