

>> This is Matt Raymond at The Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. For the first time in the festival's nine year history, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will serve as honorary chairs of this free event. Held on the National Mall Saturday September 26, the 2009 festival will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. These podcast interviews with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival Website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor to talk with the critically acclaimed author Sue Monk Kidd, who is joined by her daughter, fellow author Ann Kidd Taylor. Ms. Kidd first emerged on the writing scene with her debut book "God's Joyful Surprise" describing the beginnings of her spiritual search. Her first fiction novel "The Secret Life of Bees," published in 2002 has sold more than six million copies and spent over two and a half years on The New York Time Best Seller List. It was awarded the 2004 Book Sense Paperback Book of the Year, and was chosen as Good Morning America's Read This Book Club pick. "The Secret Life of Bees" was adapted into a movie in 2008 and won the People's Choice and the NAACP Image Awards for best picture. In 2005 Ms. Kidd penned the acclaimed "The Mermaid Chair" and won the 2005 Quill Award for general fiction. She's currently working on her newest book "Travelling with Pomegranates, A Mother Daughter Story" co-authored with her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor. Ms. Kidd, Ms. Taylor, thank you so much.

>> Thank you and we're glad to be here.

>> Well good to talk with you. Let's start out with the new book, "Traveling with Pomegranates." What is that about?

>> Well "Travelling with Pomegranates" is a mother daughter story on one level, but it's also the narrative of Ann crossing a threshold into young womanhood, my daughter, and myself crossing the threshold at the other end of life, into old womanhood. So it's probably sort of three stories about our relationships to ourselves at critical thresholds and our relationship together. But it's all set against the backdrop of three trips we took to Greece, Turkey, France and then back to Greece.

>> Is this, working as a mother and daughter team, is this something you've thought about for a long time? And how did this come about?

>> Well, I think that it actually began in 2000, so a few years ago. I first had this idea of writing a book about my travels. And I worked on that for a few years and then I came to discover that I felt like I was only telling half the story. That there was my mom's story and there was the story of our relationship. So it wasn't until, my goodness, 2006 that we actually began writing this book together. I think I asked my mom in 2003. And my timing was pretty bad. She was about to begin writing "The Mermaid Chair." So, it took some time for us to get to it. But, eventually we did.

>> Mm-hmm. What are the dynamics of both working together as authors and working together as mother and daughter?

>> Well, it's been very interesting. A lot of times when people discover that Ann and I were writing a book together and we were mother and daughter, one of the first reactions would be well, are you still speaking? So I thought that was very, almost kind of funny, but it was also very revealing about how really complex and sometimes ambivalent a mother-daughter relationship can be. But we found it to be, you know, a real wonderful kind of collaboration. And it in a way deepened our relationship. You know, we worked -- we had to figure out how to do this. I've never written book with anyone else before. So, you know, it kind of doubles everything. The time it takes to write it. It took us about three years to write "Traveling with Pomegranates." So it's newly published now. And I think we found that she would write at her house and I would write at my house. And that would work well. And then we'd come together and hand each other our chapters. And then give each other feedback. So we sort of figured it out as we went.

>> Hmm. And Ms. Taylor, what is your perception of that?

>> Well, I think in the beginning there was a lot of logistical things that we had to discover. You know, just how -- we didn't know if we were going to work in alternating chapters because we've got two voices. So there were just some things we had to figure out. And it turned out that it is told in alternating voices, alternating chapters. But certainly, we found that I -- I found I could not write at my mom's house. I needed to be at my house. So we worked in separate places. And I think that the other side of that, working together with my mom, we found that we were pretty compatible collaborators and that I think something that surprised us was that working together on this book, you know, for so long and so intensely, we discovered that it was a good experience for our relationship. That it actually deepened our relationship in many ways, just like the travelling has that we wrote about. So that was a great surprise.

>> I have to ask about the title, "Traveling with Pomegranates." What does that mean?

>> Well, it comes from the myth, the old Greek myth of Demeter of Persephone which is probably one of the oldest mother-daughter tales in the world. When Ann and I set out on our very first trip, it was 1998. And Ann was graduating from college and I was turning 50 years old. And that all coincided the same summer. And so we thought, well we'll mark these milestones and we'll go to Greece. It was all, you know, rather a lavish idea. But that's what we did. And we got over there and we found ourselves within the first 24 hours in front of this marble relief of Demeter and Persephone in the Athens museum. And I remember being struck by that and remembering that myth. And it propelled us in a way into the myth to read it and talk about it. And it started this whole conversation. And what began to become clear to me was that we had really come to Greece surreptitiously to rediscover one another. And a lot of silence and distance had crept into our relationship as mother and daughter. We were at a crossroads. You know, Ann had been off at college.

