

#29 Moms, Memoirs and Mental Health with Mira Bartok

Donna Ferris: Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose after difficulty. This is our second episode in Mental Health Awareness Month, and with Mother's Day coming up this week, also in May, we'll be exploring that theme today as well. I'm your host, Donna Ferris, and joining us is the National Book Critics Award winning author, Mira Bartok.

A bit about Mira. Mira is a Chicago-born artist, writer, and the author of the impactful memoir, the Memory Palace. Her story resonates with themes of resilience, forgiveness, and the enduring connection between a mother and her child, despite all odds. Additionally, Mira has authored over 28 children's books, including The Wonderling, which has a sequel releasing in 2025. Thank you so much for being on the podcast, Mira.

It's an honor to speak with you.

Mira Bartok: And, thank you for inviting me. He had a little bit of fun before, I came on. [00:01:00] So, thank you for, dealing with our technical difficulties quite smoothly and elegantly. Thank you.

Donna Ferris: I think we had a lot of fun at it.

We had such a good time with it, actually. So maybe we'll just dive right in. Can you share maybe the journey of writing your memoir and what inspired you to tell your story?

Mira Bartok: I had had a, a pretty major brain injury in, two, let's see, 1999, and I had had one a year before, and I just sort of healed, gotten back on track, and then I was hit by a semi. I had, you know, a lot of trouble like stuttering and memory issues and, you know, lost words and so I had a lot of impairments.

And so one of my, on my path to recovery, I, I started trying to write again. I always wrote and, made art, but sort of simultaneously or did one or the other. I [00:02:00] got to a pretty, a better place, let's just say, and, I thought it would be really good for me To apply for a MFA program in creative writing.

And there's a great one in, in this area of Massachusetts. And I thought it would be great to be with community, build community with other writers, and also just get my chops back. So I got into the program and, and I, I, I was mostly writing short fiction. And, and also, I was writing a lot of nature essays and, It's like every single thing I wrote, my mother would pop up, pop up.

Like I'd be writing an essay about beavers and my mother would appear, I would be writing an essay about some, you know, something that relating to, you know, anything in the landscape and there would be my mother somehow, you know, these memories of her kept coming back. And I just thought, okay, just, and then I, then I wrote, basically I wrote kind of a performative monologue in her voice.[00:03:00]

And I really liked that. And I, I thought, okay, maybe I should just look at this stuff because I hadn't seen her in 17 years. I knew she was homeless. We wrote each other, through post office boxes. She was schizophrenic and, and I loved her very much. And she was a real, she was a polymath, really brilliant, incredible, really talented musician, pianist.

But we had this. You know, we have this kind of standing thing where I would not see her unless she agreed to get help and she wouldn't let me know where she was unless I agreed to take her in and have her live with me. There was no way that was going to happen. I mean, cause she, she, I wouldn't say she was violent, but she had, she, she could be violent.

And the last time I had seen her, she was quite violent. We exchanged these letters. She would write me [00:04:00] care of somebody else in another state, and they would forward the letter to me. And I lived overseas for a while. So anyway, that went on. So I just started writing about her at this point where I didn't, You know, she was getting on in years and, I thought about her all the time, you know, I didn't know how the story would end, but so I wasn't quite sure how to, how to write about her, but because I draw that, visual art was my main, my first love and music, I decided to, use an object from memory.

Or an image from memory, whether it was a photograph or an object or something that would help hopefully be kind of like a talisman that would take me back into a memory of my mother and a particular event or something, a passion that we shared, something, and that's sort of how I began and what I actually, it turned into a kind of a wall sized, canvas.

I, I actually built a memory palace, painted one [00:05:00] also. So you see these little images in the book, but actually it's a giant painting of a palace with

windows and doors and so on. So I didn't know how it would end. And somehow this nurse called me, from, How she got my number and this nurse called me and said, your mother is dying.

