

Scarlet Letters

Number 5 October 2017



1956 50th Reunion Parade. From left to right, Pat Leahy Meaney, Rae Baldanza Lindsay, Sheila Owen Monks, Suzanne Tompkins, Caral Goodman Klein, Anne Sinnott Moore. Photo by Toni Holland Liebman.

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OCTOBER

October slides by like a brown bat,
holding in its mouth
berries of the bittersweet vine;
The seeds shine like little suns,
then drop
and strangle what is green.

Sheila Owen Monks



"The Autumn Bough" by Jean Fairgrieve Granum

Scarlet Letters Is One Year Old The Editors Speak

Scarlet Letters was inspired by a similar journal of the Wellesley Class of 1953, *Purple Prose*. Lois Burnham Pomeroy, a college friend, gave me a few issues, and I spent a while thinking of a suitable red title before coming up with this perfect name with its suggested erudition, wit, and riskiness. I had the name, but the time was not yet.

At our 60th reunion in 2015 I taught a little class on writing. The class itself was not much, held in a very noisy place, but I talked with a number of Wellesley 56ers who were already writing or who hoped to write. The moment had come, and I was in the right place. It was easy to consult with President Sally Linden and with Web Manager Toni Liebman who responded positively. I shared a meal with Sheila Monks who signed on as co-editor with special responsibility to keep grammar, syntax, and style under control. When I got home, I wrote to Jane Baker who designed our last two Record Books. I've actually never met Jane, but we have worked together over the years. She joined up. We had all the necessary pieces in place and set out to fill our eight pages.

We have now published five issues. And though we are now all old ladies, living on borrowed time, we hope to keep going for a good while yet. Please join our scarlet parade. Send us your charming essays, your accomplished poetry, your beautiful paintings. Share your creative accomplishments. Seeing your work and your name in print is good for the soul. Wellesley's Class of 1956 has a stellar record of participation and generosity. Let's increase our reputation for witty words and felicitous phrases. When you see your work in our handsome pages, you will be glad you sent it to us.

Claudia

An exciting and quite wonderful benefit of working on *Scarlet Letters* has been the connections made with other classmates. I have corresponded at length with classmates I never knew or knew only slightly at Wellesley. We all have at last come to a place where there is no longer any competition or strange-

ness, just friendship. I knew we were all fairly talented, but I had no idea that every single one of us can write, and write well. I would urge everyone not only to contribute, but also to contact any classmate whose contribution you enjoyed, whether or not you ever knew that person. We have so much more in common than not, and new friendships this late in life are not only possible, but deeply rewarding.

I've been able to travel back in my mind to our Wellesley days and visit through your stories, parts of the Wellesley experience that were never mine. I'm thinking especially of Valerie Brown Stauffer's article on staffing the *Wellesley News*. I had always thought about joining the staff but it never worked out and this gave me a taste of what it was like from an insider's point of view — very interesting!

Another fascinating piece for me has been writing our own obituaries. Thank you, Joan Ward Lasley, for the inspiration: what an interesting and useful exercise! I recently helped a non-Wellesley friend write her husband's obituary (after the fact). The funeral home was pressuring her for it and she was struggling in her exhaustion to remember everything. It was a real eye-opener to me to see how hard it is for those left behind to try to pull something together under pressure. As Joan says, by writing ours in advance, we can decide what to include and what not to include! I urge all of you who are so inclined to write one and submit it to *Scarlet Letters*. You won't be sorry!

Hello and thanks to all who have contributed and are thinking of contributing. We are a modern-day version of the Bloomsbury Group or the Algonquin Roundtable!

