

Koffler Centre of the Arts
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Vine Awards Panel 3: Memoir & Motherhood

Sharon Kirsch, Rachel Matlow, Myriam Steinberg, and illustrator, Christache in conversation with Zelda Abramson

>> Zelda: Before we begin our conversation with the authors I would like to share reviews of the three books we are discussing this evening. I'll begin with Sharon Kirsch, the author of, *The Smallest Objective*. The jurist wrote:

In the wake of her mother's illness, and driven by lore of hidden treasure, Kirsch excavates history from ephemera found in her parent's home; she follows clues to wherever they lead in a meandering path along different research trajectories that unearth mysteries and figures from her family tree. With poetic prose, and a proclivity for listings of things, Kirsch has a microscopic attention to detail that matches the theme of objects put under scrutiny to divine secrets. This writing has a way of hinting at the ineffable and drawing synaptic connections that reveal a real playfulness and love of words. This listing is stylistic, but also a method for coping with grief. There are themes of memory and forgetting, loss and lost things, and of course the search for treasure, where things — letters, postcards, photographs, slides, seashells, and rocks — become archival documents.

>> Rachel Matlow's, *Dead Mom Walking*. The jurist wrote: In this memoir of the illness and death of her mother, Rachel Matlow brings her unusual family vividly to the page, and addresses with both agony and sharp humour her conflict with a beloved mother who refused surgery that all but promised to save her life from cancer, opting instead for unproven treatments that ultimately failed to save her. Matlow delves fearlessly into the deepest and most vulnerable facets of her story with an unforgettably honest, wry, and deeply loving voice, and while her frustration with her mother's decision is palpable, she attempts, with great empathy, to understand and show how and why her mother came to her worldview, and to choices that seemed, on the surface, unfathomable.

>> About *Catalogue Baby*, a memoir of infertility written by Myriam Steinberg, illustrations by Christache, the jurist said: A riveting graphic novel/memoir on infertility. Steinberg leads the reader through the emotional and physical roller coaster of getting pregnant — the highs and lows, her body endlessly prodded and tested, repeated success and rejection, decision-making dilemmas, mixed feelings of failure and self-doubt — all underpinned by humour and determination. The accompanying artwork in hues of purple adds a dramatic effect to the narrative.

So, for the question, my first question, actually, I begin with a question for all the authors. I found the title of all the three books creative and evocative. Can you each talk about the significance of your title, and I am also curious whether the title changed through the writing process. So, I begin with Sharon, *The Smallest Objective*.

>> Sharon: Sure. Well, *The Smallest Objective* begins as my mother has just had to leave her home of 50 years. She has developed dementia, sadly, and moved into an assisted living facility, and I, as her only child, am tasked with emptying her house. This is quite a formidable task involving, at one point, some archeologists who helped me to search for a buried treasure my father alleged he had left in the house for me to retrieve, and I'm not going to divulge to those who haven't read the book whether or not I found the treasure, but I did find many treasures during my search, and among them was my paternal grandfather's dark handle microscope, and I would actually like to just try and show the photograph from the book, because it is the frontispiece. So, I think if people can see it, and if you just note the three lenses pointed downward at the bottom, towards the bottom of the photo, those are, in fact, the objectives lenses. This microscope dates from about 1920, so it's centenary coincided roughly with the appearance of the book, which was a very nice detail, and *The Smallest Objective* is one of the lenses I showed you which has the greatest capacity for magnification, so it is not actually physically larger in appearance than any of the other lenses, but it shows us things at a much greater level of detail and that really became a metaphor for the methodology in the book of, as Zelda was saying, looking at things in great detail close up, and this included both family history and objects, so that is where the title, *The Smallest Objective* comes from. I did change the title of the book a number of times, and I couldn't even tell you all of the titles I had as I was working on the various drafts, but when I happened upon this one, it seemed to me suddenly to be the right thing and fortunately my publisher agreed.

>> Zelda: What was your starting title?

