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## Before the happy ending: Mom shares pain of infertility

by Ellyn Wexler | Staff Writer

While babies and all the sweet stuff associated with them reign foremost among the fantasies of many females from an early age, motherhood was definitely not on Shelley Kirilenko's agenda.

As a child, she says, "I was a shy bookworm interested in foreign languages and cultures, literature and music. These interests did not exactly make me popular at Target Range Grade School."

At age 29, the Missoula, Mont., native was single and working on a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, having studied German language and literature for 11 years.

"I had never questioned the fact that I was destined to be a professor, a scholar. It never occurred to me that I might one day desire children," recalls the 46-year-old Bethesda resident.

But after meeting Soviet exchange student Andrei Kirilenko, and marrying him just three months later, "the vision I had for my life changed dramatically," she says. The new Mrs. Kirilenko had a dream that opened her to the "realm" of "Babyland," about tousling the "soft and sweet-smelling" curls of a boy who had her husband's eyes, and feeling "completely content." Thereafter, her imagination would impinge upon her work, creating what she saw as a "double life."

"While in the library, bent over an Old High German text or Proto-Indo-European construction, I would picture myself pushing a toddler in a swing. ... After I put the imaginary toddler down for a nap, I would bolt up the stairs to my book-lined study to work on my Great American Novel-in progress," she says.

Kirilenko's visions of a life spent raising a family and writing fiction contrasted sharply with the reality of her situation. She was all too aware of being "a graduate student living in a dorm room with an unemployed husband." Still, her feelings were undeniable.

"The thing was," Kirilenko writes in her recently published memoir "The Blue Kimono: A Spiritual Transformation Through Infertility," "for the first time in my life, I



Photo by Andrei Kirilenko  
Author Shelley Kirilenko.

knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted above all other things to have a child to love. I wanted to be a mom. Everything else was secondary.”

The dream took a dozen years to come true, six of them fraught with the emotional and physical pain of trying to conceive. The longer the desire was thwarted, the more obsessive the Kirilenkos, particularly Shelley, became.

Kirilenko wrote this book because “a personal account of the emotional agony caused by infertility” was what she “didn’t find — but desperately needed” while going through infertility and assisted reproduction.

“I found plenty of material on the medical procedures,” she says.

With “The Blue Kimono,” she hoped to help others “contemplating fertility treatments make a more informed choice, and to help those already going through treatments not to feel so alone.”

The couple published the book through their own small independent Technostorks Press as a “companion piece” to their DVD on infertility. Its title comes “from a tiny outfit that I bought at the Suitengu fertility shrine in Japan in the hopes that soon I would have someone to wear it,” she explains. “Five years later, the blue kimono was still collecting dust in my closet.”

On the “spiritual transformation” referred to in the book’s subtitle, Kirilenko observes, “I don’t think you can go through an experience as agonizing as infertility and not emerge a changed person. In my case, I learned that, ultimately, I am not in control of a lot of things in my life, that I don’t even have control over my own reproductive system.”

The birth of Luke, after “a particularly unpromising treatment,” she says, gave her faith she did not have before.

“I couldn’t help but view him as a gift from God, a miracle of creation. ... I have learned to take things in stride a little more, to let go, to have more faith, to walk across the earth with less fear.”

Kirilenko considers motherhood “the most satisfying and demanding” of the three careers of her adulthood.

“Although I’ve derived a great deal of satisfaction from teaching and writing, I think I’m the most proud of becoming pregnant ... given how many painful treatments and emotions I had to endure to get there,” she says, acknowledging that her statement “probably sounds strange.”

Each of the careers, she observes, “shaped and informed the next: Teaching taught me patience and helped me learn how to formulate my thoughts more clearly. Writing fiction taught me more patience, perseverance and the importance of developing thick skin. All of the above have been useful in parenting an active and independent child.”

At long last, Kirilenko’s dream came true. She has written a short-story collection and a promotional episode of a feature film based on her own screenplay, and is working on a mystery novel “A.B.D.,” set on a university campus.

And as for motherhood, she says, it's "both more wonderful and more difficult than I ever could have expected. The physical and mental exhaustion of caring for a newborn, for instance, are more intense than anything I've experienced.

"At the same time, the joy in watching my son take his first step, say his first word, or hit his first baseball has also been greater than any joy I've ever felt."

At the end of the memoir, Luke is 4 years old and "roams the earth with a sense of awe and wonder at even the most insignificant objects. Maybe he senses that he very nearly didn't make it here ..."

"The blue kimono," Kirilenko says, "no longer fits Luke, but it still hangs in my closet, reminding me not to take one single minute for granted."

The trade paperback "The Blue Kimono" (2007, Technostorks Press, Bethesda) is available for \$11.99. Visit [www.technostorks.com](http://www.technostorks.com).

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