

Margaret Trudeau's last breakdown

Oct 8, 2010 by [Anne Kingston](#) MacLean's Magazine

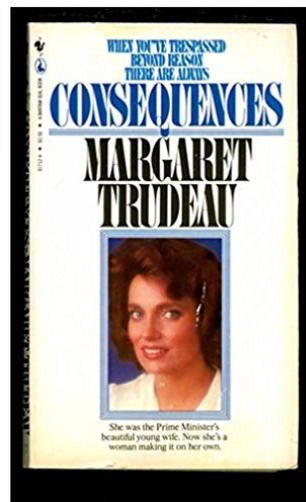
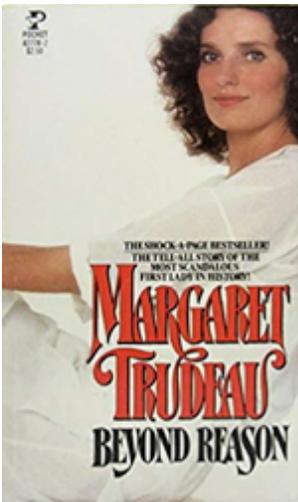
In 2010, Trudeau spoke frankly with Anne Kingston about drugs, men and how she survived the lows

Margaret Trudeau is sitting in the living room of her Montreal apartment, chatting about the Prime



Minister and marijuana. No, the former flower-child chatelaine of 24 Sussex isn't time-travelling back to her days married to prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in the '70s, smoking spliffs under the noses of her Mountie detail. She's vibrantly in the here and now as conversation veers to the government's stance on medical marijuana. "I think Mr. Harper has told us we could grow four [plants]," she says. "I'm tempted to grow four." She's joking—or seems to be. Trudeau's pot-smoking days are behind her—mostly.

Now a mental-health advocate, Trudeau is more interested in the role marijuana use played in her bipolar disorder, a condition she made public in 2006. A little grass gave her focus, she says: "some light and joy and delight." Too much triggered manic episodes. She still indulges—occasionally. "I fall off now and then, but very, very seldom," she says. "I'm too cautious now."

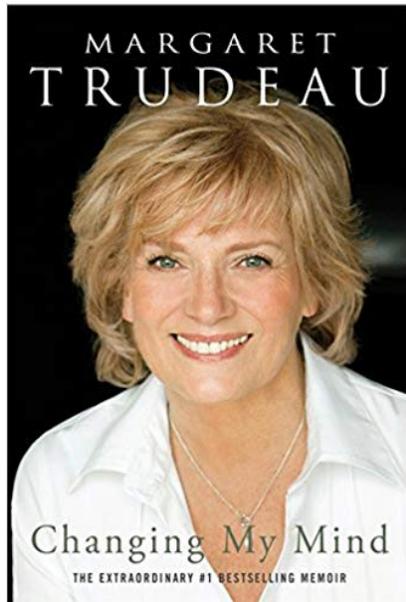


"Cautious" was never a word used to describe Margaret Trudeau, who arrived on the national stage in 1971 as the ravishing 22-year-old bride of a debonair 51-year-old PM. Their unlikely union, which produced Justin, Alexandre (known as Sacha) and Michel, ended in 1977 amidst lurid headlines that the PM's erratic wife had bolted to photograph the Rolling Stones. Margaret filled in the details in *Beyond Reason*, her 1979 tell-a-lot, which revealed her "long tunnel of darkness" during her marriage and her affair with an unnamed man later identified as senator Edward Kennedy. In 1982, a second memoir, *Consequences*, detailed dalliances with the likes of Jack Nicholson and Ryan O'Neal as she

flitted between continents seeking her own fame

Lifes tyles of the rich and heedless eventually paled; Trudeau returned to Ottawa where she took a job co-hosting a local TV show. In 1984, she married real estate developer Fried Kemper, with whom she had two children, Kyle and Alicia, and retreated into domesticity. In 1998, she was back in the headlines with news she'd been committed to a psychiatric facility in Vancouver after telling a television interviewer she'd skied with princes William and Harry—a fabrication. Then events took a tragic turn: Michel was killed in an avalanche in B.C. in 1998. The next year, she and Kemper divorced. In 2000, Pierre Trudeau died.

