



He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him

By Mimi Baird, Eve Claxton

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A Washington Post Best Book of 2015

A mid-century doctor's raw, unvarnished account of his own descent into madness, and his daughter's attempt to piece his life back together and make sense of her own.

Texas-born and Harvard-educated, Dr. Perry Baird was a rising medical star in the late 1920s and 1930s. Early in his career, ahead of his time, he grew fascinated with identifying the biochemical root of manic depression, just as he began to suffer from it himself. By the time the results of his groundbreaking experiments were published, Dr. Baird had been institutionalized multiple times, his medical license revoked, and his wife and daughters estranged. He later received a lobotomy and died from a consequent seizure, his research incomplete, his achievements unrecognized.

Mimi Baird grew up never fully knowing this story, as her family went silent about the father who had been absent for most of her childhood. Decades later, a string of extraordinary coincidences led to the recovery of a manuscript which Dr. Baird had worked on throughout his brutal institutionalization, confinement, and escape. This remarkable document, reflecting periods of both manic exhilaration and clear-headed health, presents a startling portrait of a man who was a uniquely astute observer of his own condition, struggling with a disease for which there was no cure, racing against time to unlock the key to treatment before his illness became impossible to manage.

Fifty years after being told her father would forever be “ill” and “away,” Mimi Baird set off on a quest to piece together the memoir and the man. In time her fingers became stained with the lead of the pencil he had used to write his manuscript, as she devoted herself to understanding who he was, why he disappeared, and what legacy she had inherited. The result of his extraordinary record and her journey to bring his name to light is *He Wanted the Moon*, an unforgettable testament to the reaches of the mind and the redeeming power of a

determined heart.

From the Hardcover edition.

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- Sales Rank: #289020 in Books
- Brand: Broadway Books
- Published on: 2016-02-16
- Released on: 2016-02-16

- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.99" h x .61" w x 5.15" l, .81 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *He Wanted the Moon*

“An extraordinary Möbius strip of a book...Autobiography, biography, science, history and literature all in one, as instructive as any textbook and utterly impossible to put down...The text of Dr. Baird’s manuscript is haunting. The tone is one a suspense writer might struggle to sustain: The most unreliable of narrators, Dr. Baird is objective, charming, humorous, then suddenly just a little off, and then flat-out gone, leaving an irrational stranger in his place. The reader can almost watch the circuits in his brain surge and dim just as, Ms. Baird reports, the handwriting in the manuscript morphed from disciplined to disorderly and back again.”

—*The New York Times*

“Extraordinary...a remarkably eloquent account of mental illness, reminiscent of Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind* and Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*. Perry Baird emerges as thoughtful and at times eerily aware of his condition as well as his inability to elude either its symptoms or the primitive treatments for them...The elder Baird’s narrative is cinematic, featuring Ratched-like nurses and an escape scene straight out of *The Fugitive*... [Dr. Baird] never really knew his daughter — or her achievement in telling this story.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Baird’s lonely, angry, grief-stricken, and occasionally grandiose account of his illness and its shattering costs is the reason we can’t put [this book] down. His sharply detailed recollections are sometimes sane and sometimes not, but his writing is lucid even when his thinking isn’t. His manuscript is a plea to understand his experience and, by extension, others’.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“*He Wanted the Moon* is one of the most disturbing and profoundly moving books I’ve read in years, and one of the great father-daughter books of our time. It will take its place as a classic in the literature of breakdown, alongside Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind* and William Styron’s *Darkness Visible*. The brilliant Dr. Perry Baird’s memoir lets you see up close what it is like to go through the most manic phases of bipolar disorder—it is a nightmare, but this book is a damn wonder. Through it, Mimi Baird has finally given her father the credit he was due.”

—**Pat Conroy**, author of *The Prince of Tides* and *Death of Santini*

“Powerful, fascinating, and completely unique. This heartbreaking book is a one-of-a-kind first person window into the world of psychiatric illness before the era of drug therapies in this country. Reading *He Wanted the Moon* is a bit like discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls—it is one of the most eloquent, powerful and important accounts of mental illness ever put to paper.”

