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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Writer Unexpectedly Joins the Self-Help Club

By Steve Dollar

On a lark in 2003, Jessica Lamb-Shapiro joined her child-psychologist father at an Atlanta conference led by the creator of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" franchise. Her father, who has published some 40 books without a commercial breakthrough, wanted tips on how to write a successful self-help title, but left uninspired.

The book introduces her to 'a fellowship of nervous freaks.'

The occasion was more fateful for her, leading to a comic article in the literary magazine Believer, and later to her first book, "Promise Land: My Journey Through America's Self-Help Culture." The memoir, which Simon & Schuster releases next week, takes the writer through an assortment of encounters with, as she titles one chapter, "a fellowship of nervous freaks."

Ms. Lamb-Shapiro walks over hot coals at a camp for teenagers. She takes dating notes from the authors of "The Rules" and conquers her fear of flying. She describes all this while providing an offbeat history of self-help from the Victorian Age to the "Hang in There, Baby" kitten poster evoked on the book jacket.

She also, unexpectedly, self-helped herself. "When I started this book, I had no idea it would end at a cemetery with my father, at my mother's grave," Ms. Lamb-Shapiro, who is 36 years old and lives in the West Village, said over brunch at a Chelsea cafe. The book's climactic episode, which required breaking into a Maryland graveyard, confronted something she had long avoided: the emotional impact of her mother's 1979 suicide.

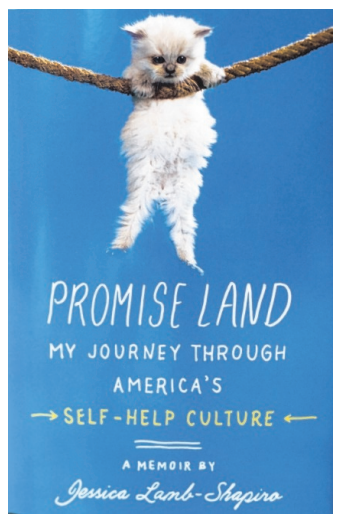
"I'm still shocked by how blind I was to this," she said. "The self-deception thing is so amazing. I was reading books on grief thinking about my mother, and did not think it was related at all."

The confessional element is what distinguishes "Promise Land" from the more straightforward book she had first intended. Ms. Lamb-Shapiro reflects on a quirky childhood in Philadelphia with an entrepreneurial father who invented a series of games for children, such as "feelings puppets" aimed at promoting emotional intelligence.

Others were more avant-garde. "When I went to the real world," she said, "that's when I realized: I cannot believe that I posed with a biofeedback machine in my dad's catalog."

Peter J. Smith for The Wall Street Journal (2)

Author Jessica Lamb-Shapiro discusses her new memoir at a Chelsea restaurant last week.



Ms. Lamb-Shapiro, whose writing has been published in McSweeney's and Open City, maintains a conversational, nonjudgmental tone, whether discussing family secrets or the eccentricities of her fellow seekers. She found a role model in the 19th-century philosopher William James.

"He went to a psychic. He was into seances. He'd try any kind of drug," she said. "I'm very suspicious and skeptical, but that open spirit, that generosity was inspiring. What would William James do? That was my motto."

That spirit impressed Andrew Solomon, who befriended Ms. Lamb-Shapiro when they met as fellows at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H. "She's an incredibly keen observer and can be quite sharply funny," said Mr. Solomon, who won a National Book Award for his 2001 book on depression "The Noonday Demon."

Her book, he added, "succeeds at being caustic, without ever being mean."

Her father, Lawrence Shapiro, whose professional and personal travails are a theme of "Promise Land," can appreciate that. It wasn't easy, he said, having his daughter write about him.

"It's been a very close relationship," Mr. Shapiro said. "It's been very hard for her over the years to say or do anything that might jeopardize that relationship. This was a pretty bold thing for her."

Ms. Lamb-Shapiro found that the book's sometimes uncomfortable candor strengthened their relationship.

"We were always trying to protect each other," she said. "You can only be so close to someone when you're on your best behavior all the time. This is like my big rebellion."

THE JAZZ SCENE | By Will Friedwald

Celebrating Jazzmen and Swing Giants

Bucky Pizzarelli will be joined by Frank Vignola, Ed Laub and Gene Bertoncini at his birthday banquet.

Bucky Pizzarelli 88th Birthday Bash

◆ **The Cutting Room**
44 E. 32nd St., (212) 691-1900
Tuesday
The passing of Frank Wess reminds us to celebrate those few remaining swing giants who still walk the earth—even if they are walking on replacement knees. The venerable Bucky Pizzarelli, a fellow big band-era veteran, inspired, mentored and sired multiple generations of contemporary players. A wizard on his special George Van Eps seven-string instrument, Mr. Pizzarelli is all the guitarist any of us ever need to hear, and therefore the addition of three Pizzarelli-ite plectrists of various generations—Frank Vignola, Ed Laub and Gene Bertoncini—will make this into a spectacular birthday banquet.