Trudeau spiralled into deep depression before finally finding help—and new purpose. In early 1998, before her Vancouver hospitalization and Michel’s death, a 49-year-old Trudeau told *Maclean’s* that she believed her “usefulness was finished”: “I believed my job on Earth was to procreate and be a pleasant sexual diversion for hard-working men.” Today she says she loves her work criss-crossing the country, sharing her tortuous journey to wellness with packed audiences.



That message also provides impetus for *Changing My Mind*, Trudeau’s third memoir (out next week). In it, the recklessly naive Maggie T is gone; in her place, a wiser, more discreet Margaret recasting her life story through the lens of late-diagnosed mental illness, and offering advice in a bid to help others. Working on the book was painful, she says, even with two ghostwriters: “It took me away from my wonderful life that I had achieved in therapy and put me back into it—and not in a nice way but as a clear-headed person looking at the horror of mental illness.”

On this sunny, muggy late August afternoon, the 61-year-old Trudeau appears far beyond any horror. Her once dark curls are blond; she’s healthy and tan, boho casual in a white cotton tunic and bare feet. Trudeau’s clearly happy in this cozy, lived-in apartment overlooking Pierre Trudeau’s old art deco house, now inhabited by Sacha, a filmmaker, his wife, Zoë Bedos, and their two children. Justin, a Liberal MP, his wife, Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau, and their two children are nearby. So is Alicia, a poli-sci student at Concordia. (Kyle works in tech in Ottawa.)

Trudeau delights in her role as grandma. Toys clog the hallway; a rogue Cheerio on the living room rug appears dropped by a tiny hand. Yet she remains in touch with her inner ’60s hippie. She throws the I Ching, does yoga daily and talks in terms of “magic.” She believes Pierre Trudeau directed her to this place, her “eagle’s nest,” in 2007. His spirit is an eagle now, she maintains; he was named an “eagle chief” and she a “sister of the raven” in a Haida ceremony during their marriage. The asking price was well over her budget, she confides; her lowball offer was accepted because the owner wanted her to have it. “If I’m a Haida sister of the raven, which I am, Pierre would have found me this nest to watch over everyone,” she says.

In conversation, Trudeau is animated and engaging, even through frequent 180 degree turns. One minute, she’s sharing how she dropped 10 lb. by kicking her sugar habit. “I’d find Werther’s wrappers at the foot of my bed and not remember how they got there,” she says with a laugh. Five minutes on, she’s tearfully reciting a heart-rending poem she wrote for Michel a year after he died. “Oh!” she cries out after reading it. “Heartbreaking, eh? You don’t want to live after your son dies. You just don’t. Pierre couldn’t.”

Michel’s and Pierre’s deaths remain raw: “I was so traumatized I didn’t want to live,” she says. Canadians were compassionate: “Such love. Such love. And for Michel . . .” Her voice cracks. “And then I was left alone.” She shakes her head sadly. “And you can’t be alone.” She holed up in her Ottawa house, stopped eating and lost 30 lb. “I didn’t want to breathe. I had to remind myself to breathe,” she says, tearfully. “I felt I had to go with Michel. I couldn’t see any other way. I couldn’t have him alone.” She pauses. “Maybe I should put it another way: I didn’t want to be alone. In my grief I was so focused on the loss of my boy that I forgot that I had a full life and lots of people who love me very much who are alive and well and here.”

Her family finally staged an intervention in late 2000, calling in psychiatrist Colin Cameron. Trudeau resisted, running into the snow without a coat, then was hospitalized. Cameron, who specializes in trauma disorders, provides a far more harrowing version of events in the book’s appendix. He recalls walking

into chaos, pine needles strewn everywhere. Trudeau says her memory of that time is distorted. “I thought everything was normal,” she says, before adding that it wasn’t pine needles on the floor: “It was cedar [chips]. I was deep into Aboriginal healing.”

