

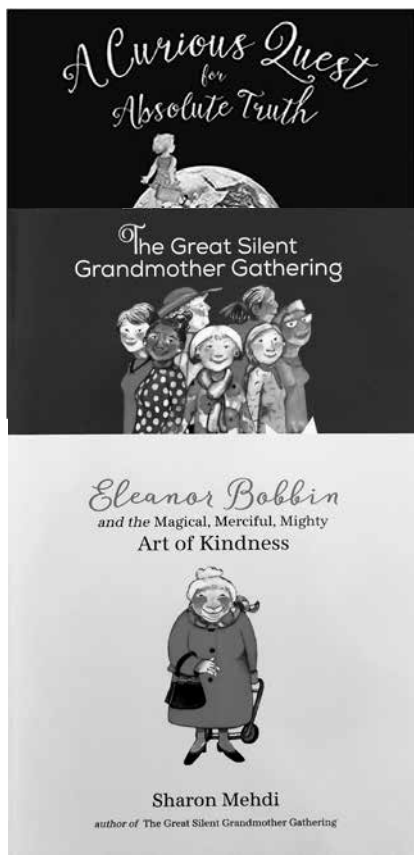
BOOK REVIEW

The wee small books of Sharon Mehdi

Sometimes when it seems the world has gone askew, many of us secretly yearn for a story. Our children and grandchildren approach us at bedtime with favorite books, and we read while they drift off, so innocent and free of cares. Not really free of care, though, because the worlds of children also go awry in many ways. A story can calm a child at least enough to trust the arms of sleep. Why don't children's books for adults exist? Well, surprise! They do. Sharon Mehdi, citizen of the world presently living in Jacksonville, has written three of them.

I first became aware of both Sharon and her writing when I heard her read at Art Presence, located in what was once Jacksonville's original jail! (Now there's an irony as well as a transformation—as true art sets us free!) That Saturday she was reading her *Eleanor Bobbin and the Magical, Merciful, Mighty Art of Kindness*. I thought, "Oh, she's a writer of children's books," even though she'd told us already that these wee small books were for adults. They just *looked* like children's books. And I began thinking of my granddaughter, Zoe. But no. This story turned out to be for all people, even people in their seventies, like me. By the time she finished (because the book takes only 20 minutes or so to read aloud), I was in tears and filled with hope. I bought four copies, kept one, and sent the other three as gifts to the kind people in my own life. This was in 2017, just after the book was released from a local publisher, Lucky Valley Press (luckyvalleypress.com).

Sharon gives us her own thoughts about the story: "As this story goes to print, the world is once again in chaos. Rancor and retribution rule the day. Greed, fear, and demagoguery have been crowned King of All That Is. For many, there seems to be no hope. And yet...and yet...hidden beneath the helplessness and hopelessness there is a glimmer of light. So faint it can be seen only in the darkest of dark nights. If this tiny flicker had a name, it might be called forgiveness, compassion, kindness, or love. Such little words. But the one thing I know for sure is that they can all create miracles. They can make the impossible possible. They can heal lives. And sometimes, whole communities. Just ask Eleanor Bobbin."



Who would not want to read all three of Sharon's books? Preceding *Eleanor Bobbin* was the internationally renowned *The Great Silent Grandmother Gathering*, now in its 15th Anniversary Edition. It was inspired by a Karuk medicine man, Charlie Thom, who told Sharon, "Men have taken the world as far as they can. It's up to the women to take us the rest of the way." So, Sharon imagined what might happen if two grandmothers stood silently in the town park to save the world. This wee small book made its way around the world, translated into half a dozen languages and giving rise to many grandmother gatherings.

The third book, *A Curious Quest for Absolute Truth: Snippets from the Early Years*, is a humorous, heart-grabbing, glorious jaunt through Sharon's young years. Reading it, I recognize the threads of experience that made her the creative, funny, wise, generous, hopeful, amazing woman and writer that she is. At one internet site, I read this comment: "This woman is one of the most precious people on the planet."

All three of Sharon Mehdi's wee small books can be found in the Jackson County Library System, purchased at local bookstores (Bloomsbury in Ashland and Rebel Heart in Jacksonville), ordered from any bookstore anywhere (through Ingram Distributors), or found online at Amazon.com and other online book vendors. Happy reading!

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Essay *Advice from a bell pepper*

BY MARGARET PERROW DELLA SANTINA

I'm staring into the refrigerator. Again. Actually, it's the fifth time in 30 minutes. But who's counting? (Well, okay, maybe *I* am.)

Sticky leftover mac 'n cheese, a gangly bunch of asparagus, half a carton of eggs stare wordlessly back at me. *Words*. I need words. And *they're* not helping. I close the refrigerator door and plod back upstairs. "Butt in the chair," I remind myself. "Fingers on the keyboard. This book isn't going to write itself."