Harry Allen Quartet

◆ **The Kitano**
66 Park Ave.
212) 885-7119
Friday
Is Harry Allen the last of the major swing saxophonists? Sometimes it seems that way. On one side of the 47-year-old tenor titan, you have the younger hot jazz clarinetists, who stop where Sidney Bechet ended; on the other side, he's flanked by a generation of "Winter Jazz"-style multireed players, who more or less begin where Lee Konitz leaves off. But Mr. Allen is a ceaselessly inventive improvisor, a ferocious combatant on up-tempo numbers and an incurable romantic on slow ballads. His long-running quartet, with bassist Joel Forbes, drummer Kevin Kanner and the brilliant pianist Rossano Sportiello is one of the major ensembles of the contemporary era.

Marilyn Maye With Billy Stritch, 'Marilyn by Request'

◆ **The Metropolitan Room**
34 W. 22nd St., (212) 206-0440
Through Jan. 12
The exuberant Marilyn Maye makes every night into New Year's Eve. And spending time with Ms. Maye in early January is particularly meaningful; there's a transformative power to her music that makes her the perfect accompaniment for the start of the new year. When she sings the dreaded "Here's to Life" (and somehow all octogenarian singers feel they must), it isn't self-aggrandizing malarkey, but rather a touching and life-affirming hymn of gratitude.

Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

Octogenarian Marilyn Maye makes every night a party.

A Blue Note Records 75th Anniversary Concert

◆ **The Town Hall**
123 W. 43rd St., (212) 307-4100
Wednesday
A high-profile concert positioned two nights before the official opening of the Winter Jazzfest, starring two very different, high-profile 30-something contemporary piano icons, Robert Glasper and Jason Moran, and special guests: singer Bilal, saxophone star Ravi Coltrane, drummer Eric Harlan and bassist Alan Hampton. Ten years ago, it might have all added up to something called the "cutting edge," but now it's no longer clear that the term has any relevance anymore. The music is now about very distinctive individuals crafting a very personal, very meaningful body of work that's complete unto itself—and perhaps that's the best legacy that Blue Note Records could have.

Frank Wess Celebration Of Life Memorial

◆ **St. Peter's Church**
619 Lexington Ave.
(212) 935-2200
Saturday
Frank Wess, who died in October, was in many ways the archetypical 21st-century jazz musician, who juggled a career as sideman—most famously with Count Basie—and as a leader of his own bands, played at least three horns brilliantly and was a gifted arranger and composer as well. Mr. Wess's 90-plus years on the planet aren't only cause for celebration (his peers, the trumpeter Jimmy Owens and fellow reed giants Jerry Dodgion and Jimmy Heath, will see to that), but so too is the release of what might be the tenor great's final session, "Magic 201," recorded in 2011. His 91 years hardly seems like enough time for Mr. Wess to have achieved all he did.

What Might Have Been in the Ring

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for about a month. Mr. Ali, for example, wore out his opponents with chatter, said actor Roger Casey. "He would talk to you, frustrate you. He was above you, the greatest of all time," he said. "That constant barrage of insults is hard to get around."

"Both Tyson and Ali were playing characters," Mr. Farrington said.

The actors also had to master the fighters' stances and movements. "Tyson's style was the peek-a-boo style. He was very compact," said Mr. Farrington. "Ali was a dancer. He would move around the ring gracefully."

Mr. Casey and fellow actors Femi Olagoke, Dennis A. Allen II and Jonathan Swain had different levels of stage-combat experience, but they all spent months training at Gleason's, a Brooklyn boxing gym where both Mr. Tyson and Mr. Ali once worked out.

"There is boxing fit, and there is regular fit. I thought I was fit until I boxed," said Mr. Casey. "Three minutes, with one minute to recover, is like running for an hour."

"Tyson vs. Ali" is a co-production of Performance Space 122—it is part of its COIL Festival this month—and the arts group 3-Legged Dog, which is also filming the show in 3-D.

"We try to find a way that this work can be produced so it exists on multiple platforms," said Kevin Cunningham, executive artistic director of 3-Legged Dog. That helps broaden the audience beyond its theatrical run, since each performance seats only about 80.

Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

Director Reid Farrington

A similar process led to the successful film project "Charlie Victor Romeo," for which 3-Legged Dog was an executive producer. A chilling 1999 play that re-created dialogue retrieved from black-box recordings before six airplane crashes, it was filmed in 3-D and shown last year at the Sundance Film Festival and New York Film Festival.

Film Forum will screen it for two weeks, starting Jan. 29. "We are trying to create a catalog of New York experimental artists and get that work out to the public," said Mr. Cunningham.

"Tyson vs. Ali" will similarly become a movie, with footage taken from this month's live performances. The participants aren't giving away spoilers.

"They were both such skilled boxers," said Mr. Casey. "It would be just who slipped first."

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