

Pam Houston

## **Early Life**

She was born in 1962 in Trenton, NJ, and was raised in Bethlehem, PA.

Her mother was Catherine Louise Hoff, and actress

Her father was Beverly Ord Houston – a playboy and not-so-successful businessman

Both parents drank heavily. From her essay collection *A Little More About Me*: “By my sixteenth birthday I had walked away from sixteen serious automobile accidents. In more than half of them, a great deal of alcohol was involved. My mother drove a Plymouth Fury right through a 7-Eleven, my father rolled a Cadillac Seville nine times on Christmas Eve, my best high school girlfriend put us and her Ford station wagon under a semi, right at decapitation level.”

She had a difficult childhood. Her parents were resentful that they “had” to marry because of pregnancy. Catherine’s own mother died giving birth to her. Catherine felt like she “gave up her life” when she gave birth to Pam.

Catherine was also anorexic. She was a “classic” beauty, while Pam was not. She was very critical of Pam’s weight and physical appearance. Years later, Pam was asked about some of her writing on weight and body image issues: “What I am doing, always when I am writing stories or essays, is giving voice to the parts of myself that I most want to hide. When I write, I’m like a heat-seeking missile, digging for the pain spot in any situation. Does that hurt? I’m asking myself the whole time. How about that? How about that? I do this because I know the only way to overcome pain and discomfort and embarrassment is, in fact, through it. And while it was hard, in a certain way, to reveal myself in those essays about weight, how much harder is it still to sit in an empty room with my fear and self-doubt? Several people have told me that the essays helped them to forgive themselves, either for weighing more than they think they should, or for thinking they weigh more than they should. Where there is honesty and bravery, forgiveness is rarely far behind” (*A Little More About Me*).

Pam’s father was demanding and negative. He was also physically abusive, which Pam repressed for years: “I think, because I grew up in a house where I was afraid all the time, I came to believe that this state was normal, and what people called fear had to be some other feeling on top of that. Repressing painful memories is a lot of work, and gets harder, I think, the further away from the trauma—both in years and distance—you get. You have to shut down so much of yourself to keep those memories in the closet that you wind up having to choose how much and how often you are going to feel. For me, I’d decided I was going to feel strong and happy only occasionally and guardedly, and I wasn’t going to feel angry, disappointed, or scared at all” (*A Little More About Me*). Her own experience as a child led Pam to become

very ambivalent about having her own children. In the end she did not have any (you will be reading about her experiences with pregnancy, so I will let her tell that story).

## **Adulthood**

She received her BA from Denison University, and began a Ph.D. program at the University of Utah. She ended up dropping out because she didn't like the politics of higher education. I can certainly understand that.

Instead she traveled; she worked as a hunting guide in Alaska, a white water rafting guide, and she spent a lot of time hiking, climbing, and fishing. She always pushed herself to her physical limits: "Well, the psychology of it is probably fairly complex. I lived in a household as a child where I was afraid all the time. It was kind of a violent household, so what the psychologists would say is that I was trying to recreate a dangerous situation for myself and master it. I think there's an element of truth in that....I knew that landscape was always going to be a huge part of my writing. I wanted to see as remote landscapes as possible. But I admit there was an obsessive element of it, where if someone said, 'Here, jump off this cliff,' I had to prove I could" ("Deep in the Heart of Houston").

When she was younger, she was attracted to the wrong kind of men: "One thing I am definitely not doing is making a statement about American manhood. Because my father was (in spite of his nine-to-five job and his paid-off car and his benefits) an extremely emotionally immature human being, I tended to date, in my twenties, and, I'm sorry to say on into my thirties, emotionally immature men who happened not to have nine-to-five jobs. It was a lesson it took a long time to learn. Because my experience was largely with those men, that is what I wrote about for years. If my father had been an emotionally immature river guide, I probably would have dated emotionally immature accountants and executives for ten years. But once you decide you want an emotionally mature man, you can find him as easily on the river as you can on Wall Street, or in an artist's studio as easily as you can in a bank" ("Talking with Pam Houston").

