

# First Person | “My Reincarnation” Director on Her 20 Years in the Making Spiritual Doc

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Jennifer Fox's "My Reincarnation."

*Below acclaimed documentarian Jennifer Fox (“Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman”) reflects on making her latest film, “My Reincarnation.” The spiritual documentary is [the top-raising finished film in Kickstarter’s history and their fourth highest earning film project at any production phase](#). It opens theatrically in New York and Los Angeles on October 28, followed by a national rollout.*

Filmed over twenty years by acclaimed documentarian Jennifer Fox, “My Reincarnation” chronicles the epic story of the high Tibetan Buddhist Master, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, and his western-born son, Yeshe. The film follows Namkhai Norbu’s rise to greatness as a Buddhist teacher in the West, while his son, Yeshe, recognized at birth as the reincarnation of a famous spiritual master, breaks away from his father’s tradition to embrace the modern world. Can the father convince his son to keep the family’s threatened spiritual legacy alive? Never before has a high Tibetan Master allowed such complete access to his private life and it is doubtful that another ever will. With her signature intimate entry to both family and icons including the Dalai Lama, Fox expertly distills a decades-long drama into a universal story about love, transformation, and destiny. [Synopsis courtesy of the film’s website]



## Responses courtesy of “My Reincarnation” director Jennifer Fox:

*How Barbara Streisand got it all started...*

I started to make documentaries in 1981, when I dropped at NYU film school to shoot my first feature, “Beirut The Last Home Movie.” I was 21 years old and I had never made a documentary before. In fact I had thought I would make fiction films when I enrolled in NYU, but I got caught because of this amazing story of the war in Lebanon so I decided I had to go and film it.

It took me six hard years to complete “Beirut.” Making it was the “tough knocks” school of filmmaking; I had no clue how to edit a film. I thought it was either “it or me” – either I would complete the film or I would die. (Luckily I did finish it and it went on to win at Sundance and be distributed worldwide, so I am still here today.) But after that experience of making a documentary, I was hooked. It was so immediate and rewarding to be in the field with real people that I couldn’t imagine working differently.

Nevertheless, my work was and is very informed by my love of a good story. I always look for real life narratives. What I adore about films (and what made me want to make films from the time I was about nine years old) is how they can make you feel things so deeply – more powerfully than any other art form – and in doing so, actually affect and change your life. As embarrassing as it is to admit, when I was a girl, I remember going to the cinema to see the first Barbara Streisand film, “Funny Girl.” I was so enthralled that I left the theater saying I want to make people feel as much as that story made me feel. I didn’t want to be an actress like Streisand; I wanted to make films like that one. When I reflect back now, that was one of the first stories I ever saw about being a liberated woman, and watching it changed the course of my life.

*How a hiatus led to another film...*

I met high Tibetan Master in the film, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche in 1985, while I was still making “Beirut.” I was searching for a spiritual path and began studying Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen with him back then. Once “Beirut” came out and after racing around the globe for its distribution, I was totally fried. I wasn’t even sure I would make another film again. So I took a much-needed hiatus to travel with Namkhai Norbu as an informal secretary. I thought I was going as far away from filmmaking as I could. But being his secretary gave me such privileged access to this very high, but unusual master. He was so playful, funny, and accessible, completely different than all expectations of what a Buddhist teacher would be. I thought I have to pick up a camera. Luckily, it was right at the time when technology was changing and the first small format Hi-8 broadcast quality cameras were available. So I bought one, threw it in my bag, and traveled the world with Namkhai Norbu as a one-woman crew. He introduced me to his family, his wife Rosa, and his son Yeshi and his daughter. All were so happy someone was helping their father so much, that they took me in as one of the clan. In fact I lived with Yeshi and his girlfriend when I was in Rome. Everyone knew I was a filmmaker, but since I was alone with this little camera, I didn’t make much of an impact and I am sure they didn’t take me very seriously.

