

The Conversation

Kambri Crews's Family Saga of Growing Up in a Tin Shack with Deaf Parents (One Now in Jail!) is So OMG You Won't Be Able to Put It Down

Imagine growing up during the 70s and 80s in a part of Texas so remote, you and your brother had had to walk more than a mile from your tin shack to your school bus each morning because the vehicle couldn't lumber down the rickety bridge that led to your little town (not to mention the hour and a half ride to school ahead of you). You'd probably have a thing or two to say about your childhood, right? Oh, well, how about throwing into the story line two deaf parents, one of whom is currently sitting in jail for attempted murder? Yep, you'd definitely have an anecdote to tell. And your name would be Kambri Crews.

By Meredith Turits

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I recently read *Burn Down the Ground* (Villard, 2012), Crews's memoir of a childhood one might swear couldn't possibly exist outside of fiction. As I combed the pages of the book, I couldn't believe what a range of emotions I felt—I laughed aloud at Crews's stories of her over-the-top-but-endearing family (both her parents were deaf, but she and her brother were both hearing), especially her father, was completely captured by the portrait of the Deaf community, something about which I knew nothing, and was heartbroken by the destruction of a real life

family. Turning the final page, I was grateful Crews had dared to get raw and real—and I wanted to hear more.

BURN
DOWN
THE
GROUND



A Memoir

"Kambri Crews writes of a chaotic and violent family life with compassion, wit, and pluck. Her triumph over tragedy is an inspiration."

—SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, CSJ, author of *Dead Man Walking*

__KAMBRI CREWS:__ You did, *Glamour*! About eight years ago I was sitting poolside in Miami skimming the latest issue (because that's glamorous, duh) and read about the "My Real-Life Story" essay contest. The deadline to enter was three days away, so I forfeited the beach in favor of writing my 3,000-word entry. I flew home to New York City and had my essay delivered by messenger but still missed the deadline.

Since I had done the work, I decided to not let it go to waste. I shared the piece with friends, one of whom insisted that I submit it for publication on FreshYarn.com, a website for personal essays, which published it.

I work in the comedy business and a number of comedians told me I had to write a book. If I didn't, I was letting a rich story go to waste. If anyone would know, they would. Through their encouragement, I ventured on stage to try out a few stories to see where it led. You could say I caved to peer pressure.

__GLAMOUR:__ Did you have confidence in your own ability to tell the story exactly as you wanted it to be heard? If not initially, what changed?

__KAMBRI CREWS:__ I knew I had experiences worth sharing and felt relatively sure I should be the one to tell it. In the hands of someone else it might become a maudlin soap opera, which is just not who I am.

Initially, I worried that my story wasn't unique. The same friend who'd encouraged me to submit my essay to Fresh Yarn had also given me a copy of *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls. I so closely related to Walls's story, which she told so beautifully, I felt like I had nothing more to add. That's when my husband reminded me that her family wasn't deaf and her father never tried to kill anyone.

__GLAMOUR:__ Why did you feel your story was an important one to share? Did you have a goal of passing something specific on to your readers?

KAMBRI CREWS: Growing up, I was constantly reminded to not to air our family's dirty laundry. Part of why domestic violence [like I talk about in my book] is allowed to continue is because there is often an unwritten rule in many families of abuse: Don't ask. Don't tell. Keeping quiet does no good. I found that sharing my story liberated me from my past. There is power in storytelling and, in that, healing. Owning my truth also empowered me. I will no longer be manipulated or controlled by guilt or shame.

__GLAMOUR:__ Who was the most inspiring woman in your life while growing up? And now?

__KAMBRI CREWS:__ Living in a tin shack and a trailer, I was easily impressed by anyone's success. I spent one week convinced Joyce DeWitt was the best actress in the world because of her stunning eye makeup (It was impressive. I actually do admire her comic timing but as a pre-teen? It *was* all about highlights and contours, baby.)

I was in awe of Olympic athletes, especially Dorothy Hamill, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Mary Lou Retton. I admired the comedic talents of Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin and Gilda Radner, and did my best (painfully dreadful) imitations of their characters for kids at school. An avid reader, I never missed a book by Judy Blume or Agatha Christie. They both remain two of my favorite authors. If I could have combined these ladies into one person, that's who I would have wanted to be when I grew up.

Now that I am grown up (ignore my juvenile tendency to squeeze Hershey's chocolate syrup straight into my mouth from the bottle), I admire so many varied women of all stripes. Judy Blume still inspires me, as does the aforementioned Jeannette Walls. Comedians Laurie Kilmartin and Lisa Lampanelli both excel in a man's business while still being generous to other comics and championing women. Mostly, I stand in awe of the every day women I knew from childhood that I interact with on Facebook. They struggle with juggling careers and raising children, endure hardships and occasional setbacks and yet do so with humility, grace and a sense of humor. Now *that* is inspiring!

__GLAMOUR:__ How do you feel about potentially becoming something of a figurehead or spokesperson for both CODA [Children of Deaf Adults], as well as those with family in jail? Is that a role that you thought you might have to take on, or something you've had to do already?

__KAMBRI CREWS:__ Throughout my childhood, I had served as an interpreter for my family. When I left home, I also left the Deaf community. I'd had enough of being a de facto intermediary and wanted to find my own identity. But, over time, I learned to embrace both cultures and find balance between them. I love my Deaf and CODA family and hope they would be proud to call me one of their own.

Being a figurehead for those with family members in prison is somewhat new for me. Something I've discovered since my father's incarceration is that the prison system is broken. My first-hand experiences have taught me that reform needs to happen sooner than later. I'm most interested in mentoring children with parents in prison. When a parent is sentenced to a jail term, the child is sentenced to the same time to be spent without a mother or father. No child should suffer a stigma or lack support and guidance because of the sins of a parent.

Dying to read *Burn Down the Ground* now? I don't blame you. [Get it here!](#)