How naively optimistic I was a month ago, at the start of this winter sabbatical leave, when I thought, "Ten chapters, ten weeks!" Now it's the end of week three, and I've spent as much time in front of the refrigerator as I have at my desk. (Well, not really, though it can feel that way.) Three weeks, and I'm still trying to articulate the throughline, still trying to nail down a draft of one chapter. But *really* what I am trying to do is overcome my own resistance to the task of writing, my fear that this book will fall short of my own expectations.

In other words, it's not thirst or hunger that ejects me from my chair every five minutes. It's resistance—another way to look at writer's block. Resistance sends me down to the refrigerator; resistance makes me green tea and spreads my saltines with blackberry jam. And

resistance waits for the words to come pouring out of a plastic container of leftover mac 'n cheese.

I'm staring into the refrigerator. Again. But this time I hear a small, waxy, green voice coming from the vegetable bin. "That's right."

"What?"
"That's right—resistance! Congratulations! You've got a lot of it! *Resist it!*"

Could I channel some of my resistant energy back into resisting resistance itself? A bit convoluted, but worth a try. Wait...isn't that a principle of martial arts—control your opponents by directing their own energy to work against them? Maybe I've got enough resistance in me that I can simply compel some of it to stay down here in the kitchen!

"Thank you," I mutter to the bell pepper. Closing the refrigerator, I sheepishly head back upstairs. Luckily the fridge is full—next time, it'll be the carrots. But for the time being, I'm back to writing.

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Note: *A thought-provoking book about the impact of resistance on creativity* is *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield.

POETRY CORNER

A wild seed settles in my garden

by Beate Foit, beatefoit@gmail.com

The first tender shoots pop up around mid-May.
Clusters of them.
They seem to protect each other.

Why they decide to grow right there,
in the middle of the gravel driveway
is a mystery.

In mid-June, stems are strong and tall;
bowl-shaped leaves
collect dew drops from the night before.

Monarch butterflies dance around the blossoms,
dive in and out of the beautiful bush.
It moves gently with the wind.

Mid-July in the heat of summer,
the pearl-like, spent blossoms
develop into oval-shaped seed pods.

The bush withers,
droops to hug the earth;
the pods are carried away by the autumn wind.

Farewell, my Milkweed!
I'll see you again next spring,
With your offspring settled near you.

■ DIVIDE CAMP

Continued from page 3

Camp hosts small groups of veterans in the majestic Willowa Mountains near Joseph, Oregon, and gives them the opportunity to "unplug and reset" from stresses of their daily lives, to connect with others who understand their struggles, and to participate in customized outdoor activities. All services are free to the veterans.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 928,000 post-9/11 veterans (three in ten) have service-related disabilities. These wounded veterans experience higher rates of marital problems, unemployment, suicide, and substance abuse than their veteran peers. The current suicide rate among both active-duty and veteran service members

is 25 a day—up from an average of 22 a day just two years ago.

The goal of Divide Camp is to use outdoor activities, peer support, and the healing power of nature to help wounded warriors improve the quality of their lives, restore their spirits, and regain a sense of purpose and self-confidence so they feel empowered to achieve their full potential. Programs like those provided by Divide Camp are nothing short of lifesaving for struggling veterans who have either fallen through the cracks or not found the help they need through the current overburdened and pharmacologically focused veterans' healthcare system. Julie believes that we owe it to these brave men and women, who have willingly sacrificed so much on our behalf, to help them find a "new

normal" and successfully transition from military life back into our communities.

Divide Camp is a small grassroots nonprofit organization originally envisioned to provide a healing refuge for hurting veterans. Since 2012, a group of dedicated volunteers have worked tirelessly to renovate the camp into a safe, comfortable, and serene retreat for veteran guests. Most of the volunteers come from the Rogue and Applegate valleys. The camp's largest supporter is Veterans of Foreign Wars in Jacksonville.

The first guest arrived in September 2013. His experience was so profound that he now serves on the board of directors and credits Divide Camp with saving his life. In 2014, four veterans spent time at camp even though critical renovations were still under way. Despite

working with unpaid staff and a limited budget, Divide Camp had its first full season of programs in 2015, serving 20 veterans. Activities included fly-fishing, rafting, deer and elk hunting, a writing workshop, and bowhunting. In 2016, the program also included wilderness backpacking and served a total of 32 veterans. Since then, backpacking trips with llamas have been added so veterans who are not physically able to carry a pack can still enjoy the hiking experience.

Today Divide Camp honors and gives hope to 50 veterans a year. Visit dividecamp.org to learn more or to donate, fill out an application, or buy a ticket to the March 16 fundraiser.

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