



Welcome To Shirley

Kelly McMasters

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Shirley seemed to be doomed from the beginning. Founded by a Vaudevillian huckster who touted it as a seaside haven despite the sand bar that blocks access to the shore, the town has been plagued by one disaster after another—a UFO, a childhood cancer cluster, and a mysterious federal nuclear laboratory in nearby Brookhaven that leaked toxic nuclear and chemical waste into the aquifer from which the residents unknowingly drew their well water. This is Kelly McMasters' account of growing up in a cursed town and loving it anyway, and of a girl's awakening to tragedy and to a sense of mission. Told in a deliciously engaging voice, *Welcome to Shirley* balances the bitter with the sweet, the funny with the infuriating, in an unforgettable story of working class Long Island.

Welcome To Shirley Details

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Book Culture says

We are having an event at our store with the author of this book on June 25th.

Tom says

This is Kelly McMasters' account of growing up in the working-class town of Shirley, on Long Island's East End. Because of Shirley's proximity to the Brookhaven National Laboratory, it appears that dangerous chemicals leached into the drinking water, causing startling rates of cancer and other illness in local residents.

McMasters devotes much of the book to exploring the town's troubled association with the Laboratory and the efforts of local activists to get answers. But *Welcome to Shirley* is not *A Civil Action*; the book's most poignant sections describe growing up in this place—seen as low-rent by many Long Islanders—and McMasters' ambivalent feelings about Shirley as she grew older and saw it without the scrim of childhood innocence.

Ashleigh Marshall says

This book was about a young girl sharing her journey of growing up and watching the people she loves die. The book discusses politics, science, and life lessons. The book gives us some history about activation for breast cancer. While this girl, Kelly McMasters, is growing up she moves to a town called Shirley in Long Island; it is right near a nuclear power plant, that many of the neighborhood parents work at. Around the time she was in middle school one of her friends dad dies, and from there a chain reaction is set into place. Many women and children in the area develop cancer and start dying. Many women get involved in Breast Cancer awareness and actually raise money through the breast cancer stamp. I overall did not enjoy this book, it was kind of confusing and in my opinion pointless. The book kind of ended abruptly and I could not identify what lesson could be learned or what exactly the author was trying to accomplish. The book I feel was well written but it went on long tangents throughout the book. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to get ideas on how to get involved in their community, or learn a little history, science, and politics.

Brian says

You will Shirley enjoy this book.

Jill says

The book started out really strong, the story about this little girl moving from place to place and finally

settling in the small town of Shirley. Then she gets in the background of the town- the cancer, nuclear power plant and it's effect, the murders of children. I had to walk away. I am in a 'summer reading' kind of mood. This was a bit too heavy. I will probably go back to this during the winter months try to finish it off... maybe.

Ruth Soz says

I read this as the result of a book swap at work. It turns out that the girl who brought it in actually is from the area. I thought McMasters did a nice job of interweaving her personal experiences and the experiences of those living in Shirley with the more complicated aspects of how the nearby laboratory was affecting its residential surroundings. Some parts were a little too technical for me to fully grasp, but it was enough to get the general idea.

Kathleen says

"Welcome to Shirley" is McMasters' memoir of her hometown, Shirley, Long Island, and the nuclear laboratory in its midst, The Brookhaven National Laboratory. Shirley is a stain of a town that sits ignored and scoffed at in the shadow of The Hamptons. Cancer is rampant in Shirley and the immediate surrounding towns and touches just about everyone in McMaster's life. She writes about the activism that ensued to try and figure out what exactly was causing the cancer - it's scary to read of all the toxic chemicals that were found to have leached into the groundwater. Very engaging and disturbing, but it's also a memoir of a woman who loves her small town despite all the tragedy.

Colleencoffey says

This book was informative and interesting. I am from the town in which Ms. McMasters refers to so I found it especially fascinating to hear her facts and opinions of the area. If your familiar with eastern Long Island its worth the time to read it.

