

LOVE OF MY LIFE:

*Insights of Barbara Mailer Wasserman*

D E N I S E   D O H E R T Y   P A P P A S

*Love of My Life: Reflections of Barbara Mailer Wasserman*

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BARBARA WASSERMAN'S MEMORY PIECE IS VERY MUCH THE TALE of a strong, intelligent and capable woman's life experienced while navigating various lovers, child-care, meaningful work, marriage, divorce, a second marriage and world travels—all the while managing her own mother.

As the saying goes, "If Shakespeare had a sister" I hope she would have had Barbara's wit and wisdom, describing the past as she lived it, sharing insights that she now draws from hindsight. In fourteen chapters, she glances back at her many adventures. Who would have guessed as a petite twenty-year old blonde in 1946 Barbara aided in a jail break from Franco's prison? She looks back with fond appreciation for her alma mater, Radcliffe College, and with equal disdain for her early work experiences and her date with Randolph Churchill.

Barbara reveals how determined she was to be independent and to carve out her own career. No easy task in the nineteen forties, fifties or sixties! Not even today! Happily, as a bold woman ahead of her time, she has been much loved by a supportive family and devoted life-long friends. Barbara states in her Preface: "I enjoy being alive . . . informed by my sense that somehow . . . I will be ok."

What reader doesn't enjoy a complicated love story? Of these, Barbara has many.

Old boyfriends turn up in later life and in her memoirs, remembered for the drama, joys and sorrows they added to her life. Mailer fans may know much about her brother's love-life; likewise, Barbara isn't shy in revealing her own.

First, she introduces Dolph Winebrenner, a journalist and communist she loved while she joined the Progressive Citizens of America and worked to elect Henry Wallace for President. Politics was a heady aphrodisiac. Surely, Barbara's youthful affair with the much older Dolph would have scandalized her mother, but Barbara now regrets not knowing how his later life turned out.

Sixty-three years after her very first love affair, Barbara reconnected with Irish-American Jack Maher, brother Norman's college friend she met at age fifteen. Barbara recalls that for years their affair was "the touchstone for me of what one should feel when one is in love." Now she concedes "What a stranger I was to life and the passage of time." Alas, conflicting feelings of "tenderness, disappointment, pleased vanity and irritation" drew her not only to help Jack in his old age but also to keep him at arm's length. Looking back, how her mother would have detested her marrying a goy.

Harry is another lover the author met in 1960 now described as "crucial to my life." At the time, Barbara was unhappily married; when her husband learned of her affair they had make-up sex. Quoting her June 22, 1960 journal: "I laughed about it and quoted Elena in *THE DEER PARK* about the attractiveness of unfaithful women." While in Italy with Harry, Barbara picked up a copy of *ANNA KARENINA* and realized how deeply she missed her son and identified with Tolstoy's fictional character. Barbara concludes this chapter: "Despite fifty years of silence, there must have been some remnant thread between us. How else to explain why I googled him that night?"

I particularly enjoyed the chapter "A Serious Man" devoted to Al Wasserman, who Barbara met while working on a TV documentary. During their courtship, he told Barbara "with her presence the whole room lights up." Al's gift to her was "he enabled me to feel my own light" giving Barbara the "very bearable lightness of being." Describing Al as "intelligent, interesting and witty" Barbara admits "Ultimately, I guess, he may have changed me more than I changed him." Reader: she married him.

Barbara devotes the final chapter to her beloved sibling. Norman decided at age seven that she was someone to be proud of because she won a pea carrying contest. He enlisted young Barbara as his practice dance partner. “How we reinforced one another!” she writes. “For a while Norman used to joke about our Mutual Admiration Society. It couldn’t have hurt that I believed his every idea. I was his acolyte.” After the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, Barbara states, “I didn’t want people glorifying me as Norman’s sister, or demeaning me as ONLY BEING his sister. It was many years before I realized and could accept that being Norman’s sister was an ineluctable part of my persona.”

Barbara reports Norman never stopped teaching her. She concludes *Love of My Life* with the following quotation: “I also have Norman to thank for my understanding of a basic existential tenet—that if you act stronger than you feel you often end up feeling as strong as you are.” Excellent advice, finely wrought in her honest and remarkable self-portrait.