### *Creating a narrative...*

Essentially I had all this fantastic access but I didn’t have a story or narrative. I knew immediately that making a film about a spiritual master was an impossible subject. Spiritual practice such as meditation is a killer on film; it just looks weird. Everything that really happens in the spiritual field is invisible to the eye, so how do you show it in a documentary? As a great master there weren’t any big conflicts in Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche’s life. He had an amazing backstory of escaping Tibet and losing his entire world and family after the Chinese took over Tibet, but this was all in the past tense and not where my core interest lay. I wanted to find a way to show the life of a modern day master in the west. I knew his son Yeshi was said to be the reincarnation of his Uncle, a famous Teacher who had been killed by the Chinese. I also knew that Yeshi didn’t want anything to do with his reincarnation; he wanted to be normal, play in a rock band, get married, and have a job. Of course, my story ears perked up when I imagined what a great film his journey would make. In fact I spoke to Yeshi in 1989 and said: “Your story combined with your father’s story would make a great film. You’ll wake up, accept your reincarnation, and return to Tibet to be enthroned in the monastery of your predecessor.” And he said, “Forget it. It will never happen.” And truthfully I believed him. I gave up on that story, but I kept on filming anyway. Honestly, I didn’t know where the narrative was going, which is unlike any other film I have made. Usually I have a clear ark or thesis in my mind when I start. Here I was just collecting amazing insider footage, not knowing how – or if – I could turn it into a film.

I was never interested in only making a film just for a Buddhist audience. So, the hardest thing for me was that there was no apparent narrative for almost 17 years of shooting. I kept thinking, “This will never work, what I am doing?” Meanwhile, funders were walking backwards and saying to me, “What’s wrong with you, why don’t you make a more “sexy” story?” Many times I thought I would abandon the film forever, and I put it aside for years while I worked on other films, but something always drew me back and I kept shooting. I even tried editing the film before the son’s story manifest and it was impossible to make it work just with the father’s story. When the Yeshi, the son began to manifest a spiritual awakening, it was the first time I started to believe we had found the vehicle for film. Then when he went back to Tibet and was enthroned in the monastery of his predecessor, I finally felt, “Oh now we have it!” But this reflects the precise challenge with spiritual films: How do you show the invisible?

The son’s awakening finally gave me scenes where you could actually “see” a person change before the camera. Suddenly the film could demonstrate a spiritual journey as it manifest outside. Meanwhile, through the son’s young criticism of his father, we are allowed to feel all our skepticism of the path and the father. As the son opens and develops, the viewer goes with him and experiences his awakening as he does. It’s as close as you’ll ever get to the inner life of a high Tibetan Master and his son. They gave unprecedented access over two decades.

### *How the reaction’s been thus far...*

Well, I’ve had the pleasure to see audiences screen “My Reincarnation” at festivals all over the world. It’s been pretty mind blowing how much the film works on a universal level. Basically it is an incredibly intimate father and son story filmed over 20 years that all can identify with; the spiritual side is the underbelly. In fact, last weekend we just came from the U.S. premiere at the Hampton’s Film Festival and had such great reactions from ordinary people. The protagonist and son in the film, Yeshi Namkhai, was with me and afterwards he did the longest Q + A’s I have ever seen. No one budged from their seats they were so enthralled by his story. Then I was in Los Angeles the week before and I had the same reaction at a press screening there. Normally, the Press do not want to hear the filmmaker speak afterwards, but here they remained glued to their seats to ask me questions about how I had gotten such an intimate story. Even the press agent was surprised. Then I headed to a class at Loyola Marymount College, and these young 18 year-olds were also enthralled. I think everyone can relate to the parent-child relationship – and here you have a front row seat for twenty years on a family.

### *Using inspiration as fuel...*

[http://www.indiewire.com/article/first\\_person\\_my\\_reincarnation](http://www.indiewire.com/article/first_person_my_reincarnation)

I always watch lots of films when I am making a new film in order to figure out language, style, narrative, everything. I am happy to steal ideas wherever I find them for my work. With this project I watched every spiritual documentary that had ever been made, and very few satisfied me because most are made for “believers,” not for a general audience, and have little narrative drive. There was only one that helped me and that was a film released in the 1992 called “The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche” by Ritu Sarin and Tenzin Sonam. It stood out because it was a real story. I ended up screening more fictional films such as “Little Buddha” by Bertolucci out of desperation, because although not perfect, they have been more successful with spiritual issues. For a long time I felt stuck because I didn’t have the latitude to create the inner world that you have in fiction. I kept being thrown back to my core documentary search for a real narrative in the lives of the father and son, which took years of shooting to manifest. Then once we began to edit, I was struck by the importance of water for the main character, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. For this, I immediately ran back and re-screened the film “Iris” – about the life of Iris Murdoch – for its reoccurring use of water as a theme. Finding the metaphor of water helped me show the importance of dreams and dreaming in the Buddhist practice of both the father and the son, as he awakens.

*In the works...*

I am actually working on a fiction doc hybrid piece, based on a true story. I am a slow developer – films can percolate for years. This one is the same. It is on the third draft of the script right now and I will be concentrating more on it next year. I can’t announce the story yet, as the people are still alive, so it must be kept secret. However, I really look forward to the freedom of fiction and fictional language to be able to investigate the invisible lives of characters and their inner story!