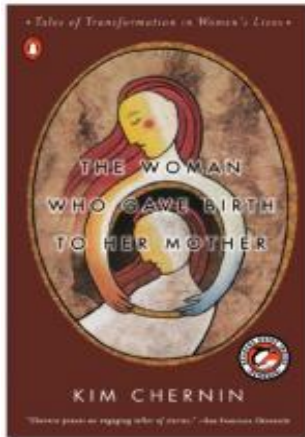


# The Woman Who Gave Birth To Her Mother

by Kim Chernin



## About the Book

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all storytellers. Our stories can be as simple as "the time I locked my keys in the car," or "the fish that got away." Or they can be complex and difficult to relate?stories less for relating an experience than for preserving that experience in a manageable form. The storytellers in Kim Chernin's **The Woman Who Gave Birth to Her Mother** are preserving the experiences of growing up with their mothers. Some tell their stories reluctantly; some in what seems like a single breath. One woman's story changes each time she tells it; another's offers a startling, hidden revelation. For each of these women, the process of telling a story is an opportunity to work through paralyzing pain, fear, loss or anger so that she can move on with her life. It is this transformation, and the ability to achieve it, that Chernin brings to light in this moving book.

Chernin's book offers two primary messages. One is the idea that through telling stories or by objectifying certain events in our lives, we can create an emotional distance between ourselves and those events. This distance allows us the freedom to explore those events less painfully?and even to be healed through the telling of them. As a writer, Chernin reaches for the same technique she employs in her clinical practice, in which she is ethically (and legally) required to maintain confidentiality between herself and her client. By disguising the women in her stories Chernin is able not only to protect their identities, but also, perhaps, to more effectively explore the importance of the stories themselves.

The other message is illustrated by a metaphor?the act of giving birth?that offers images of renewal and possibility, of creation and survival. By giving birth to her mother, a woman can re-create her own experience of childhood and provide herself with the kind of mothering she needs but perhaps never had. In this book, Chernin identifies a series of stages women go through in telling their "mother stories." Like most natural things, these stages do not occur linearly but cyclically. They are part of a transformative process that may take months or years to complete?or it may never be completed. What Chernin shows us is that learning to identify any given stage is more important than getting through it as it is through self-awareness that we grow. As a psychoanalyst, Chernin understands that progress is more often than not the result of breaking down an idea to examine its parts, of slowing down a process to fully experience it. This takes

time, patience and courage. The mother-daughter relationship is both complicated and fragile. It is also strong, and not easily changed. For women who want to start the process of that change, **The Woman Who Gave Birth to Her Mother** offers understanding and guidance as well as women with compelling stories of their own.

## Discussion Guide

1. In each of the stories, Chernin presents a scenario in which a woman comes to terms with her relationship with her mother, a process Chernin identifies as "giving birth to one's mother." Why is this a fitting term? What sorts of ideas and images does it evoke?
2. Each of these stories offers a different interpretation of the idea of giving birth to one's mother. How would you apply this term to your own experiences? What does it mean to each of you individually?
3. Chernin identifies women's experiences resolving their mother issues as a series of seven stages: idealization, revision, blaming, forgiving, identification, letting go and giving birth. Discuss individually which stage best describes your present state and why.
4. How do you think it is possible to move from one stage to another? What sorts of revelatory experiences or emotions can trigger this movement?
5. Which stories did you find particularly meaningful? Discuss why.
6. Not everyone experiences their relationship with their mother as a troubling one, but, as Chernin points out, each of us has a mother story. If you were to contribute a story to this book, what would it be?
7. How do you think women who have experienced motherhood might reconcile their mother issues differently from women who have never been mothers?
8. How does the story about the wedding differ from the other stories in the book? Why do you think Chernin positioned it after the series of seven stories but before her own? Given Chernin's own experiences as a mother and as a daughter, what do you think might have motivated her to write this book?

## Author Bio

Kim Chernin is a psychoanalyst in private practice and the author of the classic volumes **The Hungry Self**, **The Obsession: Reflections On The Tyranny Of Slenderness**, and **In My Mother's House**, and *My Life As A Boy*, a memoir. Chernin lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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