—**David Isay**, founder of StoryCorps and author of *Listening is An Act of Love* and *Ties that Bind*

“Thanks to a daughter's brave determination to excavate her absentee father's life, we are gifted with deep personal insight into a brilliant but sick mind that could have been lost forever. This is a truly important book—a devastatingly honest account of mental illness that provides personal insight into long-ranging travesties of psychiatric care in the U.S. Unforgettable.”

—**Susannah Cahalan**, author of *Brain on Fire*

“Dr. Perry Baird’s vivid account of his own madness, and the treatment he received, is as remarkable as it is disturbing. By sharing her family’s story, Mimi Baird has certainly done a great service to her father’s memory. But she’s also made a significant contribution to the literature of mental health. *He Wanted The Moon* is a poignant book, and, I believe, an important one.”

—**Alexandra Styron**, author of *Reading My Father*

“*He Wanted the Moon* does for mental illness what *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* did for the science of cancer: at once reveal suffering and heal it through knowledge. By allowing her father to be heard, Mimi Baird gives voices to all Americans silenced by mental illness down the decades. A miraculous story told in a miracle of a book.”

—**Amity Shlaes**, author of *Coolidge* and *The Forgotten Man*

“Here is how you know you have just read a wonderful book: You immediately begin telling everybody you know about it, which is exactly what I did when I finished *He Wanted the Moon*.”

—**Robert Whitaker**, author of *Anatomy of an Epidemic* and *Mad in America*

“*He Wanted the Moon* details the horrendous treatment commonly given to patients at a time when there was no known way of ameliorating the dangerous and self-destructive behavior that often characterizes manic-depression. This is a fascinating and informative book which I would highly recommend.”

—**Dr. Elliot Valenstein**, author of *Blaming the Brain* and professor emeritus of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Michigan

“Mimi Baird's short book about her father's long struggle with mental illness is a tale within a tale. She longed to know why he had simply disappeared one day from her life, and what she found was his own vivid account of watching himself slide into darkness. Mimi has performed a quiet miracle, giving life back to a man everyone wanted to forget.”

—**Thomas Powers**, Pulitzer-Prize winner and author of *The Killing of Crazy Horse*

"Astonishing in its illuminations...This striking and poignant family story evokes compassion for everyone affected by this cruel malady."

—**Booklist**

“Through this moving memoir, Baird slowly brings her father back to life and reveals the sordid history of treating mental illness.”

—*Bookpage*

“Perry Baird was a pioneer in attempting to understand the workings of manic depression...In bringing her father’s harrowing, tragic, and moving story to life, Mimi Baird celebrates him and gives voice to the terrible suffering the mentally ill once endured, and still do today, and challenges the prejudices and misperceptions the public continues to have about the disease.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“Moving...[Baird] sketches the life of a man who had done brilliantly in college and medical school—even co-authoring a paper with the eminent physiologist Walter Cannon—but who would be felled by psychosis...A sobering account of how little we knew and how much we still have to learn about mental illness—especially how not to treat it.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Mimi Baird, a Bostonian, is a graduate of Colby Sawyer College. After working at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she later moved to Woodstock, Vermont, where she worked as an office manager at the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. There she met a surgeon who had once known her father, a meeting that prompted her quest to finally understand her father's life and legacy. Mimi has two children and four grandchildren. This is her first book.

Eve Claxton was born in London. She has been instrumental in creating six works of non-fiction as a co-writer or ghostwriter, and is the editor of *The Book of Life*, an anthology of memoir. She also works with StoryCorps, the National Oral History Project featured on NPR. Eve lives with her husband and three children in Brooklyn.

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CHAPTER ONE

When my father's manuscript begins, he is forty years old and has lived with the diagnosis of manic depression for more than ten years. By now, he knows very well the symptoms of his disease, its dangerous, ecstatic highs followed by pitch-dark depressions. It is February 1944, and he has retreated to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, as he often did when he felt himself becoming manic, in order to protect his family from his increasingly erratic behavior.

Although he had informed my mother that he was going to the Ritz to work on his book, he soon became distracted from his work. My sister, Catherine, and I stayed with our mother in Chestnut Hill, just outside the city, oblivious to events unfolding around us.

