Literary Agent Betsy Lerner Publishes Her First Novel. At 64.

The author of ‘Shred Sisters’ believes age should ‘never stop anyone from doing anything’

By Alix Boyle
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Best known as the literary agent for Patti Smith's "Just Kids," Betsy Lerner published her first novel at 64. No one is more surprised than she.

"Shred Sisters" is a coming-of-age tale about sisters Ollie and Amy and how Ollie's mental illness affects the family. As Lerner writes, "No one will love you more or hurt you more than a sister."

Lerner has also become a presence on TikTok, reading excerpts of journals she kept in her 20s. Talking about her loneliness during that time has resonated and earned her 22.3K followers and climbing.

Lerner co-authored "Visual Thinking" with Temple Grandin. She's published three nonfiction books on her own, including two memoirs, and has worked in publishing as an editor, agent or author for some 40 years.

Sporting a fresh blue manicure and wearing an Electric Lady bomber jacket given to her by Patti Smith, Lerner sat down with Next Avenue at a café near her home in New Haven, Connecticut to tell the story of how "Shred Sisters" came to life.

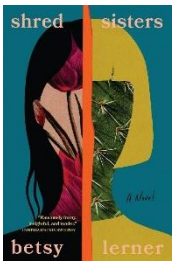
Next Avenue: Why a novel, now at 64?

Betsy Lerner: I'm a non-fiction girly. I only represent nonfiction writers, and I mostly read nonfiction, and I had no designs or even dreams of writing fiction. There's no real reason. It really just happened.

Please say more.

I'd come through half a year of unspeakable tragedy. My niece and nephew were killed by a drunk driver. They were teenagers. My mom died and my best friend took his own life. Then, COVID happened, so I was unable to visit my little sister, who lost her children in Los Angeles.

My older sister and I were deeply worried. My older sister used the phrase, 'we need eyes on her.' She was having a hard time getting out of bed, as you could imagine. So, I came up with the idea, let's work out together in the morning. We started over FaceTime with YouTube workout trainers. The three of us remotely worked out together almost every day. And we called it shredding, and we called ourselves the Shred Sisters.



I never expected to write a book with that title, but one day, my daughter, my husband and I were all watching a movie and I couldn't follow the plot. I said, 'I'm out.' I went into another room, opened my laptop and wrote the first lines of the book. I named my character Amy Shred, really as a placeholder. And it went from there, and I wrote the book in seven months in a fever.

I know a lot of people work for years on their book, and when they hear seven months, they want to kill me. All told, it was probably closer to three years.

You have two sisters — one older, one younger. Tell me about your relationship with them.

The older one, we are two years apart. And we have a sister who died, who was two years younger than me.

So, we really grew up in a house divided. They never spoke about our sister who died and the house was filled with grief, but it was all unspoken. They certainly did their best to give us a normal life in childhood. But tragedies like that don't just disappear. So, in many ways, I had a very normal middle class Jewish family upbringing with high expectations on my mother's side.

My older sister and I, we didn't get along very well.

A Family Back to Life

And then my youngest sister came along 10 years later. It was like "The Wizard of Oz." Our life was black and white. And when she was born, color came back. This adorable little baby girl just brought the whole family back to life. She was a miracle, and she and I are close. We're both writers.

The three of us have fluctuated all through the years at different times, two of us are closer, then we have our problems. The other really deep place that the book came out of was that, when my mom died, we three really pulled together. When my dad died, we pulled together. And so, when the kids died, we REALLY pulled together. The idea of these bonds, in spite of everything, just really was compelling to me.

You wrote in your memoir that you were diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Why is it so important to write about mental illness in fiction?

Mental illness is so compelling — people living in some extreme state. In fiction, you need conflict. You need characters who are on the edge, and frankly, there's just so much in [mental health issues].

I was diagnosed when I was a teenager. I rejected the diagnosis. I suffered as a result of not being on medication for a long time, and then when I finally accepted it and went on lithium, my entire life changed. I stabilized. I had my daughter.

Actually, that's one of the things that's quite autobiographical in the book. Once I had my daughter, I committed to staying on my medicine no matter what and I haven't had an episode of mania or depression in 35 years. It's a miracle really, and I attribute a lot of that to my genius psychopharmacologist who, unlike a lot of doctors, doesn't medicate by the numbers but medicates by the person. And he works with a lot of creative people, and he understands that a lot of medication numbs your creativity, and that's why a lot of people go off their medication. It's not because they're being bad. They can't tolerate it. So he's always slightly under medicated me.

I mean, there are a lot of untreated people out there, and some of them do okay. Some suffer, some wreak havoc on their families.

There's a line in the book, 'No one will love you more or hurt you more than a sister.' What does it mean for you?

Well, I couldn't give Ollie a 100% happy ending. At least in Amy's eyes. Amy was always going to be somewhat guarded about whether Ollie would keep her stability. So, I wanted to hint at that.

You don't just get well and stay well. You have to work at it and be fortunate enough to have medication work for you. You share most of your DNA with your siblings. They've known you your whole life, and they know how to push your buttons. I think we expect a lot more from our siblings and so, therefore, are more disappointed when they turn out to be human.

Reading Diaries on TikTok

What made you get involved with TikTok?

About two years ago, all the publishers were saying the only thing that moves the needle for fiction is TikTok's BookTok. A friend of our agency took me to lunch and said, 'If you really want to be on the platform, you need to show your face and do something consistent.' And then I thought, well, I could talk about my diaries. I've got, like, 30 diaries from my 20s.

I made one post where I showed the diaries, and I said, 'I'm gonna see who I was and see who I wanted to be and see who I am, and maybe you'll come along for the ride.' And that post went viral. Wow, that encouraged me to keep going. And a few have gone viral since. Enough kids in their 20s left the kind of comments that made me feel really good about doing it. You know, saying things like, 'I identify; this is so real. I feel so awful. This gives me hope.'

And those are my people. That's who I was. I was such a lonely, unhappy person in my 20s, trying to figure myself out. It just feels so good. And then I've also connected with a lot of the book influencers. And a lot of them have been posting about "Shred Sisters," which is really gratifying.

You've been the agent for some amazing authors, Patti Smith and Temple Grandin among them. What did those writers teach you?

From Patti, I learned to reach for like the literary stars. From Temple, I've learned an incredible work ethic.

I also work with Neil deGrasse Tyson, and he's a brilliant communicator. So, in addition to the science I've learned, I've also learned a lot about how to communicate and how to look for authors who connect and have charisma. There are a lot of ways to connect with people. Star power is only one, but Neil has star power. They all do, all three of them, in their own way,

What advice do you have for others who want to write a book later in life? How should they get started?

Write. Definitely keep a journal. It takes years and years and years to develop your voice and develop your skills. You have to love doing it. But if you don't really know where to begin, I would take a memoir class. I would be in a writing workshop. I would never let age stop anybody from doing anything.