Most of Pam's fiction is autobiographical. You will be reading three short stories that are fiction based upon her own experience ("How to Talk to a Hunter," "Waltzing the Cat," and "Epilogue"), and two pieces of autobiographical nonfiction, "In Pursuit of What I Don't Do Well," and "Pregnancy and Other Natural Disasters." Her first book was *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, and it was my introduction to Pam Houston. When I read the first story, "How to Talk to a Hunter," I was forced to admit that I was actually dating that guy. It was a tremendous wake up call for me. Her writing in that book is spare – Hemingway-like. She changed her style a bit in her next book, *Waltzing the Cat*, another set of short stories with autobiographical roots: "I feel that my writing has become more complicated, and that I have become more generous as a storyteller, more generous to my readers and to myself. For me, writing a short story is like juggling, and while in *Cowboys* I could probably only juggle, say, ten or

fifteen balls at once, in *Waltzing* I feel I can juggle more like twenty, and sometimes they aren't even balls at all, they are apples and chainsaws and toasters. I also learned in the interim between the two books that it is really important to take at least some responsibility for every situation we find ourselves in. That is probably the essential difference between the narrators of those two books. The ones in *Cowboys* stare in wide-eyed wonder, the ones in *Waltzing* are starting to suspect that they put themselves right where they are" ("Talking with Pam Houston").

She married Michael Elkington, a safari guide from South Africa. She had a miscarriage while married to him. That marriage did not last, and they divorced.

A short time later, her best friend Sally died of breast cancer. In the end, Sally left her friends and husband and children to supposedly participate in an experimental treatment program. Instead she checked herself into a hospital and died alone. Her death sent Pam into a depression that it took her five years to overcome.

### **Later Life**

Her major works include *Cowboys Are My Weakness* (short stories), *Waltzing the Cat* (short stories), *A Little More About Me* (essays/memoir), *Sighthound* (novel), and *Contents May Have Shifted* (short stories). *Sighthound* is a novel based on her Irish wolfhound Dante's battle with cancer. It is told in part from the dog's point of view – and includes chapters from the point of view of the vet, the owner, the replacement dog, and the cat). In the novel, Dante explains that his human needs to love and trust the world before he's not there to protect her.

Pam is currently the Director of the Creative Writing Program at UC Davis in CA. When she's not teaching, she lives on a ranch outside of Durango. She is a very accessible writer, and often reads at bookstores and events around CO.

She also has tremendous respect for the writer Adrienne Rich. She talks about attending an awards ceremony for Rich with her friend Jane: "Tonight we will attend an awards ceremony where Rich will receive the Bay Area's Cody Award for lifetime achievement in the literary arts. In her most recent book of poems, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, there is a poem about dislocation, where the poet finds herself in California, almost to her surprise. *This is no place you ever knew me*, the poem says, describing *small canyons running through pitched hillsides/liveoaks twisted on steepness, the eucalyptus avenue leading/to the wrecked homestead, the fog wreathed heavy-chested cattle/on their blond hills*. I have read that poem each night since I have been in California, feeling a vicarious connection to this place through the poem's words and images, imagining the day when I will find solace in this landscape too. This is where I live now, the poem reminds me nightly. It has been my version of saying my bedtime prayers. I have never seen Adrienne Rich read in person, so I sit beside Jane at the award ceremony so excited I can barely breathe. And when she finally comes onstage at the end of the evening and says that she'd rather read a poem than make an acceptance speech, I know in my gut that my

prayers have been answered and the poem she'll read will be this favorite one of mine. And as she begins to speak the lines I know by heart—*A dark woman, head bent, listening for something*—I think to myself, this is one of those moments. To be sitting here at the elbow of my dear friend, and also at the feet of this clear-sighted woman, bathing in the balm of these good and honest words. I throw a glance toward Jane to make sure she knows how this is for me, and before I've even asked the question with my eyes she nods. *These are not the roads/you knew me by*, the poem concludes, *But the woman driving, walking, watching/for life and death, is the same*. At this moment, and for a little while after, there will be nothing else on earth I need" (*A Little More About Me*).