She's at this hospital. She was in Cleveland, which is where we grew up. And she really would like to see you. My mother didn't actually understand she was dying. She couldn't comprehend that. So boom, I had to make a decision.

Am I going to see my mother before she dies? And my immediate response was yes, absolutely. So, long story short, uh, I told my sister and my sister and I had not talked about my mother for 17 years. It was, my sister didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to, you know, she, she carries her own, you know, suitcase of darkness from that.

[00:06:00] Um, and, and, and, and, I didn't think she would come, but she did. And, I was really proud of her that she, she was able to do that. And so we spent the last, you know, three weeks of my mother's life, three and a half, four weeks of my mother's life by her side. And I had the end of my story. Well, almost, because I discovered she had a storage room filled with seven

years of diaries. I would send her art, art supplies. And so she's, I knew. That she was trying to learn how to draw, but I didn't realize she did these things like, she, she would write in her diary, or in one of her notebooks, stop the voices, how to stop the voices, right? Draw a, draw a map of the world.

See if you can remember all the capital cities and countries and name them in three languages. Go. She would say, and she would do it. Um, draw, uh, see if you can remember all the, all the bones in the body. Alphabetically boom, [00:07:00] she would do that. She was, like I said, a polymath and she was, you know, like, kind of beyond mental level genius.

So I, I got the end of my story and then I got. Another little land because I uncovered my mother's sort of secret life. It was very, very, very touching and she didn't have access to a piano. And she, and the other thing she did was she Xeroxed the keyboard, a part of the keyboard and, and kept in books in every, she stuck these everywhere in her, her.

Yeah, so that you could play. That was very moving and, so, so, yeah, that's, that's sort of, what inspired me was I couldn't get her out of my mind. That's a long way to answer that question. Yeah. It was time to write about her.

[00:08:00]

Donna Ferris: It was funny when I was reading your book, and I love your book, how so many of our stories, especially when we write memoirs, are about our mothers,

Mira Bartok: I freelance edit off and on, and I would, yeah, I would say that the majority of memoirs that I have edited have been about mother daughter relationships. Part of that is because people hear about me through my memoir. But you know, family, a lot of people that that's their, their fam, first family is there is, is, is such a, sometimes, you know, strife filled relationship.

But I always go back. One thing I tell my students is that. Great quote by Andy Dillard, where she said, writing about family is an art, but it should never be a martial art. And so I try to get people to write, to write through a point, to point of compassion, you [00:09:00] know, and sometimes it's really hard.

Especially if you have a parent who is abusive.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, you really did. I really loved how you brought in her lists, like the things that she was writing as well, you know, so that you could kind of, she got, she kind of got her own voice in your book, which I thought was really well done.

Mira Bartok: Choosing, choosing little sections. Of those diaries was tough because I'm, I'm talking about 17 years of tight handwriting and, and hundreds of pages that, you know, I just wanted to capture the essence of something, something that was her, her and, and let her love for music come through, let her, love of art and of, of the natural world come through, you know, I always told people who deal with, you know, You know, family, you know, family member or someone they love with schizophrenia or something, you know, some severe or even brain trauma, the essential person is in there, [00:10:00] you know, if that person's still in there, it's this, you know, disease or accident or whatever, that's hijacked the brain.

But if you look at, you know, like, I'm sure you've seen those videos of, you know, like a ballerina who's like in her 80s who. Who, you know, has dementia or Alzheimer's and hears this music of Swan Lake and she starts, she remembers, her body remembers, her body remembers this thing that is, is beyond the self.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. I really appreciated how you described her illness, too. And I think it's really a profound book in teaching us about schizophrenia. And, you know, what it means to have a parent that has that. Have a lot of people

come to you and said that this was very helpful for them to understand , that condition.

Mira Bartok: I have to say, you know, I was on the road off [00:11:00] and on for like two years. And doing events was emotionally draining but also moving. Sometimes, the signing part would last two hours, and eventually, I realized I needed to be protected from it because I would be absolutely exhausted. You know, I would be toast.

