

The Disease That Took Her Breath Away

By Carolyn See

In September 1948, in the North Carolina town of Lattimore – only a few hundred souls – an epidemic of polio that had been raging in the region tapered off, then flared up again. A 13 year-old boy named Gaston Mason died; three days later his little sister Martha was stricken. She spent about a year in hospitals, then came home with helpful admonitions to the effect that she had a “horrible heart” and was actually little more than a “talking vegetable”, but that it didn’t matter much because she’d be dead shortly. She came home in an iron lung and, with only an occasional hour recess, lived in that unhappy circumstance until she died in 2009 – 60 years.

Something in her responded to this crazy challenge like an irate superwoman; she vowed, over and over, to live life fully, to enjoy herself and never, if possible, to complain.

Someone had told her when she was an active little girl that she lived in what amounted to a magic circle: “What did the preacher tell you? You know about that Babblin’ Tower. Stand there where the (train) tracks cross. Now, look around you. In every direction – north and south, east and west – for half a mile is where you live. If you went any way from the point where you’re standing, you would be in Lattimore till you went half a mile straight. Then you’d be out. You go `round and `round in your circle. Maybe that’s why you young’uns is so damn silly. `Cause you stay giddy from going `round and `round in the circle you live in.”

That circle kept Martha perfectly safe, until it didn’t. Before the polio she was willful, smart, pretty, clueless. Her father worked hard to keep them in their snug little house; her mother was a meticulous housekeeper who contributed to the family finances by working in the cafeteria at school. They were devout Baptists. Both sets of grandparents lived nearby. The children grew up on good home cooking; meals came to the kitchen table virtually straight from the fields or barnyard. Gaston got a .22 rifle for his 12th birthday and cherished it. Their dad bought his first new car. Martha performed in a piano recital when she was 10, looking very grown up in a long, silky dress. She was very beautiful in those last photographs taken before she fell ill.

“I knew that I had polio. I didn’t want anyone else to know,” she writes. “The day before I had heard Mother talking to a friend about the iron lung Gaston had been in...I knew I wouldn’t have that difficulty because I had excellent lungs.” But the illness came down in all its fury. Her temperature soared, she endured horrendous pain, and then she was a quadriplegic.

Her parents seem to have been saints: Without thinking twice, her mother moved into the hospital where Martha stayed, working as a nurse’s aide. Her father toiled on at home. Something about her parent’s quiet devotion worked in Martha to ensure that

when she came home, she graduated first in her high school class, went on to a junior college and then to a four-year institution, with her mother right along with her, feeding and bathing and cleaning and cooking and turning thousands of pages in hundreds of books, so that Martha could graduate summa cum laude.

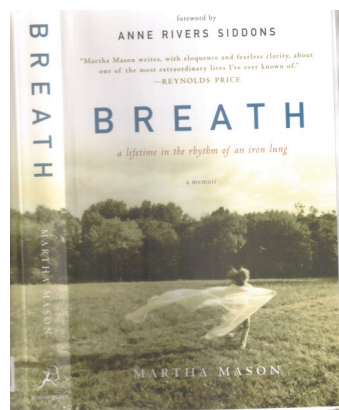
But life isn't placated so easily. Extreme difficulties challenged her as an adult when she returned to her parents' home in Lattimore, which, by then – thanks to her good education and introduction to the larger world – had begun to look shabby in her eyes. But what else could she do? Where else could she go? How could she redeem this life of hers, which started as something so mindlessly joyful, then was hit by catastrophe, even before the tiresome depredations of real life had fairly begun?

Among other things Mason chose to write this memoir, which was released in 2003 by Down Home Press, a small North Carolina publisher, and is now being republished by Bloomsbury with a foreword by Anne Rivers Siddons. "Breath" reminds us of a time irrevocably gone – a time when everyone knew a couple of survivors from polio, relatives hidden from visitors in a back bedroom; a society in which gentility wasn't always marked by a university degree and people showed their cultural affiliation by exhibiting ferociously good table manners or dressing in good taste or listening to classical music on the radio during a Sunday afternoon.

That's the way Mason was raised. College was a fluke because of her disability. The community rose up and took care of her because it reflected well on all of them, showed the world who and what they were. Maybe these values still exist in the middle of our country.

So this book, although its prose style can be artless and a little pokey, is well worth reading. It really does sum up a vision of America as absolutely reliable, decent, resourceful and kind – just as Martha Mason and her wonderful mother managed to be during their difficult but extremely rewarding lives.

(Reprinted from the Washington Post with permission from Carolyn See)



Breath
A Lifetime In the Rhythm of an Iron Lung
By Martha Mason
Bloomsbury. 342 pp. Paperback, \$16