



Under This Beautiful Dome: A Senator, A Journalist, and the Politics of Gay Love in America

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“One of the greatest love stories I have ever heard played out right here, under this beautiful dome. But it was a secret. . . . Penny and Terry just wanted what so many people want—to express their love through marriage.” —Illinois Representative Ann Williams

Under This Beautiful Dome tells the true story of journalist Terry Mutchler's secret five-year relationship with Penny Severns, an Illinois State Senator who mentored Barack Obama. Forced to engage in an elaborate ruse to keep their relationship a secret, the two women constantly fear discovery in their conservative town. Denied legal access to the altar, they face even greater hardships when Penny is diagnosed with cancer and begins undergoing treatment.

Set in the political arena, *Under This Beautiful Dome* reminds us why the march to legalize same-sex marriage is both personal and political. This vivid, beautiful story paints an intimate portrait of a loving relationship and the vast impact gay marriage legislation has on couples and families in America today.

"In a modern world that has seen an acceleration of gay marriage rights and public LGBT figures, it is crucial to honor and remember the struggles of those who could not love openly, afraid for their jobs, their homes, their families, and their beloved." --Courtney Gillette, *Lambda Literary*

Under This Beautiful Dome: A Senator, A Journalist, and the Politics of Gay Love in America Details

Date : Published September 23rd 2014 by Seal Press (first published September 2nd 2014)

ISBN : 9781580055086

Author : Terry Mutchler

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Lgbt, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography Memoir, Politics



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From Reader Review Under This Beautiful Dome: A Senator, A Journalist, and the Politics of Gay Love in America for online ebook

Susan says

As I reached the part where Penny Severns is dying and her partner, the author, is struggling with that and Penny's family, I had chest pains and anxiety and found it so difficult to get through. It evoked, for me, my life as a lesbian of about the same age who lived through the same era. All those times of being at family gatherings and feeling like I was drowning as straight siblings and their partners were graced with parental approval, societal and legal approval and weddings and all that was not available to me. Instead I struggled to have my relationships recognized and accepted a little. Then there was the awful fear for the fragility of our lives as portrayed in this book. The horror stories of my friends who lost homes and belongings when the biological family swooped in and took over from the devastated girlfriend. I remember sitting in hospital hallways because only "family" was permitted to visit our loved one. It is a lot better now, but there is still a long way to go. At least marriage will now provide some legal protection.

This book needed to be written. I would have given more stars if it were better written. Some points are hammered home over and over again as if repeating them makes them more real. The author still seems consumed by what she lost, but the incessant name branding (Chagell painting, Columbia rain jackets) left me feeling as if the lost lifestyle was a big part of the issue. I also wondered how a budding attorney would be left without ANY written document that established ownership or right to inheritance. Any way, I had a lot of questions for the author.

Cecilia Dugan says

I loved this book. The last chapter made all the suffering worthwhile.

Steph says

The wonderful account of a journalist and a senator who fall in love, *Under this Beautiful Dome* is an important and affecting true story. From the sweet new love between politician Penny Severns and journalist Terry Mutchler, to Penny's tragic death and the nightmarish aftermath that Terry must deal with, I was consistently emotionally engaged.

Unfortunately, this book isn't as well-written as it should be. Considering the author is a former journalist, I expected the style to be very organized and clear - it's not, and that bothered me throughout.

Nevertheless, I did love reading *Under this Beautiful Dome*, because it's a story that needs to be shared. There are so many other lesbians who have kept their relationships secret, whose stories we will never hear. When you read about Penny and Terry, be thankful that they are one couple whose lives we are fortunate enough to know about.

Thank you to NetGalley and Perseus Books Group, Seal Press for providing me with a copy of this book in return for an honest review.

Williesun says

I came across this book a while ago and this review will go up before the book is even officially published. ‘Under This Beautiful Dome’ is the memoir of former award winning journalist for the AP who then became a lawyer. It talks about Terry Mutchler’s life with Illinois Senator Penny Severns.

Both women had a five year relationship back in the 90s when it wasn’t as easy to come out publicly, especially if you were working in politics, even more so though, if you fell in love with your source as it was the case for Terry who was a reporter for the AP when she met Penny. That’s a whole different ballgame and one they only resolved after years when Terry resigned from her position and went to law school.

