

IN SEARCH OF HER

Katie James

THE LAST OF HER: A FORENSIC MEMOIR

Kim Dana Kupperman

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Kim Dana Kupperman delves into the mystique of her mother's past and probes the depths of truth in her latest book *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir*. This stunning new memoir is a feat of impressive storytelling based upon expansive research, excavated memories, and an inquisitive imagination. It directly confronts the artifice of life and the artifice of writing and tries with honest vigor to communicate a narrative that conveys the truth once and for all of the life—and death—of Dolores Buxton.

Kupperman begins her memoir at the end—that is to say, in the aftermath of her mother's suicide. She abstains from a linear, forward-moving plot structure and instead sets in motion a book composed in reverse chronological order, accounting for pivotal days in Dolores's life. It begins with Dolores's suicide and, running backward, describes the court order that removed Kupperman from her custody; her arrest for assaulting a pregnant woman; her own mother's death of multiple sclerosis; and her birth to a mother whom she later abandons and a con man father to whom she acts as accomplice.

Kupperman gives each of these moments to us in the form of individual stories that interact to tell a larger story of a life lived in earnest and in defeat. Her purpose is to uncover answers about who her mother truly was—the actual woman behind the elaborate make-up, disguises, false names, and criminal activity—and what led her to make the choices she made. Kupperman's intent to “lay bare [Dolores's] life and examine it” drives this book's content, and Dolores is handed to us naked and raw despite her own efforts to keep her personal life heavily guarded and hidden, especially from those closest to her.

While documented facts are the foundation of this narrative, Kupperman easily refrains from a book that reads like the reports she obtained during the research phase. This is not a book to sit amid the many newspaper articles; the court, law enforcement, and census records; and the coroner's report from which she draws. This is a memoir at its core—a story (or stories) with a narrative arc, dialogue, conflict, and other elements of storytelling that enliven a recorded history so that it stands as not so much a document itself but a reimagining of that which already has been documented. It is as if she took a black and white photo and, with paints,

a tiny brush, and a steady hand, added color to the captured memory, carefully filling in the details. With her artistic imagination, she overlays a story onto history—inserting fiction onto fact—in order to enlighten certain angles of Dolores's life that had remained shrouded in the dark corners of mystery. Not every word spoken, action taken, motive premeditated is captured by the many reports and recollections upon which this memoir is based; storytelling is an inevitable departure for this book, as many details are unknown, and even that which is known from Dolores's past is fragmented. “All that remains of my mother are the stories I tell about her,” Kupperman writes. “The instinct to cobble together a whole person of these pieces drives me to return, over and over again, to the narrative scraps with which I am familiar of Dolores's life.”

This memoir is written less so for Kupperman's readership to come to know the true Dolores and more so that Kupperman might gather, through the act of writing, who Dolores was (beyond motherhood) and the pain she accumulated throughout her life, which requires an inquisitive

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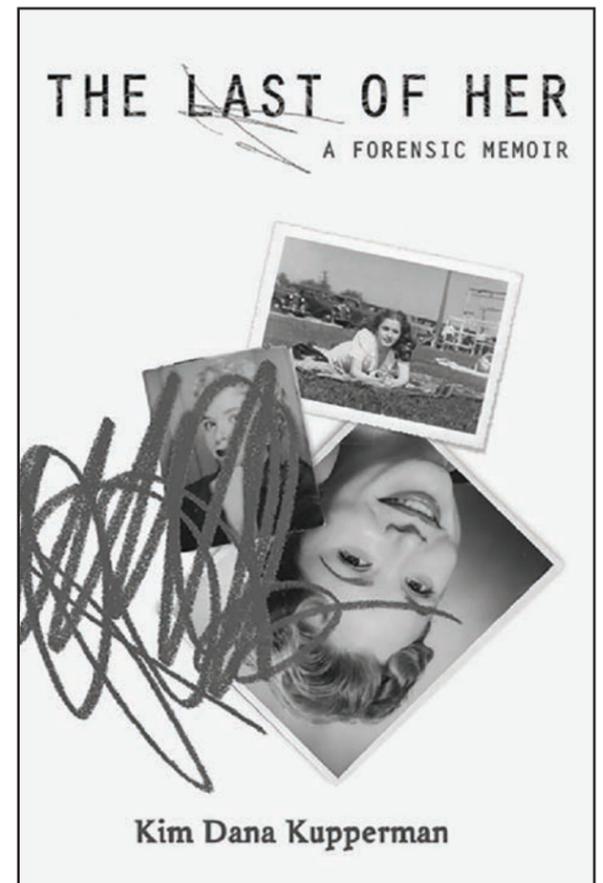
and empathetic stance. The lens of a daughter, with its biases and familial turmoil, is more opaque than is the lens of a writer, yet Kupperman successfully transitions from daughter to writer and distances herself appropriately so that she can take in an entire life rather than a life lived only in a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship.

