

A Doubleday Daughter belongs at last....

By Sandra Dorr, Special to *The Denver Post*

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Halfway through “North of Crazy” is a rabidly honest sentence, one of many in a cathartic memoir that often reads like an extended artist’s statement. Delighting in her children sneaking cookies, unable to scold them, Neltje writes, “Discipline did not come easy to me because I thought like a child, and I often still do.”

Neltje, who goes by a solo name, acknowledges herself here as the daughter of publishing magnate Nelson Doubleday; sister to his heir, Nelson; child of a less-than-tender socialite mother, Ellen; and ex-wife of John Sargent, who became Doubleday’s president in a family and business built on power and fear.

The memoir covers 78 years of her life — almost, akin to Neltje’s current 10×30 paintings, more than can be taken in. In these pages, we learn how a woman shakes off the first 30 years of an opulent, literary yet suffocating life to discover her own true nature, that echo of childhood that leads her to a fantastic, frontier landscape in Wyoming, where a bitter past can melt like mountain water in an arroyo.

Early on, Neltje vividly describes the warm moments of her childhood in Bonny Hall, the family plantation in Yemassee, S.C., where black friends and servants, Jimmy, Haskell and Little John, take her fishing in rice fields, and loving Mattie tells her stories in the nursery: “I lay against her breast, listening to her heartbeat, her voice; felt the soft warmth of her flesh beneath her uniform. And her laugh made her whole body jiggle.”

Here and throughout she acutely remembers colors and shapes: the green bottomed boat, her father’s gray Buick, the pique collared dress tried on by her two older half-sisters, Puck and Madeline, children of her mother’s first marriage, whom she occasionally sees. She craves the nights when her father asks the servants, whom he terms “the darkies,” to sing for their guests: “I want to cry ... their voices, rolling out like waves lapping on the beach, soothe and envelop us ... the throb of music in their voices speaks of a belonging I have never known.”

These memories are interludes in years of being presented to parents in Barberries, a more formal home in Oyster Bay, Long Island, and being raised by a host of nannies, maids, tutors, and a cold governess who once forced Neltje to eat her own vomit off the floor. She shares an uneasy kinship with her brother Nelson, who’s treated as a young king, the future of Doubleday, while her future is to be molded as an heiress and society wife. Her father frightens her to the degree that she stammers when she speaks to him, desperately wanting him to listen.

In 1942, she spends an idyllic summer playing with English children of publishing friends who come to Oyster Bay to escape air raids. All the children deeply envy the one boy who lives with his mother. When New York is threatened by potential air raids, Neltje and Nelson are sent to

Bonny Hall for the winter without their parents. There, a friend of the family takes her riding and molests her. For the next 70 years, she will remember his threats of what he will do if she tells.

Puck, however, learns of this and comes to her rescue at Bonny Hall. Her parents remove the man and hire a psychiatrist for Neltje, yet do not discuss the matter with her; she feels like “an animal in a cage of glass.”

In 1946, her father’s lungs collapse, and for the first time she spends weekends at Barberries keeping her father company, watching baseball and musicals on an early-model TV, especially “Annie Get Your Gun,” together, laughing. He sends her Cymbidium orchids, “small, velvety flowers in a wide range of colors, so delicate. I feel his love, new for me to know. And I love him and tell him so.”

Her mother has the flowers stopped, and sends her to an all-girls boarding school over the next year, in Switzerland. Though her mother rarely writes, she receives letters from her father every week, and from Nelson almost daily. She gains strength, and finally some weight, learning multiple languages and befriending other lonely girls. When author Daphne du Maurier takes her to Windsor Castle, she witnesses a way of life, easy and full of pleasure, between Daphne and her partner, Tommy, something even more exciting than meeting the royal family, or viewing the Mona Lisa in Paris.

Jump ahead another seven years, past her father’s death of lung cancer, her mother’s collapse into nightly drinking, to Neltje’s “coming out,” which she considers both a pleasure and a meat market, and a ride home in a cab with family friend John Sargent, who coaxes her into an engagement before she turns 18. Over the objections of her mother and siblings, she marries him, and begins a lonely New York life much like her mother’s, learning to keep house by day, entertaining authors in streams of publishing parties by night.