Rebecca McNutt says

The best words I can find to describe *Welcome to Shirley* is that reading it is like watching a box full of super 8 home movie reels and brightly colored Kodachrome slides. This is a powerful memoir telling the story of a family trying to live the American Dream in a land tainted by pollution. But it doesn't get all preachy about saving the earth or anything like that, instead it focuses more on Kelly growing up and the experiences she has with her neighbors and family, and how she both loves and loathes her little town. It's full of nostalgia, from the vivid descriptions to the mentions of various phrases and television shows from the times, and Kelly's writing takes the reader through the ups and downs of coming of age, from having a huge 4th of July party with glittering fireworks, to seeing a much-loved neighbor pass way from cancer, to trying her first cigarette on the beach with her friends. This book is an excellent example of a 20th century home tainted with toxic waste but always supported by love and friendship in the best and worst of times.

Jennifer says

Wow. And not in a good way.

In March 2008, when I first learned of Kelly McMaster's forthcoming book about our hometown, I sent her an e-mail, commending her for writing about all that is good about Shirley. I should have withheld my kudos until I'd read the book. Throughout "Welcome to Shirley," Kelly presents supposition as fact, offers half truths, and omits pertinent details.

On page 101, for example, Kelly writes about the selection of "Brookhaven" as the name for the new national lab. She writes,

"[The subcommittee] decided instead to focus on those natural attributes that had so captivated Walter T. and chose to name the area Brookhaven. They thought the bucolic tone and suggestion of babbling brooks and pastoral idylls might appeal to the wives of scientists considering placement at the lab. In a way, it was the subcommittee's version of Walter T.'s idealistic 'Town of Flowers' slogan for Shirley."

As Kelly writes it, readers are led to believe that the subcommittee dreamt up the name "Brookhaven." In reality, according to the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society, Brookhaven is a 19th century hamlet located two towns west of Shirley. It was called "Fireplace" until 1871, when the name changed officially to "Brookhaven." The lab simply borrowed that name from the hamlet and the greater Town of Brookhaven. (A geography major during my college years, I wrote my senior thesis on the evolution and decline of hamlets on Long Island, researching from afar in Virginia in the days before the Internet. The information is out there and readily available.)

Beginning on page 118, Kelly discusses the name-change "contest" that took place in Shirley in 1986. She claims on page 120, "The contest was open to all schoolchildren within the town. I was enticed by the prospect of the \$250 college scholarship."

The renaming effort was not, in fact, a school-sponsored contest. As an article published in the September 16, 1986, edition of *Newsday* explains,

"The movement began last spring with a casual comment from a classified advertiser in the *Moriches Bay Tide*. The ad buyer told a staffer at the weekly paper that he heard about an effort to change the name of Shirley to 'Brookhampton.'

"John B. Cummings, the *Tide*'s editor and publisher, said he had not heard the same rumor, but he forwarded it to the directors of the chamber of commerce. . . .

"About 70 percent of the 384 people who responded to a subsequent *Tide* straw poll voted in favor of renaming Shirley. Chamber directors were influenced most strongly by a letter from [Jennifer] Reichert, a lifelong Shirley resident and then a seventh-grader at William Paca Junior High School."

Anyone could propose a new name, whether they were schoolchildren or adults, whether they lived in Shirley or not. Perhaps Kelly's elementary school presented the name-change effort as a contest as a way to get students involved in their community.

On page 121, Kelly writes, "By the end of the following week, however, it became clear that no matter what we wrote on those ballots, none of us had ever really stood much of a chance of winning that scholarship money.

"When Mrs. Gelfand announced the winner in class one morning, we were all disappointed that we didn't know her. Jennifer was an eighth-grader, and although most of us knew her family name because her father was on the school board, his daughters all went to a different elementary school because they lived on the other side of town.

"More than 5,000 kids had lost out to this eighth-grader's winning submission: Floyd Harbor."

I'm the Jennifer that Kelly writes about. Kelly's comment that "no matter what we wrote on those ballots, none of us had ever really stood much of a chance of winning that scholarship money" suggests that "Floyd Harbor" was a shoo-in simply because of my last name.

