

Tuesday, October 30, 2012



NORA WAS RIGHT



(1941-2012) Humorist, Journalist, Writer, Director, Foodie

By Lauren Milberger

"It's not about the truth, it's about the story – there is no truth. And everyone tells the story differently."

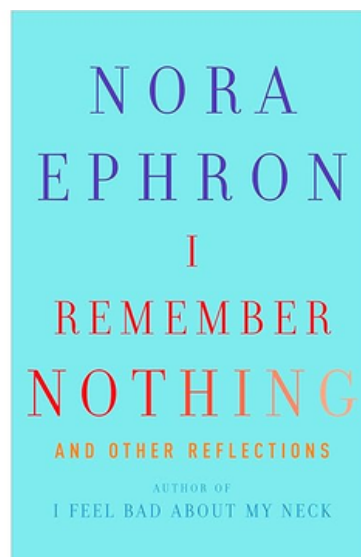
~ Nora Ephron

When Nora Ephron died I found out on Facebook – sadly a common occurrence these days – our digital town crier, spreading the word with just the click of the share button. As I scrolled down and caught the bi-line, Nora Ephron dies at 71, I stopped and stared blankly. I didn't speak for a least several minutes. Mostly, I was in shock. Shocked because it was at that very moment the following thought occurred to me: I had taken Nora Ephron for granted. And not because I knew Nora personally (which I did not), but because somehow, in the back recesses of my brain, I assumed Nora would always be there. After all, the term "Nora Ephron Movie" is a genre within itself, already embedded in our lexicon. We both lived in the same city, our beloved New York. We even crossed paths on three separate occasions. (Well, more like I ran into Nora, but more on that later.)

Still, you just always expected her to be there -- around somewhere -- like Mayor Bloomberg or the Empire State Building. You might not see it all the time, but just one slight move of your head and there it would be - peeking out behind The Bank America Building, jumping on the subway or making a personal appearance on *The View*. Over the next few days, I read through what seemed like thousands of obituaries and tributes throughout the interwebs, and what struck me -- reminded me, like a sense of melancholy nostalgia -- was the mark Nora had left not just on Hollywood, but on the written and spoken word itself. She wasn't just a filmmaker -- or a journalist -- or a writer, she was an artist -- only instead of clay or paint, her material of choice was language. And I mourned again for the loss -- like a parent moving to another town, watching as their child says goodbye to their playmates -- you know they will find another playmate, but will they find someone who will play with them the same way again?

Girl Writer Blog

Personally, I have always had a love affair with words – witty words to be exact. Many people, upon finding out that I am a dyslexic who loves words and entomology, often say, “*Oh, how ironic.*” And I’m sure they mean it with all sincerity, but it comes off sounding more like an Alanis Morissette song. It’s as if I told them I was a chocolatier who was allergic to chocolate or a social worker allergic to children. Most of my childhood was spent collecting, finding witty people, especially women, who, as Dorothy Parker once said, “Sharpen [their] tongue[s]”. And in turn, I developed a deep love affair with witty people such as Dorothy like: Diane English, Bonnie Hunt, Wendy Wasserstein, Betty Comden, Carrie Fisher and Steve Martin. My love of Steve Martin then took me to a whirlwind star-crossed romance with the comic essay. I soon became familiar with not only the work of Steve, Wendi, and Carrie (also essay writers) but of the essay work of such scribes as David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, and, most recently, David Rakoff. (Yes, guys, I know, I’m totally late to the party – putting *This American Life* on my iTunes now!) Yet, for most of my life, I was unaware that Nora was herself part of this breed – she was not on my list. I knew her movie *Heartburn* had been a semi-autobiographical novel, and I don’t remember how I found out – was I watching *The View* or *The Today Show* (two of my guilty pleasures)? I honestly can’t remember. All I know is that after her interview, I had to read her most recent book. Did I run out to buy it? No, I was a young, starving artist... I asked for the book for Hanukkah. But once I did get it and read *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, my entire perspective of Nora Ephron changed. And once I read, *I Remember Nothing*, I was hooked for good. How could I have missed this? After all, I was the person who read Steve Martin’s *Pure Drivel* sitting one night in the bathroom of my dorm (not on the toilet, get your mind out of the... well, never mind) because I was laughing so hard and I didn’t want to wake my roommates. So, when Nora died, I worried that this part of her life would fade away from the collective memory of her – in exchange for “I’ll have what she’s having” – a great line, of course, but Nora didn’t even write it- Billy Crystal did.



