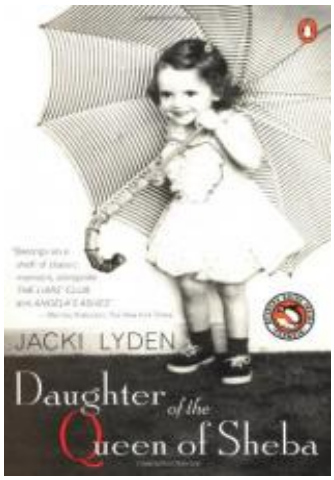
Daughter of the Queen of Sheba

by Jacki Lyden



About the Book

Jacki Lyden is known to many as a foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, a vocation which has brought her to the front lines of some of the world's most precarious regions. But in this memoir, she tells of the precariousness of her childhood and of her struggles growing up with her manic depressive mother. Beautiful, with a quick imagination and a constant yearning for a wider life than the one she was offered in her small Wisconsin town, Dolores Lyden filled her daughters' lives with the uncertainty that comes from parental instability. Her divorce from her first husband, a man who was dearly loved by his three daughters, was the initial blow to their family life. But her subsequent, and ultimately destructive marriage to a wealthy physician triggered the primary episode of Dolores' manic depression?and sent Jacki and her sisters lives' into a freefall of confusion and chaos that would last for two decades.

Jacki never knew how and when her mother's sickness would take hold. It was the 1960s, and the concept of the "mad housewife" hadn't quite swept the American consciousness. Nor had the realities of spousal abuse. The Doctor's cruel treatment of Dolores' daughters, especially Jacki, forced Dolores to make a choice between her daughters' welfare and her marriage. It was a choice difficult enough to drive any woman crazy and quite possibly brought about the onset of Dolores' mental illness. As a teenager and a young woman struggling to find her place in the world, Jacki was forced to become a parent to her own parent at a time when she could have benefited from a mother's good sense. She turned instead to her grandmother, Mabel, a hardscrabble woman who'd suffered enormous losses of her own yet managed to live happily on her own terms?a woman whom many wouldn't have hesitated to call crazy. The influences of these two powerful women instilled in the Lyden daughters an appreciation of their lives' unpredictability. But it also instilled in them a determination to make their way in an uncertain world, and helped them appreciate the force of their own imaginations?a force which, sadly, often got the better of their mother.

Jacki grew to accept, and even relish, the manifestations of her mother's illness. In her memoir she marvels at her mother's creative energy, at the intricate workings of the extraordinary mind that took Dolores to such exotic places as Mesopotamia or eighteenth-century France. Later, Jacki would become a traveler in her own right, more at home in the

unsettled territory of the Middle East than with the comfort that comes from a quiescent life. As a journalist covering the front lines of some of the world's most dangerous war zones, Jacki's chaotic childhood experiences have allowed her to comprehend the insanity that prevails in so many peoples' lives. Hers was not, perhaps, a childhood she would have chosen, but it's the only one she knows. And so, in this hilarious, lyrical, and achingly beautiful tribute we come to know Dolores, to empathize with Jacki, and to revel in an unusually moving story about mothers, daughters, and growing up.

Discussion Guide

1. Lyden says she was a diarist from the time she could write. How do you think writing helped her cope with her mother's illness? How may her mother's illness have contributed to Jacki's talent for writing?

2. Lyden writes "My life as her daughter, the life of my imagination, began with my mother's visions . . . Her madness was our narrative line. I am trying to decipher that line still, for its power and meaning over our past." What does this say about the way imagination and personality develop? How much are we the product of our parents' lives, and how much the product of our environment? Why do you think Dolores' illness prodded Jacki toward such dangerous assignments? How would it have contributed to Kate's unconventional lifestyle, and Sarah's craving for order in her own life?

3. Dolores didn't exhibit signs of mental illness until after her second marriage. How much of a role do you think her relationships with men, including her father, played in Dolores' illness?

4. Lyden often makes references to the pressures she felt protecting her mother, usually not the role of a daughter. How do you think this role reversal affected Jacki's adolescence? In what ways was Dolores a good mother to Jacki?

5. What do you think of Jacki's grandmother, Mabel? What were her strengths and weaknesses? How did she influence Jacki's life?

6. In the throes of her illness, Dolores is incredibly creative and energetic, and Lyden has preserved many of the notes and letters Dolores wrote to everyone from her lawyers to her daughters. Why do you think Lyden wants to hold on to these artifacts of her mother's illness? What do they tell her about who her mother really is?

7.As a child Jacki learned to tolerate not only her mother's erratic behavior, but her stepfather's cruel ways. Lyden writes, "the armed hands of children do not surprise me in the least. Children are fierce, without nuance or hesitation." What do you think allows children to withstand trauma; what makes them so resilient and fierce?

8. Lyden claims that she has been "drawn to men with despotic natures...A desperado helps one live dangerously, and perhaps that is how we know we are alive." Do you think Lyden's predilection for violent men had its roots in Dolores' relationship with the Doctor? If so, why wouldn't Jacki have learned the danger of being involved in those types of relationships instead of being attracted to them?

9. In the chapter, "Teotihuacán, Mexico, 1960," Lyden describes an incident in which she climbed an Aztec pyramid and tried to imagine what it would have been like to be a young girl about to be sacrificed at the altar. She strays so far into this daydream that she feels as if she had passed directly into ancient history?a sensation she likens to her mother's own periods of insanity. Why is this episode significant? What is Lyden saying about the delusions of the mentally ill as

compared to the fierce imaginings of a young girl?

10. Lyden describes her and her sisters' childhood as "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." How different do you think her experience was from other girls her age? Was Jacki's childhood insecure or unconventional? What are the advantages and disadvantages of an unconventional upbringing?