>> Sharon: I'm not sure I can remember. I'd have to look them up. I probably had six or seven over the years, but I can e-mail it to you if you're interested.

>> Zelda: Thank you. Myriam, *Catalogue Baby*?

>> Myriam: So, *Catalogue Baby* was the title that came to me immediately, and really, the only debate was do I do the American spelling or the Canadian spelling, and obviously I ended up with the Canadian one. It came to me because going into motherhood or trying to be a mother and going at it as a single mother by choice, well, I needed to find some sperm and so that meant going to sperm banks and finding a donor and looking through multiple catalogs of men and their profiles and kind of figuring out and making, like, Excel sheets of people that I was interested in using as a donor. So, it was really about, like, all the catalogs that I had to go through and the fact that these babies would not exist were it not for donors.

>> Zelda: So, it was consistent? The first title throughout and it stayed that way?

>> Myriam: It was, yeah.

>> Zelda: Rachel? Dead Mom Walking?

>> Rachel: Yeah, Sharon and Myriam had such great thoughtful answers, and I really just, you know, a good pun is a good pun. I like a good pun, and it's amazing, you know, how far you can run with it. Yeah. As Mary mentioned before, I had made an audio piece using tape that I'd recorded with my mom before she died and kind of strung together this kind of creative conversation, you know, kind of like a Natalie King Cole and Unforgettable, you know, where they sing together. Anyway, so I called that Dead Mom Talking, and then, you know, people would always say, you know, when are you going to write a book or something about this, and I was like, well, when the book comes, it will be Dead Mom Walking, so it kind of just started off as a joke, you know, and then, but I guess it expanded the pun franchise and it stuck. I mean, the first subheading, it was called Dead Mom Walking, a Traumody, but now it's A Memoir of Miracle Cures and Other Disasters.

>> Zelda: Okay. Thank you.

So, Myriam, I'd like to begin with a question with you and just around Memoir is a story or a number of stories woven together to either capture a historical period or a pivotal event in one's life, like becoming a mom, written, I would argue, to inspire others. In writing your memoir, what was the larger message you had hoped or hope to get across to the reader?

>> Myriam: When I was going through my whole journey through infertility and struggling with miscarriage, there was a real lack of resources that I found in terms of things that I could read up on or other people's stories, and there's just a general sense of silence and taboo around maternal fetal health, especially around loss, and so probably about two-thirds of the way, halfway, two-thirds of the way through my journey, I was like, I need to start talking about my story, and I was just kind of trying to figure out, what does that look like and it ended up being like a memoir as a graphic novel, but it's really to kind of give a voice to something that happens to so many people around the world, like every day, countless moms in uterus carriers lose a child or are not able to conceive or go through really traumatic experiences trying to start a family, and it's not this, like, fluffy thing that the media portrays constantly, that getting pregnant is easy or you learn it in school, too. Pregnant is, getting pregnant is easy and that pregnancies are always, you know, they go nine months and woohoo, you have a baby, and that's not the story for so many people, so it was really about shattering that silence and making, making it a real story and that hopefully other people going through it won't feel alone in their own journey and they won't feel broken.

>> Zelda: Okay. Thank you.

Rachel, your mother came across as a determined, strong willed person. Your relationship with her was very special. The closeness was palpable in your writing and her loss, of course, totally devastating. Since writing the memoir, did your views on her

treatment choices shift at all? I guess I'm asking, did you empathize more or less with the decisions she made to reject allopathic remedies, namely, chemotherapy?