Maybe the other proposed names just, well, sucked? According to the book, after all, Kelly suggested "Nature's Way."

My father's involvement with the William Floyd School District's Board of Education had nothing to do with "Floyd Harbor" being selected to vie against "Shirley," especially considering that I didn't enter the name as part of a contest at school. As the September 16, 1986, edition of Newsday explains, I simply wrote a letter to Cummings, editor of the Moriches Bay Tide, in May 1986, as part of the straw poll conducted by the newspaper. The Chamber of Commerce latched onto the name.

Other members of the school board—Jeananne Dawson, Thomas Galinski, Mark Matthews, Dolores Williams—had children who attended William Floyd schools. And many school officials—Bob Lund, Michael Schildkraut, Mel Combs—had children in the district schools. If those children submitted names as part of Kelly's fabricated school-sponsored contest, they too "lost out"—in spite of their last names.

Further, I first learned about the alleged \$250 college scholarship in Welcome to Shirley. I wasn't aware of such a prize, didn't receive a \$250 scholarship, and can find no reference to the scholarship in any of the newspapers that discuss the name-change effort.

Kelly goes on to write, "Residents immediately began complaining about the choice. Not only did it seem suspicious that the winner's father was on the Board of Education and had links to the Chamber of Commerce, but the name Floyd Harbor bore a striking resemblance to a nearby town on the North Shore called Lloyd Harbor."

Again, the suspicion about my family ties is unnecessary. I had plenty of opportunities pass me by during my school years—despite my last name: A terrible violinist, I was relegated appropriately to the last stand of the Violin II section. I flunked AP Calculus one quarter, knocking myself right out of my #5 class ranking—and out of the Top 10 entirely. Athletics wasn't my strong suit either, and phys. ed. teachers throughout the years refused to let me stand on the sidelines, not matter how hard I tried to blend into the outfield and the bleachers. There was no special treatment.

Despite Kelly's suppositions, neither the school board nor the Chamber of Commerce fed the name to me or had me submit it on their behalf. Little known fact: A neighbor came up with the name "Floyd Harbor." She did not want to step into the political arena by suggesting it herself, so she told my parents that they could submit the name. They didn't—despite my persistent nagging that they should—so one weekend afternoon I

sat down at our computer, pounded out my letter, and mailed it in. I wish I'd had better forethought: Being smack dab in the middle of the public eye was the last place this shy 12-year-old—who spent her school years trying to be as inconspicuous as possible—wanted to be.

Further, Kelly neglects to mention the support the name received, even from then mayor of Lloyd Harbor, Richardson Pratt Jr. A September 16, 1986, Newsday article states that he "was not alarmed." Pratt said, "[William] Floyd lived out there, [Henry] Lloyd lived here,' he said. 'I don't think people are going to get confused between one and another.'" A look at copies of the Moriches Bay Tide from the late 1980s shows numerous letters from residents who were in favor of Floyd Harbor. Where is Kelly's balanced reporting?

Beginning on page 119, Kelly introduces her parents' feelings about the name change. She portrays her father as supporting the effort and her mother as pooh-poohing it. The local paper published a photo of Kelly's mother, Barbara, in autumn 1986, collecting signatures at a table bearing the slogans "I Want to Live in Floyd Harbor." That photo hardly supports Kelly's assertion that her mother was against the name change. More in line with Kelly's claim is the February 5, 1987, edition of the Moriches Bay Tide, which includes Eugene McMasters, Kelly's father, on a list of supporters for changing "Shirley" to "Floyd Harbor." If Barbara McMasters supported the name change and later changed her mind, Kelly should have stated that for credibility's sake.