Sheila



from left: Jane Kentnor Dean, Ann Terry DeLuise, Claudia Lauper Bushman at a recent NYC Wellesley event

Open Letter to Classmates

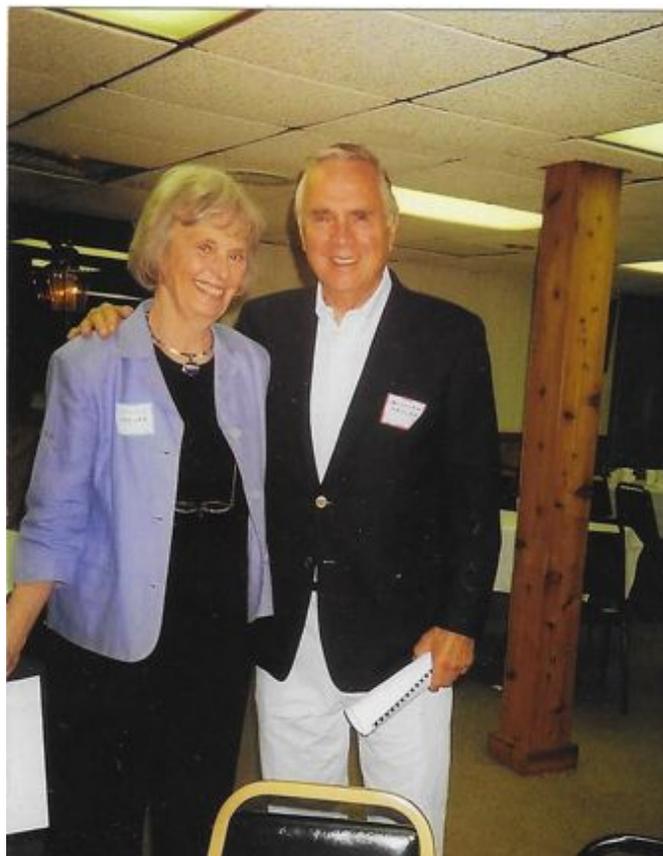
They say that we are best at writing about what we know or have known. Thus, I shall attempt to put down some of my thoughts of what it has been like becoming a widow. On May 22, 2017 I lost my partner of fifty-nine years and now am going through that process of “uncoupling.” As Jane Power Mykrantz told me several years ago, “I have gone from ‘we’ to ‘me.’ My anchor has gone.”

I’m muddling through what’s known as grief. Not an easy one and in so doing, I have begun to journal some of my thoughts. I am drawing upon times when I was once one person (not part of a couple), perhaps harkening back to my Wellesley self—a period of growth, strength, and dreams.

During the time of Bill’s death and funeral, our kids were champs. They took care of all of the arrangements with all the precision and warmth of feeling both of us wanted. I was able to treat the calling hours as a political event. I have always been good at compartmentalizing. I had done this many times before for Bill and could do it one more time. We hosted a beautiful diversity in the crowd that came to honor him and arranged posters from his political days on the walls everywhere. Unbeknownst to us, a man whom Bill had helped in a political campaign arrived from out of town with political buttons stating that Bill was a great “Democrat” and a great “Humanitarian.” All of our family members wore these buttons with pride.

For several weeks thereafter I thought that I was sailing through and that I had escaped the virus called “grief.” Probably I had been in shock; then it hit me like a ton of bricks in unexpected ways for which I was unprepared. I attended a wedding out of town and was fine until the dance music started up at the reception. I panicked! Where was he, my dance partner of so many years? I grabbed our son in desperation and danced with him and later with the father of the bride, telling his wife that I needed him more than she did, but still that really didn’t work. I wanted the one who anticipated me and my dancing, the one who really knew me.

Other peoples’ faith in me and their acts of kind-



ness have helped enormously, but the stabs of loneliness just grab you. It is often just a bar of music. Or it was the night when I came home to a half empty garage. We had agreed to sell Bill’s car but when I came home and found it no longer there it was devastating. As long as it sat there, he still might need it (like Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking*: “I could not give away his shoes, he would need [them] if he was to return.”) And so it goes. It is new. It is raw.

I received some good assurances a week or two ago when I bumped into Jane Kentnor Dean at Chautauqua, New York, by chance. After I told her my news she replied that he’ll “always be with you.” That had been her experience and I’d never be “walking alone.” Thank you to Jane and all my Wellesley classmates. I draw strength from all of you and I’m happy that I was able to share my Bill with you at so many reunions.