The morning of February 20, 1944, I slept deeply but awoke at the Ritz after only three or four hours of sleep, feeling that strange manic exuberance. I bathed, shaved and dressed, had breakfast, and then started out for a walk across the Boston Public Gardens. I ran short distances and leaped wildly over the broad flowerbeds. Anyone who might have seen me from the hotel would have thought my behavior a little unrestrained. I felt wonderful but restless, feverishly overactive, impatient. After walking for about ten minutes, I located a taxi and drove to my home in Chestnut Hill. I felt possessed with demoniacal energy. I was acutely manic.

When I arrived at my home, no one seemed to be there. I wandered around to the backyard and on impulse, climbed over the twelve-foot wire fence surrounding the deer park. I broke into a run. As I ran up and over an elevation of land in the deer park I saw a group of deer standing in the clearing. I wondered if I could run as fast as a deer and if I could catch one. I increased my pace by a sudden burst of speed. All of the deer except one turned and ran. This one deer stood her ground a few moments, wagging her funny little short white tail. Then she too turned and ran away. I hid behind a large boulder, and as the deer ran around in a circle they came past the boulder, and once again I tried to overtake them. The small herd of deer was led by a large stag that, as I jumped into his path, might have turned upon me, guided by his protective interest. Instead, he merely led his flock around me and they soon outdistanced me.

After wandering around the deer park for a while and finding all the gates locked, I climbed back over the fence and went into the back door of my house. I found Nona, our maid, sitting at a table, her head in the crook of her arm, evidently crying. She must have known I felt upset. I went through the kitchen hurriedly,

going into the dining room and through the living room, then out the front door.

As I walked along without my topcoat or overcoat, I felt quite hot even though it was a rather cold day. The sun was shining brightly. I looked into the sun but was not dazzled by its glare. Soon, the sun changed its appearance. It was gradually transformed from a fuzzy ball of fire with a shapely outline into a round silver-like disc with a clear halo around it. I looked away from the sun and, as my eyes turned upon the snow in front of me, I could see smoothly outlined, deep yellow spots upon the snow.

Soon, I arrived at the home of my good friend, the psychiatrist Dr. Reginald Smithwick. I walked across his lawn; then I stopped at his living room window. As was usual for him on Sunday morning, he was sitting in his armchair by the side of the fire, working on tables and texts of a scientific paper. I knocked and, without waiting long, went in.

"Good morning, Reg," I said.

"Hi, Perry," he replied. "Come and sit down."

I sat on the sofa and then lay down for a moment. I cannot recall the context of our conversation, but I admitted that I was somewhat manic and spoke of a feeling of greatly augmented physical strength. Saying this, I rose from my position, walked across the room, and picked up a poker by the fireplace. It was an iron instrument with a shiny copper sheath.

"Just as an experiment, let me see if I can bend this poker into a figure eight or a bow knot," I said.

I started to twist the poker.

"Don't!" Reg said in a high-pitched and nervous voice, as if some important decision rested upon what was about to transpire. Paying little attention to what might have been interpreted as a very important warning, I went ahead and twisted the copper poker into the shape of a double circle.

I could see that Reg was a little upset.

"Will you call me a taxi?" I asked.

Obligingly he went to the telephone immediately and called me a taxi.

"Please take me to the Ritz hotel," I said to the driver.

As we drove to the Ritz, it seemed to me that the streets were singularly deserted for a fairly advanced hour of Sunday morning. When the taxi pulled up in front of the Ritz there was no other car in sight.

In the far corner of the lobby, one of my secretaries, Charlotte Richards, was waiting. I had called my office earlier and asked for someone to come. Charlotte seemed quite nervous.

We stepped into the elevator and went to my room. There was another luscious copper and iron poker by the fireplace. I picked it up and went into my steel-bending performance.

"I am the only one who would come," Charlotte commented. "The rest were afraid."

During the following two hours or so, I dictated large amounts to Charlotte, drank enormous quantities of Coca Cola, and smoked Kool cigarettes almost constantly. The waiter brought up Coca Cola by the dozen bottles. I believe that the combination of Coca Colas and Kool cigarettes aggravated my state of excitement. My thoughts seemed to travel with the speed and clearness of light. I dictated and talked continuously.

