

Author Q&A:

A Conversation with Mimi Baird, Author of *He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him*

By Rachel Pastiva

*Mimi Baird was only six years old when her father, Dr. Perry Baird, disappeared from her life. Told only that he was "sick" or "away," her mother quickly remarried and put the past behind them. Growing up she learned that her father suffered from manic depression, but it wasn't until 50 years later, when a manuscript written by her father showed up at her front door, that she discovered the struggles he faced suffering from a poorly understood disease in the 1940s and his contribution to the study of bipolar disorder. In *He Wanted the Moon*, Mimi shares his story, and hers. A graduate of Colby-Sawyer College, Mimi worked at the Harvard Graduate School of Education until moving to Woodstock, Vermont, where she worked as an office manager at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. Mimi has two children and four grandchildren. This is her first book.*

Rachel Pastiva: I imagine it was an overwhelming experience to read your father's manuscript 50 years after he disappeared from your life. What was the first thing that struck you while reading through it?

Mimi Baird: As I gazed upon those 1,172 pieces of delicate paper, the sight of my father's handwriting was overwhelming. The pages were proof that he actually had been alive. The absence of my father, without adequate explanation, allowed me to think he was never coming back. But he did come back, just in a different form.

RP: How do you think including your father's medical records among his own writing impacts the understanding of his experience?

Mimi Baird: Because my father was unmedicated, his thinking and writing are pure manic in expression. He may write something that he thought was happening when in essence it was the complete opposite. Therefore, the medical records allow the reader to have a clear view of the manic mind with its swings of emotion and extreme activity. This book could be an important tool for freshman medical students when confronted with this type of illness.

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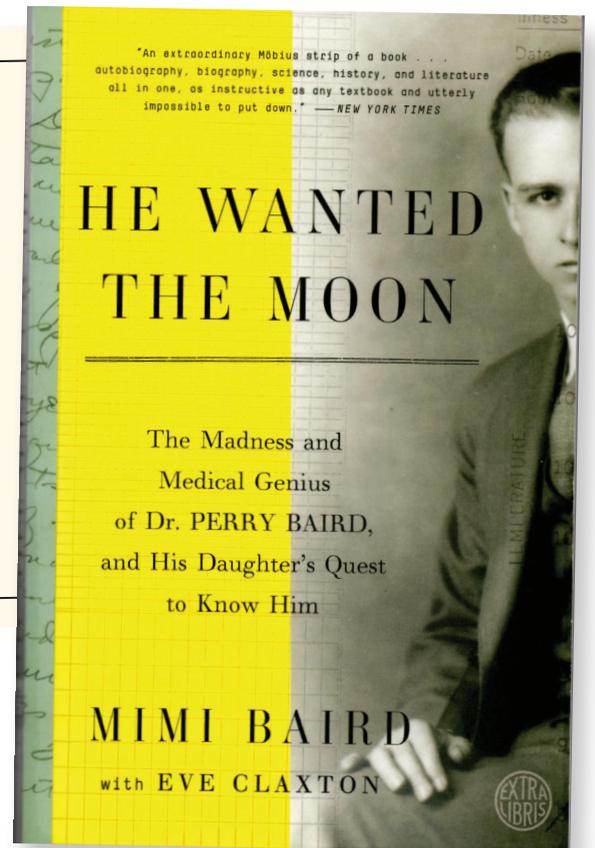
RP: You briefly mention the potential link between genius and mental illness, referencing Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched by Fire*. Your father was a highly intelligent, forward thinking, passionate, and persistent man. Do you think these qualities were somehow connected to his manic depression?

Mimi Baird: Absolutely. Many talented people from all walks of life and interests have a touch of mania in some form. One of the problems with taking medication nowadays is that a person likes being in the exciting land of a manic episode, and, therefore, won't take their prescriptions. This can sometimes lead to uncontrollable behavior.

RP: How do you think the public would've received your father's book had he been able to publish it in the 1940s?

Mimi Baird: It would have been difficult. My father was smart and charming, but he was also scary and unpredictable. New England was still in the iron grip of the Freudian philosophy dictating that mental illness was psychological. My father's generation, as well as generations before that, did not like to talk about unseemly things. My father's plight was something one simply did not talk about. This is why my father was eventually abandoned by his friends and colleagues.

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RP: How do you think society's view of mental illness has changed since your father's experience?

Mimi Baird: I am not a professional, but I do sense an increase in awareness and understanding on the part of the general public towards the mentally ill. Talking about this problem is done more freely and with more compassion. However, there is still fear and stigma about this disease, and silence still prevails in families stricken with this health problem. The care of the mentally ill is marginal in many states, and some ancient methods are still used in handling distraught patients. Progress is essential. I hope my father's manuscript will help lead to desperately needed mental health care and reform.

RP: I was excited to see that it was a University of Michigan doctor, Dr. Elliot Valenstein, who first publicly acknowledged your father's important contribution to the study of manic depression. Has the medical community embraced your father's contribution?

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Mimi Baird: *He Wanted the Moon* is slowly making its way into the medical community. Speaking at Vanderbilt University and the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association are two recent examples. One of my goals in writing the book is to restore my father's place in medical history. He was a pioneer in the research he conducted regarding the concept that manic depressive psychosis was physiological, not psychological. Coming to visit the Heinz C. Prechter Bipolar Research Fund at the University of Michigan this October is a huge honor and will enhance my quest.

RP: Preparing your father's story for publication was a decades' long labor of love, and now you continue to support his experience through speaking engagements. What has this process taught you about the bond between a father and daughter?

Mimi Baird: It is never too late to re-establish a relationship with a parent even if they are estranged or deceased. At some point that connection was strong and lingers in our cellular memory. I encourage people to try and confront past differences with a parent. Ask questions and conduct research. You will enter your later years as a more contented and peaceful person.

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He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him is available at Crazy Wisdom for \$16.



Mimi Baird will be featured at the **10th Annual Prechter Lecture** at the University of Michigan's Kahn Auditorium, at the A. Alfred Taubman Biomedical Science Research Building on **Wednesday, October 19, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.** Visit prechterfund.org for more information.