On page 122, Kelly writes that "a legion of hunter green-and-white signs stated, 'I Live in Floyd Harbor.'" She mentions the "'I Live in Floyd Harbor' faction" several times. Once again, Kelly's got it wrong. As an article published in the October 9, 1986, edition of the Moriches Bay Tide states, the Committee to Rename Shirley selected "I'd Rather Live in Floyd Harbor" as its slogan for signs and bumper stickers. I still have one of the green bumper stickers, as well as an earlier, black-and-white version of the committee's bumper sticker. The green sticker states, "I'd Rather Live in Floyd Harbor." The white one, "I Want to Live in Floyd Harbor." Mistakes like that hurt Kelly's credibility.

Throughout "Welcome to Shirley," Kelly does little to hide her disdain for The Woodlands development. On page 126, a sentence states, "Jennifer's family had also recently moved into a freshly constructed house in the Woodlands." She follows that with a quote from Stan Prekurat, an outspoken opponent of the name change, who referred to the residents of The Woodlands as "new people with the new money."

My family's building a home in The Woodlands is irrelevant to Kelly's story. In addition, like many of The Woodlands residents—the Coracis, the Geigers, the Guarinos, the Pascales, the Katzes, the Kruks, the Morgeneggs—my family was not "new" to Shirley and we didn't have "new" money. My father and his siblings were raised in Mastic, around the corner from the Forge River. My parents bought a house on Arrowhead Drive in Shirley, a block from Kelly's beloved Wertheim Wildlife Refuge, after they married in the late 1960s. In 1974, my father's mother became a founding member of the Mastics-Moriches-Shirley Community Library. My mother taught fourth grade in the William Floyd School District for 20 years. She subbed in the district for three or four years before that. My father, although active in his community, was first and foremost a detective with the Suffolk County Police Department and later an official with Brookhaven Town.

In the mid-1980s, my parents felt that our family had outgrown our home on Arrowhead Drive, which wasn't "on the other side of town," as Kelly states on page 121. It was on the other side of the Woodlands from her neighborhood. My parents considered adding on, and they considered moving to a new community. When they learned of Anthony Coraci's new development, The Woodlands, they purchased a lot and set about selling our home. They rolled their earnings from the sale of our home into a new home on Deer Path, in The Woodlands, investing in the very community in which my father grew up, my sisters and I were raised, and

my parents were so actively involved. Why our moving to The Woodlands merits a remark in Kelly's book is confounding.

Kelly omits relevant information throughout the book. On page 199, she discusses the home that her family's real estate agent turned neighbor built in The Woodlands. She writes, "[T]he structure burned to the ground. The fire started in the middle of the night, before construction was completed and before Joe's family moved in, so thankfully no one was hurt."

What she neglects to mention is that Joe allegedly set fire to the home himself. Brookhaven Fire Department handled the fire. Suffolk County Police Department's Fifth Precinct handled the original call.

Also along the lines of sloppy reporting—although less suspect—is a sentence on page 130, where Kelly writes about her fears about the name change: "Then I began to worry. What would happen to the bowling alley, Shirley Lanes? Floyd Harbor Lanes just didn't have the same ring to it." An article published in the April 7, 1988, issue of the Moriches Bay Tide—at the tail-end of the name-change debate—mentions the bowling alley in Shirley. Back then, the bowling alley was still called "Shirley Bowl." The switch to "Shirley Lanes" took place later. Again, Kelly's readers are left wondering exactly how well she remembers details contained in the book.

(In that same vein, in her Acknowledgements, Kelly thanks "the "Shirley, Mastic, Moriches Community Library, especially Linda Knell in the Local History Room." Besides getting the name of the library wrong—it's the Mastics-Moriches-Shirley Community Library—surely the Local History Room had newspaper articles that explained how the campaign to rename Shirley came about. Perhaps Kelly relied too heavily on her childhood memories instead of delving into the local newspapers.)

On page 211, Kelly should have pinned down an exact death toll for the crash of TWA Flight 800. An easy Internet search would have revealed that number as 230. Kelly's sentence, "Smith Point Beach was transformed into a memorial for the hundreds of plane crash victims," causes the reader to pause and wonder just what "hundreds" implies. Four hundred? Seven hundred? Three hundred and fifty?

