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If Norman Lear at 92 Is What 92 Is, I'll Have What He's Having



By Marty Kaplan

It is not widely known that Norman Lear and I have the same mother.

Norman once called his mother in Bridgeport, Conn., and said, "Mother, I just got this call. The Television Academy is forming a Hall of Fame. And the first inductees are going to be General Sarnoff and Edward R. Murrow and William Paley and Milton Berle and Paddy Chayefsky and Lucille Ball — and me."

There was about a two-second beat, and she said, "Listen, if that's what they want to do, who am I to say?"

My brother and I once sent our parents a silver bowl from Tiffany's, engraved, "For our Mom and Dad on their Silver Wedding Anniversary. With Love from David and Martin." We didn't hear anything, so I called.

"Mom, did a package come for you and Dad?"

"Yes, son, it did."

"I hope you like it. Jill helped us pick it out."

Jill was my college roommate's girlfriend, who lived in New York. I didn't know from Tiffany silver bowls, except that this was the best present my brother and I could think of to make them feel special. I had asked Jill, who did know from such things, to go to Tiffany's and tell me the classiest bowl we could afford.

"Do you like it, Mom?"



There was about a two-second beat, and she said, “Listen, I’m sure Jill’s parents would know how to appreciate it.”

When I heard Norman tell that story about his mother, I was thrilled to find out I’m not the only kid who grew up thinking that sado-narcissism is normal motherly love. My father, unlike Norman’s, did not go to jail. But when Norman tells how a 9-year old feels when his father is sent to prison for three years for fraud, those feelings are mine.

Over the past few weeks, for many hours a day, aloud, Norman has been telling painful, hilarious stories about our (OK, his) mother and father, and about many others in his life, from Frank Sinatra and Mary Hartman to Jerry Falwell and Maya Angelou. He’s just finished recording the audio version of his autobiography, which is coming out in October. Its title is *Even This I Get to Experience*, a sentiment he’s considered engraving on his tombstone.

A guy who’d say that is a guy who doesn’t forget to savor life. Norman turns 92 on Sunday, and today he’s as creative, smart, busy and passionate as ever. If that’s what 92 looks like — it’s also what the indefatigable Deborah Szekely turned in May — then I’ll have what they’re having.

Whether you read or listen to it, you will love Norman Lear’s book. It’s beautiful writing, rich and raw. He’s a gifted storyteller, and he’s led a helluva life. I know: You’d expect me to say something like that. So full disclosure: I love Norman Lear. (For a second opinion: Kirkus — the publishing industry’s pre-publication tip sheet — also loves him; they just gave him a starred review, the best they can award, calling the book “engrossing and entertaining,” a “bighearted, richly detailed chronicle of comedy, commitment and a long life lived fully.”)

Some people, however, do not love Norman Lear. His liberalism and iconoclasm long ago made him a *bête noire* of the right: Richard Nixon put him on his enemies list. Today he makes Rush Limbaugh and Fox News sputter and rant. (He often listens to Rush in the car, one master entertainer sizing up another’s shtick.)

But Norman’s book, like his life, is as patriotic as the Fourth of July. Who knew that he flew more than 50 bombing missions in World War II? For *I Love Liberty*, a 1982 two-hour ABC special, he got Barry Goldwater, John Wayne and Jane Fonda onto the same stage. In 2011, Nancy Reagan asked him to accompany her to the Republican presidential debate at the Ronald Reagan Library. He bought a copy of the Declaration of Independence made the night of July 4, 1776. He thought people shouldn’t have to travel to see their country’s birth certificate — it should travel to see them — so he put it on a nine-year tour to all 50 states. He loves America, he has often said, like his grandfather — who regularly wrote letters to the White House beginning “My dearest darling Mr. President” — loved Roosevelt. (In the book, he says that letter story is actually about someone else’s grandfather, and cops to appropriating it.)

Though I spoke to Norman on the phone a couple of times when I worked in the Carter White House, I first met him in the flesh at a big black tie New Year’s Eve party at the home of *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee and his wife, writer Sally Quinn. I was at the party solo. At midnight, as everyone kissed

and toasted 1984, I found myself standing next to Norman, who seemed to be the only other person who had come alone. Without a word between us, to the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*, we fell into each other's arms. Norman kissed me on the lips. I wiped a tear from my cheek. We hugged. He looked deep into my eyes for a two-second beat, and he said, "Listen, I don't want to hurt you, but you know this can't go on." (OK, I cop to adding that "listen.")

I didn't know three things at that moment. One was that just a few hours earlier, at my Mondale campaign desk, I had met for the first time the future mother of my children. Another was that Norman would become my blood brother and soul mate. The third was that he was as miserably sad that New Year's Eve as he'd ever been in his life. I was oblivious of that until I read his pages about his marriage to Frances Lear. In the manuscript, when he wrote about that night, I wasn't even in the story.

Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Norman's book captures the bittersweet comedy of hindsight insight, the way life forces us to revise the running Story of Me we're always telling ourselves in order to make its twists and turns keep making sense. We're lucky Mr. Lear waited to write the Book of Norman until he had so much life to understand backwards.

I can't wait to find out what he's figured out when he's 120.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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