

Author Launches Daring Photo Essay On Her 40th Birthday

By BillieRae.com

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Billie Rae Bates' "My Mother's Clothing" offers a glimpse at two lives set 30 years apart.

The teenage years of novelist / journalist Billie Rae Bates were awash in lambswool sweaters, straight wool skirts to the knee and spiked-heel, pointed-toe pumps.

But Bates wasn't a teen in the 1950s; she came of age in the 1980s. Her wardrobe was marked, however, by the boxes and racks of stylish '50s clothing that her mother carefully tucked away decades earlier, clothing that influenced how she presented herself through her teens, 20s and 30s -- just as her mother, too, had influenced her.

Now Bates, the author of two novels and a set of TV reference books, has launched a special photo project on April 7, the date of her 40th birthday and a year after her mother died of lung cancer.

"My Mother's Clothing" is an online photo essay, featuring one photo per week throughout the year 2008. The photos feature Bates in her mother's vintage outfits, in various areas of the author's home in Metro Atlanta, Georgia. Bates, who began the project promptly at the beginning of January, is shooting the photos herself, with a tripod and her digital camera's self-timer, each Sunday morning before she leaves for church. Each photo bears a name and a description, with musings from the author.

For instance: "Mother once remarked that she typically wore her white circle blouse under this delicate gray wool dress marked with fine white speckles," she writes of the photo "Grayday," dated January 13. "I, on the other hand, have always worn a black satin handkerchief, pinned underneath each side of the plunging neckline. I've always considered this a killer outfit, a one-of-a-kind."

Bates is using her point-and-shoot Samsung Digimax A 503 camera. And (here's where the daring part comes in!) each photo is a raw jpg file, straight out of the camera, loaded onto the My Mother's Clothing webpage with absolutely no retouching of any kind. No stray lint removal. No smoothing of skintone. Not even cropping or resizing.

"I haven't had plastic surgery," Bates says. "I haven't had botox. I'm just a silly chick, for better or worse, plain and simple. The way God made me."

It means that various items in Bates' home may be sitting in the background of the shots, whether they fit or not, such as the white extension cord on the floor in "Grayday." It means that if you look closely you'll see the tiny moth holes in the sweater dress of "Zilwaukee." It's truly an "as is" approach. And Bates insists on the no-retouching rule to further carry the message of "My Mother's Clothing." "It's a celebration of life, just as it is," she says. "Real. I remember my mother repeating, when she was turning 40 in 1978, that popular adage of 'life begins at 40.' Well, in some ways, my own life is beginning at 40, too."

But more than just a celebration of life in general, "My Mother's Clothing" is a tribute to two divergent lives, set 30 years apart, Bates says. "My mother got engaged at age 16, got married at age 21, and stayed married all her life, nearly 50 years. She was a homemaker, then later an office worker for extra money for the family, but she lived a very traditional, comfortable, stable life, raising a family and embracing all of the values of the '50s in which she was raised."

The author continues, "I, on the other hand, went right into college after high school, then right onto the corporate ladder, where the Lord blessed me for many years, through my 20s and 30s. I scarcely gave a thought to marriage or raising a family. I had a different plan."

Bates, who grew up on a farm in tiny Ovid, Mich., graduated from Michigan State University with a bachelor's degree in journalism and English in 1990. She spent 10 years in the daily newspaper business first, five of those years as an editor and page designer at The Detroit News, after stints in Saginaw, Mich., and Wausau, Wis. From there, she took on a management role in the publications area of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, then moved on to a director of communication post at St. Joseph Health System in northern Michigan.

In December 2002, she opted to step out of the corporate world to concentrate on her book projects and ministry work. Though she'd published an e-book of her first novel "Rubi" in 2000, her first print book, "Dynasty High: a guide to TV's 'Dynasty,'" was released in 2004. Other books, including a second novel, "Call Me Mary Magdalene," followed.

Bates quips, "At my age, my mother had three children, had been married nearly 20 years, through thick and thin, and her youngest child was already 10. Me? My children are my books."

And the thread that ties these two lives together? "My Mother's Clothing."

Now that the photo project has been officially published (<http://mymothersclothing.billierae.com>), her work is certainly not done. Bates will continue shooting the photos each Sunday morning from now until the end of the year, until the collection numbers a clean 52.

"It usually takes me 10 to 20 shots to get the one I want to use for that day," she says. "I'm sure it'd be easier if I wanted to Photoshop them, and I know they're not 'professional,' in any sense. But they're the way I want them, and I hope anyone who views them will appreciate that and enjoy it."

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Billie Rae Bates is the author of two novels and the founder of BRBTV.com, a slightly zany web homage to several classic TV shows of the 1980s. Part of the web since 1998, BRBTV produces reference guides designed as fun companions to the classic TV shows, 'Dallas,' 'Dynasty,' 'The Dukes of Hazzard' and 'Santa Barbara.' BRB has more than 17 years of professional experience in writing, editing and graphic design, including 10 years in the daily newspaper business.

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