>> Rachel: Yeah. Thank you for the question. I don't think my views changed. I still think she made a big mistake, and, yeah, I don't believe any more in the Rife machine or homeopathy than I did before, but I think what has changed is I think I've developed, you know, a greater understanding and perhaps like more empathy for why she made the seemingly illogical choices she made, and I think just even the process of writing the book really allowed me to. You know, I would literally bring my laptop to my therapy sessions and ask my therapist, like, what's going on in this scene, like, why is she doing that? So, I think by pulling in all the threads and spending a couple years kind of going over this, I developed, yeah, a greater understanding of who my mom was, the things in her past, you know, trauma that, you know, may have contributed to the decisions she ultimately made about her cancer treatment, and I think, also, just, I think I also got to just know her more in a good way, too, right? I think I just, you know, my mom did say, like, the relationship continues after a parent dies, and I didn't really get what she was saying, but I think I do feel that now. It has developed, and I think, yeah, I understand her more, and I definitely, you know, have a lot of sympathy and empathy, but, you know, there's still days where I'm frustrated and angry and I'm like, why did she do what she did, and, you know, and I also feel like it's been coming back a lot recently just with the age of COVID and all the kind of lefty hippie anti-vaxxers we're seeing. I think, you know, it also gives me a new perspective on that and also what we're seeing also gives me more perspective on my mom, so, yeah.

>> Zelda: Yeah. I was curious if that would be a dance you would be experiencing. So, I wonder if this is a good time for you to share the reading you have chosen from Dead Mom Walking?

>> Rachel: Yes. So, this is a part from, so after my mom has decided to, yeah, cure herself with all of these natural remedies, a lot of woo woo, there's a point maybe half a year in when I end up moving apartments and I end up having to stay with her for a few weeks, so that's when I get an up close view of what she's really up to in her apartment, like, the first thing is I'm in my old room and, like, where my desk used to be there's a new infrared sauna that she's set up because, you know, infrared is one of the many things to cure cancer, so, all right, so this is me. I move in.

I made a concerted effort not to react. I was just there to hang out, watch reruns of Sex and the City, and enjoy my morning coffee service. No more fits of anger. My new approach was to simply observe and ask questions—without giving any DVD commentary. You catch more flies With raw organic manuka honey, right? And a part of me thought that maybe if Mom described some of her pie-in-sky cures out loud, she'd hear just how ridiculous they sounded.

I looked around. The kitchen cupboard where Mom normally kept tea was now overflowing with bottles of supplements: IP6, vitamin C, vitamin D, selenium, vitamin E,

papaya enzymes, castor oil, probiotics, colloidal silver, random gold-and-green capsules. On the fridge was a card with “Father Zago’s secret recipe” for curing cancer: aloe juice, raw honey, and whisky. It sounded like something on the menu at a hipster cocktail bar.

She was now using only chemical-free makeup and household products. She’d bought a negative ion machine to purify the air. Mom was in Full Healer Mode. An extended game of alternative medicine bingo, my first week at the Hemingway played out something like this: Monday morning - Mom was standing over the kitchen counter, mixing up a bowl of organic cottage cheese and flaxseed oil.

“What’s that?” I asked, poking my head over her shoulder.

“It’s the Budwig diet!” She continued to stir.

“The whah?”

“Johanna Budwig was a famous German scientist in the 1950s,” Mom explained, carrying her breakfast over to the dining room table. “She was nominated for the Nobel Prize seven times for curing cancer, but Big Pharma shut her down because she refused to add chemo to her protocol.”

I kept my mouth shut but couldn’t hide my look of skepticism.

“Look her up if you want some reassurance,” Mom said.

“Reassurance? Of what?”

“That things can work! She had a ninety percent cure rate with her diet.”

I took my mug of coffee and salt down across from her at the table, watching as she took a spoonful in her mouth and wrinkled her nose. “It tastes awful,” she said, grinning performatively. “It’s a lot of flaxseed oil.”

Tuesday evening - Mom’s cell energy doctor, Dr. Beattie, lent her something called a Rife Machine, an old-timey-looking device that would supposedly clear her cancer cells of negative energy. I thought it looked like a Scientology E-meter — and probably just as effective.

Mom held a cylinder grip in each hand and powered it up. “It was created by a man named Royal Rife in the 1920s,” she said. “Of course, he was hounded because he was so successful.”

“How does it work?” I asked.

“My cancer is sending out certain energy.” She looked me straight in the eyes. “We’re talking about the quantum world now. You know we’re all made out of energy, right?”

