

Q & A with Debbie Russell

1. How did you come to write *Crossing Fifty-One*?

The idea for the book first came to me in 2005 when I stumbled across a file of family letters from my grandfather's stay at the "Narcotic Farm." I remember feeling really stunned by the discovery, especially since no one in the family had ever mentioned it. The letters revealed a loving and strong family dynamic, in a time when communication by letter was typical. At that time, I wanted to make the letters into a book. I believed they provided a compelling story, and I took a short course entitled "How to Get Your Book Published." Then life got in the way, and I abandoned the project.

When my dad was accepted into hospice in 2016, I became acutely aware that my paternal lineage was disappearing. I'd always been interested in family history and genealogy and felt enormous pressure to preserve everything I knew about my dad and his family. I wanted to understand my dad through his experience as a son and brother, so I brought the letters out again. The events that followed were so remarkable that I knew I had to somehow weave my own experience with that of my grandfather's.

2. What's the story behind the title of your book?

My grandfather and I were each 51 years-old when we decided to get professional help. I didn't want to call it a memoir because with memoir/autobiography, the focus is on the author. I wish there was a genre for nonfiction family saga because this is more a family saga type story. While I play the lead in this book, my intent was to honor my dad and my amazing paternal lineage. The book flips back and forth between 1951-52 and 2015-2018.

3. What sort of research did you do for your grandfather's story?

When I went back to the letters, I googled the official name of the institution, which led me to an amazing book entitled *The Narcotic Farm: The Rise and Fall of America's First Prison for Drug Addicts*. The fact that my grandfather would choose to submit himself to the regulations of a locked prison-type environment was remarkable. The letters show him to be a student of his own experience. He requested several times that they be preserved. I've often wondered if he intended to do something with them academically.

While writing the book, I found a *New York Times* article from 1951 about another doctor who tried, but failed the program. He only stayed there for three months and left against medical advice. My grandfather described many of his fellow patient-inmates and noted some voluntary patients left early. He made very clear that he planned to stick it out until he was deemed appropriate for discharge. I was able to correspond with a researcher at the

University of Oklahoma, whose book on the Fort Worth facility is due out later this year. I also connected with Dr. Campbell, the author of *The Narcotic Farm*, which was lovely. Just recently I found a report from the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General about the facility's Covid response which includes interior photos. Once again, I marveled at my grandfather's ability to live the life of a prisoner for four months.

4. You also found a couple of historically significant relatives in your family research, tell us about them.

Growing up, I met my great uncle (by marriage) J. Lee Rankin and even gave a presentation about him when I was in sixth grade. He served as general counsel to the Warren Commission when they investigated the assassination of President Kennedy. My great, great uncle Howard Hyde Russell was a fierce advocate for Prohibition. He began his professional career as a lawyer and then quickly switched to being a preacher. He wrote a book in 1893 called *A Lawyer's Examination of the Bible*. I found him on Ancestry and learned of his great collection of papers, which is stored at the University of Michigan.

His brother, my great grandfather, Calvin Parker Russell, was a pioneer, ranchman, entrepreneur, and prolific writer. I'm holding his memoir in my author photo. It's wonderful to have his life preserved as it is.

5. You've written candidly about your time in therapy. What made you decide to share that very personal information?

Cameron Crowe once said, "the personal is the universal." When I started therapy, I told very few people. As a former practicing lawyer, I know firsthand the stress and conflict that comes with the job. I also know that we are wired to not display any sort of weakness, lest it gets exploited by the opposition. I had arrived at a point personally and professionally where I could no longer trust my own ability to manage my anticipatory grief. I was panicking when I considered a future without my dad.

Even though the pandemic and Prince Harry have made it more acceptable to talk about mental health and therapy, I think it's different when a regular person makes this kind of disclosure, as opposed to a celebrity. I struggled in therapy, primarily because I wanted to control everything. Also, my first therapist had her own issues, and I believe they contributed to my sense of not getting anywhere. Thankfully, I inherited my grandfather's curiosity, so I took it upon myself to figure out some of the work I needed to do. I've also learned how to better advocate for myself in a therapeutic environment.

6. What does your family think about the book?

I interviewed my aunt extensively when I was writing the book. She and I had communicated about the letters back in 2017 when I first shared a few with her. She had

just turned eighty at the time and had not even thought about them for decades. It was a delicate process initially, but after my dad passed, I think she became more willing to talk about that time in their family's history. My dad was so willing to speak of his memories about his father and I learned just how close they were. I think my grandfather's premature death really weighed on my dad, but he had nobody with whom to share that grief, especially when our family moved from San Diego in 1968.

When I first told my aunt that I had completed the manuscript, she was resistant to reading it. She asked me point blank: "will I be embarrassed?" Of course, that's always a concern with writing a memoir. So, I sent it to her. Within a couple of days, she emailed me the following response: "Your book is absolutely amazing. I couldn't put it down. I have been totally captivated and can't wait to talk about it. So well written!!! And I learned a lot and was reminded of a lot." That makes me so happy.

7. In the book, your relationship with your mother is very strained. What is it like now?

I no longer have any contact with her. It's unfortunate, but after my dad died, our family kind of blew up. I've described him as the buffer and the glue for the rest of us. I found that being around my mother was simply too detrimental to my own mental health. It's clear she never really attached to me the way a mother should, and yet she blamed me for that. I believe at some point, family ties should be severed for the good of everyone involved.

8. What do you hope your readers take away from *Crossing Fifty-One*?

Three things. First: never give up! Most of us will go through dark periods in our lives. From my experience, middle age is a fertile ground for lots of pain and suffering – mental, emotional, and physical. We are, quite literally, starting to fall apart physically and for those with children, the family unit feels like it's falling apart as kids grow up and leave the nest. We start to question our identities and self-worth. When we can envision our futures and start taking steps to make those dreams a reality, we can find purpose in new and different experiences.

While I was writing the book, my aunt found a letter my dad had sent her right before he turned (wait for it...) 51. He was in a very dark place. That letter broke my heart because as a 13-year-old kid, I had no idea what he was going through. But he never gave up. As I tell him in the final chapter of the book, he is the very best part of me, and he lives on through me.

Second: it's never too late to redefine yourself or your life. Oftentimes we remain stuck in situations that are no longer serving us because the thought of change is scary. In my book, my financial planner is the unlikely igniter of the fire of change within me. It was a big,

terrifying change, especially with everything that was happening in my life at that time, but this change ultimately turned out to be a dream come true.

Finally, family stories are so important to share, even if they carry the weight of shame, because forgiveness and understanding are important parts of healing. I grew up with barriers erected by my mother and it really affected my relationship with her, as well as my perspective of the greater world.

9. Are you working on another book?

I am! It's fiction, but based on a true story, and another look at the origins of dysfunctional family dynamics.

10. Will you ever go back to practicing law?

I will never say never! Right now, however, my creative brain is so very happy getting to write about things that are important to me. I feel like I can be helpful doing what I'm doing now. That said, you just never know what the future will bring.

11. Where can readers find you?

My website is www.debbie-russell.com and my socials and blog all live there. I send out a monthly newsletter, which, as of late, has been about the journey of getting *Crossing Fifty-One* published.