



# The Book of Knowledge and Wonder

*Steven Harvey*

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The Book of Knowledge and Wonder is a memoir about claiming a legacy of wonder from knowledge of a devastating event. In some ways it has the feel of a detective story in which Steven Harvey pieces together the life of his mother, Roberta Reinhardt Harvey, who committed suicide when he was eleven, out of the 406 letters she left behind. Before he read the letters his mother had become little more than her death to him, but while writing her story he discovered a woman who, despite her vulnerability to depression, had a large capacity for wonder and a love of familiar things, legacies that she passed on to him.

The book tackles subjects of recent fascination in American culture: corporate life and sexism in the fifties, mental illness and its influence on families, and art and learning as a consolation for life's woes, but in the end it is the perennial theme of abiding love despite the odds that fuels the tale. As the memoir unfolds, his mother changes and grows, darkens and retreats as she gives up her chance at a career in nursing, struggles with her position as a housewife, harbors paranoid delusions of having contracted syphilis at childbirth, succumbs to a mysterious, psychic link with her melancholic father, and fights back against depression with counseling, medicine, art, and learning.

Harvey charts the way, after his mother's death, that he blotted out her memory almost completely in his new family where his mother was rarely talked about, a protective process of letting go that he did not resist and in a way welcomed, but the book grows out of a nagging longing that never went away, a sense of being haunted that caused the writer to seek out places alone—dribbling a basketball on a lonely court, going on long solitary bicycle rides, walking away from his family to the edge of a mountain overlook, and working daily at his writing desk—where he might feel her presence.

In the end, the loss cannot be repaired. Her death, like a camera flash in the dark, blotted out all but a few lingering memories of her in his mind, but the triumph of the book is in the creative collaboration between the dead mother, speaking to her son in letters, and the writer piecing together the story from photographs, snatches of memory, and her words so that he can, for the first time, know her and miss her, not some made up idea of her. The letters do not bring her back—he knows the loss is irrevocable—but as he shaped them into art, the pain, that had been nothing more than a dull throb, changed in character, becoming more diffuse and ardent, like heartache.

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