

BOOKS

AUTHOR PROFILE | NINA BARRAGAN

More than a memoir

Nina Barragan proves she is much more than just a 'Printmaker's Daughter, Painter's Wife'

By Laura Farmer, correspondent

Iowa City author Nina Barragan (the pen name of Rocio Lasansky Weinstein) has lived an exciting life, calling numerous countries home while she and her husband, artist Alan Weinstein, pursued their art and followed their dreams.

After publishing three works of fiction, Barragan has recently written a carefully constructed memoir, "Printmaker's Daughter, Painter's Wife," that juxtaposes various personal experiences while also weaving in a few short fiction pieces, demonstrating how life often informs art.

Barragan recently answered a few questions about coming from a family of artists and the importance of maintaining a positive attitude.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Q. How would you describe this book?

A. "Printmaker's Daughter, Painter's Wife" is a work of fusion that moves beyond memoir to become a juggling act of reality and imagination. The narrative travels through melded panoramas of past and present, this country, the others, certainties, doubts and the inner workings of a large family. I hope the inserts of fiction — revealing ties between life and writing — deepen the journey.

Q. Each chapter in your memoir is set in a different time period and geographic location. How did you decide on which moments to

include, and in what order?

A. I first had to decide on the book's anchor. I landed on one day in Iowa City, April 4, 2009, and a visit to my elderly, failing parents. During that visit, realities and memories became springboards to youth and a year of early married life on the Mediterranean island of Ibiza. That April day became the ballast, and the encounter with Ibiza shaped the chronicle of the book. The order of the moments evolved organically. Everything flowed so naturally, this book seemed to write itself over a three-year period.

Q. You write about a number of "pioneering adventures," from summers in a rambling property in Maine with no running water or electricity, to living in a rustic finca in Ibiza for over a year. You seem to approach these situations with joy and a sense of adventure. How did you channel that positive attitude, and how has that attitude impacted other areas of your life?

A. You mention Maine. The summer place of our youth, Vinalhaven's original "Poor Farm," was a Cape Cod farmhouse with an attached dormitory structure. Each of the dormitory's 16 bedrooms had a window and a small cast iron stove. Though there was no electricity or running water when it first came into our young lives, the "Poor Farm" provided us with space and privacy to develop our interests. (My siblings and I were each assigned our own work rooms.) Those summer experiences strengthened our



Iowa City author Nina Barragan's latest book, "Printmaker's Daughter, Painter's Wife," is part memoir, part fiction, demonstrating how life often informs art. Barragan is the pen name Rocio Lasansky Weinstein uses. (Nina Barragan)

instinctive understandings of what was important, and what wasn't.

To answer your question about a sense of adventure and a positive attitude, yes, I've always veered toward a fundamental simplicity. A kind of 'less is more,' except when it comes to art and literature. What I consider superfluous is left by the wayside; what I can't have, I don't want. The reflex to identify as first generation has been a close companion. I'm a saver and recycler of just about everything, from the necessities of life to emotions and words. I enjoy the energizing reality of independence, of making do and being resourceful; it fuels my self-confidence, makes me happy and gives me the peace to write.

Q. Family history is very important to you, and

through your research you uncovered a number of delicate stories, including information about the death of your paternal grandfather and uncle. Why is it important for you to understand and speak about your family history?

A. During my youth, it wasn't often that our extended family or our family history were the focus of attention or conversation. I was always looking to bring them into the light, to understand and decide their value for myself. I needed to relate to more than my present. By knowing and understanding family history, I can attempt to safeguard the positive and not perpetuate the negative. As the saying goes: Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it.

Q. One of the themes I noticed in your book is photographs: Who in your family keeps them, who displays them — and who keeps them tucked away. What is your relationship to photographs? Do you regret taking them or not taking enough?

A. I touch on the importance of memory in the book. Like memories, photographs, especially family images, capture moments in time and place. Sheltering us under protective canopies that span ancestors to grandchildren, our origins are secured as we proceed — links in the chain, and as independent entities. I mention in the book that I'm sorry not to have had a camera on Ibiza. (We didn't want to appear like tourists.) Because we have few photos of that significant time, my memory and imagination had to work overtime for this book. It was a terrific exercise having

to dig and dig until a moment or scene presented itself.

Q. You are the daughter of printmaker Mauricio Lasansky and the wife of artist Alan Weinstein, as you cleverly acknowledge in your book's title. In your memoir you state that "the challenge of printmaker's daughter, painter's wife, was mine alone to embrace and deconstruct." Can you tell me a little about how you navigated this role while also building a writing career for yourself?

A. I've been a writer all my life, but I was never involved in 'building' a writing career. As a daughter, wife, mother of four and, for almost 25 years, synagogue administrator, I'd like to say I didn't have time. But in truth, I believe it has more to do with my reticent personality and that I never felt 'making connections' was urgent — not very farsighted on my part. Creating the time to write called for ongoing focus, organization and an attention to priorities. Alan and I were partners in every sense of the word. Together we raised four children, together we managed the necessities, together we carried on with our independent, creative lives. Privacy and work time were always respected, never questioned. I think we've both been incredibly fortunate.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. Fiction! New stories, and I'm considering reworking my unpublished novel. Segments of it appear in "Printmaker's Daughter, Painter's Wife." Working on this memoir has been liberating. I feel free to move on. There's still a great deal to write about.

