



Good on Paper

BARBARA LUBIN GOLDSMITH '53

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD HOWARD

EXCERPTED FROM AN INTERVIEW BY SARAH LIGON '03

I had written before I ever went to Wellesley. I just loved to write. But I did not think my freshman English class was very productive, so I went to the famous [class dean] Jeanette McPherrin in tears and said, "I just can't be an English major. I'm going to lose my voice. I'm not quite 18, but I know one thing and that is when I write, it's in my voice. It's a unique voice, and I don't want to write properly and be rapped over the knuckles every time I deviate from the norm."

So I ended up as an art-history major, and in that way, when I came out of Wellesley, I not only felt I still could have a voice, but then I got a job at *Art News*. The two things just clicked beautifully, because I loved art, and I was given a job to write about it.

That was in the '50s, '60s, and I knew all these artists very, very well, because I was writing about them. Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg, Johns, Marcel Breuer, I.M. Pei, Picasso. You know you've hit the right job when it isn't like a job.

My first book about the art world, *The Straw Man*, was fiction, because I felt it would hurt a lot of people if I used their real names. Truman Capote wrote that it's one of the best fictions that he'd read—"if it is fiction." And so my second book was my first nonfiction book.

If you're writing nonfiction, as I do, you have to research like crazy. It's the stuff you do not use that informs the book. You should throw away 99 percent for the one thing that catches. For example, in *Little Gloria ... Happy at Last*, I wrote that when Cornelius Vanderbilt was dying, they emptied every stable in New York and put the chips all over Fifth Avenue so he wouldn't hear the vehicles rolling by under his window as he died. Then they closed the stock market for four days because he was the richest man in America, and the markets went into turmoil. That's a good detail, but then you say that he left a \$100 million fortune when Civil War veterans were getting \$4 a month, and it puts that detail into perspective.

Every book I write takes a historical period and brings it to life, and then I get one character that's usually like the locomotive that pulls the whole train of all this history. So a book like *Other Powers* tells you everything you need to know about the women's movement from Seneca Falls on down through the life of one person: Victoria Woodhull.

I would like to spend all my time writing, but I do feel the imperative of helping, and that came from my family, which was very philanthropic. My dad was like a Horatio Alger story. He was an impoverished kid from the Lower East Side, and by 40, he was chairman of the board of Pepsi-Cola. He believed in a kind of quid pro quo, that if you have it, you have to give back.

And he had a little sign over his desk that read: "When the committees are through, do it yourself." That was what I thought when I did this campaign for permanent paper. It cost the same as paper that deteriorated in 30 years, but it lasted 300 years. And I thought, "Why wasn't someone getting publishers and writers aware of this?"

So I was the head of the committee that got \$20 million a year for the National Endowment for the Humanities to continue this work, and also helped pass a law requiring that all government documents of any value now be printed on acid-free paper. But it has taken years and years and years. You can imagine what it took to get that \$20 million from the government. We would go down to Washington with famous writers—Arthur Miller and Joseph Brodsky—and wake up the senators who were sitting there reading their *Washington Post*.

Another example is that I started the PEN Freedom to Write prize that went to somebody who had disappeared, was in jail, or was persecuted because of his or her writing. And then I contacted all the media and said, "I want you to come to this dinner. I want you to write it up. I want a big spotlight on this." And they all accommodated. Now with the Freedom to Write prize, we have had 39 winners, and 36 of them got out [of prison] within four months, or were rediscovered and then got out, or were shipped out of the hospital they were dying in. It's saving lives and saving paper.

If you have a passion, you are very, very lucky. And if you don't, you should try everything until you hit on something that you know should belong to you. I have a passion for writing, and I have a passion for not seeing our cultural heritage, as Orwell said, go down the "memory hole." It could do that if people don't honor the past.

Sarah Ligon '03 is a writer and editor living in Edmonton, Canada.

In Short:

Barbara Lubin Goldsmith '53

Award-winning author: *Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie*; *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*; *Little Gloria ... Happy at Last*; and others

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Cofounder of *New York* magazine, senior editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, and writer for the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and *Vanity Fair*

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Founder of the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award

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Successfully lobbied for the adoption of acid-free paper as a publishing standard and for the passage of the US Permanent Paper Law

❖
Philanthropist who has endowed conservation facilities at the New York Public Library, Wellesley, and other institutions