

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANE
KIRKPATRICK

*The
Healing of
Natalie Curtis*



“*The Healing of Natalie Curtis* is Jane Kirkpatrick at her finest, bringing to life a real woman from history, someone who wrestles with issues that are startlingly contemporary, including racism and cultural appropriation. You will find yourself drawn in by the story of Natalie Curtis, an early twentieth-century musical prodigy nearly broken by the rigid conventions of her era, who leaves her loving but somewhat smothering New York family to travel with her brother through the wild expanses of the American Southwest. Curtis finds her health, her voice, and her calling in recording the music of the Southwest’s Native cultures, and determinedly fighting for their rights. Fair warning: once you begin this compelling tale, you won’t be able to put it down.”

Susan J. Tweit, author of *Bless the Birds: Living with Love
in a Time of Dying*

“Natalie Curtis was a force to be reckoned with in the early years of the twentieth century. Her life as a musician, an ethnomusicologist, an advocate of social justice for Native Americans, and as a single woman breaking gender and culture barriers to find a life of her own in the American Southwest is a story worth telling and retelling. Kirkpatrick’s novel *The Healing of Natalie Curtis* is a welcome addition to the body of literature celebrating Curtis’s life.”

Lesley Poling-Kempes, author of *Ladies of the Canyons: A
League of Extraordinary Women and Their Adventures
in the American Southwest*

“‘It’s less time that heals than having a . . . creative purpose.’ Encapsulating the heart of *The Healing of Natalie Curtis*, these words landed on my soul with the resonance they must have carried a century ago, when one woman’s quest for physical, emotional, and creative healing led her on a journey that would broaden her vision to see her struggles mirrored in the losses of an Indigenous culture vanishing with alarming brutality—and to

take extraordinary action to preserve that heritage. Jane Kirkpatrick presents us with talented musician Natalie Curtis, a woman broken by the very thing she loved, in search of hope and healing yet extending both to those Native singers her path inevitably crosses. Natalie grows across these pages to be a heroine worth rooting for—all the more because this story is true.”

Lori Benton, award-winning author of *Burning Sky*,
Mountain Laurel, and *Shiloh*

Praise for *Something Worth Doing*

“I have long admired Jane Kirkpatrick’s rich historical fiction, and *Something Worth Doing* is well worth reading! Oregonian Abigail Duniway is a vibrant, fiercely passionate, and determined activist who fought for women’s suffrage. Women of today have cause to respect and admire her—as well as the loving, patient, and supportive husband who encouraged her to continue ‘the silent hunt.’”

Francine Rivers, author of *Redeeming Love*

“On the trail to Oregon, young Jenny Scott lost her beloved mother and little brother and learned that no matter what, she must persist until she reaches her goal. Remembering her mother’s words—“a woman’s life is so hard”—the young woman who became Abigail Scott Duniway came to understand through observation and experience that law and custom favored men. The author brings alive Abigail’s struggles as frontier wife and mother turned newspaper publisher, prolific writer, and activist in her lifelong battle to win the vote and other rights for women in Oregon and beyond. Jane Kirkpatrick’s story of this persistent, passionate, and bold Oregon icon is indeed *Something Worth Doing!*”

Susan G. Butruille, author of *Women’s Voices from the Oregon Trail*, now in the 25th anniversary edition

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This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author’s imagination.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author’s imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Dedicated to Jerry,
who is the song in my heart.



Cast of Characters

Natalie Curtis—Classically trained singer and pianist

George Curtis—Brother to Natalie; former librarian; ranch hand

Mimsey and Bogey—Natalie's parents

Bridgham, Constance, Mariam—Natalie's other siblings

Charles and Eva Lummis—Builder of El Alisal, journalist, and historical preservationist; and his wife