So many people are crying and, and saying me too. And I remember one event I did, it was a benefit for the homeless shelter that my mother was in the last part of her life, which incidentally has since been named for her. It's called the Norma Hare Women's Center in Cleveland. So this organization did this big benefit for her and we were at, , a temple and, and somewhere outside of Cleveland and, there were, I, I would say about four or 500 people there and I said, okay, everyone close your eyes and raise your [00:12:00] hand.

If you have someone close to you, even your family or a friend or yourself who, who suffers from mental illness, and then I said, now, open your eyes and there was not a hand that was not raised. And it was this really heart, heart, heartbreaking, but, but moving thing, like, everybody felt connected, I think, in some way we, we try to hide mental illness, like, you know, we, we've given, you know, our country's given so little care for - more research and money toward tooth decay that there was mental illness. Now, tooth decay is important, but, you know.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. I think there's a. A real need to destigmatize this, this subject. That's the whole purpose of Mental Health Awareness Month, but we should make it Mental Health Awareness Year with how many, you know, I could, and as you said, it really affects [00:13:00] everyone.

If you had been in that, if I had been in that room, I would have raised both hands. I think maybe that's partially why I relate so much to this book. Maybe take a moment. To talk about your car accident, not necessarily about, you know, what, what happened, but more how that helped you understand, because I think that's one of the really nice, deep parts of this book is you could understand a little bit more, maybe your mother's experience based on what you went through.

I thought that was really, just kind of amazing to have that connection with, with somebody, you know, after so many years. I think that, you know, following something like that.

Mira Bartok: Well, it was particularly, it was particularly traumatic because, a week after I got hit by this truck, I had to, move [00:14:00] and, and the day before I moved.

I was in this town, North, North Hampton Mass, which is about 15 minutes from here. I had a doctor's appointment, and I was the first one on the scene of a man who had just shot his wife in the street, which is not something that had, it was, it was, they both died. He, he, it was right, right across from the courthouse.

And I actually thought it was, an active shooter. And I, I mean, it was. Let's look, I don't want to trigger anybody, but it was a horrible scene and, and I hid and then I had this thought that, oh, my God, what if, what if I can save her life? I mean, I, I just had this both, I, you know, a hidden nice hidden, the, like, somewhere in the building.

And then I just said, what do you have to lose? [00:15:00] I just ran out into the street back out into the street. And the cops were already there and everything. So by the time I had to like, move into, you know, my, my friends came, I was pretty lost and very depressed.

I felt like I lost my sense of self and, and, and then my, my, neuropsych doctor who is doing neuropsych therapy and doing all the testing, she said, well, maybe you should try to draw again.

I was having some cognitive problems with that too. I started drawing again. And, and I also started doing things like, going , on nature walks, I started keeping a sketchbook again and I'm a big list maker.

So I started, going on a wildflower walk in, seeing what I could identify, you know, in terms of what flowers are remembered. , and the other thing that happened was, I started looking at my [00:16:00] problems of speech and understanding speech as something that was along the lines of poetry.

So, someone would say, they would say something about, oh, look at the bird on the, bird on the bridge on the, and I would hear that bridge is full of birdsong or something, or I would hear, or I, I thought my husband said, I don't remember what he said, but he said, I think we could sell oceans off the back of a cart.

And so, so I I just started, just sort of writing that stuff down and I started thinking, well I wonder how close this is to the way my mother thinks and her

disconnected Strange way, which was very poetic and so I think one of the things that helped me the most was really curiosity.

Curiosity about my own brain and, and, [00:17:00] and I've always been fascinated by the creative process. And so I just thought, just go with it. You know, there's a great, I think this is a list, I think this is Eleanor Roosevelt who said, do with, do what you can with what you have, where you are.

Donna Ferris: Wow.

