

## Weaving a Memoir of Marriage

Review by Kaye Bache-Snyder

**Book: "Sköna Maj: An Enchanted Life," by Larry Curtis,  
BookSurge, 2009**

If you dream of writing a memoir, read this one by Larry Curtis. If you enjoy reading love stories, read this one. Man or woman, husband or wife, it will move you. This American husband celebrates his Swedish-born wife Maj, even as he mourns her passing. His title Sköna Maj in English means, "Beautiful May." On the book's cover is a color photograph of the couple standing on a red carpet and smiling. The author and his wife, the prince and his princess, pose after he received an honorary doctoral degree in Lund, Sweden. Larry wears a satin, velvet-trimmed robe and Maj, a tall blond, wears a white formal with a delicately woven gray stole. It is one of many color photos in the memoir documenting their lives.

Larry Curtis is a Professor of Physics (now emeritus) at the University of Toledo in Ohio, but garnered many research grants to work in Sweden. Of his first research sabbatical there, age 34, he began to learn Swedish. On July 4, 1970, he first glimpsed Maj. "I found myself alone in a restaurant in Stockholm."

Seeing a tall, blond woman across the floor, he asked her to dance. . . .  
"From that moment we were soul mates, and for the next 36 years we lived an enchanted life."

His memoir recalls their mutual joys: music, the arts, travel, adventures, and nature. In it, he pays tribute to their 36 years together, before she died of ovarian cancer. In the Toledo Hospice, Larry and the latest of their beloved cats stayed beside her and, at night, lay on the floor beside her bed. Before that time, they had skied, explored the outdoors, and traveled, meanwhile excelling in their respective professions. Maj was a librarian, a creative weaver, and a volunteer at the Toledo Botanic Gardens. Curtis is a research physicist. In 1980, he received funding from the U.S. Department of Energy. It continued until he retired from sponsored research 23 years later because of Maj's illness.

He compares their cultures. There is a tradition of gender equality and of living together a time before marriage. Also, attitudes towards work in the Swedish welfare state differ from those in American democracy. As a visiting scientist, he learned about the Swedish "middle way." The translation "just right" for the Swedish word "lagom" seems positive, but to a success-fired American, it might suggest mediocrity. Yet, he writes, "In sociological survey, Swedish people are rated among the happiest of nationalities." . . . "Every job is a meaningful vocation and not a path upward. This avoids the American tendency toward the 'Peter Principle,' in which competent workers are promoted until reaching a position for which they are incompetent, and this becomes their life work," he states. "In my naiveté I had learned to speak Swedish, developed affection for the Swedish forests and lakes, and adopted many Swedish customs, but I was still very much a highly competitive American."

In 1995, Maj exhibited her weaving in a gallery in Sylvania, Ohio. That year, the Clinton White House invited her to prepare a woven Christmas ornament, which later adorned the National Christmas Tree. Of weaving, Maj wrote, "I like to think that my contribution to the art of weaving is my use of design and color which is more contemporary than those used by my Swedish ancestors. This merger of tradition and innovation is very important to me as I try to bridge the gap between utilitarianism and aesthetic qualities of my work."

On May 28, 1999 with Maj by his side, Professor Larry Curtis walked in a giant academic procession from the University of Lund to receive the honorary degree: "Philosophia Doctor Honoris Causa" in a service conducted in Latin. Trumpets blew, girls spread flower petals, and people lined the route to the Lund Cathedral. He recalls, "With the conferring of the degree, a laurel wreath was placed on my head, a ring on my finger, and an artillery regiment on the village green fired a cannon salute." He received and carried on his flight home, an 80-mm. artillery shell casing presented to him at the banquet.

Curtis with the objectivity and detail of a scientist gives us a memoir of an enchanted life in this moving elegy for Maj. Reading this memoir, I realized how little I knew Larry, who graduated with me in 1953 from Libbey High School. I am inspired to busy my fingers and brain to celebrate my life and marriage, as he has done. Will you?