Alice Klauber—Artist and friend of Natalie's

Chiparopai—English/Spanish/Yuman-speaking Yuma woman

Texan—Friend in Yuma

Frank Mead—Indian activist and architect

*Mary Jo Brigand—Co-owner Bar X Ranch

Lololomai —Tribal leader of Old Oraibi, Hopi village

Charles Burton—Indian agent/superintendent at Oraibi

*Mina—Hopi girl at Oraibi

Tawakwaptiwa—Hopi chief, nephew of Lololomai, at Old Oraibi

Pelia —Yavapai man bringing a gift to Roosevelt

Nampeyo—Hopi potter, Hano village

Hiamovi—Cheyenne and Dakota high chief, interpreter, and
policeman

Theodore Roosevelt—President of the United States

*Bonita—Natalie's burro

*Fully fictionalized characters

Prelude

NEW MEXICO, 1905

She followed the blind boy up through the crevice, up through the warm rocks the colors of weeping rainbows, up to a life beyond any she had known. Natalie Curtis watched where the child put his moccasin-covered feet into the ancient footholds and finger ledges, copying his movements, though not as deftly. Her breath labored as she tucked her small boots into the toeholds he'd just left, toeholds made by ancient ones moving from the desert floor to the mesa above.

The boy was no taller than her, his cotton pants wide against his thin legs. Chopped black hair stuck to his neck. His calico shirt fluttered as he reached, ever climbing. Natalie pushed ahead in her khaki riding skirt, white linen blouse, and a flat, wide-brimmed hat she'd bought at the trading post weeks before. It was held with a cord she felt against her neck, having pushed it from her head so she could bring her face closer to the rock. Up they climbed. Her muscles strained. She was a blonde, blue-eyed Anglo following an Indian boy. An interpreter and her brother came behind them both. Resting for a moment, she tipped her head back to see the

lake-blue sky, a patch framed by the towering rock crevice. She could see it widened. They'd soon be at the top. In the distance she heard the singing.

"What's that, then?" she asked, her voice spoken in that New York hurried way.

"Corn Planting song," the interpreter called up to her, his soft voice carried by the wind. "It is the time for planting. Those songs, you'll hear now."

Corn Planting song.

"Lovely."

A smile crossed her face. She inhaled the desert scents, reached for the next stone step, and continued climbing in a foreign land. Then, there she was, at the top of the mesa, wispy clouds sailing across the vast sky and reflected in the water of the stone reservoir. A whole new world lay before her—so far from where she'd been, so much closer to where she hoped to be.

Part One

A decorative graphic featuring a wavy musical staff with several eighth and sixteenth notes, rendered in a light gray color. The staff is positioned horizontally across the middle of the page, with the title 'Part One' written in a black, elegant script font over it.

From Broken Things

AUTUMN—1902, THREE YEARS EARLIER

Though she had not seen the desert-bronzed face of her brother for two years, Natalie Curtis recognized in the sparkle of his eyes what was different. “You’ve found yourself,” she said.

“And you haven’t.”

George Curtis dropped his leather travel pack in the vestibule of the New York family home, shaking the umbrellas in the brass stand. He held Natalie’s shoulders, and she looked into blue eyes that matched her own. They shared the same wispy blond hair. George pulled her to his chest. “Come here. Let me hug my little sister.”

Natalie leaned into the scent of leather as her shoulders relaxed for the first time in months. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed him. George was like an apparition arriving from the exotic West.

Natalie backed away first, looked her brother up and down. “You’re brown as a walnut. You look . . . rested.”

"I am, but for the train ride." He flipped his hat to the hat rack, then ran his hands through his hair. "It's so good to see you. So good." His voice carried warmth and wistfulness, but his eyes said *pitiful*. And she was.

The chambermaid appeared from nowhere to take his long coat.

"Shall I place your bag in your room, Master George?"

"No, leave it here. I'll take it up later, Bella. Thank you."

"Very good, sir." She curtsied and disappeared.

"Your years away have fortified you." Natalie watched his easy smile expand to his warm eyes.

"Asthma, gone." He paused. "Wish I could say the same for you."

She'd put on weight in her malaise and she knew her skin was pale as a piano key. Simply getting out of bed exhausted her. Fortunately, she'd had the day to get ready for her brother's return.

"Are you feeling any . . . stronger?" George asked.

"I'm not sure it's about strength so much as overcoming the doubt."

"About never playing again?"

She forced her voice higher. "Come on." She slipped her arm through his. "They're all waiting, but I begged them to let me see you first, before you put on any western airs."