During their relationship, Penny got breast cancer and later died of the illness which in itself is enough to pull on your heartstrings, I think. It’s only made worse by the fact that they were hiding their relationship, even from their families and friends and they also could not get married or enter a domestic partnership so Terry had no claim to Penny’s estate or anything after Penny’s death which is just devastating. I guess, those things just hurt more deeply for me because the last part has been the reality for a lot of homosexuals back then and even is today though our situations have vastly improved. It’s still not perfect, but much better. I can easily imagine myself in that situation and it just hurts.

I read most of this book while being on the road, first on my way to and from Paris and then London. Especially the London part was hard because I was trapped on a plane without tissues while I read about Penny’s death and tried desperately not to cry because that would have looked so weird. I only got through it by looking out of the window every few sentences because this all hit too close to home. I will never be able to read a cancer story and not have it feel personal to me anymore. That’s just the way it is once a family member dies of that disease. So this story was double personal to me.

My experience with taking care of my dying mother was vastly different to that one in the story though. I don’t understand how Terry managed to do all the things she did, I hardly got through my studies that last year whereas she ran a national political campaign, started law school and also took care of the love of her life. That’s a lot!! But both women were also acutely unaware of how sick Penny really was until it was too late.

I feel grateful that I got to read this story though because it is honest albeit brutal. It pulls at your heartstrings but I also couldn’t put the story down. You could tell that Terry Mutchler actually earned her living through writing because the woman knows how to put words into sentences. Having bitten down the tears in the last third of the book, I was a sobbing mess after the last chapter. It all was too much but it was such a great read and I think this was the best book I read in 2014 so far.

Jasmine from How Useful It Is says

About: Under This Beautiful Dome is a biography/memoir of a Senator, a Journalist, and the politics of Gay Love in America. This book is written by Terry Mutchler, a Journalist and a lawyer. This book is about her and more. It was published on 9/23/14 by Seal Press.

My Experience: This is definitely a love story. I enjoyed reading it and stayed up late into the night reading it. I started reading this book on 1/23/15 and finished it on 1/31/15 at 3AM. Terry's writing is beautiful. Reading this book, I felt all the emotions that Terry went through. I feel sorry that she has to go through this but I believe that life is unfair and when you are in the public eye, secrecy is needed in order to stay out of the media. I feel the author is very honest in writing this book, a true story written from the heart. I cried and smiled as I read about their love. I like that the book includes their love letters to each other. I like that the author provides enough backgrounds into her life from childhood to adult so that readers can understand what she goes through and how her life has shaped. I feel very sad every time I read about children being abused. I am very glad that Terry's life turned out great. She's so successful despite the hardship she went through and I admire that greatly.

My side effects from reading this book is a major headache incurred from staying up late, cried, and lacked of sleep. The worst thing is, I have to go to work the next day. The hardest 9 hours at work and the strongest craving to sleep ever. However, it's all worth it because it's the best autobiography to start the year. From this positive experience, I am actively seeking another great autobiography to read.

Pros: true-story, first person point of view, love, happiness, humor, sad, page turner, can't put down

Cons: none

I rate it 5 stars!

Jasmine at www.howusefulitis.wordpress.com

Debbie "DJ" says

Another amazing ARC from NetGalley. Thank you NetGalley!

I loved this book. It is an exquisite love story of a State Senator and a journalist, both women. Their love began 20 years ago in a world where being gay was not accepted, especially for a State Senator. The author, Terry Mutchler tells the true story of her love for State Senator Penny Severns. Mutchler looks deeply at the ramifications of living a lie, and the devastating consequences of denying gays marriage equality.

I don't think this book could have been written any sooner for many reasons, the most important of which is our countries emerging acceptance for gays. The lengths to which these two women went to keep their love a secret is staggering. Not one other person in each of their lives knew. Not even family or close friends. Can you imagine parking your car two miles from your home and walking so as not to have your car spotted. The very home they lived in was purchased by both, but only Penny's name could be on the deed as it is public record.

When things begin to go wrong with Penny's health, Terry has no rights, not only to visit in the hospital, or protect her home in case of possible death. Both women have no one to share their grief with, and must act as if they are strangers. There were so many times I found myself in tears throughout this book. The hate of others for two women who simply fell in love is astonishing. The kindness, compassion, and love these women experienced should be celebrated, and even looked to as a role model of what a truly loving relationship looks like.

I was also impressed with Terry Mutchler's writing. She was able to dig deep, revealing the innermost of emotions in such a way I felt as if I were there. I was profoundly touched by this memoir, and highly recommend it.

Arja Salafranca says

When journalist, Terry Mutchler, then AP Statehouse Bureau Chief in Illinois saw Penny Severns, an Illinois State Senator, for the first time in 1993, "a jolt of electricity passed through me".