With love from Cecily Sesler

Housebroken by Barbara Leith: A Review

Housebroken, by Barbara Leith (2009, iUniverse, 423 pp.), is a collection of 43 of Barbara Leith's short stories, written across her writing career. *Housebroken* is like a box of chocolates for the mind, filled with short stories as varied as a Whitman sampler and of every possible flavor; most have chewy centers rather than soft ones.

Barbara paints on a very big canvas. Settings range from Shanghai, Australia, Argentina, and Paris to Miami environs, West Virginia, Kansas, Boston, and New Hampshire. The settings almost vie with characters for attention: they are acutely observed, not only visually but with the ears and touch, smell, and taste. Each setting is a microcosm into which the reader is immersed for several pages, a world that seems as compelling as one's own. These narratives are truly a feast for the senses.

The world of *Housebroken* is a man's world, but one in which women have both strategic weapons (wit) and tactical ones (sex). Protagonists are often chronicled pushing the envelope, whether of the natural order or of societal conventions, so they are testing the limits, living dangerously, playing with fire. Though characters do indeed get burned, their wounds are almost never fatal; they are prototypic survivors.

Barbara's dramatis personae seem to fall mainly into three overarching groups. First are strivers: Caucasian, educated, and upper-middle class. Not all, or even most, of these characters are kind or good. They are, however, without exception, vital, vibrant, deeply engaged, and engaging. Traits that endear them to me are that they are wide awake, struggling to make sense of their lives and their world. Second are nurturers: servants (usually Spanish, both men and women) and mothers of younger children. The servants are "the salt of the earth," gentle, faithful, fully accepting of their responsibilities as they step in for parents who have abdicated. The mothers are intuitive, empathic, deeply attuned and devoted to their children, well-springs for even difficult, sometimes frightening offspring. Third are animals: the occasional cat, some horses, but mainly dogs—emo-

tionally attuned and responsive, profoundly loyal, and offering unconditional love in ways that human characters are generally unable to summon.

Running through their astonishing variety are recurring kinds of people who make up a kind of repertory company appearing in different roles. One recurring character is the "clueless," intellectualizing male who cannot relate emotionally; another is the exasperated, frustrated woman who cannot grasp that her romantic partner's cluelessness is the obverse of his vocational success. Molly and Hank are a married couple observed at many stages of a relationship's journey, from early bonding to late middle age, alter egos for the author and her husband. "The Sisterhood" is made up of sisters not of blood but of choice, lifelong companions through life's greatest adversities and deepest trials who often know each other better than husbands or romantic partners ever will. There are wicked step-mothers who are, alas, biological mothers: aloof, detached, and finally deeply cruel. There are well-intentioned but sadly ineffectual fathers, and some fathers who are equally well-intentioned but critical and demanding, especially of sons. Another type of man who makes several appearances is the older, experienced, and seductive male with a perhaps predatory fixation on a younger, less experienced woman.

Housebroken is a book that belongs not on the cocktail table but on a family room or bedside table, where it can be sampled repeatedly. Reading *Housebroken* is something like taking a road trip through major cities and small towns, turning on the radio, and tuning it to local stations: tuning in to news, human interest stories, talk radio, all priceless chronicles of our time, and all in regional dialect.

Housebroken is available from amazon.com.

Joan Miles Oliver

Have you written a book? Do you know a classmate who has? Please let us know so that we can review the book in these pages.

The Author's Foreword to *Housebroken*

Living abroad in China and Buenos Aires as a young girl—always a stranger in a strange land—I found books to be crucially important companions. I began reading at four and have never stopped. Very early in kindergarten, I was writing plays and illustrating them. I do believe lots of writers sketch—we literally see stories first of all visually, almost like running movies in our heads. Most storytellers gather images (scraps); then we weave blindly, unsure of final shapes or outcomes. But the power of this imagery lights the way, and ultimately we SEE the story as translated into words on a page—often a clumsy reincarnation. Then our job is to enable the reader to see as well, because storytelling is a participatory art—successful fiction sets off powerful reverberations in the reader. Happy result? A magical fusion takes place: the writer provides the raw materials, always careful to leave room for the reader's own idiosyncratic memories, imagination, dreams, emotions to conjoin with the author's. The reader is very much part of the creative equation. Good fiction is not a solo. Good fiction is a duet! And together we create imaginary worlds. No author ever writes the heart of the matter, the only one who can do that is the reader.