I nodded tentatively.

“The Rife machine sends out charges that match the frequency of the cancer inside me. It destroys the cells in the same way an opera singer’s voice can break a mirror.”

I laughed out loud. I couldn’t help it. Did she really think she could reverberate her cancer to smithereens? Mom shrugged and rolled her eyes at me. “I’m sure you’ll want to leave Newton behind at some point in your life.”

And it goes on and on and on.

>> Zelda: Thanks. So, where does your rage end and humor begin, or conversely, where does your humor end and your rage begin?

>> Rachel: I mean, that's a good question. We're all Jews here, right?

>> Zelda: I know.

>> Rachel: It's a blurry line. I mean, like, my mother and I have always shared, you know, a sense of humor that's a little dark or morbid. It runs in the family, so it comes naturally, and then I think, you know, it is part of the Jewish tradition. This is how we deal with hard times, but, you know, like, I love Greek memoirs, I love Year of Magical Thinking, but, you know, most cancer stories, they're not a laugh a minute, you know, and I wanted to, but there's a lot of things that are funny about death and grief and dying and so I didn't want to ignore that. I know, like, sometimes humor can be used as a way to, like, deny your real feelings, but I kind of think of it as maybe it's also a way actually into actually tackling these hard truths, and so, yeah, I wanted to explore all the hard, sad things about death, but also the really funny things, because, you know, with my mom, there was a lot. There's a lot of good material.

>> Zelda: Okay. That's great. Thank you. So, I have a question for Sharon now. I see *The Smallest Objective* as a study of how the past informs the present. In searching through and organizing your mother's belongings, you not only unpack the story of your family's history, but you also present a portrait of the Montreal Jewish community in the middle of the last century. The immense amount of detail you present is impressive. I imagine there are many stories you chose not to include.

So, this is a question about structure. Can you share why you chose the stories you did and perhaps even share a story that you chose not to include in the book if you can?

>> Sharon: Okay. Thank you. Well, I guess the stories that I did include were largely based on the objects that I found in the house. These were objects that had belonged to people I came to call my lost family. These were people I either hadn't really met in any substantial way, our paths might have crossed once or when I was very young, or they were people who actually died long before I was born, as was the case with my paternal grandfather. So, those objects spoke to me and inspired me to pursue the stories belonging to those few people. As you well know, Zelda, there were two people, two out of the three personalities in my mother's family. My great uncle Jockey Fleming, who was a notorious gag man and kind of rogue of mid century Montreal and beyond. There are people alive now who would still remember him. He died, I think, in 1974. He was one of the taboo personalities whose belongings and clippings were buried in a suitcase in the basement, and alongside him, also from my mother's side of the family, was the more tragic story of my aunt, Carol Rutenburg, eventually Carol Silver, a young woman of tremendous promise who came of age in Montreal in the 1950s and then died very suddenly and tragically when she was only in her mid 20s, and I won't give away the entire story, and there is some mystery surrounding her

death, but there is an element of motherhood linked to that, as well, since we're talking about motherhood.

So, those were the stories that seemed most prominent and to which I had access, because I couldn't always piece together everything. I did actually travel to Lithuania to try to trace the family history farther back, and my grandfather Simon, whose microscope I showed you the picture of earlier, was the only one of the three personalities depicted in the book who actually had come from Lithuania as a child. He was six-years-old and traveled over in about 1890 to Montreal and became one of the first Jewish faculty members at McGill University, so I would actually have liked to include more about Lithuania in the book, and I did have a chapter actually in Lithuania which my publisher and substantive editor persuaded me to drop, because he felt it was taking away from the focus on Montreal, and those stories were also less tangible in a way. I was exploring the landscape, but there were not quite the same personal details and specifics that I have been able to provide for the Montreal years, for the various people.

>> Zelda: Okay. Thank you. Would you mind reading for us from your book?

