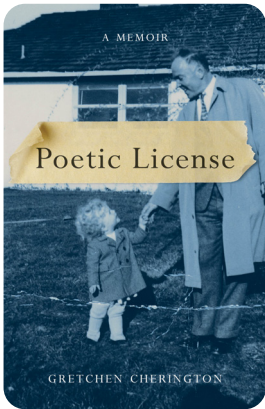


A WISE book discussion *Poetic License* by Gretchen Cherington



In her memoir *Poetic License*, Gretchen Cherington explores growing up in an academic household and her complicated relationship with her well-known father. In a powerful statement towards the end of the book, Gretchen writes *“I saw myself as just one of millions of girls around the world who’d been molested, objectified, abused or disregarded by our fathers, uncles, brothers, priests and lovers – a never-ending stream of us, robbed of what was rightfully ours alone to give, our intimate injustices often silenced. Tangled in the old family systems, the primacy of men, who choose – still choose – to use their power to silence the voices they most need to hear.”* We invite you to explore and reflect on the notable gender-based violence themes that emerge in the book.

The opening quote of the book is from a novel by Rachel Cusk, “And if there’s one thing I know it’s that writing comes out of tension, tension between what’s inside and what’s outside.” This tension appears often as the book explores the challenges between private reality and public image and who tells the story and controls the narrative. **How do these conflicts impact survivors’ lives and influence the people around them? How can we support survivors as they seek to reclaim the power of their truth?**

Gretchen shares her experience of reviewing her father’s letters, now saved in Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth. On page 16, Gretchen writes, “now I was looking at his letters with the eye of a woman.” **What is it about relationships, gender, and power that we often are only able to see and acknowledge in hindsight?**

Gretchen puzzles over her father’s casual objectification and disregard for her, while he was also a champion of contemporary women poets. **How do we understand this simultaneous progressive and regressive attitude towards women? What examples do we see of similar seemingly contradictory behaviors in present day?**

As Gretchen reflects on her relationship with her father, her female friendships provide support and respite. There is a sense of ease and relief as she confides in women who have had similar experiences and they help her to embrace that she did not deserve what happened to her. **Why is validation so important? What are some of the ways that we can provide validation to survivors in our lives?**

Gretchen writes that many people assumed her brother would continue the family legacy of writing. The book exposes many ways in which women are expected to play supporting roles to men’s voices, leadership, and successes. **How have such gendered roles evolved in our communities and how have they not?**

The book reveals several examples of individuals choosing their personal gain or comfort over speaking out against what was wrong. **What makes such silence so pervasive? What can we do as individuals and as a community to interrupt these patterns?**

After her father dies, Gretchen talks to his physician and shares how she is feeling in that moment. On page 244, she replies, “I don’t think I need anyone else to change their experience of my father anymore. I’m just no longer willing to change mine.” **How might this perspective be an important or necessary turning point for survivors?**

Would you like WISE to help facilitate a conversation with your book group?
Please contact us at kate@wiseuv.org and we can explore these and other thoughts together.