Similarly, on page 136, Kelly writes, "Blue-and-white signs, decorated with the silhouette of a large bird in flight, dotted the perimeter of the refuge, listing fines for hunting." A quick e-mail to the National Wildlife Refuge System, similar to one I sent, would have revealed to Kelly that the mysterious "large bird" was a Canada goose. Including that detail might have added some credence to her story.

On page 125, Kelly writes, "Mr. Coraci stuck a second sign in the ground near the Woodlands one with the pictures of deer and quail. The new sign was neon green and read: 'Welcome to Floyd Harbor!'" As the February 19, 1987, edition of the Moriches Bay Tide states, "A big, bright blue and white sign went up Tuesday at the intersection of William Floyd Parkway and Mastic Boulevard blazoned with the message: 'Welcome to Floyd Harbor.'" This intersection is where Coraci's Cor-Ace realty is located. Considering the other errors Kelly has made, I'm inclined to discount her report that a neon green sign was placed near the sign for The Woodlands and trust instead the Tide's report of where a blue sign was placed.

And on pages 153-54, Kelly writes, "Throughout my childhood in Shirley, I spent afternoons helping [my mother] fold clothes at the nearby thrift store, deliver holiday food baskets from the church, and pack grocery bags with diapers and week-old English muffins at the neighborhood food pantry, a dilapidated trailer in the parking lot of the town's junior high school."

That dilapidated trailer was not located in the junior high school's parking lot. It was located at one of the

parking entrances for William Floyd High School, as reported by the Moriches Bay Tide on November 19, 1987: "The Colonial Youth Center on Mastic Beach Road, tucked away on the southeast end of the William Floyd High School parking lot, is in high gear preparing for the upcoming holiday season. The Center is the Salvation Army of the Mastic/Shirley area. . . ."

Again, Kelly's seems to be reporting based on her memories.

The upshot is, as a reader, I'm left questioning Kelly's credibility and intentions, as well as the accuracy of her research. If Kelly McMasters wants to write nonfiction, she cannot pick and chose the facts as they fit her story and she should make sure that her reporting is accurate. If she can't get the simple, easily verified details correct, why should readers trust that the more scientific details pertaining to the Brookhaven Lab, cancer, and water pollution are accurate?

A little Internet search turns up that Kelly was crushed that the publisher deemed this a memoir:

"I wrote a memoir.

"There. I said it. And I didn't even wince.

"It has taken me two years to be able to announce this fact proudly and without an eye roll. . . . When I first started writing my book, which is a first-person account of an environmental catastrophe in my blue-collar hometown on the east end of Long Island, I used the term narrative nonfiction to describe my work. And when I wrote my book proposal, I called the project a hybrid—a combination of the journalistic and the personal.

"But shortly after the contract was signed, it became clear that my publisher intended to market my book as a memoir. I immediately blanched. That's what you think of my work? I thought. Simplistic, navel-gazing slop? The book is written in first-person, but it's also intensely reported and leans on history, science, and primary source material. At the time, the word "memoir" to me connoted fluff. Could this manuscript I'd spent years working on really feel this way to my editor?" ("Welcome Guest Deb Kelly McMasters," The Debutante Ball, April 23, 2008, <http://www.thedebutanteball.com/?p=901>)

The publisher's classifying Kelly's book as a memoir was done so for a good reason. That's what it is. A poorly researched, inaccurate, bitter memoir.

The offensive icing on the cake: The author's blurb states, "Kelly McMasters . . . lives in Manhattan and northeast Pennsylvania with her husband, the painter Mark Milroy."

Seriously? "The painter Mark Milord"? As if readers might gasp and whisper, "Oh, my! The painter Mark Milroy!"

Feign modesty, Kelly: "Kelly McMasters . . . lives in Manhattan and northeast Pennsylvania with her husband, Mark Milroy, a painter." (I assume it is art that he paints and not houses.)

Heather says

Having grown up in Mastic Beach, Shirley's neighboring little sister-town, I simply had to read this book

after hearing Kelly McMasters interviewed on the Brian Lehrer show on WNYC.