I realize now that I actually ran into Nora three times around New York. The first was when I walked past a salon on the Upper West Side and looked in. “*Oh look, Nora Ephron,*” I thought. The second was when I inadvertently walked past the Eugene O’Neill Theater, after an acting class, right into the opening night audience of her play, *Imaginary Friends*. I caught sight of her for a moment, so quick I wasn’t sure if it was Elaine May or someone else, so I looked back: “*Oh, look, that’s Nora Ephron,*” I thought. The third was far more interesting.

It was about the time that I finished reading Nora’s more recent essay book that I got a call -- a call I hadn’t gotten in a long time.

“Hi, Lauren – this is unnamed casting director.”

“Hello, unnamed casting director,” I of course replied.

“We’re looking to match a picture for a Meryl Streep movie. You just need to come in - we’ll take your picture in an evening dress to be considered - it’s a period piece – the 1950s – we would also cut your hair. It’s featured.”

“*Don’t let the number of women in the workforce trick you—there are still lots of magazines devoted almost exclusively to making perfect casseroles and turning various things into tents.*”

~’96 Wellesley Commencement Address

"Oh, how I regret not having worn a bikini for the entire year I was twenty-six. If anyone young is reading this, go, right this minute, put on a bikini, and don't take it off until you're thirty-four."

~ From Nora's book *"I Feel Bad About My Neck"*

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I hadn't done extra work in a long time, but the casting director knew me and had been especially nice to me in the past. Extra work is a great thing for beginning actors to do, so they can learn what it's like to be on a real set. They get a chance to learn the lingo, the way things run, how film actors work, what people's jobs are, whose way to get out of – I believe it is invaluable. Any hesitation on my part in going back to extra work left me at the phrase: Period Piece. I am a history nut, especially most of the 20th Century and its fashion. The idea of foundation garments, full skirts and pointed bras had me almost salivating. Plus featured, which by no means meant more pay or credit on the resume (Never put extra work on your resume! Lesson over.) did provide, from previous experience, a closer seat for the watching. I said yes.

The casting director didn't have to tell me about *Julie and Julia*. I kept up with the trade papers, I knew all about the movie and who was doing it. But once I came in and had my picture snapped in a strapless evening dress (I was strapless evening dress girl), it was the next call that perplexed me. "We gave the book of pictures to Nora Ephron, and **she picked you.**"

Me? That couldn't be right. That had to be a lie. Nora picked me? Why would she pick out an extra? Didn't she have more important things to do? This was just a ruse to get me to say yes. It's part of their job, I thought – getting thousands of breathing people with pulses to want to be in the same place for fourteen hours. It's hard work – and I do not envy them, nor do I have a problem with their methods – I can barely get five friends organized to gather for my birthday (I'm the Mary Richards of party throwing.) So in fact, I applaud them for their techniques, and I always take it with nothing but a grain of salt. Ironically, though, come to think of it, it's the same process most men use to pick up women: *"I love your look."* *"You're special."* *"Tom Cruise is gonna to be there."* The usual.



Nora in her journalism years with RFK

That day in hair and make-up, no one seemed to know who I was. I didn't care! I had on a fabulous dress! And I was here to learn. Most of the time on extra shoots, I would look at the camera angle and figure out where the worst spot to be seen was, and I would try to stand or sit there. Therefore, I felt no reason to speak up. Once I got to set, it was no different, and after being placed in two separate places – not featured – among the patrons in a Brooklyn restaurant made to look like the heart of France, a woman I recognized (not Nora) approached me.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned me in a concerned and assertive way.

"This is where they placed me."

"Oh, noo!!" she said and took me by the wrist and put me in my place – literally.