And I think we could have easily begun to lose one another and we needed to shift the relationship into something new and kind of re-invent it. So at that point, this myth of Demeter and Persephone began to guide our travels and our relationship. But the pomegranate is a symbol in the myth of fertility, of each -- of Persephone, this young woman finding her own independent life. It's a very -- it's a wonderful symbol for mothers and daughters.

>> Hmm. From a writer's perspective, did you find that either one of you influenced the other's writing style?

>> Well, I think that the challenge for me was to, at the beginning of this process, to find my voice. This was my first book. And I think the -- I wanted my voice to be authentic. And I wanted it to be natural and organic. And I wanted it to be true. And I wanted to be honest about it. So I think initially it was me finding my voice. And then once I could find it, I wanted to stay faithful to that. But I think that my voice is very different from my mom's. And I think -- I don't know if our styles are similar. But I know that my mom was, you know, has always been a kind of writing mentor for me.

>> Mm-hmm. Ms. Kidd, your book "The Secret Life of Bees" has a large focus on mother-daughter relationships as well. Did you find yourself reflecting back on that book or are the experiences in writing it as you went ahead writing the new book? Well, actually, the timing is slightly reversed in that. This, the book, "Travelling with Pomegranates," though it's you know, newly out, it actually -- the experiences we write about actually took place nine or ten years ago. So it preceded me writing "The Secret Life of Bees." In fact, when Ann and I were travelling together, I was carrying this idea for "The Secret Life of Bees." And I was also carrying around the desire to become a novelist. That had not crystalized for me at all. You know, at turning 50 I was trying to envision my older years, what was I going to do? What was my third act? And I think you begin to get in touch as a woman with those things that are still yet to be done. And I had a dream of wanting to become a novelist. But I hadn't acted on it. So that became real potent for me at that particular time. So I went off on these trips with that question in my mind. Am I going to take this up and act on this passion I have to become a novelist? And what about this little seed of an idea for this novel about a girl who has bees living in the wall of her house and goes off in search of her mother. What am I going to do about that? And so in "Travelling with Pomegranates" I'm actually recounting part of my own coming to terms with all of that and how that crystalized for me, and in fact, how travelling in Greece and France informed the writing of "The Secret Life of Bees." I mean, I met the black Madonna over there who's this iconic figure in "The Secret Life of Bees." And so much of how that novel unfolded and my entry into the world of fiction is recounted in this memoir.

>> Spirituality is a theme of a lot of your books. Did you find that to be so in "Traveling with Pomegranates?"

>> Well, there is definitely a spiritual quest going on in "Traveling with Pomegranates." It's -- there's a creative quest, too. As I said, there are a lot of narrative threads happening in the book. I think you

could say that this book has a lot of motifs. It's part travel tale. It's part induction into feminine passages. It's part spiritual journey of rediscovering new spiritual centers inside of ourselves, new iconic figures to inspire us. Ann had encounters with Joan of Arc and Athena in Greece. And I was captivated. My imagination, my spiritual imagination was captivated by this guise of the Virgin Mary as a black Madonna. And it's part creative quest. We're both trying to figure out what to do with the rest of our lives. You know, and I think that above all, it's a mother-daughter story.

>> Mm-hmm. Ms. Taylor, what's your perspective on that? Do you consider yourself spiritual?

>> I do. And you know, these -- so much of my story in the book is not only searching for what I'm going to do with my life and coming to terms with it being writing. You know, for the longest time I thought I needed to do something else that didn't resemble what my mother did. And then the other part of my story is this searching for a new spirituality or discovering it, maybe, for the first time. And Athena was one of those figures that resonated for me. And Joan of Arc. And I think that I needed to -- you know, those things that they represent were the very things I needed to find in myself, you know, courage and bravery and a sense of mission and purpose that Joan of Arc had. They inspired me along the way. You know, I think they still inspire me. So I think I am a spiritual person. And it was certainly that part of my life influenced through these trips that we took and these figures that we encountered.

>> Mm-hmm. Has the writer's bug bit you, would you say?

>> Oh, I think it absolutely has. I think it has, yes.

>> Do you -- do the two of you have plans to co-author any additional books together? Or do you have a desire to do that?