Mira Bartok: And that's all we can do really, you know, and, and, and so that, that plus a million other things really helped me. I think the thing that was Most, in a way, most painful was right before my accident. I was in all sorts of musical groups. I just started, I play a few instruments, you know, the music thing is in the family.

And so, I was just playing in the Smith College Gamelin Orchestra, which is, you know, for shadow puppet theater. And I was in a Baroque choir, and I was playing the harp and, And a [00:18:00] couple other instruments in another little group and, and in a trio. I mean, I was probably in five different groups, and all that ended.

And so I just thought, okay, do with what you have, where you are, well, you have, you could sing. I'm not a great singer, but just sing, sing whenever you want, sing all the time, sing in the shower, sing, you know? And. And then eventually I, when I got my book deal, I bought a violin because I hadn't played in years and years and years.

It's incremental when you recover from something, and, you know, the funny thing is that I never really, I never turned to, you know, I've never, I was pretty straight edge. I'm not, not like. I mean, I was, I was never straight edge in the sense that I was like super conservative as a, as a, a young person or a kid, but I just never drank or did drugs.

I just had no interest. My [00:19:00] drugs were just the arts, anything in the arts. I've had ups and downs with that because, uh, I had another brain injury in 2018, which just derailed me. Uh, it's like I had. I had a book due like the next year, and I am still, I am now finally finishing it.

It's like years overdue, which caused an enormous financial disaster in our family. And, and it's like, you know, there are some things that I've had to do

again and again and again, but you know, I'll tell you a little story. When I was young, I played classical violin and I wasn't great.

I was much better at piano, but I also played harp, and I thought I wanted to, you know, I thought. I want to play fiddle tunes, Celtic music, stuff I really, really can play with other people. And it's really simple. And my first fiddle [00:20:00] teacher, Dave Koehner, was a lovely man, and he got me playing right off the bat.

I think he died last year. And this kind of says it all. So Dave is a beautiful man, and he did a lot of community; he did so much for the community he lived in and for other people and for bringing music to, to people who might not have had access to, you know, playing and playing instruments.

He got ALS. First, he lost the use of his legs. Then he lost the use of his torso, arms, and hands. He could no longer play. Then he lost speech. At the end of his life, he wrote a hundred songs using eye gauge technology. He was completely, [00:21:00] completely, uh, paralyzed, but he wrote a hundred songs.

That has always stuck with me, and it's something that I heard. I don't know where this came from, but it's a phrase that I heard. I think I was in my late teens or early 20s. What is within us without us? I don't know where it came from, but I think, what, what is deep inside us?

What, it's like my mother's, my mother's musicality, my mother's. Is it the soul? What is in us without the cloaks of gender and race, your favorite football team, and whatever? What is deep inside you? Well, Dave Koehner, that was, that, that is actually the heart of his story is it's that.

So I think about that [00:22:00] whenever I have yet another accident. You know, there's something deep inside us that is essential, and we can want, we can have all the things, you know, can say all these things that we want. We want this. We want that. But it's what's inside that really matters.

And I, that might sound sentimental or I don't know what, but it's like, that's the truth. I think it's important to remember that when we see someone on the street who's homeless, knowing that they have something essential that is lovable inside them when Someone is talking to themselves and they seem really off their rocker.

Well, what's inside them? There is a there is a human in there. There's a soul and It's our job. It's our job is to love that soul to connect with that soul.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I love, I love that. I love that so much. I [00:23:00] think Sharon Salzberg says, if you might, if you're familiar with her, she, she says, um, everybody wants to be happy.

Everybody desires to be happy. We may not agree with how they look at happy, but it's a good way to kind of level us. And it's kind of where you are, what you were saying about Dave is, you know, he wanted, his happiness was still creating songs regardless of what his, you know, physical situation was. It's a really, really good way to think about a lot of these subjects, especially mental health.

Maybe we should take a moment on Wunderling because it sounds like you're going to come out with a sequel to that soon. And I love the theme of that. No matter one's size, stature, or humble beginnings, they can make a positive change in the world. Maybe we should talk a little bit about that. I mean, you were talking a little bit about it, and it's probably a good segue from what we were just talking about.

