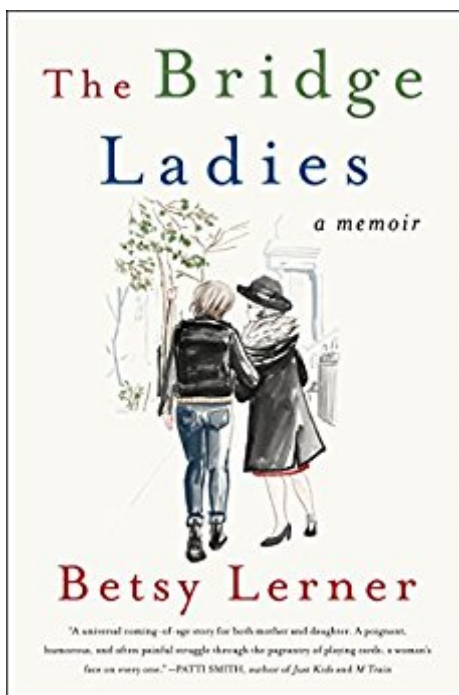


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The Bridge Ladies: A Memoir



Synopsis

A fifty-year-old Bridge game provides an unexpected way to cross the generational divide between a daughter and her mother. Betsy Lerner takes us on a powerfully personal literary journey, where we learn a little about Bridge and a lot about life. After a lifetime defining herself in contrast to her mother's "don't ask, don't tell" generation, Lerner finds herself back in her childhood home, not five miles from the mother she spent decades avoiding. When Roz needs help after surgery, it falls to Betsy to take care of her. She expected a week of tense civility; what she got instead were the Bridge Ladies. Impressed by their loyalty, she saw something her generation lacked. Facebook was great, but it wouldn't deliver a pot roast. Tentatively at first, Betsy becomes a regular at her mother's Monday Bridge club. Through her friendships with the ladies, she is finally able to face years of misunderstandings and family tragedy, the Bridge table becoming the common ground she and Roz never had. By turns darkly funny and deeply moving, *The Bridge Ladies* is the unforgettable story of a hard-won "but never-too-late" bond between mother and daughter.

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Customer Reviews

Betsy Lerner Talks With George Hodgman George Hodgman is the author of *Bettyville: A Memoir*.

George Hodgman (GH): I just read that you and your mother are going to Reno for the National Bridge Championships. You're like Ryan and Tatum in *Paper Moon*. So tell me, have you actually started to like playing bridge and how did this all begin and what's next? Mother and daughter swimming with the dolphins?

Betsy Lerner (BL): Swimming with the dolphins is so Eighties. Bridge is the future. Think about it, we're living longer than ever before. You're going to want to play Bridge in the nursing home. I started by taking lessons at the Manhattan Bridge Club. I was immediately hooked, though my enthusiasm sadly exceeds my ability.

GH: When I wrote my book, I had to worry and I did worry a lot about my mother's reaction. How in the world have you managed to keep all five ladies happy and not calling lawyers or launching missile strikes in your direction? Very tough to please these folks AND keep your honesty/integrity as a writer.

BL: No way was I going to screw them. If it was off the record it stayed off the record. I still live in New Haven and have to eat lunch in this town. I tried very hard to capture their essence, and their personalities. You gave me advice at one point that guided me: you never regret keeping something unkind out. It served me well.

GH: I am really fascinated by the longevity of these bridge groups all around the country, women who have played together for half a century sometimes. It is truly an amazing tradition. They must have developed incredible intimacies, but also incredible rivalries and resentments. Could you please talk a little about the whole personal dynamic of your mother's club?

BL: My mother's club has been together for over 50 years. But they don't seem incredibly intimate. In part, it's generational. "Sharing," for folks in their generation, meant splitting a sandwich, not spilling your guts. Observing the dynamic in my mother's club reminded me of a long marriage; sometimes you have to keep it zipped for the greater good.

GH: These women have led what you might call traditional or conventional lives. Do you think they ever felt jealous of your life? Were there things about their choices and lives that made them have any regrets?

BL: I've heard regret in their voices. Most poignant is the lady who gave up on a much-desired acting career because she couldn't imagine going to New York or Los Angeles on her own. They all gave up something, but they also believed they had the life they wanted.

GH: I think that Bridge sounds like a very hard game, and you do a good job of capturing the difficulty not just of learning it, but of sitting down with these veterans who are really serious about it. Talk a bit about your learning curve and please, tell me, are you a good player now?

BL: I no longer suck. Let's leave it at that.

GH: You are a very busy literary agent. You write. You have a husband, a daughter, a host of lovers

throughout the country. You are a very ambitious woman, but don't come off like that at all. Can you tell us a little bit about how you have managed to "have it all"? BL: First, I only need five hours of sleep. Second, I am incredibly compulsive. I am ambitious, but I am also filled with self-loathing so it balances out. I try to keep my lovers happy.