Much of my material comes from dreams. Eight stories in this collection are fantasies, drawn straight from dreaming. Often I write them first as poems, then re-calibrate as stories. Whatever form these dreams may take, disentangling the hidden conflicts of the heart remains the core enigma in my "real" and imaginary life. As E. M. Forster puts it: "Fiction reveals the hidden life at its source. It makes the invisible secrets of life as it is lived visible."—this is the writer's primary task. Equally important to me is to make sure emotional truth undergirds the content of each individual story. It constitutes my own personal and professional goal in writing fiction.

My deepest thanks to Townley Budde and Melanie Owens for their extraordinary help in bringing this book to fruition.

Barbara Roberts Leith

This imaginary dialogue recalls the relationship between Matt Cat and her boy, Bee's son, Matt Leith.

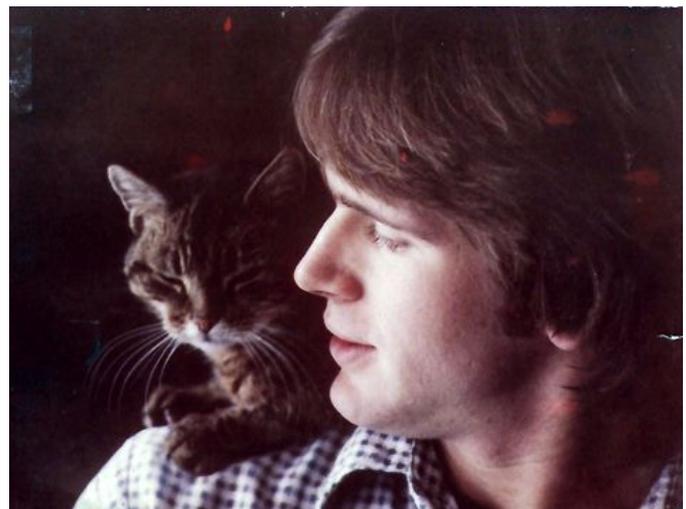
COUNTERPOINT MATT CAT'S FAREWELL

"If only she could have waited,"
I waited as long as I could,
"just one week until he came home,"
I wait for him now near the woods.
"so he could have told her goodbye."
I loved him because he was good.

"We buried her near the big oak,"
He loved me because I was wise.
"out by the woods in the clearing,"
I saw through his childish disguise;
"where small boys used to play war."
he saw his true self through my eyes.

"If only she could have waited,"
That noble man I helped him see,
"just one week until he came home,"
shall soon kneel here to weep for me
"so he could have told her goodbye."
and mourn that boy he used to be.

Bee Leith (1980)



Scarlet Letters offers this ongoing series of documents for the benefit of classmates. These documents can be prepared in advance of their need and revised annually on birthdays.

Advance Draft for Obituary of Jean Fairgrieve Granum

Jean Fairgrieve Granum, age (), died on (). She leaves behind her children, Audrey Swensen Phillips (Michael) and Robert Campbell Swensen (Lena), and her grandchildren Connor Michael Phillips, Mackenzie Lynn Phillips, Haley Elizabeth Phillips, Daniel John Swensen, Amber Nadira Swensen, and Claire Jayana Swensen, and her many friends. She was predeceased by her son James Fairgrieve Swensen (Orna) and her husbands Robert Denis Swensen and Bradford Simley Granum.

