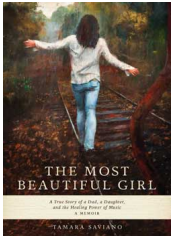


THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL - Grammy-winning producer Tamara Saviano unveils difficult childhood

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 07 March 2014 14:17



When she was growing up in St. Francis, Wisconsin during the 1960s, Tammy Ruditys felt like an outsider in her own home.

Her three brothers had brown eyes, straight blonde hair and tanned quickly.

Her eyes were large and crystalline blue. Her dark hair was so curly that at junior high graduation she was voted mostly likely to be “the president of Afro Sheen.” Her skin was fair and she broke out in hives in the sun.

In 1976, during a move, Tamara, as she is now called, found a box of letters her parents had written during their courtship and early marriage. Though her mother told her to stay away from the box, teenage curiosity won out.

In one of the letters, Tamara read her mother’s words, “Kathy said I tricked you into marrying me by letting you believe the baby was yours.”

After letting the information soak in, “Reality sets in: Dad might not be my biological father. On one hand, I feel relief. . . . At the same time, I am enormously sad. . . . If my dad isn’t my dad, where do I belong?”

And so begins a girl’s search for her identity and the man who fathered her.

During her journey, Tamara, who later took her biological father’s name, Saviano, got pregnant, married an abusive man who drank to excess like her father, endured a painful divorce, worked in radio and eventually drifted to Nashville, where she found work as a publicist and record producer. She won a Grammy in 2004 for her work on “Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster.” She also produced “The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson” and Grammy-nominated “This One’s For Him,” 2012’s star-studded tribute to Guy Clark, which also won Album of the Year at the Americana Honors and Awards.

She is currently working on a biography of Guy Clark.

Bob Ruditys died in 2001 at the age of 59. He and Saviano were estranged for the last 10 years of his life.

Last month, she released a memoir, “The Most Beautiful Girl: A True Story of a Dad, a Daughter and the Healing Power of Music.” The title is a nod to the Charlie Rich tune her dad sang to cheer her up or make amends after one of his drunken rages.

Saviano took a break from her busy schedule to answer some questions about her life, the book and working with some of Nashville’s most respected artists.

News-Telegram: Your book opens with Johnny Cash's death and funeral ... talk about the decision to lead with that.

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Tamara Saviano: The first few drafts of the book led with the time I met my grief counselor, Patrick Dean, and how that changed me. But the further I got into the writing, the more I realized that my grief about my dad's death truly began at Cash's funeral. The powerful emotions I felt that day are what led me down the path to write the book, so it seemed appropriate to open with that day.

N-T: You are brutally honest about the dysfunction in your family, including your father's drinking and violence. Was it difficult to go public with your history?

TS: Yes. It's a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. I believed I had worked through all of these issues but releasing my story out into the world has made me feel especially vulnerable and I find I am going back to grieve some things. I don't think that is necessarily a bad thing and I hope it will lead to further growth, understanding and compassion on my part.

N-T: You have always kept a journal. Talk about how journaling has helped – other than for the book.

TS: I have kept a journal since I was 13 years old. There are times where I may go weeks or even a few months without writing, but for the most part it's been a regular part of my life for 40 years. It's just something I do. I've always loved to write, so I write. For the book, it helped because I was able to go back and read all those years of my journals. There was stuff in there I had long forgotten and it was pretty wild to read it as it happened in the moment.

N-T: Although you wanted a college education, you became pregnant, married and dropped out for a while. That period of time must have been difficult for someone as creative and curious as you. Talk about it and how you pulled yourself out of a bad situation.

TS: At that time in my life, I think I was too numb and damaged to feel creative and curious. I was just trying to survive day-to-day life. I did what I had to do to make a living and raise my daughter, but I didn't have the mental energy for anything else.

N-T: Your first dad is responsible for your life-long love affair with music. Did you ever thank him for the connection?

TS: I wish I could have thanked him but by the time I realized how much he was responsible, it was too late to thank him. He was dead. I have sent my gratitude to him out into the universe and I hope that he knows it.

N-T: You saw your dad in a café shortly before his death. You were with your grandmother, but you didn't have the chance to speak to him. Does that final encounter haunt you for what

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might have been?

□ **TS:** It did haunt me for a while. And it still makes me sad when I think about the lost opportunity. Writing the book was my way of trying to find closure with him and that process definitely helped. I only feel love and compassion when I think about him now.

N-T: In the book, you note you don't have much physical resemblance to the other members of your family. It's hard enough to grow up, but the feeling of "otherness" must have been especially difficult, given the atmosphere in your house. Talk about the first time you saw your birth father, Mike, and his sister.

TS: The first time I met my biological dad, Mike Saviano, who, by the way, is the greatest father any girl could ever hope to have, I was immediately struck by how much I looked like him. I couldn't stop staring at him!

My husband often comments that we even have the same mannerisms. When I met my aunt Corinne, it was like I knew her my entire life. She is an amazing woman and I turn to her for everything.

The thing about the entire Saviano family is that they love me and accept me unconditionally. There is no judgment or shame or denial about me. I always tell them how lucky I am to have found them and they will tell me they are the lucky ones. There is just unconditional love. Period.

□ **N-T:** You acknowledge the help of professional therapists in dealing with your past. Do you think the stigma of needing/asking for help has lessened over the past years and how do we get others to understand that therapy is designed to help work through difficult and painful issues?

TS: I don't know if there is still a stigma about getting professional help, but I don't care if there is. I have been in therapy a few times and am in therapy with a psychologist now to work through some issues that have come up in my life. Life has ups and downs. I don't feel any shame in asking for help when I need it. It helps me and that's all that matters.

N-T: How has the book been received by your family – on both sides?

TS: The Saviano side couldn't be prouder of me. They have all read the book and love it and love me and support me through it.

On the other side, there are some hurt feelings. That side of the family believes that family secrets should never be shared, that it is a private business and the public airing of dirty laundry is a bad thing. And, some of them idolize my first dad because they did not live with him or see the side of him that I did.

My intention was to write a book that would be truthful yet also compassionate about my first dad and I view the book as a love letter to him. They don't see it that way. And, that's okay.

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N-T: You live in Nashville and have worked with some of the biggest names in Americana and country music. What makes those genres so popular?

TS: I think it's because the songs are about real life and real people. People can relate to the stories.

N-T: You're working on a biography of Guy Clark, Texas' elder songwriting statesman. Talk about that experience and your feelings about recent piece in *Texas Monthly* magazine that revealed new facts about Clark's life, including that he seems to have found happiness in his private life following the 2012 death of his wife, Susanna.

TS: I loved that piece and I think John Spong did a great job reporting and writing it.

Guy's girlfriend Joy is an angel. I am so happy that they found each other and that Guy has that love in his life. The two of them are so sweet together and the Clark house is a happy place to be these days.

I have been working on the biography for several years and it is the most amazing experience of my life. This project won't be finished for a long time and the writing work changes and grows as things with Guy change and grow.

I've got all the research done from Guy's early years and have spent time in his hometowns of Monahans and Rockport, interviewed his family and friends, and am now working on the Nashville years.

It's a huge undertaking to write a book of this magnitude, but I'm having a lot of fun with it.

Copies of "The Most Beautiful Girl" are available at bookstores and amazon.com. Autographed copies are available at www.tamarasaviano.com