>> Sharon: Sure. So, I chose something to do with my mother, actually, since the panel was on motherhood, even though the book does have a lot of historical personalities in it. As I said previously, the book is very much about the magnification of small things and bringing together small details to create a larger whole, and so here I am exposing some of my mother's notes that she wrote incredible numbers of. They were scattered throughout the house and also stashed away. There are notes from over the decades, and so they are part of the raw material I used in this book.

>> The Rutenbergs, my mother's family, show a propensity for scribbling, which I've inherited down the female line. I've alluded before to my mother's exuberant note-taking, hoard of directives, lists, and jottings so composed. Her writing ranged from the provocatively cryptic – Eddie, her brother-in-law: Oka cheese, never peace since Cain killed Abel, U.S. meddling, dial Vietnam - to the transparently banal – Maine: no white necessary for navy outfit, red duster, bras can wash. She composed on the backs of scorecards for the golf course, on the cardboard rectangles from Knee-Highs packages, on sheets from my father's prescription pad. Her notes were rarely disciplined in appearance but, rather, shot out in the unpredictable manner of fireworks, some as linear as Roman candles, others expansive like a chrysanthemum burst, some as wayward as poppers and snaps.

In my mother's later years, the note-taking served as a form of remembering, whereas throughout her life it made for a release from the too-many thoughts in her head. More than anything, the impetus for the scribbles was to avert disaster. Not infrequently, they were addressed to me. For example, the fire drill she sent when I first moved away from home and was living in England in a postgraduate residence named after a Roman emperor. Sloping ceilings, underlined in red. Is the door locked to your neighbour's

room? If possible, crawl with nose and mouth covered to the closest escape. And on the second of two pages, an afterthought: Building location good.

So pervasive was my mother's anxiety that my father would share with relative strangers the following prognosis for his wife: "She has so many worries, if she has one more, she won't be able to worry about it for a month." With no genuine release for her surplus of imagination, my mother as a young housewife became focused on absurdities. What if my father used the pink instead of the blue finger towel. What if the baked prune whip didn't congeal. The prospects equal to her anxiety - for example, the prospect of losing her memory - she didn't worry about enough.

>> Zelda: I love how you express note-taking as a means to avert disaster, either by it being a tool for memory or a tool for emotional expression, but, unbeknownst to your mom, her notes were notes to the future.

>> Sharon: Exactly.

>> Zelda: You see it that way, too?

>> Sharon: I do, absolutely, and I think one of the great satisfactions of writing this book was being able to revive several people, including my mother, who are no longer with us, sadly, and in some cases, that required a greater act of imagination than others, because obviously, my mother was somebody I knew well, whereas the other personalities were people I had to imagine to a larger extent, although I tried to be very careful when I was imagining versus presenting more factual material to make those streams of research or thinking clear, but certainly I am very pleased that I was able to do that. I don't know what my mother would have thought about the book. I did try to portray her as a complete, rounded person with her eccentricities, which I think were a great part of her interest and liveliness, and I'm sure, I can see Rachel nodding there, I'm sure you felt the same in portraying your own mother. But, of course, you want to portray a person with a certain level of honesty, as well, and I think that's always a very fine line to walk. So, I actually had some close friends who knew my mother as we were growing up read through the manuscript and asked them if they felt it was balanced portrayal of her, and I did the same with my husband, who knew my mother for 20 odd years.

>> Zelda: She certainly came across that way, from my standpoint, at least.

The next question I have is for Myriam and Christache, and Christache, I deeply apologize. I totally forgot to ask you to visually describe yourself, so please do that now, and welcome.

>> Christache: No problem. So, I'm a 37-year-old white man with a curly brown mustache and a green hat and headphones, a maroon sweater, and I'm sitting in my office where I do my illustrations with books and papers and calendars around me.

>> Zelda: Okay. So, the illustrations in the graphic novel, Catalogue Baby, powerfully visualize the text. They are in different shades of one color, mostly a purply pink, as everyone will shortly see. Tell us how you came to choose one color only and tell us

why purple, as I wear purple myself, so I don't know if Myriam wants to answer or Christache or both or however you want to.