Her recovery took time. “I finally got courage and I know that courage came from Michel and Pierre—when I realized that their deaths gave me my life,” she says. Her illness manifested itself for decades, but she was in denial, blaming and lashing out at others. In 1974, she was hospitalized in Montreal for “serious emotional stress”; she blamed the pressures of life in a fishbowl—and marital tensions. Her description of being an unhappy political wife in *Beyond Reason* now seems prescient: “a glass panel was gently lowered into place around me, like a patient in a mental hospital who is no longer considered able to make decisions and who cannot be exposed to a harsh light.”

It took time to find the proper mix of meds that didn’t make her fat and more depressed. Today she’s almost drug-free, and has learned to cope. “I may cry too much and I may laugh too much but I live with it.” She’s lonely sometimes living alone, but has family and “beautiful” friends to rely on. “If it gets too sad, I go to a movie or a drive or call my kids.”

By now, conversation has moved to her bedroom, where Trudeau sits on her bed smoking a cigarette to even her nerves. A print of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* adorns one wall. Over her head, there’s a portrait of her holding Justin as a baby. It’s a vivid reminder of Trudeau’s knack for attracting the spotlight as she shape-shifts with the zeitgeist—from ’60s hippie who snared a PM to ’70s Earth mother to ’80s celeb to post-millennial Mother Courage. And add to that memoirist serving up celebrity and divorce and motherhood and recovery.

Throughout the memoir, Pierre Trudeau provides a framework long after the marriage ends, though there’s no mention of his post-mortem real-estate guidance. The night he took his famous walk in the snow deciding to leave politics in 1984, Margaret and Kemper were in a hot tub conceiving Kyle. The day she married Kemper, Trudeau’s driver arrived with roses from the politician. When Trudeau died, Margaret was with their sons at his bedside. “Just because our marriage ended didn’t mean the love stopped,” she says. Asked how she forged harmonious post-divorce relationships with her husband, Trudeau says it was simple: “The only way was not to ask for any money. Period. The end.” She laughs. “Any money I ever got from Pierre Trudeau was grudgingly handed out. Everybody knows that.”

But he did leave the legacy of his name, which she has reclaimed professionally, though she’s Kemper legally. “But I think I should just be known as Margaret,” she says.

Her children have all read the book. “I told them, speak now or forever hold your peace,” she says with a laugh. Not that there’s much to offend. She treads carefully on how her illness affected their lives. And she downplays the end of her marriage to Kemper: “I was so fat and bored with Fried by the end,” she admits. Some people didn’t make the cut, she says playfully: “I have to apologize to all of the darling men in my life who got no mention.”

The suggestion that Justin’s political aspirations tamped her natural candour is waved away. “He’s so proud of me,” she says: “He says, ‘Oh Mom, you’re going to help so many people.’” She frets that words aren’t enough: “Here I am telling all of these people to go out and get help. But where are they finding it?” The Canadian Mental Health Association is a first stop, she says, but more support is needed.

She can’t resist a partisan jab when mentioning former senator Michael Kirby, who’s overseeing a national mental health strategy. “My dream is that when senator Kirby has the report prepared, he hands it to a compassionate government.”

Later, she mentions buying a new jacket for her book tour, one that’s Liberal red. If there’s a fall election, she says mischievously, she’ll be able to send out a subliminal signal. Just watch her.

The Quiet Comeback of Margaret Trudeau

November 16, 2015 by Speakers' Spotlight Ian Austen/New York Times/November, 2015



[Margaret Trudeau](#) is a Canadian icon, celebrated both for her role in the public eye and as a respected mental-health issues advocate. From becoming a prime minister's wife at a young age, to the loss of both her son and her former husband, to living with bipolar disorder, Margaret tirelessly shares her personal stories to remind others of the importance of nurturing the body, mind, and spirit. Last week, Margaret was profiled in *The New York Times*,

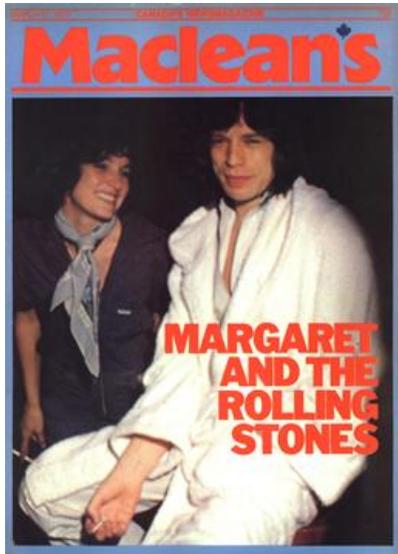
shortly after her son, Justin Trudeau, was sworn in as Canada's newest prime minister:

