

IN PERSON

From a Mountaintop, A Writer Emerges

Maplewood Woman's Adventures Lead to a Book

By TINA KELLEY

MEG NOBLE PETERSON lists a number of adages from her parents and teachers that have fueled her adventures:

The joy is in the struggle. The only way you coast is downhill. The only difference between a rut and a grave is the dimensions. If you are satisfied, you are dead.

She could have added the one about life beginning at 58 — after 5 children, 33 years of marriage, and an unpleasant divorce.

They go far to explain how a woman easily reduced to tears by spicy foods finds herself backpacking solo around the world, squatting over pit toilets, hiking up to 12 miles a day at 11,000 to 18,500 feet, and filling up 14 journals that eventually outweighed her clothes.

Along the way, she gets hit on by an endless array of Indian men who ask her, with a wink and a nudge, the lascivious question that has become the title of the book: "Madam, Have You Ever Really Been Happy?" which is scheduled to be published in May by Universe Publishing. (She will be reading from her book at the Town Bookstore in Westfield on April 22, and at Watchung Booksellers in Montclair on May 18.)

For instance, Ms. Peterson returned from a moving visit to the Taj Mahal only to find the hotel desk clerk lying in wait on her bed. He said to her: "You're single. I'm single. Have you ever really been happy?"

She quickly kicked him out.

"Being a single woman, you're vulnerable," she said in a recent interview at her home in Maplewood, where she has lived for the last 12 years.

She chose the pickup line as a title, she said, because she thought it was a universal question: "It's something we all think about — is our life fulfilled?"

She was able to answer that question in the affirmative, thanks to her travels. "I was able to get on that mountaintop, literally and figuratively, and see a path ahead," she said. It led to writing nonfiction.

"I always wanted to be a writer," she said. "This was a whole new career. The title fit me perfectly."

Ms. Peterson, who does not look her age (77), wrote the book in part to encourage

people of any age to take on new challenge. Her eight-month journey in 1987, followed by a second solo round-the-world backpacking trip in 1996, represented the culmination of years of dreaming and planning, the need for change and challenge, and "the desire to face the world as a whole person, not half couple."

The book, in a lively voice that speaks to anyone who, like Ms. Peterson, has ever daydreamed over the inviting pages of National Geographic, tells of her leaving detailed instructions (never opened, it turns out) with her children on how to handle her affairs for a year, riding packed trains in India, and starting a love affair with an Austrian scientist in Nepal.

Reviews have praised it, with one comparing her with Jack Kerouac, as if he "had been more mature and a little more sober."

And it describes the events leading up to her trip, events that might have sent people with less gumption off to a second career watching the "Antiques Roadshow."

The daughter of a preacher and an actor, she grew up in the Syracuse area, the middle of three daughters. Her mother, a professor of speech and dramatic arts, loved Ronald Colman, who starred in "Lost Horizon," and young Meg dreamed of traveling to Shangri-La. The family frequently hiked in the White Mountains, where she enjoyed the "stripping away of excess baggage," both physically and spiritually, to be found in nature.

She also learned that if parents spend happy times in certain activities with their children, the children will likely enjoy those activities far into adulthood. She was able to share her love of the mountains with her parents and children, taking four of her children, ages 13 to 19, backpacking and mountain climbing through Europe when she was 45.

When they were not traveling, Ms. Peterson and her husband at the time, Glen,



Meg Noble Peterson, in her Maplewood home, says her adventures began at 58. They included her trek (insert) to the top of Kala Pattar in Nepal.

Dith Pran/The New York Times

her son, Chris, a few times a month. When she called too infrequently, her son reproached her. She laughed, recalling how he would ask: "Did you find a lover yet? Everyone thinks you either found a lover or are having a face-lift."

She traveled through Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, India, Nepal, Thailand, China, Australia and New Zealand, before cutting her trip short to spend time with her ex-husband, who was dying.

"My memoir illustrates that it's never too late to strike out for places exotic and unknown," Ms. Peterson said. "I didn't let the fact that I was a woman approaching 60 deter me from traveling. I had some of the most exhilarating and thrilling experiences of my life."

She found that one trip leads to another, and has gone on to climb the Annapurna circuit in Nepal in 2000, as well as the Inca

Trail to Machu Picchu in Peru. She circumambulated Mount Kailash in Tibet in 2004, reaching a pass at 18,000 feet, at age 75.

"You eat right, you walk two miles a day, and you love what you do — that's why people live," she said, explaining her longevity. "And be able to weather loss — mainly my oldest son. If you can live through that . . ." Chris died of AIDS in 2001, at 46. She hopes to write a book about his death.

For now, she is thinking of renting out her house in Maplewood, which is decorated with Tibetan prayer flags along the dining room window.

She hopes to go to Mongolia in July to ride horses in the mountains. She has plans to return to Nepal to trek in the Mustang and Manaslu regions.

She would like a smaller place to hang her backpack, but wants to remain close to New York City, where she feeds what she calls her addiction to theater. After 20 years in Summit and a stint in Watchung, she liked Maplewood for its inclusiveness and hopes to stay in the area.

"I intend to stay here a long time and enjoy the hills, which I climb every day, and the open, friendly atmosphere," she said.

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