He laughed, didn't move. "No airs. But I do feel the confinement here between the brownstones, all the cabs, the hawkers on the streets." He shook himself like a dog of rain. "The desert, Natalie." His eyes grew distant. "It's astonishingly magnificent."

"Astonishingly." She smiled. "Do your cowboy friends mind the way you talk?"

"They tolerate my vocabulary, now that I'm a good hand. That's all that matters on a ranch. Whether you can stay on a horse while moving cattle through greasewood and sage, up and out of arroyos. That's how you're graded. I call the cows 'bovines of a recalcitrant nature.' My cowboy colleagues wondered if those words were a form of foreign profanity." He smiled. "A few have picked up on calling them recalcitrant."

“Oh, you.” She punched his shoulder. *Solid muscle.*

“It’s been the best thing I ever did, Nat. Leave here. Head west. The postcards I’ve sent don’t say the half of it.”

“But why did you have to go in the first place?” Natalie had a little girl’s voice rather than a whine.

He lifted her chin. He was nearly a foot taller than her. “You should come back with me.”

She stepped away. “I couldn’t. Mimsey would never permit it nor Bogey either. And I’m not strong. I’m so very tired almost all of the time. I cough. There are other things . . .”

“You’re twenty-six years old. Old enough to be an independent woman, I’d say.”

“There’s no such thing as an independent woman in this era. At my age. I’m a woman with nothing to consume her life. The doctor says I . . . still have healing to do to rid myself of the . . .” She squeezed his arm. “I’m struggling a little, that’s all. Bogey says it’ll get better.”

“It’s been nearly five years, Nat.” The kindness in his voice, not pitying but sympathizing, caused her to blink back tears.

“I know, I know.”

He patted her fingers as he pulled them through his bent elbow. “Promise me we’ll talk about it later.”

She nodded assent.

They were the closest of the Curtis children. Though George was four years older than Natalie, he understood her. He lived in an inner world of words as she lived in an inner sphere of music. But then he’d headed to the West and he had changed.

As had she five years before.

“They’re waiting for you,” she said.

Arm in arm they sauntered into the dining room where siblings and parents greeted George with joyous shouts. Mimsey, as the Curtis children called their mother, usually so organized and proper, fluttered with tears in her eyes as she clung to George, welcoming home her wayward son. “Come, come. Tell us all about

your latest adventures. How was the train ride?” Mimsey took his hands in hers. “You’re chilled.” Then, releasing them, “Are you home for good, one can only hope?”

“I’m used to desert heat.” George rubbed his palms, as though before a fire.

“My friends are all atwitter wanting a luncheon with you to hear your stories. We’ll get that on the schedule.” She pronounced it *shed-ule*. Natalie remembered she’d picked that up on that last trip to Europe. The *healing tour* that didn’t heal.

“In due course, Mimsey.” Her father intervened. “Let’s let the lad have a bite to eat. Cook’s prepared something healthy for you.” Their father—called Bogey by his children and friends—stood with hands clasped behind his back, warming himself at the fireplace in the living room. “A little food will warm you up. Just what the doctor ordered.”

Their father was a prominent physician, currently an emeritus professor. As a major in the army, he had attended President Lincoln’s bedside during his final hours and helped with the autopsy. He’d known sorrow, and Natalie knew he grieved for her current emotional state that he seemed powerless to change. She couldn’t change it either. Or hadn’t.

Bogey herded his family into the dining room. Natalie held back as the siblings crowded around George at the table, passing him the silver saltshaker, the platters with cheeses and cold chicken and ham that the cook brought in. Pickles and coarse brown bread were next. George told his stories with wide swathes of his arms. He was more animated than Natalie remembered him being. He’d always been the shy one, along with her. She’d been bold only in her music, excelling at everything she tried, especially the piano. Until that day.

Laughter. Oohs and ahhs and exclamations. She scanned the room of her brothers and sisters. Except for George, they all lived together, still. Constance was nearly forty. Natalie supposed they were considered “old maids,” or “at home” as the latest census

described single women. She as well. She had hoped for a life beyond, maybe one day marrying and managing a household staff—after her career. She'd been on the road toward that when her life—like shattered silk—ripped apart.