>> Myriam: Well, part of it was logistic and it ended up just feeling, for me, maybe Christache has a different view on it, but for me, it was really, you know, using, so I, so the initial color came from the magenta of my hair. That was kind of like the root of it, so it was something that is physically me. The story is all about the physicality of getting pregnant and losing pregnancies and not getting pregnant and all of that stuff, so everything is very physical in it, and so using a color that was part of my own body felt like a really good starting point, and I also, of course, it's the color of, you know, blood and all things that are body and so it was, it kind of had that dimension, as well, and then it had another dimension for me, where having everything revolve around a single color meant that you could focus on the story and you didn't have, you weren't, there wasn't, like, all this extra visual, like there was the visual of the images, which was super powerful, but then there wasn't all the other colors that just kind of fed your imagination, as well. It was really, you were able, for me, I'm able to focus on the story a lot deeper using one color as a base. Chris?

>> Zelda: Christache, do you have anything to offer in terms of the actual drawing and using of the hues of the color that were so expressive and, you know, just gave so much mood to the illustrations?

>> Christache: The colors? Yeah, so the one color we chose is magenta, and like Myriam said, it's based on her hair, so in the sort of CMYK, you know, you've got cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, so we have just magenta and black are the only two colors and then every combination of those two. So, it was kind of fun when we first decided on magenta. You can kind of make a little grid of all the potential colors now that we can have, so you can have black 100%, you can have magenta 100%, and then you can have any combination of those two. So, you can have a few light pinks, you can have kind of some dark browns, you can have some sort of purply colors, so that's the range that you've got to work with so that kind of becomes your palette is either black, magenta, or some combination of the both.

>> Zelda: Okay. Anything else you want to share about the before, I'm going to ask you shortly to read and we'll see the illustration, but just is there anything more you'd like to add about the drawing process or how you worked together, or was it just separated into the drawing and the text?

>> Christache: Well, Myriam was very hands on with her ideas, like she presented a book that was not just a script but also had thumbnail sort of stick figure drawings that, so she was sort of involved in the visual creation, as well, and obviously, because it's her and her family and her life, she had lots of input over sending me photographs of the relatives or telling me, oh, my friend doesn't quite look like that, make a bit more like this, and so, yeah, a lot of back and forth and it's very nerve-racking working with real people, you know, because you're sending pictures of someone and saying I think this

looks like you, or I think this looks like your friend, and hoping that they don't get too insulted or take it wrong, so it's definitely a nerve-racking experience like sort of cartooning real people that are going to actually see it, and I was kind of glad that I was, you know, during the pandemic I was not actually in the presence of people opening it for the first time and seeing their cartoon version and having to watch their face and say, that's what I look like? So, in some ways, the pandemic helped me so I didn't have to see those reactions. Hopefully most people liked their cartoon version of themselves.

>> Myriam: They did.

>> Zelda: Myriam, would you like to read to us from Catalogue Baby, and I believe there will be some illustrations shown.

>> Myriam: Yeah, if we can put up the screen share of, there you go, yeah, thank you. So, this, you know, the whole journey to children was a huge emotional rollercoaster, and a lot of, you know, like what Rachel was talking about in terms of the relationship with grief and anger and joy and hilarity, it's like everything was so intermixed, so I ended up having like this very different relationship with grief than I ever thought I would, and so this scene kind of talks about my processing of grief and kind of like the next step after.

