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Physician With a Mission

Marcia **Bartusiak****SECTION:** BOOK WORLD; Pg. X08**LENGTH:** 934 words

A DESPERATE PASSION

An Autobiography

By Helen Broinowski Caldicott

Norton. 366 pp. \$ 27.50

IN THE 1950s Australian writer Nevil Shute wrote a horrifying tale, famous in the early days of the Cold War, that depicted a world destroyed by radiation after nuclear battle. Set in Melbourne, the city where Helen Caldicott grew up, *On the Beach* haunted her as a teenager. As an adult she devoted her life to preventing the book from becoming reality: A physician, wife, and mother of three, she worked on the front lines of the nuclear disarmament movement and was the central figure in an Oscar-nominated documentary, "Eight Minutes to Midnight"; her books *Nuclear Madness* and *Missile Envy* were read worldwide.

Wherever she traveled, reaction was swift and polarized. Conservative critics called her arrogant and overly emotional, especially when she dramatized the grisly medical consequences of nuclear conflict to make her point. Supporters viewed her as a brave and charismatic crusader. In *A Desperate Passion*, Caldicott reviews her life as an activist and reveals in a straightforward, workaday style (though at times with bitter frankness) how her accomplishments were achieved at a price: She saw her idealism crushed in political power plays that forced her out of the anti-nuclear organization she had nurtured for years. Her marriage strained by her obsession and incessant travel, she and her husband of nearly 30 years eventually divorced.

Born Helen Broinowski in 1938, she was the oldest child of a struggling salesman father and an abusive, intellectually frustrated mother. As a young woman, she was caught in a cycle of estrangements from and reconciliations with her mother. Her decision to marry William Caldicott, a fellow medical student, was driven, not by an overwhelming love, but rather by close friendship and a sense of obligation.

Her consuming passion was born out of crisis. After the death of both her parents and a brush with death herself (she caught hepatitis from a patient), she felt newly liberated. "I was ripe to throw off the shackles of childhood conditioning, entering a period of delayed adolescent rebellion," she writes.

Her first volley was a letter to an Adelaide newspaper warning of the medical dangers of atmospheric nuclear explosions. Extensively interviewed on Australian television, she soon was leading a national demonstration to end French bomb tests in the South Pacific. When her husband, a pediatric radiologist, obtained a permanent position in

Boston in 1977, she moved to the United States and continued her anti-nuclear campaigns. With several colleagues, she reactivated a dormant organization called Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR). Their timing was uncanny. The fledgling group bought an ad in the New England Journal of Medicine; the day before it was published, the infamous Three Mile Island accident occurred.

Lacking passion in her marriage, she found it in a cause, eventually giving up her medical work to head up PSR full time. Her life became an endless round of lectures, rallies and conferences. She quickly learned to adapt her pitch to each audience. To women, she described the faces of burned children; hard-boiled union men heard about the effects of radiation on testicles. With her attractive looks, smart suits and signature pearls, she became the media's darling.

Unfortunately, Caldicott mainly dwells on the minutia of her efforts: every meeting, every speech, every handshake with a labor official or medical colleague. No friend or administrative aide goes unthanked. She is obviously smitten by the celebrities that flocked to her cause: Robert Redford is a "golden-haired man more beautiful in the flesh than on celluloid"; Sally Field was "lit up by what I had to say."

WHAT Caldicott does not provide is the bigger picture: how her particular actions fit into the anti-nuclear politics of the day. Suffering from tunnel vision, she judges everything through the lens of her cause. She naively claims that Walter Mondale would have handily beat Ronald Reagan if only he had "talked about the threat of nuclear war with passion." And had she stayed president of PSR, she contends, "we would now be well on the way to bilateral nuclear disarmament." But what about China or India? Or the potential for terrorist bombs being made from black market materials? The playing field has changed.

Yet public attitudes did play a role in establishing the new world order, and Caldicott's effort -- her passion -- was a factor. In the 1970s the majority of Americans expressed little support for ending the arms race. Partly due to the work of PSR and other nuclear-freeze organizations, by 1983 up to 80 percent of the public supported disarmament in some form.

A Desperate Passion captures the forceful drive, sacrifices and sheer drudgery required to push an international cause. For a brash and outspoken woman like Caldicott, who is now applying her energies to the environmental movement, it also meant confronting male competitors who left her feeling "psychologically raped."

Missing in A Desperate Passion are enriching insights into an activist's inner motivations and philosophy. "Perhaps . . . because I had been so unprotected as a child, I need to protect the world's children as a compensatory mechanism," she tersely suggests. Ironically, she nearly becomes a stranger to her own children in her addiction to the limelight.

Marcia Bartusiak is an adjunct professor of science journalism at Boston University. Her latest book is "Through a Universe Darkly."

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GRAPHIC: Photo, douglas chevalier, Helen Caldicott with a chart showing the firepower of Trident submarines during a meeting of the National Womens Conference to Prevent Nuclear War in 1984