The woman was Oscar-winning costume designer Ann Roth. Twice when a PA (Production Assistant) tried to move me from where Oscar-winning Ann Roth had placed me, she yelled to them, *"No, keep her there, DON'T MOVE HER!"* Except, as I looked at the camera set up, I knew I was out of frame – Jackpot. I get to wear the great dress, and I can just watch Nora, Meryl and Stanley work—front row seat. But after a short time, someone must have figured out I was in Cleveland compared to the camera angle, and I was moved to the main table with Meryl Streep and Stanley Tucci – so much for matching the picture they had cast me based on.

Soon, the actors approached and said hello to us. Mr. Tucci nicely put out his hand to introduce himself to all of us, but after a nervous extra (who had told me he had already met him the day before) knocked over a water glass upon reaching his own hand to shake Stanley's – that put the kibosh on that.

I like to call that day: The day I learned how to get out of the way of a tracking shot without looking at the camera and not getting my head knocked off its block. But mostly, it was the day I got to watch Nora Ephron direct (And Meryl Streep and Stanley Tucci act).

As Nora approached the table, I so desperately wanted to blurt out, *"I just read I Feel Bad About My Neck and I love it. Yes, I know I'm not really in the demographic, but I'm mature for my age! I even have bad knees, I swear! I can show you my orthotics if you want."* But that would have been inappropriate – so I said what I was being paid to say: nothing. I'm not sure if I am remembering wrong in retrospect, but I recall Nora being dressed just like I expected her to be: All in black. Her neck was covered, and I want to say she was wearing a leather jacket, but it was a hot day in Brooklyn, and I can't imagine anyone would wear a leather jacket on such a hot day. (In fact, that was also the day I discovered the convenience of the dress shield – if you don't know, Google it.) And she sounded and acted the way I expected her to act. Her voice was very New York, although she grew up in California, (at college, Nora was told she had a New Jersey accent; I'm guessing the combo of her parents' own east coast accent and a California one) and had a deep, dry tone with a little rasp. She would approach Meryl and Stanley at the end of the table and direct them with ease after each shot. I remember when, in one take, Meryl improvised, "Is it smaller than a bread box?"-- about a gift she had just been given; after the take, Nora came to the actor's side to correct her: *"You can't say bigger than a bread box,"* she explained. "That became popular because of the game show I've Got a Secret, and it wasn't on the air yet."



Lauren on Set of Julie and Julia

Later in the shoot, Stanley Tucci started to sing Happy Birthday and back she came. *"Are you trying to kill me?!"* she demanded (from my point of view, comically). *"You can't sing that song, I can't afford that song!"* It was after the Happy Birthday Incident that Nora turned to the extras and asked, *"Can you sing Happy Birthday in French? - Oh wait, they can't talk,"* she remembered despondently – she would have to pay us more if we did.

Nora was everything I expected her to be – without my actually meeting her. So, anything I say may essentially be completely wrong about Nora, but watching her gave me the same feeling I get when I would see any creative woman in charge -- here was woman who knew what she was doing and was respected for it – she was the boss. And she wasn't a bitch; she just did her job the way any person should. She just did. And no one treated her otherwise. Recently I read a quote from Nora that I will now paraphrase, for I can't seem to find the exact quote for some reason -- she spoke of when she graduated from college in 1962 she knew the history of woman up to her lifespan at that time and as much as men told her figuratively (and I'm sure sometimes literally) to go home – she just decided she would be the exception. She just went forward.

So, maybe the feeling that day I felt in Brooklyn was a sense of confidence that somehow lingered in the air and settled on me like sediment on the bottom of the ocean – something she got from the sixty-odd years of life she had led up to that point. Nora was one of the reasons my generation and any after me wouldn't have to bump our heads on the glass ceiling quite as often as she had. I think for me, this feeling was maybe even a sense of pride. And maybe right now you're saying to yourself, *"Lauren, this isn't 1969 or even 1977,"* but tell that to Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to win the Oscar for directing in 2011. Or the women of the Senate who didn't have a ladies' room until 1993; the House just got one this year.