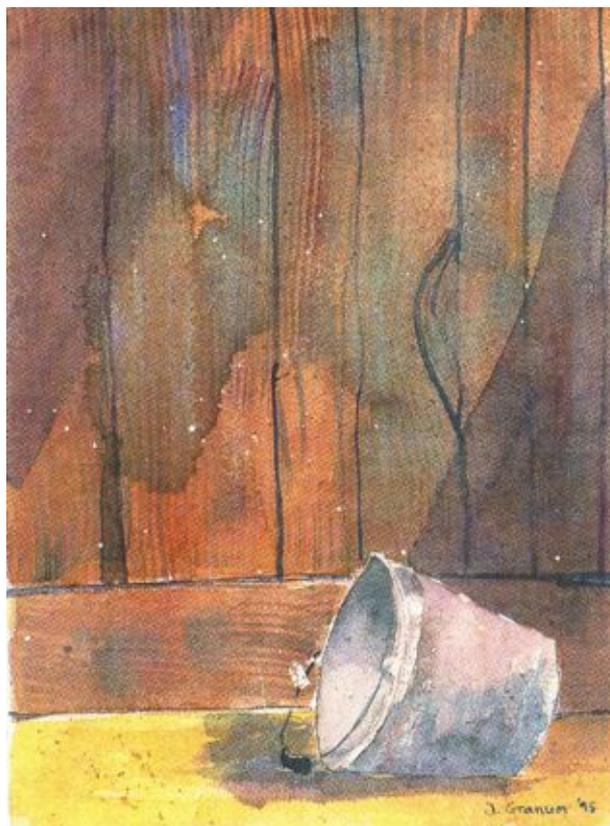
Jean was born in Montclair, New Jersey, to James and Helen Fairgrieve. She graduated from the Kimberley School in 1952, from Wellesley College with a B.A. in English Literature in 1956, and from Simmons College with an M.L.A. in Library Science in 1960. She worked in the New York City Public Library system as a children's librarian, heading the Nathan Strauss Children's Room, and as a storyteller.

After her marriage to Robert Swensen, she moved to Washington D.C., where she raised her three children and worked as a substitute librarian in the Montgomery County Public Library System, primarily as a substitute librarian but also as head of the Bethesda Library on Sundays. She was a volunteer at Bethesda Help, a docent at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and a Stephen Minister at the Potomac Presbyterian Church. After Robert's death, she married Bradford Granum. Always an avid and eclectic reader, she developed two elementary school libraries, one in Mineola, Long Island, and one in Potomac, Maryland.

Known for her watercolor paintings, Jean made cards from them to send to her friends.

In lieu of flowers, a donation may be made

in Jean's name to the Potomac Presbyterian Church, Wellesley College, or a charity of your choice.



"The Bucket" by Jean Fairgrieve



Jean Fairgrieve Granum

SAND-BAGGING

In failing light
We sit silent
In the living room,
Companionate,
Too spent perhaps to do more,
Too much love between us to be less.
The silence is effortless, like
Breathing.

You've seen sand-bagging, but
No one talks of its pain.
It's back-breaking labor,
And if, in age, as in mine
Your back is already broken, a
Myriad tiny fissures snaking
Like spider veins through
What was bone, the pain
Could be called exquisite.

You who do not live here, who
Do not know us, will say
We built on flood plain.
We did not.
We built on hillcrest, but
The water came up to seek us,
Floating, then flooding, then
Lapping at our door.

They say
One takes one's past with one
Wherever and however one goes.
What would we take?
Everything here is old,
Threadbare, worn to the bone, yet they are our
Treasures, everything
Saturated by rising tides of feeling—
Not least of which is that, without being
Asked, he stays.

The fireflies flit and flicker
outside in the gloaming.
Today we have spent sand-bagging, and today
Between us
We have beaten the river back for
One more day.

Joan Miles Oliver

Non-Violence and Hard-Boiled Eggs

Posted on Judy's blog <http://Touch2Touch.Wordpress.com> June 5, 2013

I make really good egg salad. Which, of course, starts with hard-boiled eggs. When my egg salad comes to the table, it looks great, usually in its blue-and-white Chinese bowl, maybe some thin-sliced radishes adorning it, maybe nothing at all, just pure yellow and white.