When Betsy Lerner (author of "Forest for the Trees," and "Food and Loathing") was a little girl, the "Bridge Ladies," a group of suburban Jewish women in Connecticut who played the game regularly at her mother's house were a source of glamour, though as a teen, she later dismissed them as square and disconnected from the growing feminist movement. Years later with a husband and daughter of her own, Betsy moved back to her parents' area, first in order to help her father who had a stroke. Later, in the winter of 2013, she came to the aid of her mother, who was recovering from surgery, and discovered that the Bridge ladies, were still a fixture, bringing food and meeting for games about fifty years later. To her surprise, after asking to sit in on a game, Betsy developed an interest in the game and began to take lessons. She also became interested in the five women's lives and began to interview them as well, a process which would wind up lasting almost three years (and culminate with this memoir). Her journey would take her to places like the Manhattan Bridge Club (where she found the teachers varied greatly in their effectiveness and humility), into therapy to help her understand the friction in her relationship with her own mother, and into five remarkable octogenarians': Rhoda, Bette, Bea, Jackie and Roz's lives. At first, Betsy, a literary agent without a knack for numbers found mastering bridge tricky but was aided when a teacher recommended that she think of playing Bridge as telling a story. Eventually, she began to fill in on occasion at the Bridge table for her mother's group. She also began discovering that her ideas of who the Bridge ladies were weren't quite accurate to say the least. But though they didn't share (or overshare) the way later generations do, they still revealed fascinating things about their lives. From them, Betsy learned about how that generation handled issues like infertility, adoption and even the death of a young child. She also learned about their interests, educational experiences and romantic relationships both then and now. In doing so, Betsy came to better understand herself, her mother in a way that she hadn't been able to previously, and the game of Bridge, which turned out to be less dry than it had seemed to her as a teen. "Bridge," she writes, "is the mother of all metaphors." It's been said that well-behaved women seldom make history, but they are capable of making absorbing, even moving reading with the right author. And Betsy would agree. "They haven't fought any wars or even picketed any causes. For the most part, they upheld the conventions they were raised with. Mostly, they've hung in." But, she concludes, "I never thought I would say this, but I

think the Bridge Ladies are brave." It's more than likely that the reader will share her view.

Betsy Lerner's relationship with her mother was always fraught, from the time when, as a pot-smoking rebellious teenager, she balked at her mother's goals for her: marriage to a nice Jewish man, followed by children. Decades later, married and with a daughter, Lerner is living close to her widowed octogenarian mother in New Haven, and is married with a daughter, but their relationship is still strained: her mother still rolls her eyes at everything from Lerner's clothing choices to the fact that a rug in her household is fraying at its edges. Could joining in at the fringes of her mother's 50-year-old bridge game -- a circle of Jewish matrons whom Lerner has watched mature and grow old, and whose children she grew up alongside in Connecticut -- give her insight into her mother and her own generation? And is there a wider lesson here for Lerner's readers? The answer to the first is yes, perhaps -- or at least, there is a measure of peace to be found for the restless Lerner who seems to struggle constantly with the idea that these women, who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s, might have priorities so very different from her own. Why didn't they yearn for more? More from a marriage? More of a personal life? More open exchanges with their friends in their weekly bridge games? These are questions she keeps returning to in her conversations with each of these women, individually and collectively, and in her own ruminations. The women, for their part, deal with her graciously; Lerner sometimes sounds like the irritating adolescent still struggling to define herself against her elders. Lerner also sets out to study the game of Bridge itself -- to immerse herself in its rules and strategy, with decidedly uneven results. The contrast between her frustration as she tries, in a half-hearted and frustrated manner, to acquire Bridge skills, and the smooth prowess with which her mother's circle have honed their skills over the years, is telling, and reflects an underlying theme of the book, even if it's one I'm not altogether sure that Lerner recognized she was developing. For me, the real poignancy and appeal of this memoir were to be found in the way Lerner has captured the grace, fortitude, stubbornness and dignity with which a generation of Jewish matrons in a particular corner of the world are choosing to experience their final years. They know, better than we, what it is like, and that what lies ahead will mean further lack of dignity and independence. They have experienced far more than we have, and done it without asking all and sundry for emotional support or mood-altering medications. I don't know that I'd find them easy to live with, but I came away from this book admiring their stoicism, their faith to their principles as they saw them, and their lack of sentimentality. I didn't see it as humorous or funny, as others have noted, but rather as a moving testimonial to how a group of women adjust to moving through the stages of life and dealing with challenges and setbacks, as recounted through the eyes of a

not-always-comprehending member of the next generation. Ultimately, though, it's a memoir -- another memoir about strained and troubled family relationships, and while it's well-written, that part of it doesn't really rise beyond the pack. And the group of five women, for all Lerner's careful efforts to make them distinct personalities, ultimately aren't that different. I remember that Rhoda was the beauty and Bette was the wannabe actress, but beyond that, the specifics of their lives blur slightly. The collective, however, is interesting enough to make this appeal to avid memoir readers. If you're not interested in this particular demographic, or type of memoir (mothers/daughters; the elderly reminiscing) I would steer clear. It doesn't contain the same magical "ingredient X" that some memoirs do that make it rise above the pack.

Entertaining women not too different from the ones I observed playing bridge in my own home while I was growing up. An interesting study of women of a certain era with a few tidbits about bridge tossed in.

An enjoyable read about mothers and daughters and reaching understanding and tolerance for generational differences. Because I struggled with learning bridge, I could relate to all the feelings of inadequacy that the author felt. Of course learning bridge was part of the journey. The other part of learning how to connect with others, accept their shortcomings, and realize their value is the true reward for the author. If your mother was in a bridge club, you'll relive what went on at your house years ago. Most of the ladies in my mom's club are gone now, but this book made me fondly remember all of them, my mother most of all.

I loved this book so much that I will probably read it again. I am the age of "the bridge ladies" and although I started out with my "Friday group" quickly graduated to tournament bridge which I still play on a daily basis. Pieces of each of the ladies lives is my life story. The book made me laugh and it made me cry. Don't know when I have enjoyed a book more.

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