

Nancy K. Miller on her latest book

BREATHLESS

The Author And The Book...

Breathless is a memoir about the years I spent in Paris during the 1960s, just before the cultural upheaval that led to May 1968. The girl I was then had been a French major in college and was enamored of all things French. She hoped that living in France would let her escape her destiny as a nice-Jewish-girl on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She wanted to become someone else, someone sophisticated and glamorous like the heroines of French movies. Things didn't work out that way. After various romantic misadventures, including a disastrous first marriage, she ultimately returned to New York—sadder but also wiser, ready to reinvent herself as a native rather than an ex-pat.

Inspiration Behind The Book...

I wrote Breathless after finishing a family memoir called What They Saved. My research for that book took me to Moldova, Ukraine, Israel, Canada, Tennessee and Arizona. The process of tracing my grandparents' journey from Russia to the United States in the early twentieth century made me think more about what else had had made me who I was. The question led me to examine a crucial period in my own life—the decade of my twenties, when I moved from New York to Paris, hoping never to return. With the help of letters, photographs, and diaries, I did research on my past self. I wasn't a real immigrant, of course, but I realized that the years in Paris had profoundly shaped my identity, my idea of myself.

The Central Flavor Of The Book...

You never get over your first love, whether it's a person or a place.

I'll always have Paris, even if I never live there again. I have never gotten over the roller-coaster of emotions that characterized those Paris years. Perhaps readers would be moved by my story to revisit the experiences that turned out to be formative for them in their youth, especially love stories, joyful or sad, and the places to which they are attached in memory.

What does traveling means to you and why you do it?

When I was young, traveling was at once an exploration of new worlds and an adventure in self-discovery. I marveled at how different the simplest things could be—how to hold your knife and fork—and at the same time, how similar: wanting coffee in the morning, or a drink in the evening.

But now traveling has a different function. I'm mainly eager to forget about myself. I know myself too well. What excites me is the possibility of getting lost. I don't mean literally not finding the way—though that can be good too—but shedding my daily thought patterns and changing my rhythms, getting rid of me. When I walk in a city with a scale different from New York—London, for instance, where the low buildings mean that you always see the immensity of the sky—I forget my “to do” list. Or more dramatically, when I find myself in a different culture—the insanely busy streets of Hanoi that you cross at your peril—it becomes almost impossible to remember who I am, what my problems are. Instead I become avid to see everything, eat what I've never tasted, feel a different climate on my skin. No matter how tiring travel can be (having to endure

the indignities of the airport, for one), the thrill of newness and the jolt of the unfamiliar are ways to create a new set of memories to lay over the old ones, reset the brainwaves.

