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Hard Choices

An author decides to publish another book, and risk losing her family again

BY LAURA DAVIS



When Ellen Bass and I published *The Courage to Heal*, a book that helped launch the incest survivor empowerment movement, it was 1988 and I was 31 years old. I was shocked when the book became a grassroots bestseller, catapulting me to fame for the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

During the years Ellen and I were writing the book, I was terrified about how my family would react. My fears were justified. When I outed my grandfather as my perpetrator, my already volatile relationship with my mother exploded, and I became estranged from her side of the family. Holidays and Mother's Day became painful reminders of the price I'd paid for writing the truth.

But my fierce, dramatic mother and I shared something in common: a stubborn insistence on working our way back into each other's lives. It took years, but we ultimately succeeded, in part by agreeing to disagree about the hot-button issue that had driven us apart. Grandchildren helped bring us together, and I rewove threads of connection with estranged relatives. I wrote books about other things.

Over the next two decades, I built a career as a writing teacher, and my own writing faded into the shadows. I never stopped writing, but I didn't publish. To keep the peace, I had to avoid writing and publishing about the subjects closest to my heart. I didn't want to lose my family again.

Yet the epic story of my mother and me still thrummed inside. When the reconciliation I thought we'd achieved was challenged a dozen years later by her sudden announcement that she was moving across the country to my town for the rest of her life, I was faced with caring for an 80-year-old woman whose developing dementia pushed every button I had. Could I possibly rise to the challenge of becoming the daughter she needed me to be?

Millions of people are in this position, caring for parents who in one way or another betrayed them; this story needed

to be told. So, as I sat with my mother in doctor's offices and hospital rooms. As we played 500 rummy in her tidy mobile home, I scrawled bits of dialogue on random scraps of paper. Late at night, I wrote the truth about being a caregiver for a parent whose proximity had never equaled safety.

As the pages piled up, I told myself, "I'm just writing this for myself. I don't have to publish it." That was the safe container I had to create for myself, because lurking on the edge of my consciousness were the relatives who'd rejected me the first time I'd entered this territory. How could I tell our mother-daughter story without

once again writing about the sexual abuse, the conflict that had sundered us the most?

It wasn't until my mother and the rest of her generation died that I seriously considered publishing *The Burning Light of Two Stars*. Deciding to put it out into the world required agonizing soul-searching. I was no longer that young woman whose attitude was, "Fuck them. I'm telling the truth and they're in denial." Now, 33 years later, I cared about the relationships I'd rebuilt. I recognized how hard it is, as a private person, to have a writer in the family—especially one who repeatedly dredges up the past.

My immediate family members—those depicted in my memoir—gave me their permission and blessings, but I knew my choice to publish would bring distress to a small pod of extended family related to my long-dead grandfather. I knew I might lose them forever.

After wrestling with this dilemma for years, I chose to publish—to become an author again. The day I signed the book contract, I sat down and wrote my relatives a letter, informing them about *The Burning Light of Two Stars* and apologizing for the impact it would have on their lives.

In the months since then, I've gotten an angry reply from one cousin. A second asked, "Laura, when are you going to be done writing about this?" A third said calmly, "I don't ever want you to talk to me about this again." And I agreed. There has been silence from everyone else.

Now, in the exciting days leading up to the launch of my first book in 19 years, my joy is tempered. I have made my choice, and in offering this story to the unknown readers with whom my journey may deeply resonate, I must accept that I may also be hurting people I love. For that, I will always be sorry. ■

Laura Davis teaches writing and lives in Santa Cruz, Calif. Her memoir will be published October 19 by Girl Friday Books, and the first five chapters are available now at lauradavis.net/chapters.