She shook her head of the painful memory. She focused instead on the light in George's eyes, noted the tiny crow's-feet, the tanned face with laugh lines. He was thirty-one and wore the look of an explorer, someone who had gone beyond expectations, even his own.

"Don't you think so, Nat?" George spoke.

She hadn't heard what he'd said.

"About what?"

"About coming to Arizona with me. And California. And New Mexico. Some people seem to think New Mexico is still a part of Mexico."

"Isn't it?" This from Marian, the youngest Curtis at twenty-two.

Her siblings teased Marian for not knowing such a fact of geography, and Natalie was grateful the subject had changed as she watched them chatter. George had a broken canine tooth. There was probably a story about what happened to cause that. She'd have to ask.

"You haven't answered my question." George returned to her.

"She couldn't possibly make such a trip," Mimsey said. "She's not strong enough."

"And what would she do there?" Miriam asked. "Sign on as a ranch—what did you call yourself—a ranch hand?"

"Let her breathe in the air. That alone will heal her. Look what it did for my asthma."

"You do look healthy," their father-doctor said. "Good to see that, son. Good to see." He appeared to consider George's offer. "It might benefit Natalie."

"No." Mimsey's word was dressed in finality. Her husband frowned and she added, "She's simply not strong enough."

"The West could heal her. Why, I've—"

"I am here." Natalie spoke more forcefully than she'd intended. "In front of you all. Please, don't talk about me as though I'm not present."

Silence like an early morning fog filled the formerly boisterous room. Her siblings looked away, caught each other's eyes. *Pity. They pity me.*

George cleared his throat. "I nearly forgot. I brought gifts for you." He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin. "Let me get my pack."

"Bella can fetch it for you." Her father motioned to the maid who'd been standing by the sideboard. She curtsied, then moved into the hall and returned with the leather knapsack while the cook entered and cleared away George's dishes. George thanked her for the meal and the maid for his bag and set it on the dining room table, plopping it with a sturdy *thump!*

He unlatched the buckles, reached inside, and pulled out treasures. Colorfully woven lengths of cloth that could be table runners or a dresser scarf. "Navajo," George said. A red sash he described as part of a Katsina regalia. "Katsina dolls are Hopi. And dancers represent Katsina spirits which are powerful helpers in everyday life and who carry their prayers. The red sash represents the earth in blossom after rain clouds have made their way to the desert." He pulled out a rattle made from a gourd, something he described as a musical instrument. A selection of turquoise stones. A silver bracelet. A coral necklace.

"So beautiful. Such smooth stones." His siblings passed the items to each other.

"It's like Christmas in October," Miriam said.

Then he unwrapped from sheepskin a piece of smooth pottery that he set at the end of the woven runner displaying his gifts. The pot could be held in the palm of a woman's hand. It was bowl-shaped with a small nozzle-like protuberance at the top. George pointed to that feature. "It's a seed pot. For corn, mostly."

"They're all precious." Natalie reached out as though to touch the pottery, then pulled back.

“Go ahead and pick something, each of you. Mimsey too.”

“You pick ours then, Bogey. Or we can take what’s left. Yes, go ahead, children. Natalie, you first, dear.”

Miriam pouted. “She always goes first.”

“Shush.” Mimsey motioned Natalie to proceed.

Natalie chose the pottery bowl. She held it in both hands. The clay felt warm almost, though she knew that must be just a feature of its artistry as it was October and the outside air cool. “The design. It’s so delicate. And such lovely colors.”

“It’s Acoma, from a pueblo in New Mexico. They work with an aloe tip dipped in the paint they make themselves from insects and seeds. Then they draw the designs using the plant rather than a brush.”

“With a very steady hand,” Constance said. “Not a wavy line in sight.” She donned the coral necklace, turned to look at herself in the mirror above the sideboard.

“An aloe plant,” Natalie said. “Like the one Cook has in the kitchen? The one we break open to heal burns?”

“The same,” George said.

“And you say they were done by aboriginal people?” This from Bridgham, the only other Curtis son.

“They’re natives to that land. American Indians.”

“And you brought this all the way from the West. And it didn’t break.” Natalie examined the pottery piece with red and green designs artfully arranged, crossing each other in a delicate pattern around the entire pot, including the throat, as she thought of the protuberance. “Such thin clay walls.”