On Wednesday, Justin Trudeau took the oath of office as the new prime minister of Canada, accompanied by his wife and three small children — and a woman in a dark blue coat that many people in the country may not have seen much of in recent years but who remains an indelible character in Canadian political history: his mother.

Justin's father, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, is still, 15 years after his death, the only former Canadian prime minister most people from outside the country can probably name. And Margaret Trudeau still reigns as the most famous wife of a Canadian prime minister.

Less than half the prime minister's age when they married in 1971, Mrs. Trudeau, suddenly went from being a hippie who had been wandering around North Africa to the world's most glamorous first lady. Then as her marriage to the cerebral Mr. Trudeau began crumbling, she found even greater fame, of a very different sort.





Partying with the Rolling Stones, watching the scene at Studio 54 with Andy Warhol and being tutored in photography by Richard Avedon made Mrs. Trudeau, then the mother of three young children, global tabloid fodder. And with last week's swearing-in of the oldest of those children, Justin, 43, Mrs. Trudeau became the first person to be both the wife and mother of Canadian heads of government.

The ceremony also brought Mrs. Trudeau back to Ottawa, a city where she found little peace in the past, as well as back to the public spotlight.

"Everywhere I go, particularly when there's people who know me or recognize me, I get the warmest hugs and happiest sighs full of hope and full of relief," she said, from Montreal, in a telephone interview on Friday. "It's been such a rejoicing in our family and I have felt it from all the emails, letters and phone messages — everything."

After losing interest in Mrs. Trudeau, who is now 67, much of the world then missed the back story to her New York escapades as well as the sometimes harrowing tale of the rest of her life, which includes the tragedy of a lost son. Mrs. Trudeau was judged and condemned by many Canadians for — as it was generally, if not entirely accurately, seen at the time — abandoning her children.

Over the last three decades, it has become clear that Mrs. Trudeau's actions, while often seen as selfish and sometimes outrageous, were the product of a long hidden battle with bipolar disorder, one that would put her in a straitjacket and a padded cell. Today Mrs. Trudeau is not just Canada's first grandmother, she is also one of the country's leading advocates for mental health patients.



In her memoir, "Changing My Mind," published in 2010, Mrs. Trudeau recalls not being particularly impressed by her future husband when they first met on the island of Moorea in Tahiti. She was on vacation with her parents and sisters; he was there to mull over seeking the leadership of the Liberal Party.

Mr. Trudeau was reading "History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," which struck her as an odd choice for a holiday. "My first thought was that he was old, with old skin and old toes," Mrs. Trudeau wrote.

After graduating from Simon Fraser University in her native British Columbia, Mrs. Trudeau made her way to Morocco and "wandered from one hippie colony to another, experimenting and growing up — or so I imagined." After she returned to Canada, Mr. Trudeau, a longtime bachelor, looked her up for a date while he was out in British Columbia.

Based on an offhand comment from him that evening, she moved to Ottawa and took a job as a government sociologist. Neither the capital city nor the work suited her. But Mr. Trudeau did. He may have had old toes, but he was as athletic as he was intellectual. Photos of Mr. Trudeau skiing or canoeing, often in a buckskin jacket, regularly appeared in Canadian newspapers. They married in March 1971. She was 22, he was 51.



Within the next few years, Mrs. Trudeau gave birth to three boys. The two oldest, Justin and [Alexandre](#), who is known as Sasha, were both born on Christmas Days. The youngest, Michel, came to be called Miche (pronounced “Meesh”), a name given to him by Fidel Castro during a state visit to Cuba.

Whatever Mr. Trudeau’s charms, living with his mother well into middle age proved not to be ideal preparation for life as a husband, a situation made worse by his heavy work schedule. And while he was wealthy thanks to his father’s success in the gas station business, Mrs. Trudeau soon discovered that her husband was an exceptional tightwad.