Mira Bartok: I would say that the Wonderling, the first Wonderling, which is, uh, the series or the two-book series, is called the [00:24:00] Wonderling. Then the first one was called Song Catcher. The second one is called Singing Tree. When I was 14, I wrote and illustrated, uh, a fairy tale. In the first book of the one, the first Wonderling Arthur, my little character, he, he has this memory, actually I was gonna say is that this is this book, the Wonderling is, the first book is more autobiographical in many ways than, than my memoir.

And that's something, he has this memory of his mother. He couldn't remember his family and didn't know where he came from, but his memories started coming back. And he remembers this thing that his mother said to him, which is, you are the Wonderling. You must sing to the lonely, comfort the frightened, and awaken the love in sleeping hearts.

And I think last year or the year [00:25:00] before, I found this illustration that I did when I was 14 for this book. And, and what does it say? That exact same thing. I wrote that, same sentence when I was 14.

Donna Ferris: It sounds like that's been your message, right? It sounds like that was something that you knew was your message. When you were little.

What are you hoping the theme of the next book is?

Mira Bartok: I don't actually think of themes. That's why I don't think of themes. That's, that's not how I write. One of the problems with the sequel is that, if your character has gone through some, you know, big journey and they've transformed at the end, where do you go?

You basically keep making things worse for your character. So my character in book one finally finds his voice. Without - spoiler alert - he finds his [00:26:00] voice, he learns that he, he can, he can sing and he is an incredible singer. He also has this ability to hear things from far away, like the sap in a tree, or, he can understand animals.

He gains. Little by little, those things become stronger. And, in book two, he needs to go on a journey with his friends and, basically, save this tree called the Singing Tree, which is dying. And it's like, it's like the tree of life. So I think what he learns is more like what he learns, how he connects not only to his friends and to the world around him but also to what he learns about.

You know, that's, there's something greater, greater than his world. And basically, the adults in the room are not; they're not really taking care of business, and it's up to the little [00:27:00] guys. You know, it's always up to the little guys, really. So, so, and, and, you know, that, that element was there in the, in book one, but it's, it's strengthened in book two because basically he sings a song that people start this, it sort of sparks a rebellion and of my characters who are the groundlings of the lowest of the low in the, in their world, and it sort of sparks a, a rebellion.

I guess he conquers his shyness a bit, but it's, you know, he, I'm not sure. I have to think about that one. I mean, it's really, it's all about connection; I think the, the sense of connection is even greater because it has this sense that connection to the natural world becomes a really big, big theme, and it, you know, Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. It's interesting. You know, if I look at, if I think back to your memoir into this, I mean, you know, I was trying to think about where you or how you converted [00:28:00] from memoir to fiction or fiction to memoir. It feels like there are some themes there, like connection and, you know, you have an interest in maybe people who are overlooked or beings that are overlooked.

Right?

Mira Bartok: Yeah, definitely. I am always rooting for the little guy. And, you know, before I wrote my memoir, I I was writing a lot of short stories, and, in a

way, it was a little tough to write a memoir because my interests are my favorite kind of writing.

I read a lot of different kinds of books. I'm a very omnivorous reader. reader. But I would say the kind of thing I like to write the most is speculative fiction or fabulous fiction, where maybe everything is the same and normal, but there's one thing that's just a little off. I like this border between the real and the unreal.

That there's this thin place, that maybe you can go in the past, [00:29:00] travel back to the past, or, or maybe everything's normal, but you have, you know, a character has the ability to hear the sap in trees and hear understand animals or something. So it's not like full-blown fantasy, but my stories are all, you know, just sort of on that edge of a little strange.

Like, I think, probably closest to Borges or, you know, some of the magic realists in South America, Latin America. That's what it sounds like.

Donna Ferris: I guess I have one last question. Is your mother still popping up in your stories, or did it kind of die down after the memoir?