Raoul Fleishman, co-founder of the New Yorker, is witty and kind; W. Somerset Maugham, whom she knows from her childhood, advises her on sex in marriage; and she staves off a drunken, manic Theodore Roethke, who holds a knife to her throat in her kitchen. More important, she attends an art show opening for an old friend, Jon Schueler’s, whose abstract expressionist paintings she cannot forget.

The marriage slides even as she gives birth to two beloved children, Ellen and John, and argues with her husband over trying to eat dinner with the family instead of the constant cocktail parties and evenings with authors she is to help snag for the business. Both have affairs. She gradually realizes that her husband is unable to feel emotional attachment toward women, men or children.

Being “Dutch stubborn and Irish difficult,” she renovates old houses for the family upstate, and spends time playing with her children, much of it outdoors, always wondering, “Was I going to be a selfish mother? Like mine?”

Breadcrumbs appear in the forest of the 12 years with John, and their publishing trips to Europe. In the large studio of a Swiss abstract painter, Oscar Kokoschka, a contemporary of Picasso, she senses a kindred spirit, and the possibility of a life of art. Another friend, Geoffrey Hellman, advises her on marriage: "Get out before ten years, or you won't."

She battles with her brother over her share of stock, and his unwillingness to allow Doubleday Publishing to go public, and also with her husband over allowing shares of stock to go to the children, rather than him. Ultimately, she wins the stock back for her children, obtains a divorce in Mexico, and then wins a partial battle after taking Nelson, appointed as her trustee, to court.

"I grew up during this court battle in ways that triggered change in my future," she writes. "The disregard of my mother and brother hurt, yet it set me free ... I no longer felt I had a family save for my half sisters."

She puts her life back together "out of the scraps of myself" with a writer/painter from London, and moves her family, with him, to Banner, Wyo., buying an 1898 ranch with a stone house and sheep sheds on a lush creek with a view of the Bighorn Mountains. Her children ride horses and start school in a one-room schoolhouse, which horrifies her mother.

With the impulsiveness of a Frida Kahlo (or a Jo March), Neltje buys a historic inn hours before it's due to be crushed by a wrecking ball, and spends several years restoring it as a talisman of Western pioneers, and a center in downtown Sheridan. Neighbors and new friends pull her jeep out of the creek in mid-winter, loan her equipment, help her buy cattle, hold potlucks with great home cooking and pies, and play poker together around kitchen tables. At last she finds community and trust that have nothing to do with her wealth or surname, which she drops entirely.

Though her second marriage also ends, Neltje begins painting in earnest, first learning how to make the mark of sumi-e painting on rice paper, then creating monotypes, then abstract canvases. On a visit to her sister Puck, she acknowledges her own addiction to alcohol. Puck takes Neltje to an AA meeting that night, the beginning of 30 years of sobriety. "How fragile are moments like this," she remembers, "how serendipitous."

She becomes active in the local women's center, founds a local gallery for artists up and down the Rockies, and in 1987, is invited to exhibit solo at the Yellowstone Art Center. On the little North Fork of Crazy Woman Creek, she buys a "piece of paradise" at the base of the Bighorn Mountains, converting the property into homes for her children, and eventually grandchildren, as wilderness retreats.

With love and forgiveness, Neltje helps her mother die, and reconnects with her brother before he dies in 2015.

Ultimately, she finds an artists' residency program, Jentel, on another section of the ranch. With Jentel's director, M.J. Edwards, she travels the world from Antarctica to Uzbekistan, to Mongolia and Morocco, which inspires her first suite of four 10x30 paintings, exhibited at the University of Wyoming.

"I paint from the unconscious," she writes, "moving color and brush mark in a rhythmic dance, a pulse beat. The seed is sown; the layers grow."

Her own house grows "like a wandering sculpture," with her own large metal sculptures on the grounds, and wings added for her grandchildren, "who have encouraged me, to my great happiness, to remain a child at heart."

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