



## Open Book

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Between raising her teenage son and running a church school for kids, single mom Anne Lamott manages to find six hours a day to write her highly praised novels and nonfiction works. But finding time to put away her clothes? Forget it. “When I’m 80 years old,” says Lamott, who has learned to live with the piles around her Fairfax, Calif., bungalow, “I don’t think I’m going to wish I had folded my laundry.”

Especially when it’s so much more fun to air it. Over the course of her writing career, which has produced nine books, Lamott has invited readers to share her most intimate moments, from her father’s losing battle with brain cancer (chronicled in her 1980 debut, the novel *Hard Laughter*) to her own alcoholism and drug addiction (1999’s *Traveling Mercies*) and her turbulent first year of single motherhood (the 1993 bestseller *Operating Instructions*). “It gives me hope for things to be scary and to find a way for them to be funny,” she says. “I think that’s what my message usually is: If I can get through it, you can.”

In her latest novel, the bestselling, critically acclaimed *Blue Shoe*, published last month, Lamott once again mines her personal life. Her heroine Mattie Ryder, a newly divorced mother of two, has an elderly mom battling Alzheimer’s, the disease Lamott’s mother suffered from before dying last year. And like Lamott, a born-again Christian who serves as an elder at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Marin City, Calif., Mattie Ryder leans on her faith—even as she’s being self-destructive by sleeping with her ex-husband.

Says *Publishers Weekly* book critic Jana Riess: “It’s Lamott’s honesty that people respond to. She doesn’t claim to have all the answers—she only claims to have all the questions.”

Lamott, 48, displayed an inquisitive nature early on. The second of three children raised in Tiburon, Calif., by writer Kenneth Lamott (*The Money-makers: The Great Big New Rich in America*) and his wife, Dorothy, a journalist and lawyer, Lamott grew up in a bohemian household. During her parents’ wild parties, “you’d come into a room, and people who weren’t married to each other would be kissing each other,” recalls Lamott, who first smoked pot when she was 13. “It wasn’t like people were hanging on chandeliers,” says Lamott’s brother Steve, now 43 and a teacher, who had his first beer at 10. (Brother John Lamott, 50, is an office manager.) “But I’d get drunk. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Despite the chaos at home, Lamott thrived at school, skipping fourth grade and winning state prizes for her poetry. “I always had a gift,” she says. Yet her talents—which included being ranked among California’s top 20 singles tennis players as a teen—didn’t keep her happy. “I was never okay socially,” says Lamott, who felt particularly insecure about her kinky, unruly hair. “There was just one type of pretty girl, and it always involved smooth, straight hair.”

At all-women’s Goucher College in Towson, Md., Lamott masked her insecurities with amphetamines and LSD (“I liked being impaired,” she says). During sophomore year, after Lamott felt classes were interfering with her all-night partying, she dropped out to pursue a writing career—as well as the spirituality she had long felt was missing from her life.

“I was so starved for people who could speak the same language,” says Lamott, who tried religions from Buddhism to Christian Science in her quest. “I talked to God and asked for help.” In the mid-’80s, she says, God answered—“His love came to me very specifically in the person of Jesus”—giving her the

strength to seek help for her addictions through a support group. “I really think she would be dead by now,” says Lamott’s friend, writer Peggy Knickerbocker, “if she hadn’t embraced something bigger than herself.”

Today a clean and sober Lamott shares her three-bedroom home with son Sam, 13. (Sam’s father, whom Lamott never married, is involved in his son’s life.) She has tamed her hair with funky dreadlocks (“I waited 40 years for this!” she says), and for the past year she has been dating Rory Phoenix, 54, an advertising copywriter and painter. “We both have a funny, cynical, sort-of-hopeful view of the world,” Phoenix says.

Shared outlook aside, Lamott says she’s “not interested in getting married.” After all, that might threaten her hard-won peace. “I have an incredible career; I am totally loved,” Lamott says. “It’s the dream writer’s life.”

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