Worst of all, particularly for someone already struggling with undiagnosed bipolar disease, was living under the constant guard of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Mrs. Trudeau wrote that 24 Sussex Drive, the stone mansion which is the prime minister’s official residence, “was the jewel in the crown of Canada’s penitentiary system in which I was the sole prisoner.” (Because that house will undergo renovations for at least two years, Justin Trudeau and his family are living in another government house.)

Last week, Mrs. Trudeau said that she didn’t expect her daughter-in-law, Sophie Grégoire, 40, to endure similar struggles given her age and her background as a television host.

“She’s a very curious and inquisitive person,” said Mrs. Trudeau of Ms. Grégoire, “so she’s always reached out for help. The opposite of me. I was always young, and I had none of these lessons under my belt and I didn’t know how to ask for help. Sophie is a magnificent woman.”

As she has noted, Mrs. Trudeau did not always deal with the pressure wisely. Before giving a speech, which became “a song of love” during a state dinner in Venezuela, Mrs. Trudeau ate peyote. “Even in my addled state, I could sense the acute embarrassment I had caused,” she later recalled. After a visit to the United States, Mrs. Trudeau became infatuated with Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who she found to be more sympathetic than her husband.

Prompted by one of her manic periods, Mrs. Trudeau decided to live part of the time in New York and develop a career in photography. Following what became an infamous trip to Toronto to party with the Rolling Stones, she left Canada to study with Richard Avedon.

While Mrs. Trudeau became a recognized photographer, the New York foray marked the start of the gradual end of her marriage and the beginning of a series of out-of-control episodes, several of which landed her in hospitals. Most of the related episodes of bad behavior were dutifully reported in Canada and by Britain’s tabloid press.

Amid the downs, there were good periods. Among them was her marriage to Fried Kemper. The two children from that marriage, Alicia and Kyle Kemper, have enjoyed the anonymity denied their mother and half-siblings.

But when Michel was killed by an avalanche while skiing in 1998 that marriage, and Mrs. Trudeau's life, began to truly collapse.

During an interview in 2013, Justin Trudeau said that following the death of Michel, his father, who died two years later, "never bounced back physically, and that was that. And my mother, who has struggled with bipolarity all her life; it took her five years to be able to get over, be past and get to a place of balance and joy."

Mrs. Trudeau attributes the stability that has finally come to her life largely to the patient work of Dr. Colin Cameron, a psychiatrist at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Center, a mental health center.

"I had to go into such deep, deep treatments to get my brain health back, to get my mental health back, after I was thrown to the ground," she said. "But that was then. Now I think we can shorten the time between diagnoses and recovery."

The hospital also led Mrs. Trudeau into what is an improbable career for someone who spent most of her life trying to escape public scrutiny. After being persuaded to speak at one of its fund-raising events, Mrs. Trudeau said that she found that she had a talent for it and now regularly holds talks about mental health throughout Canada. In the past they have included mother-son talks with Justin. And in addition to her 2010 memoir, she published a self-help book for older women this year.

Justin Trudeau's rise to power has prompted something of a reassessment of Mrs. Trudeau. Neil Macdonald, now a senior correspondent for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, was once a newspaper reporter who covered Mrs. Trudeau and questions how she was treated by the press.



"She was guileless, and we were predatory," he wrote in a recent essay. "Our stories were full of snide references to the 'flower girl' our Jesuitical prime minister had brought home."

In 2007, Mrs. Trudeau moved to Montreal to be closer to Sasha and Justin, their wives and her grandchildren. As a bonus, she has been able to lead a more anonymous life in the much larger city.

Her son's succession of her husband as prime minister, however, will now draw Mrs. Trudeau back to Ottawa more frequently, even if she is a bit ambivalent about her return to prominence.

"Who am I," she said on Friday, "Canada's Rodney Dangerfield? I get no respect. I don't care about the respect of the press or the public or anybody. Whose respect every day I'm trying to garner is the respect of my children and my grandchildren and my friends, the people I work with. I find myself now in a position in life where I'm so comfortably in place — but unfortunately I'm getting old."