Captivated from the first, she didn't even know what the woman's name was: "It didn't make sense for me to be so captivated. Yet this unknown woman held my attention. I could not, and still can't explain it but when I saw her, I felt something inside me shift."

From the beginning their relationship was both circumspect and circumscribed. Both were dealing with a gay relationship in the political landscape of the America of the 1990s – not so far away, but yet a million years away in attitude perceptions, as we look back. And in addition, Mutchler's profession as a journalist meant that she supposed to be neutral and objective. Dating a senator, let alone becoming involved with her, was dangerous stuff.

Their first date included five people, including themselves – an intimate dinner that simply expanded. Mutchler was to learn that the demands of a politician's life were beyond what she could have imagined. A politician truly belongs to the people who elect him or her, and Severns was committed to her job of serving her constituency. The relationship had to remain secret – and so, the five-year relationship did, but at huge cost and hardship to both. The consequences of "loving in secret" are spelled out here in a way that is almost unbelievable to read about. Of sneaking out of each others' homes at some ungodly hour of the morning so as not to be seen, parking a far distance away overnight – these are the physical, every day difficulties. But there was also the fact that their families never really knew what role they played in each others' lives. There never seemed to be the "right" time to talk. Both also grappled with their religious sensitivities – concerned that what they were doing was against their religion and God.

When they bought a home together, and lived in it together, with Mutchler being described as her "press secretary", only Severns' name was on the bond, out of necessity. To add both names to the bond – which could be accessed by publically – meant possible discovery. So in this as so much else, Mutchler's role and part was secret. Only when travelling overseas could they be freer in their relationship. And yet although their bond was strong and powerful – and the jolt of electricity lasted throughout their coupling, "the best years of our life were written in invisible ink".

When Severns was diagnosed with cancer, neither knew the end was coming. A cancer that not so slowly made its way through her body. Severns died in February 1998. Not only did Mutchler have to announce her death on TV, but also had to contend with hiding her grief from so many, both publically and privately. In addition Severns' family cut her out of the inner circle, denying her not only recognition, but her share in anything she had contributed towards with Severns.

It all happened so long ago in terms of attitudes and yet we're only looking at the 1990s from a distance of two decades. Same sex unions were stigmatised, and same sex marriages a seemingly long way into the future. When more and more high profile people are coming out, and it's increasingly accepted in our more "permissive" society, it's mind-boggling to believe that a same sex relationship could spell the end of a career. There's a sadness in reading this account because of this. Mutchler and Severns seemed to share that rare love – and the fact that it was cut short by cancer, and so sadly hidden – is cause for sadness. And sad too, to see the effect of prejudice and stigma on the lives of just one couple living in secret.

Mutchler writes the story of their love, and her subsequent unravelling after Severns died, with a fresh immediacy that brings the past alive vividly and compellingly. The pain is there, but never threatens to overwhelm the telling of the story. The story is told is beautiful, although sad; and also illuminates and reminds us how far we have come in the past few decades. The story ends full circle, as it were – with same sex marriages being signed into law in the state of Illinois. A remarkable, hauntingly told story.

Dogsandbooks says

Could not put it down. Gripping, heartbreaking, intense. Terry's story--oh how we wish to have Penny's words as well. Hopefully the writing and the reading of this story will heal some pain--for terry and for others with their own dramas. I am angry--what terrible things to do. Although not explaind--and how could the victim explain the why of her mistreatment--if is clear that there is deep fear and deeper denial. And isn't that always how evil is born?

Finished at 1am

Rhonda Lomazow says

Penny & Terry meet fall in love and start a life together.Sadly their life has to be conducted in private because they are gay.Still they have a wonderful life travel share a home until Penny becomes gravely ill& passes away.Terry not only losing her love is also denied& rejected cruelly by Penny's family.This is a must read for all who believe in equal rights&it would be an eye opener for those who don't.

Deena Metzger says

One wonders if the Justices of the Supreme Court read this book and so came to their compassionate ruling about same sex marriage, finally. Mutchler's exacting and rigorous accounting of the extreme injustice of being prevented from living with and partnering with one's loved one is a necessary book at this time. What she was prohibited -- forbidden - to say when her lover was alive and a State Senator (the mentor to Barack Obama, actually) is detailed here after the Senator died of breast cancer. But not immediately after .. it took so so so many years to be able to step out into the light from so much suffering and socially imposed shame. As brave a book as they get

Ned says

As I become whatever kind of adult I am going to be, it becomes increasingly important to me to connect however possible with "my elders" - the queer people who fought and died, who experienced pain, grief, and loss, so that I can live with so much less fear of being killed for who I am and who I choose to love. I did not particularly enjoy reading this book. Mutchler struggles with balancing the reporter's commitment to sticking simply to the facts and the personal desire to share with us her grief and pain at the death of the woman she loved and at the actions of Penny Severns' family, though she makes an admirable and largely successful attempt to avoid baseless castigation of those family members who certainly seem to have most directly wished to hurt her.