Why so much happiness in the manic state? Perhaps an ability to dwell upon only the pleasing phases of one's past experiences and current problems, combined with an ability to shut out disturbing considerations; the process of thought seems not only clear and logical but powerful and penetrating, features made possible by focusing all attention upon the major facts, leaving out distracting details. Perhaps the euphoria is also in part physiological in nature, representing a spastic sudden flushing of areas of the vascular-bed long idle but now overactive; the escape is a transition from long phases of inactivity to a state characterized by an easy and abundant flow of energy.

The phone rang in the bedroom. It was my wife, Gretta.

"Good morning, Perry, how are you?" she asked.

"Oh, just fine, dear," I replied. "How are you? I'm here giving some dictation to Charlotte."

"Dr. Lang wants you to call him," Gretta informed me.

At this point I should have had every reason to realize the hazardous nature of my position. A call from Dr. Lang--the superintendent of Westborough State Hospital--should have indicated the possibility of my return to that psychiatric institution, a prospect that had long filled me with a sense of miserable apprehension.

In my wallet, I had about six hundred dollars. I could have walked out of my room on the pretext of going to the drug store and could have managed to get out of the state. If I had done so, I might have saved myself months of grief and despair. But--by some cruel stroke of fate, by some strange absence of any sense of caution--I went right on with what I was doing, paying slight heed to the dark cloud hanging low over me.

At my request, Charlotte called Dr. Reg Smithwick and asked him to see whether he could get a room at Massachusetts General Hospital for a few days of careful chemical studies of blood and urine. There were no rooms available.

As I dictated to Charlotte, I began collecting urine specimens in empty Coca Cola bottles, placing the specimens on the window ledge to keep them cool. I recall that the output of urine was quite large and seemed to be controlled by thought and emotion. When pleasurable ideas came to mind, I could seem to feel my bladder filling up. But when I felt anxiety, the flow of urine seemed to cease. I wonder whether the renal arteries and arterioles were expanding and contracting under the influence of nervous stress and nervous relaxation.

During these activities I made occasional trips to the bathroom and rubbed olive oil into my skin and hair. For some weeks my hair had been exceedingly dry, so much so that it would not stay in place after being combed and showed a tendency to stick up in all directions. It looked and felt like straw. This condition had developed at the end of a three- or four-month period of time during which I had followed a successful weight-reducing program cutting out all butter. Though I had continued to consume cod liver oil capsules containing vitamin A, this source did not evidently replace the loss from omission of butter. I feel sure that I was suffering from real vitamin A deficiency.

My food arrived. I had ordered an enormous meal consisting of about six eggs, two steaks and other items. My behavior was certainly unrestrained, to say the least. Charlotte left.

Soon after, my wife Gretta arrived with the children. She remained standing and began to make preparation to leave almost immediately after arriving.

Our eldest daughter, Mimi, was standing near me.

"I want to stay with Daddy," she said.

Instantly, Gretta found some excuse for taking Mimi with her and they left. Gretta's final remark was that they were going to The Country Club to skate.

I went to the bar, consuming another Coca Cola. I decided to follow Gretta to The Country Club and went out to get a taxi. At The Country Club, I walked towards the skating pond, but I couldn't find Gretta and the children and so returned to the clubhouse. As I came to the door, they were just leaving.

"I'll come back for you," Gretta said.

"Don't bother," I replied.

Gretta left to go home; I remained to face the tragedy of a lifetime.

Inside the clubhouse, I sat on the large divan looking out over the racetrack and golf course, and ordered a Coca Cola. The large old majestic trees and vast expanse of snow-covered lawn that can be seen from the side of the clubhouse form a beautiful and restful view. Very few people were around. I went over and spoke to a few friends. One of them refused to have a drink with me. (Could he have known that I was trying to keep my promise to my psychiatrist not to drink?) He acted a little strangely. Later he departed.

I ordered a martini that I sipped slowly. At this stage of events other friends began to file in, including Storer Baldwin, who walked up to me in a friendly manner, shaking my hand.

"Hello," he said.

I rose and spoke to him.

"I hate you!" I added softly.

Storer looked at me in rather a strange manner.

"That's pleasant," he said.

I heard someone say that Storer had ordered tea. I looked over his way, and to my astonishment, he was sitting before the fireplace with a tray of tea and sandwiches before him and surrounded by his customary group of friends and their children.