Author Bio

Jacki Lyden is a regular substitute host on NPR's **Weekend Edition** and **Weekend All Things Considered**. She was part of the award-winning NPR team that covered the Persian Gulf War. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Author Essay

The experience of living within a universe without light, prediction and a world you can name?this is experience of living, I think, in the absence of reason. This was my mother's distant and unreachable, unknowable world of delusion. Daughter of the Queen of Sheba attempts to enter that world in the only way we can...by framing it, by turning on the light, by giving it a vocabulary and imposing a circular chronology. In the real world, I was fascinated by the roots of my mother's mental illness. Madness was for me the sheer vocabulary of the imagination. And yet, in the real world, you cannot have a dialogue with someone who is mad?who is delusional. You can attempt it, but it will be what turning the pages of a book is to reading, or listening to a melody you know in a language you cannot quite catch. On the page, however, I could have a dialogue with the Queen of Sheba. I could define her terms, so to speak. I could give her a history, a reason to become an all-conquering power. I could speak back to her where in real life I was nothing but one of her more difficult subjects. This time, in the world on the page I had my own sense of authority in what was previously her dominion. She could hardly answer me back or turn away from me. Writing was a chance to meet her in her own country, the country of the imagination, and capture her, on the page, as I could never hope to do in life. In real life of course, my mother is a free spirit?here, I have her down, one interpretation anyway. Sometimes I imagine Daughter of the Queen of Sheba like a verse poem, written by an apostle long after the act...it's a canon about or a mythology about an almost mystical event.

Mental illness, untreated, can be frightening or inspiring. It can be a little of both. But it needn't ultimately rob either its claimants or their kin of their humanity. The fight we have to have is to keep those we love alive long enough in order to reach them. Sometimes, we never can. They elude us forever. As a journalist who has been on many stories that contain in them the nature of a campaign of the heart?be they the chronicles of a struggling farmer or a riot-torn Belfast neighborhood or a twisting tale from Iran, to track Sheba was the most elemental and necessary thing in all the world. In fact there are many other stories I want to tell, in fiction and non-fiction, but nothing seemed quite worth it as long as Sheba remained out there like a wayfarer in an uncharted expanse of chaos, with no voice and no order and not even the formality of memory to give her any real meaning. You are always wondering, when someone mentally ill who is close

to you is actively delusional, who that person really is. Is that your mother who has gone mad, or is she that mad creature? How do you know that person you best think you know, namely your mother, if she is mad? And if that creature she has become is no longer your mother, then who is she? And what is troubling her? And how can you know her in an unreality you can never enter? Because the brain, we know, gives us many chambers?only a few of them do we inhabit. And so Sheba is an attempt to create in a literary way a reality that eludes us in life.

So, too, the memoir tries to frame an experience that could have been little more than chaotic at the time, albeit with amazing moments of insight and struggle. We have survived, we are at the end of our journey, we want to, like Odysseus, make some sense of where we have gone. There is a great deal of bunk written about memoirs, and the only truth that is universal for them is the truth applicable to any good piece of writing: they must transform our experience of what it is to be human. That means we must have digested the experience, not merely confessed it. We must have a little compassion for the selves that we are delving into here, not a sense of revenge or self-pity. I know there are people who write books like that, but I'm not interested in reading them. But then I could never see the point of going anywhere if you didn't come home a little richer in your understanding of that place or culture, even if you didn't much like it there. And nothing, to me, is ever so bad it can't be funny. Gallows humor helps a lot, and we had buckets of it at my house. My mother can be one of the funniest people I know, besides being one of the most creative.

People who are delusional, who are mentally ill, who elude us in life, take us somewhere?often to someplace we never expected to go. I have received hundreds of letters since Daughter of the Queen of Sheba was published. Many of them talk about experiences far darker than my mother's, though no less frustrating. Sometimes it is a surviving family member who has written, because the afflicted family member has committed suicide or died. Sometimes the brother or the sister is wandering out there still, unreachable, uncomprehending and incomprehensible. I do think that the fear, the lack of understanding, the guilt, and the stigma that attach to these disorders deep in the wellsprings of thinking?and I suppose of our human biology?will lessen in time. I think more demands will have to be made for acceptance, for fair health practices, for money and for insurance coverage. But even in a perfect world, we will be left or have been left with the reality of unreality?the days when all the world's language hurts too much, or when all its footsteps pass too quickly, when we are the image I used to have of my mother in my brain?of the girl at the bottom of a well I could never reach. Those will be the days when literature fills the gap, as myths have done at one time and tales of the Gods have done in another, when we will only know that our understanding is imperfect and our compassion strained. Those are the days when stories like Daughter of the Queen of Sheba, I hope, will have to suffice?(you might also try reading Yeats) because in creating a connection to ourselves, we do create a connection to that trackless chaos outside of us. And once you have that dialogue in your own imagination of who you are and who is that "other" that you may or may not be able to pull from the well, you have a dialogue. What you choose to do with it, of course, is up to you. My mother sometimes says she will write her own book. Whether she does or not, I will always love the fact that she has the courage which gave me the encouragement to write this one. This book is a testament to her courage, and that you can survive being shattered, even when you do not think that is possible. Her courage gave me this book, and I am in turn, giving it to you.

I have said before that I miss the Queen of Sheba. In some senses that is absolutely true?I miss her dramatic power, her sense of the outrageous, her daily reminder that only our fears keep us anchored to reality. What transports us is our vision. But I want to keep on missing Sheba. I don't need to see her again?I have her here, right on the page.

Critical Praise

"Lyden's lucid, powerful prose makes her psychic drama real and vivid. "

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