But I am grateful for the reminder of what has been suffered and lost in the attempt to truly gain the right of the pursuit of happiness. I am touched by the reminder of how huge a thing was accomplished by the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of gay marriage and how much is yet to be done.

Warren-Newport Public Library says

In *Under This Beautiful Dome* journalist and lawyer Terry Mutchler reveals her lesbian relationship with the late Illinois State Senator Penny Severns. The two women shared a deep love as well as a lavish (but clandestine) lifestyle which featured designer clothes, expensive artwork, and exotic vacations. It all came to an abrupt end when Severns died of breast cancer in 1998. During Severns's lifetime the couple could not have legally married, and Severns, who was in denial about her terminal illness, never completed a will. All of the precious mementos, as well as the home the couple shared, went to Severns's dysfunctional family, which refused to acknowledge Mutchler's role as Severns's de facto spouse or let Mutchler take the things Severns would have wanted her to have. This book represents both Mutchler's tribute to her deceased lover and her revenge on the Severns family.

As a book *Under This Beautiful Dome* could have benefited from tighter editing. Still it is an intriguing memoir of love, loss and Illinois state politics. (Amy B.)

Laura says

This is a moving, sad, but kind of uplifting, true love story. It's so sad, seeing how the basic unfairness of prejudice against same-sex relationships, and unequal laws, had such disastrous effects on the lives of these two women. On the other hand, it's so heartening that marriage is now at least technically, legally available to same-sex couples throughout the USA. That doesn't solve all potential problems, but then, as we know, "the course of true love never did run smooth," even for those with the least difficulty in their paths.

What's particularly lovely here is the descriptions of the incredible, intense feelings of attraction, and the sense of "love at first sight" that apparently were shared by the two women, and observed by others around them. It's rather delicious to immerse oneself in those feelings, especially for those like me, who haven't experienced them personally in a long time. Later, of course, come much sadder developments, but the sense of a great, profound (and yet also perfectly ordinary and universal) love story remains. I recommend this to all who want a sweet love story.

Gale says

Such a well-written, compelling book about the life Terry Mutchler shared with Penny Severns. The 1990s were not that long ago, and yet seem to be, for some of us. There are far too many still living the life that Terry and Penny HAD to live, and my heart aches for those couples. I cried multiple times as I read this book, and this passage is just one of those times:

"Nearly two decades later, I still do not have any of my things, not even the limited list that I asked for...I still ache for certain pieces of our life together, whether it's a jacket she wore, a book she read, or a piece of art we bought. I now know I possess the most cherished aspect of my life with Penny: our memories and our love. The things I lost are just things in a material sense, but somehow, things mean a great deal in death. Even the smallest item that belonged to a loved one becomes a token of the life shared, and the essence and elements of healing. You touch these items, you cry a little, you laugh a little, and you put them back down--they're conduits between this dimension and the memory of those we loved and lost."

D'Anne says

In the 90's Journalist Terry Mutchler and her partner, Senator Penny Severns, went to pretty much pathological extremes to keep their lesbian relationship secret. Unfortunately, these extremes resulted in Terry's virtual erasure from Penny's life after Penny died, allowing Penny's family to completely cut her out and claim that Terry had never been more than a friend and colleague. It's a heartbreak story and important reminder of how far we've come and how recently gays and lesbians have suffered from being in the closet.

I do think that Mutchler focuses a little too much on material possessions, especially making sure the reader knows how expensive many of the things she lost were. I totally understand why those things are important to her (imagine losing everything you ever bought with your husband or wife because it "wasn't yours"). But after awhile I was like, "Okay, I get it. You and your partner had a lot of money." At one point she talks about giving a \$500 paperweight that belonged to her and Penny to someone as a gift and she makes sure to mention that their jackets were "Columbia and North Face," that their matching watches were TAG Heuer, and that they had a lot of valuable artwork. Even if everything the two of them had came from Value Village the story would have the same importance. Penny's family accuses Mutchler of being only interested in money, and while that is clearly not true, the focus on material things does distract from the book's larger themes a bit.