Time doesn't make the grief disappear. It simply builds around it. Like any building, though, it has windows, and through those windows, the grief is visible, shining - as present as it ever was. Sometimes the brick wall goes on for a very long time, windowless and protective. And sometimes there's a seemingly endless row of windows exposing the pain. When will I get to the end of it? 6 months, 2 years, 10 years later Until you die. The sadness has become part of my inner landscape. It lives behind the brick wall in the meadow where I used to dance freely under the sun's rays and the moon's glow. It lives surrounded by the colorful flowers of my resilience and heart, the gnarly vines of my confusion and anger and the trees of my eternal self. It has transformed my light-hearted exuberance into cautious hope and an unnamable depth. I miss the glee of the past. The hopeful beginnings of my journey. Now, I hold on by sheer will, both submitting to and in fear of the elements. I listen to the groans of the wind and the whispers of the soil and hope that I am enough. Despite it all, I had it in me for one last try. I had to choose a new egg donor because the first one was no longer available. Curiously, well before the embryo transfer, when the eggs were in the lab being fertilized and growing into blastocysts, I'd go to sleep snuggled by spirits who wanted to stay. There was an intimacy there that dispelled the melancholy around the fact that that there was so far no physical connection between me and the little ones growing in the petri dish. I was confused as to why I could feel more than 1, but a few weeks later, your hormone levels are good and your lining is perfect. Based on your history, we're going put 2 in this time. I think this will give you the best shot of having at least one stick and stay. Eeps! Well, better 2 than none, I guess!

>> Zelda: Okay. Thank you. Well, Myriam, I mean, your book, like the other 2 books, probes grief, loss and a love of life for, you know, in other cases, your mother or for becoming a mother, right? What did you learn about your self and the writing of the memoir, and I'm going to be asking Sharon and Rachel the same question after.

>> Myriam: Oh, my goodness. I learned that resilience, a lot of resilience. I learned that I am a pig-headed mule. I wanted that goal. I was going to get that thing. Yes, I was. I learned really, like, how damn strong people can be when they're on journeys like this, and it's not just me. It's like people telling me their own stories once I started sharing my, and opening up about my own stories is hearing other people's stories and what they went through and how they just keep on keeping on, like, you have to live life. You have to go to work. You have friends. You have family. You have like all this stuff that you have to negotiate as well as deal with what you're trying to do with your own life and building your own family and mitigate your grief and mitigate your courage and your sadness and, like, create a world where you can survive in that and just, like, how strong people are in being able to do that.

>> Zelda: Rachel?

>> Rachel: So, the question is what did I learn about myself. Right?

>> Zelda: Yeah.

>> Rachel: Well, I mean, the honest answer is that, like, I learned I'm a lot more like my mom than I thought. It just sounds so cliché, but I really always was like, the genes are split in half. Like, I look like my dad, I feel like I'm wired like my dad and then, you know, like, I love my mom, but I never identified with being like her, but I guess, you know, I realized that I, too, have my own, you know, fantasies of self-reliance. I also can be emotionally avoidant. All that fun stuff. So, you know, it wasn't just that we had shared interests in, you know, raw organic cheese, you know. We had other things, other similarities, but I think, you know, I also learned just through the process of writing the book, like, I guess the importance of emotions. It sounds so cheesy, I guess, but I've always been such a, like, intellectual person, and I guess my mom was like a case of the ultimate consequence of avoiding your emotions. So, I guess I learned to actually sit with them and that was like what I actually needed to do to actually grieve and process what happened. And, you know, it's funny, because that's what she told me. That was the advice, like, she knew that's what she should have done, that's what she needed to do, you know. It's like the Buddhist way. Like, sitting with the uncomfortable feelings, but I think it was hard for her to do it. Like, it's hard for anybody. Who wants? Who wants to sit with my uncomfortable feelings? Nobody does, but, I guess, yeah, I learned how to, like, do that a little bit more, and I think, yeah, learn how to like realize I'm not in control of everything, either, and that includes that I couldn't have, I wasn't in control of saving my mom. Like, I couldn't have saved her. I really wanted to. There are times when I still think maybe if I did this or that, but, like, ultimately, I think, like, I learned that that was something she needed to do for herself,

like, I couldn't have done it. So, I guess, yeah, through that process, I found, like, more peace to actually be able to grieve, which, you know, doesn't mean I'm still not like, I don't still have some of the rage or some of the frustrations, but, you know, in the end, I'm a lot more at peace.

>> Zelda: Sharon?