>> I wouldn't mind that at all. And we have talked about it. I don't think we have any immediate plans to do that. I'm about to begin my third novel. And Ann has plans for her own book. But you never say never because we enjoyed this experience so much that I think it's possible we might do it again.

>> Mm-hmm. What can you tell us about the third novel?

>> Well, I can only tell you that I've been incubating the idea for a couple of years. And it's really ready to be written. I haven't put anything on paper yet. You know, it's one of those things that you don't want to talk too much about, really, until you start writing it.

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> So I hate to tease about that, but the fact is I'm holding it really close inside. And I'm very excited to start into that, you know, imagination again.

>> I mentioned that you wrote non-fiction, and of course, now into novels. Do you think you'll write non-fiction again? Do you have any plans or thoughts along those lines?

>> You know, I think there is a memoirist in me that's almost as strong as the novelist in me. It's true that when I began writing a novel at 50 years old, I felt a sense of homecoming about that. But I have a need to also articulate my own experience. It's always about story, whether it's coming from my imagination or whether I'm trying to tell the truths of my own experience. For me, it helps me make meaning out of things. And I think one of the values of memoir, which is essentially reflection on, you know, your memory, is that other people perhaps who read it can see their own story. It evokes their own story. And they find meaning in their own life. So I suspect I will write non-fiction again in the form of memoir. This book, "Traveling with Pomegranates" was probably the hardest book I've written, but also the most satisfying. Part of that had to do with the fact that I wrote it with my daughter. But it also had to do with feeling like we were capturing, in a story, a very important and profound transition in our lives and in our relationship. And being able to write about those places we went. So, you know, it was a conversation with my own soul and I think with Ann's.

>> Through this process, did either of you find that you discovered, I guess, any sort of universal truths about mother-daughter relationships? Or any perspective on where those relationships stand today and maybe how they've evolved?

>> Well, I feel like we did stumble into some universal truths about mothers and daughters that came through that myth of Demeter and Persephone. I mean, that myth has endured for thousands of years for some reason. And I think it's because the motif in it resonates. And there's great truth in it. And it's essentially about all the ways that mothers and daughters leave one another and all the ways they try to find one another again. And that reunion is possible, but not as you were before. You have to leave each other kind of in a new way. That seems to be this enduring truth that I think you can take from reading "Travelling with Pomegranates" and see how it plays out in our lives. But, you know, mothers and daughters are -- they can have such conflicted relationships. But emotionally intense and sometimes the closest relationships. But the materials are there as the poet Adrienne Rich said for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. So I think it is a book that speaks to all of those possibilities.

>> Ms. Taylor, do you agree?

>> I do. I certainly do. And I know that I found with the relationship with my mom, especially as we set out on that first trip to Greece together, a lot of distance and silence had set in with us. And, you know, we like to say we never had one of those pyrotechnic relationships. It was just very warm and very congenial, but there was not a lot of depth there between us. You know, I was at college growing up. And my mom was doing her thing. So I found that coming back together and travelling can be a real intimate thing. You know, you're sharing the same room. You're doing everything together. I found that that trip we had a

conversation on that trip that really broke things open for us. And so I think sometimes with mothers and daughters, it can require a great deal of vulnerability and a great deal of honesty. So I think if we're willing to do that, you know, then that can really open up a passage of back and forth communication. That can be a great thing.

>> Mm-hmm. Ms. Kidd, I mentioned earlier that you've had books that have been translated to movies. So, have those been positive experiences for you?

>> Amazingly enough, they have. I think that was a kind of astonishment for me. Because --

>> Why is that?

>> Well, you hear all these stories. I would hear my writer friends who've had this experience talking about the horror of doing that sometimes. So I went in it with a little trepidation. But it turned out to be a pretty positive experience for me. I think initially when you hand over a novel to someone else, you know, it's like skydiving. You feel like you just jumped out of an airplane and you think is the parachute going to open or not? "The Mermaid Chair" became a television movie. And then "The Secret Life of Bees" a feature film. So I had it in sort of two different formats happening. And I was actually pretty pleased with both of those movies. I learned, because I had some role as just a consultant to the script writers, that it's very difficult to adapt a literary work into a movie. And I have a real appreciation for how hard that is. But they distilled the book, "The Secret Life of Bees" down pretty well. And I was pleased with it.

>> Well, the new book is "Traveling with Pomegranates. A Mother-Daughter Story." Sue Monk Kidd and Ann Kidd Taylor. Thank you so much for your time today.

>> It was our pleasure.

>> Thank you.

>> And we'll certainly be looking forward to hearing more from you at the National Book Festival. That's on Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and the complete list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.