Kupperman places herself within a lineage of mother-daughter relationships fraught with distancing acts and leavetakings. And although she left her mother during a time of unrecognized desperation, Kupperman atones for this act by ultimately returning to her mother. “The chance of catching a glimpse of [Dolores's] true self lures me back,” Kupperman confesses, demonstrating that this writing process is an attempt to not only realize the authentic woman who was her mother, but also reunite with that woman on the page.

Although Kupperman writes with a deliberate “forensic attention” as a means of activating the truth, what she finds is an empathetic orientation and a willingness to forgive a woman she felt had wronged her in life and in death. Kupperman begins her process as an investigator digging up recorded artifacts, craving the Truth. She grows into a writer authoring a memoir where she fleshes out those uncovered truths into stories as a means of conveying *her* truth. And she finally progresses into the personal as a daughter telling the story of her mother wherein she acquires empathy and is not only willing to forgive Dolores for her mothering absences and her criminal activity, but also for her sudden suicide. Although it took years, Kupperman is able to call forth empathy when perceiving and remembering her mother:

A quarter of a century passed before I was able to actively imagine the loneliness and despair she inhabited, though I've never come close to what must have been the deadening endlessness of days and nights that she certainly experienced, a life lived on an edge that must have been as sheer as any real precipice.

During the final pages of the book, Kupperman



demonstrates her capacity to “actively imagine” the state of being in which her mother endured at the end of her life when she presents Dolores “readying her final, solo performance.” This juncture of the book is critical, for in terms of storytelling, it too is Kupperman's final performance. Truth and fiction overlap, and it matters not where fiction begins and truth ends; it is the collision of the two that makes this ending all the more powerful.

When someone close to us has the same resolve as Dolores to take their own life, we are left with wanting to examine the victim's life; prompted with asking questions and trying to see from their perspective; and ultimately forced to live with so many unanswerables. Naturally, this is the trajectory of Kupperman's book: she writes a memoir based on fact intermingled with her imaginings of Dolores's life; assumes Dolores's point of view throughout the process; and, rather than ending with a definitive answer as to what compelled Dolores to end her life, Kupperman shows us the origins of Dolores's pain and the constellation of choices she made throughout life that led her to be found naked and sprawled on her bed, her mouth in that haunting “O” shape.

The Last of Her is not a pleasant book, but it's not supposed to be. It incorporates the disorder of familial relationships and the discomfort brought on by the processes of atonement and forgiveness and merges these scenes of turmoil into a book that, while entertaining, is also disturbing. We need books that are messy in substance and that make us feel uncomfortable. However, Kupperman does well to temper the discomfort through her colorful storytelling and the illuminative nature of her writing. Her book is exploratory rather than directly conclusive, and it is this process of exploration for Kupperman that makes it a thrilling read for us on the other end. This is a book that needs to be on the shelves of our personal libraries, for its themes of familial discord and searching for those whom we have lost are universal.

Katie James is a writer and researcher living in Chicago. She holds an MA in English Literature from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and her scholarly writing has been published in the Nabokov Online Journal.

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