Cut to me in the present day: At around the time that Nora died, I was going through what at the time seemed like a scary change in my life -- I moved. A major staple of New York living is getting very little notice on finding an apartment. Co-ops are formed; roommates move away, leases are up – for whatever reason, change is forced upon you. This was my case; I had four and a half weeks to find an apartment that I could afford, with a roommate who wasn't sketchy, and not in an area so bad that prayer was the best line of defense. Not to mention, financially, I had put myself in a hole – a little more investment in my career than return. But change doesn't have a timeline – the next act of my life was upon me.



And not just in the form of a change of address. That was just how it had literally manifested itself. See, there comes a time in a person's life when they look out and say: "This is not where I thought I would be in my life" because, like John Lennon said, *"Life is what happens when you're making other plans."* I have never been a person who believes in absolutes. I don't know the person I will be tomorrow or next week – so how can I say "I'll never" for who knows what the future will bring. I was at that precipitous point in my life where the "starving artists" ask themselves – "Am I on the right path?" And no matter how abundantly I told myself this was an exciting time of new beginnings -- with my deadline looming -- the fear of the unknown change and financial strife crept into my subconscious like Frankenstein's monster: *"Change bad!"*

"Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim."

~ '96 Wellesley Commencement Address

Nora had a few different acts in her own life. Her parents were screenwriters, so it would seem inevitable that she would become a screenwriter – a writer of fiction in some capacity, but perhaps, in a subconscious act of defiance, Nora became one of the first of the #girlwriters – a reporter. Like many prominent women of her generation, Nora graduated from Wellesley (an all-girls college which boasts successes such as Hillary Clinton, Madeline Albright and Diane Sawyer) and interned at the JFK White House, long before interns were infamous. Nora would boast her claim to fame was that JFK didn't hit on her. When she applied at *Newsweek*, she was told until what at the time was considered "middle age."

"Maybe young women don't wonder whether they can have it all any longer, but in case any of you are wondering, of course you can have it all. What are you going to do? Everything is my guess. It will be a little messy, but embrace the mess. It will be complicated, but rejoice in the complications. It will not be anything like what you think it will be like, but surprises are good for you. And don't be frightened: you can always change your mind. I know: I've had four careers and three husbands."

~'96 Wellesley Commencement Address

Women didn't write for *Newsweek* and were given a job clipping articles from other newspapers and magazines for the staff. "We weren't meant to have futures, we were meant to marry them," Nora would later muse. But Nora was one of the lucky few who grew up with a mother, a working mother, who made sure her girls asked themselves what they wanted to be when they grew up. Imagine a time, modern women, when that wasn't a question a little girl was asked. After *Newsweek*, Nora went on to write for *The NY Post* as well as several magazines. She later wrote *Heartburn*, the autobiographical novel based on her marriage and break-up with Carl Bernstein, of Watergate Woodward and Bernstein fame. In fact, for a long time, Nora was one of the few people who actually knew who Deep Throat was. She says her first throw at screenwriting was script doctoring *All The President's Men*. (Side Bar: Script Doctoring is when another writer is hired for no credit and does some re-writing. Neil Simon was so famous for this that he was nicknamed: Doc.) When *Heartburn* was published, Nora was forty-one – FORTY-ONE. She had two ex-husbands, two kids and had yet to write the films for which she would be known: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've Got Mail*, *Julie and Julia*. She had yet to write or direct any films (well, with a credit). In short: Nora didn't live in a one-act play, or even a traditional three-act play. And she didn't become famous for what many say is "*the first line of your obituary.*"

Of course, I didn't know about Nora's four-act life at first. I knew she had been a journalist because of her essay books, but I never really did the math. I hadn't done the math literally and figuratively on any of it. Not until her death. I started this blog because of Nora, because I was saddened people wouldn't know everything else she had done other than her films. The films were flashier – people would remember. The movies were safe. What I didn't know was that in the process, I would find out there was something more about Nora I needed to learn. For myself and for all the women like me – people like me – what else Nora had left behind.



