

Nancy Mairs

Early Life

Born 1943 in Long Beach, CA

Father – John Eldredge (naval officer – Civil Engineer in the SeeBees)

Mother - Ann Pedrick Smith (tax collector)

Younger sister Sally

Nancy's father died when she was four. He ran his car off the road, likely due to a cerebral hemorrhage suffered earlier in the day when he struck his head on a refrigerator pipe at work. He was 28, and the family was stationed in Guam at the time. Years later she wrote an essay titled "On Loving Men," in which she states: "I would prefer not to. The first man I loved left me without even saying goodbye, and the loving of men has brought me endless sorrow and travail ever since" (*Plain Text*, 107). She remembers the day of his death: "Daddy always came home for lunch, and he must often have put me to bed. At any rate, I was puzzled by his absence, for as Mother reached to pull the tent of mosquito netting over me, I asked, 'Where's Daddy? Daddy's dead, Nancy,'" she said, and I hit her with all my strength in the stomach" (107). Nancy moved with her mother and sister to live in NH, near her father's parents. When Nancy was nine they moved in with Ann's mother in Wenham, MA. So she grew up mostly among women, but unlike Kate Chopin, she didn't find strength among these women. Most of them seemed to believe that a woman was incomplete without a man. Family/friends went husband hunting for Nancy's mother, so she dated a lot. She remarried when Nancy was 11. Nancy began turning to boys for attention early on to fill her father void— but she didn't become sexually active – she just had a lot of crushes (they didn't return her affection). She wanted boys to want her. When she got their attention, didn't know what to do with it. But she fell into a pattern of needing to have someone, and wouldn't end one relationship until she had found another. At 16 she fell in love with a boy named Caleb. He wanted to have sex—she didn't/couldn't. They encountered each other again two years later and he raped her. Years later she wrote about her relationship with him, and the attack: "A good feminist always hates her rapist, I suppose, but I cannot hate mine. Not this late in my life anyway. I loved Caleb when he was little older than my son is now, a fragile, handsome, brooding boy, who struck one pose after another, complete with British accent, German accent, so that I was never sure who he 'really' was....I know now that he was in trouble. And what he didn't need was a young woman at once so self-absorbed and so self-despising that it never occurred to her to accept responsibility for his pain, or even to credit its authenticity" (120).

Adulthood

Nancy received her BA in English from Wheaton College in 1964, and her MFA from the University of Arizona in 1975. She went on to get a Ph.D. in 1984.

When she married in 1963, she found herself completely unprepared: “The baby-faced icon of marriage beaming on us vacuously, we had no notion how to develop and work through arguments, how to reach across the fathomless rifts that would yawn without warning between us, how to ask for and offer comfort. We had measuring cups and yellow enamel saucepans in graduated sizes” (*Ordinary Time* 111). Marriage didn’t seem to be a choice, but the only option: “What I missed was the opportunity to consider single life an authentic choice. I might remain single, but I would do so only by default, as an ‘old maid,’ dedicating my shrunken life to whatever pursuits I could find to substitute, palely, for the husband and children fate had denied me. We pitied such women, the ones who for some reason failed to get a man, we didn’t revere them” (112).

After marrying George, she gave birth to Anne two years later, and then, two years after that, ended up committed to a mental institution for six months. She had become agoraphobic and unable to function without the help of her husband (reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s breakdown). Once committed, she was medicated and given electroshock therapy. She also had an affair with another patient. After this episode, she had another child, a son Matthew. She also continued to have a number of brief affairs in an attempt to fill her void. Her husband George had one prolonged affair—he knew the woman for a decade, and slept with her for two years. He didn’t tell Nancy until four years after it was over. He called it a kind of “marriage” and likely pursued the relationship because he felt his own wife was unavailable to him.

Later Life

Nancy had developed multiple-sclerosis in her late twenties. (She writes quite a bit about it – including a classic essay titled “On Being a Cripple”) She stopped having affairs, but did attempt suicide a number of times. She then converted to Catholicism. She had been raised as a Congregationalist (Protestant), and a year after her marriage she became Episcopalian. She then converted to Catholicism after attending a marriage encounter retreat with George when she was 34. Became a feminist a couple of years after that. George blamed her feminism for many of their problems. George has also suffered ill health, including three bouts of melanoma. Yet despite all the obstacles they faced, they remained together as a couple. You can find a great interview with them on PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/thoushalthonor/carefor/nancy.html>

Her major written works include her first book of poetry published in 1977 – *Instead it is Winter*

1984 – *In all the rooms of the Yellow House* – a book of poems

1986 – *Plaintext* (autobiographical essays)

1989 – *Remembering the Bone House* (essays)

1990 – *Carnal Acts* - essays

1993 – *Ordinary Time* – essays

1994: *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer*

1996 – *Waist-high in the World: A Life among the Nondisabled*

2001: *A Troubled Guest – Life and Death Stories*

2008: *A Dynamic God: Living an Unconventional Catholic Faith*