As if in a trance, I walked over to Storer, and watched him drink tea. I looked around and said hello to some of my friends. I laid my half empty martini glass on Storer's tray and walked away.

The President of the Massachusetts Medical Society, Dr. Channing Frothingham, and his wife came into the room.

I sat down with Dr. and Mrs. Frothingham and talked with them for a few minutes. Dr. Frothingham invited me to have a drink with them and to eat with them. I felt greatly honored because I have always admired Dr. Frothingham. I recall discussing court tennis, at which Dr. Frothingham had been a world champion. I made some sort of a boast that I thought I could beat him (manic overconfidence). I hope the remark sounded humorous.

A boy came along and said that someone wanted me at the front. Completely innocent of the nature of this call, I walked out of the living room and down the corridor. I recognized plain-clothes policemen--three of them standing at the front desk near the telephone operator. By now, it was too late to retrace my steps. I walked into the midst of them and soon verified my suspicions: they had come to take me to Westborough State Hospital.

I knew that I needed help. I felt a desperate desire to escape the horror of returning to a psychiatric institution. I went to the club telephone booth and began to call my psychiatrist friends but they were not at home. I reached our family physician, Dr. Porter, and told him what was about to happen. I asked him to help me.

"It's up to you, my boy," he said.

What could he have meant by this statement?

I might have thought to call my lawyer, but I didn't. Finally I called Dr. Lang, Superintendent of Westborough Hospital.

"I think you'd better come on out," Lang said dryly.

I left the telephone booth.

"There's no hurry, Doctor," said the policeman in charge.

"Please excuse me," I replied. "I'd like to go back and speak to my friend, Dr. Frothingham."

I went back into the living room and found that Dr. and Mrs. Frothingham had gone into the dining room. I went to their table and drew up a chair.

"They have come to take me back to Westborough," I said in a voice that was soft but which must have betrayed my despair.

Mrs. Frothingham sat very quietly, saying nothing, but looking very tense.

I walked into the living room and found our Chestnut Hill neighbor, Helen Webster, sitting with a group of guests. To my own surprise I went over and sat close to her, placing my head on her shoulder. Her friends looked surprised. She rose immediately and took me by the arm.

Helen and I walked to the entrance to the men's bar and stood there alone for a moment.

"Will you kiss me, Helen?" I asked.

Helen came up to me and kissed me very softly on the cheek and left.

Dr. Frothingham and a group of Club members came down the hallway with the policemen.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carissa Ware:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important behave, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a reserve. Beside you can solve your trouble; you can add your knowledge by the publication entitled He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him. Try to make book He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him as your buddy. It means that it can to get your friend when you feel alone and beside regarding course make you smarter than previously. Yeah, it is very fortunated for yourself. The book makes you much more confidence because you can know anything by the book. So , let us make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

Sandy Holiday:

Precisely why? Because this He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap it but latter it will zap you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book close to it was fantastic author who all write the book in such amazing way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining method but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of rewards than the other book possess such as help improving your ability and your critical thinking means. So , still want to hold off having that book? If I have been you I will go to the publication store hurriedly.

Kimberly Langdon:

That publication can make you to feel relax. This specific book He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him was vibrant and of course has pictures on there. As we know that book He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him has many kinds or type. Start from kids until teens. For example Naruto or Private investigator Conan you can read and believe you are the character on there. So , not at all of book are usually make you bored, any it offers you feel happy, fun and unwind. Try to choose the best book for yourself and try to like reading this.

Mary Clement:

As a college student exactly feel bored in order to reading. If their teacher questioned them to go to the

library in order to make summary for some publication, they are complained. Just little students that has reading's heart or real their interest. They just do what the instructor want, like asked to the library. They go to presently there but nothing reading significantly. Any students feel that examining is not important, boring as well as can't see colorful photos on there. Yeah, it is for being complicated. Book is very important in your case. As we know that on this age, many ways to get whatever we wish. Likewise word says, many ways to reach Chinese's country. Therefore , this He Wanted the Moon: The Madness and Medical Genius of Dr. Perry Baird, and His Daughter's Quest to Know Him can make you feel more interested to read.

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