I'm not really a memoir sort of person, but I loved the way McMasters intertwined her personal story with her research on the Brookhaven National Laboratory and its impact on her community. Her imagery combined with personal and historical facts made for a complex web of personal and political writing that is extremely successful. I too thought of the Lab as a mysterious place, where a few of my friends fathers worked service positions, but I had no concept of its environmental impact; McMasters seems to have been less fortunate than in this capacity. I was shocked to read throughout the book how many of her neighbors and acquaintances died of cancer throughout her life.

Her descriptions of her childhood were very similar to my experiences, despite our 6-year difference in age (I am older), indicating that Shirley has been in a rut for decades. I feel that there is hope, however, as the community has so much potential. A high school filled with dedicated teachers, an exquisite public beach, and a community of good neighbors. How can it not thrive?

Thanks for the nostalgia, Kelly! And keep fighting the good fight!

Rhonda says

Better than I thought it would be. Interesting, and definitely makes a case for health hazards of living near a nuclear reactor.

Kristen says

Kelly and I went to college together and were 2 of the 12 International Studies majors in our class. We bumped into each other on Columbia's campus 5 or 6 years later when both of us were there for our master's degrees. She told me about all of the research she was doing on breast cancer rates and radiation exposure on Long Island, but I had no idea she had turned her research into a book until I joined GoodReads. Shortly after I joined I clicked on the "authors" link and her photo was there along with a link to her book. It's really exciting that all of that research culminated in this great book.

Welcome to Shirley is Kelly's memoir of growing up in the Long Island town of Shirley, but in many ways the town is the main character of the book. In public health we talk a lot about fundamental causes of disease and this book is full of them -- for the residents of Shirley as well as the town itself, which never really had a chance to be the suburban paradise its founder had envisioned. I read the book with a lot of fear about the radiation levels in the groundwater -- particularly because Frank's hometown of Smithtown isn't too far from Shirley. Kelly points out that there is a ridge under Long Island and that the pollutants being generated by the Brookhaven Lab flowed south, which means they probably didn't flow north toward Smithtown. I felt guilty for being relieved that my in-laws (not to mention my husband!) probably didn't have to worry about the same horrendously high levels of radiation exposure as the folks living and dying in Shirley. It's really tragic and sickening to read about the people who lived so close to this SuperFund site and who were (and probably still are) kept so much in the dark about the risks they face every day just being at home.

Felicia says

Kelly McMaster's Shirley is a small, run-down town in Long Island that once held a great deal of promise. Shirley's the child you want to keep saving, but can't because you find yourself suffocating in all the red tape. From a Brooklyn boy's grand dreams of a second Hamptons replete with golf courses and flower boxes to clusters of children suffering from rare forms of cancer to a litany of women who hold vigil for their friends whose boughts with cancer are a horrific right of passage. This is a powerful story about class issues, marginalization and it's also a very honest portrait of the affects of man's hand in the environment, and how the decisions we make based on survival today-what we put into the earth, what we put into our bodies-follow us into our families and our homes.

Connie (Ava Catherine) says

Kelly McMasters grew up in Shirley, a Long Island working class neighborhood, located in the shadow of the Brookhaven National Laboratory. Much of McMasters's book is dedicated to research about the truth surrounding the atomic lab's culpability in the chemical leakage into the water supply for the town. She discovered that not only had chemicals been allowed to contaminate the area, but atomic waste had been buried on the grounds of the lab. During the years Kelly had grown up in Shirley, almost every family in the small town was touched by cancer, which the citizens always felt but could not prove was caused by the close proximity to the Brookhaven National Laboratory. The cancer death rate for the town was off the charts.

But this is more than a book about the atomic research laboratory and chemical waste which killed so many people and made so many others ill. It is the story of Kelly's beautiful childhood with four other little girls, the secrets they shared, the magical moments, the ordinary days that seemed extraordinary, and her love for her life in a special neighborhood. McMasters has a lovely voice, and I shall certainly read her next book.