“About that,” George said. “They use pots for everything, the way some tribes use baskets for storage or how we use glass containers to hold salts or buttons. What I learned about the Acoma pot is that long ago, when they made them from the local clay, the pots would be quite beautiful after painting and firing, but they were fragile, easily broken. They tossed the broken shards out onto the desert and made more.” Storytelling and enthusiasm

brightened his eyes. *Telling stories is what he did at the library before he moved west.* “The tale goes, that some ancient grandmothers were out on the desert and began picking up the broken pieces and pounding them back into powder. One ingenious potter added the old clay to the new clay, and those pots when fired became strong.” He clicked his fingernail on the side of the piece Natalie had chosen. “Very strong. And beautiful. Both.”

“And the broken pieces mixed in the new clay, that’s what brought the resiliency?” Natalie asked.

“That’s what they say.”

Natalie turned her pot around in her small hands. “And these are used for storing seeds, and then the throat allows but one seed out at a time during planting?”

“Supposedly. They walk across the fields and drop them in, singing as they go.”

“Singing.”

“So the traders tell me. I’ve never been there,” George said.

“Could be a good sales pitch for gullible outsiders,” Bridgham said. “Everyone likes a story to go with their purchases.”

“I love that story.” Natalie felt tears she blinked away. “That out of broken things, already gone through fire, when mixed with new clay, something totally different is created. Something stronger.”

The family chatter over their gifts and George’s stories faded as Natalie held the art piece: practical yet a metaphor too. New purpose could come out of what was broken. Natalie imagined herself as a cracked and damaged piece of clay. What was the “new” she could blend it with to grow stronger?

“Are there other Indian artists like the one who made this?” Natalie asked.

“Dozens of tribes, so I’d suspect so,” George said. “They’re not all in New Mexico. They’re scattered around California and Arizona and have names like Zuni and Taos. Apache, Navajo. Many others. It’s like stepping into another world there, Nat. Anthropologists, even some women, descend on certain ruins during

the cooler season because the artifacts there are so old. It's our nation's history written in clay and stone."

"Women?" Mimsey said. "Oh yes, I think I did read about a Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson spending six months among the Pueblo people, she called them, some twenty years ago. They were looking for patrons—remember, Bogey?"

Natalie's father nodded agreement.

Natalie said, "It must have been very interesting work."

"Surely not for a single woman though. Unchaperoned? Egads," Constance said. She stood, holding the ceramic piece Natalie had handed to her. "Whatever will you do with this? We've no garden to plant."

"It's art," Natalie said. "Beautiful in its own right. And it's . . . history." She looked at all the items George had brought back. Each was singularly precious. Handcrafted.

"My bedtime is long overdue," Miriam said, standing. "And I imagine you're exhausted, George. You'll be here for a while, won't you, dear Brother? To regale us with more adventures?"

"A week or so." He hesitated, then added, "Long enough to talk Natalie into going back with me."

"It'll take longer than a week for a negotiation that's going nowhere." Mimsey put her arms around Natalie's shoulders. She felt her mother's warmth but also the containment. "I have all my chicks at home for the first time in two years, and I'm not going to let you spend one moment trying to break up the flock, George."

Natalie's heart beat a little faster. She caught her breath and stepped away from her mother's arms, the cloying of family suddenly suffocating in a way she hadn't known before. "I could go at least for a visit, couldn't I?" She answered her own question. "Yes. I will go, for a visit."

"Good for you, Nat!" George said.

"We'll see," Mimsey said.

"I have to go back to Arizona in a week, but I'll come back

for Christmas and we'll head west for the New Year, you and me, Nat."

Natalie rubbed the pottery as if a genie might pop out and grant her three wishes. "I want to meet the person who made this."

"It'll be our goal."

"Bogey, say something?" Mimsey pleaded. "She's not up to this."

"I see a little spark in Natalie's eyes I haven't seen for years. I won't put that out."

Natalie let them discuss her. She had something more important to engage her heart. A glorious work of art crafted from the clay of broken things had found its way into her hands. George had found himself in the West. *Maybe there's hope for me.*