Mira Bartok: The weird thing, that's an interesting question because after I wrote the book and finished it and it got published, I stopped dreaming of her.[00:30:00]

I mean, I always had dreams that were extremely vivid and almost epic. Often, my mother was in them. Yeah. And generally, she was trying to chase me or, you know, I was really afraid of her. Sometimes, I tried to help her off, and I tried to help her. I just stopped dreaming about her, and in a way, it made me kind of sad because I think I've only dreamt of her maybe three times since that book came out in 2011.

I don't dream of any of my family members at all.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I had a similar experience. My mother would after she died, and I went through those difficulties; she kept showing up in my psychic readings almost every time. She would, nobody else would, but she would.

And then after I wrote the book, it stopped. I was wondering whether the same thing kind of happened to you.

Mira Bartok: Yeah, it's almost like an exorcism.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. Yeah. It was almost like, well, it's for me, you know [00:31:00] I had a bit of a strange situation with her and. And it was almost like she needed to finish our connection like it wasn't, it wasn't complete.

She wanted to make sure that I knew she loved me, I think. You know, so it was really important to have that. I wondered if, if, you know, once you wrote it, you had something, it just kind of ended too.

Mira Bartok: Was she mentally ill too?

Donna Ferris: Undiagnosed. Um, she had a really difficult childhood, was abused as a child, and I think my childhood hit her at a time when she was very unhappy.

I bore the brunt of most of that. So I had to separate myself from her because of how difficult she was for me. It was really, um, very difficult for me mentally, but you know, I always felt bad. I think I had a similar situation where I wanted to go back when she was dying, and I didn't [00:32:00] get the chance to be with her.

So I do think, you know, what you wrote and your experience was so profound to have that opportunity to go back.

Mira Bartok: I think it would have been very different without my sister there. I would have felt very sad if she had not been there. I would have understood, but the interesting thing is that the morning after my mother died, we found out about these storage rooms, and my sister woke up and said, well, that's the end of that, that, that chapter's closed.

And now, she's never looked at those diaries. She's never looked at them, and I was like, wow, I think a new chapter just opened for me. Yeah. So, so, you know, every, everybody has their different, way, you know, she, either she didn't need to look at those things or she avoided looking at those things or she didn't, it just wasn't helpful for her.

Donna Ferris: Everybody has their [00:33:00] different way of processing and, and processing is not the right word, but, you know, figuring out how they're going to move through the end of a relationship like that.

Mira Bartok: For her, you know, maybe she just, my sister just needed to say goodbye, you know, And I know it's very profound for her.

But you know, I was still writing a book.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, you were, you were a memoir writer looking for your ending too. I mean, there's nothing like that.

Mira Bartok: I mean, it's weird. It's weird. Like literally the week before I found out about her being in the hospital. My friend Jane said, how will you end your book?

I go; I have no idea. And then when I came back from Cleveland, she said, now, you know what, how you're going to end the book, aren't you? And I go, yep.

Donna Ferris: That's always it. Memoir writers are always in search of that ending. Yeah, that feels like a good place to end our talk. Is there anything else that [00:34:00] you want to share?

Mira Bartok: No, but I'm looking forward to reading your book. Aw, thank you for that. I'll send you my book. You were so kind to do that for me. Yeah, I love your book so much. And for everybody, it's, um, the Memory Palace. I'm going to take my sticky off, but it's the Memory Palace. I highly recommend it, especially for Mother's Day.

And, Mira, thank you so much for being with me today.

Mira Bartok: Oh, thank you. Thank you for putting up with our adventures and technology. Maybe we should start a whole new podcast series.

Donna Ferris: We should start one - like comedians in cars. We could do writers in technology, technology snafus.

That's all for today. Those links will be in the show notes if you want to learn more about Mira and her books. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a [00:35:00] review, and share it with your friends.

That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit.

And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvia, are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you and how much I love you.

Bye now.