In Nora's last book, she listed a few things she would miss when she was gone – of course, her kids and her husband, laughs, butter, dinner with friends, but she would also miss Shake Shack's custard and looking at Manhattan from the Brooklyn Bridge. On doing research on what I would write about in this essay, I decided to download the two audiobooks the New York Public Library had and revisit the essays which introduced me to the Nora I came to know. And may I just say there is nothing better than walking through Manhattan listening to Nora Ephron speak about New York. (That and listening to Dean Martin while walking uptown in the rain – I highly recommend that, too.) But this time it wasn't raining, and I walked all the way up to Lincoln Center and sat in the new white and red chairs and listened. And I had this new sense of calm – that I could do anything. This was because just days earlier, in my search for interviews with Nora on iTunes, I came across something called *The Path To Success*. It was a short lecture Nora gave after being presented the Golden Plate Award from the Academy of Achievement in DC in 2007. She almost bounced onto the stage, eager to share her wisdom with the young people in the audience. She said she had anecdotes to share, but she called them more epiphanies. Her last epiphany made me realize what she meant:

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"The luckiest thing that has happened to me as a writer. And what I would hope for all of you... I'm telling you this now, 'cause I didn't know it. Whatever your choice to do next, is not, if you are lucky, what you're going to do forever. And the luckiest thing that can happen is that you can kinda keep moving sideways, that you can keep changing... Stay open.... Stay open to the changes that happen to you, that whatever you begin, so in doing so you can make that transition into something else."

Nora had strong opinions on a lot of things, I gather – like that hazelnuts were what's wrong with Europe, egg whites are not better for you, and you should never start an article with a quote. But after finding the Paths To Success lecture, I found more and more of Nora's words of wisdom to women, including the quotations from her 1996 alma mater commencement speech, I have pasted throughout this post, I saw a theme. A path of sorts, and Nora's words were the breadcrumbs left so we wouldn't lose our way. Nora believed in living each day like it might be your last. Have that extra piece of dessert. Love the little things in life, like custard at the Shake Shack or the New York skyline. And maybe this was from years of battling cancer, I don't know, but what was refreshing about it was she had done it successfully, and it sounded like a good idea to me. It sounded like the best way to honor her memory.

I live in Brooklyn now (after staying with a friend for two weeks, so it really was on the wire), and I am back on my feet financially due to a much cheaper apartment. (It even includes a housekeeper!!) And every time I open my front door, I think to myself, "I am so lucky."



And every day when I ride in and out of Brooklyn on the subway, I get to see Manhattan in all its brightly-lit glory, and I always make sure to sit on the south side of the train to take in that great view. Because each time I do, I remember the first time I looked out at the Manhattan skyline from the Brooklyn Bridge – and how all I could think of as I gazed at its beauty was, *"Nora was right, Nora was right,"* and once again for good measure, *"Nora was right."* And every day when I make that same journey in and out of Manhattan I make sure to look out and remind myself in so many ways, whether Nora picked me or not, that Nora was right – as I bask in the glory of my sideways life.

Thank you, Nora

"Two paths diverge in a wood, and we get to take them both... It's another of the nicest things about being women -we can do that. Did I say it was hard? Yes, but let me say it again so that none of you can ever say the words, nobody said it was so hard. But it's also incredibly interesting. You are so lucky to have that life as an option. Whatever you choose, however many roads you travel, I hope that you choose not to be a lady. I hope you will find some way to break the rules and make a little trouble out there. And I also hope that you will choose to make some of that trouble on behalf of women."

~'96 Wellesley Commencement Address

4 comments:



Michelle Simone October 30, 2012 at 12:22 PM

Lauren, you're such a wonderful writer! Thank you so much for sharing this essay. Not only do I feel grateful that I've learned more about Nora Ephron, but I found it so beautiful how you wove her writing and presence into your life.

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Lauren Milberger  October 30, 2012 at 12:23 PM

Thanks so much for your lovely, lovely words. :)

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Unknown February 24, 2016 at 11:02 AM

Great :)

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Lauren Milberger  April 3, 2016 at 6:21 AM

Thank you!

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