>> Sharon: Well, I guess one thing I discovered was, as for my mother, taking notes was essential to my equanimity. I began taking notes as my mother's health was failing. She had not merely dementia, but tragically cancer right at the end of her life, and it was a very, very harsh reality for me to have to deal with, especially as her only child, and on my train trips, they were largely train back from Montreal, I began to take notes that eventually were translated in one way or another into this book, and I honestly think the writing of the book and researching the older family members, as well, the lost family, were really essential to grieving for my mother and coming to terms with that experience.

I also learned that my interest in detail and magnification and close observation was very much a trait throughout many of my family members, and many of them had a medical background. My father and his eldest brother were both doctors. My grandfather was a botanist. My aunt was a physiotherapist. These are all things that depend on very close observation, I think, and although I have taken that tendency, or aptitude, if we can call it that, and translated it into a very different way of life and being, I think there is a commonality there that I found interesting, and then I just learned a tremendous amount about not merely my own family and the immigrant history of it, but Montreal, as well, the Jewish community and its history, which I'm ashamed to say, I knew not that much about growing up. I grew up in a very Jewish environment in Montreal and took many things for granted and didn't really think to ask those questions, and then having lived away and began to think about people who came before me and the various generation of immigrants in the family, I realized what a significant community the Montreal community is and how interesting the history is, and I know, Zelda, that you have written about that yourself.

>> Zelda: Yeah, I had to go away, too, to come back 40 years later.

>> Sharon: Yes, exactly.

>> Zelda: So, I totally understand that.

>> Sharon: Yeah.

>> Zelda: We're actually approaching the end, but I have many more questions, and there are no questions coming forth, but I had asked Myriam, because we were talking about Memoir, and very quickly, you know, I had asked Myriam, what was the larger, you know, message she had had hoped to get across, so I'd like to ask Sharon and Rachel the same thing about your books. What was, you know, what was the larger message? Rachel, we can begin with you in terms of, you know, writing about, you know, your mother's death and your sense of grieving, loss, powerlessness.

>> Rachel: Yeah, I don't know if there's a message, you know. Like, I wasn't really thinking about that, you know? Like, I think it truly was just more for me, like, I'm very happy that the book is connecting with other people and the story resonates, but, yeah, honestly, it was more like an exercise to, to just work stuff out for myself, so I don't know, like, I think there's kind of lots of different messages and themes. There's kind of, I kind of joke that there's something in there for everybody, like, you know, like just what I was saying about that tension between kind of our intellectual minds and our emotional worlds and, oh, you know, logic and reason can so easily be suspended in the face of our fears, so there's that, you know? There's a lot of Jewishness, there's a lot of queerness, there's parent/child relationships, and I think that definitely resonates recently, like, I think we're all seeing parents in the age of COVID like act like reckless teenagers. I don't know. My dad is always running off in an Uber and going places, and I'm like, just stay home. That was before the vaccines. But, yeah, and then, like, there's a lot of workplace drama, kind of a me, too, time's up theme, too, in the book, so, yeah, I don't think there's a message, but I just hope people take, you know, what they want from it.

>> Zelda: Sharon?

>> Sharon: Well, I liked that the jury mentioned my book pointed to the ineffable, in a sense, because I think ultimately, I did discover that a number of things were unknowable and maybe there is a beauty in mystery, and I had to satisfy myself with that at times, so that was one dimension.

I would also say there can be some comfort in trying to situate yourself after having experienced a loss in some broader context, for me anyway. Understanding where my parents came from, the origins of their families, thinking about Lithuania and that connection helped me in a way to feel less alone, and I say in the book that the lost family, in a way, became a sort of constellation for me. I didn't feel entirely alone, even though they were not physically present with me. So, I think as maybe Rachel was saying earlier, you, or perhaps Zelda, you always retain something of the people who are gone, as well, and maybe that is a comfort to others that I would like to convey, if possible.

>> Zelda: Okay. Thank you. Christache, Myriam, Rachel, Sharon. Thank you for your time and the gift of your words to all of us. It's been wonderful hosting this.