My hard-boiled eggs in the kitchen, on the other hand, look horrible: they're battered and broken, gouged and clawed—and this is one of the better looking ones! Usually by the time I'm finished, chunks of egg white mingle with shards of shell, and the resulting egg had BETTER go into egg salad, because it isn't fit for anything else.

Until—

Until one morning, looking at three mangled eggs, the penny dropped at last. THIS is what violence is. Slamming the egg because it's unresponsive to my wishes. Because the shell won't fly off, it won't peel in a hurry, it resists my will. I want it done NOW, so I'm impatient, I'm angry, I'm rough, I'm harsh. I, me, mine. What I want MUST be done NOW. Or else.

My violent impulses show themselves in other ways, often in a good cause! I flossed my teeth so roughly that the floss cut my finger and made my gums bleed. When I walked in the gym, I walked so vigorously I walked myself into a heel spur. I lifted weights so vehemently I strained my rotator cuff.

You want to laugh? You should see cereal boxes after I've opened them. My "rip and tear" method leaves a jagged opening out of which a spray of muesli showers and precipitates a tiny burst of annoyance—read, anger—every morning. Every morning! Anger at myself as well as at the cereal box. What I realized in that morning's quick flash of enlightenment is that violence is violence. On any scale, in any dimension—ripping open a letter, slamming a door, gunning the car at a light (hey, they use that verb for a reason)—it's all one. However cozy and miniature

(continued on next page)



the scale, this is the same ego that drives criminals to value their own will above anyone or anything else's existence. The distance from gunning the car to road rage to slapping a whiny child to blowing the head off an infuriating neighbor is shorter than we think.

So what is the antidote? Non-violence, what Mohandas Gandhi called *ahimsa*, which I realize I never understood before. Violence is in the human heart; therefore it can only be subdued in the human heart. And never by violence. It can be subdued by *time*, by taking time: when I am less hurried I am more able to think, to be master of myself rather than servant.

It can be subdued by *patience*. Not being impatient with myself, not getting angry with myself is a place to start. Choosing the way that is gentler, having compassion on myself AND on the eggs, those are good places to start. And then—Surprise! Surprise! Egg shells seem to peel themselves off, things fall into place as of their own volition once I allow them to. So the way of non-violence turns out also to be the way of efficiency.

So funny! Can I do this all the time? Of course not. But the more I do it, the better I get at it. I really have to laugh at myself: *Gandhi-ji*, I come to you late, but far better late than never. *Namaste!*

Judith Mandell Bruder

Some Last Words from Gizella (Gigi) Parrish Callender

As some of you know, my mother, Gizella (Gigi) Parrish Callender, died suddenly on February 15 in a car accident. It has left my sisters and me empty and sad for a mother FULL of love and life. We were truly blessed with her love for her girls.

Mom loved to read and write and collect names of books and loved to document anything. I am fortunate to have some of her journals documenting her trips, her journeys, her favorite recipes (or the ones she wanted to try!), and sayings/verses. I was not aware of how much she would document something she read from a poet, a historian, or just someone. I found a poem she wrote or copied in 1999 called "Women." She does not name the writer, so my apologies if you have already read this somewhere. This poem says a lot about our mom.

WOMEN

They smile when they want to scream.
They sing when they want to cry.
They cry when they are happy and laugh when they are nervous.

They fight for what they believe in
They stand up for justice.
They don't take 'no' for an answer when they believe there is a better solution.

They go without shoes so their children can have them.
They go to the doctor with a frightened friend.
They love unconditionally.

They cry when their children excel and cheer when their friends win awards.
They are happy when they hear about a birth or marriage.

Their hearts break when a friend dies.
They have sorrow at the loss of a family member
yet they are strong when they think there is no strength left.

They know that a hug and a kiss can heal a broken heart.

Women come in all sizes, in all colors and shapes.
They'll drive, fly, walk, run or e-mail you to show how much they care about you.
The heart of a woman is what makes the world spin.

*Scribed by her oldest daughter,
Gizella Anne Crawford*