

Q&A With Diana M. Raab

Q. What inspired you to write this book?

A. My diagnosis with breast cancer set me on a journey into my past. I suppose I began missing my late grandmother and wanted to somehow connect with her.

Q. Are you a lot like your grandmother?

A. People who knew her say that we were similar in many ways. I've been told that we look alike, love dancing, have a passion for learning - and of course, our shared passion for journaling.

Q. What did you learn from your grandmother?

A. The necessity of healthy passions and to journal during difficult times.

Q. What childhood event had the most impact on your life?

A. I believe there were two events that had a huge impact on my life, and the first one led to the second one. The first event was my grandmother's suicide, the second was receiving my first journal.

It was just a few months after my 10th birthday, and my grandmother was watching me. At ten o'clock in the morning, I knocked on her bedroom door, but there was no answer. My grandmother was usually up at the crack of dawn, so with a child's intuition, I sensed something was wrong. I phoned my mother to come home, and within moments my grandmother was taken away in an ambulance. The next day I found out she would never be back. I felt a huge sense of abandonment.

Being an only child only magnified my fears of being abandoned, particularly because I didn't have any siblings with whom I could validate my concerns. For quite some time I was unable to get close to others because I feared they would also leave me. I still think that fear of abandonment has never completely left me.

Just after my grandmother died, my mother gave me my first journal. My journal became my best friend, and I told it everything. This daily writing ritual had a huge impact on my life in that it set the stage for my future as a professional writer.

Q. Why did you specifically decide to look into your grandmother's journal again while going through your bout of depression?

A. In 2001, just after 9/11 and only a few months after my diagnosis with breast cancer, I was accepted into graduate school for my MFA in Writing. Receiving my master's degree had always been a dream of mine, and my breast cancer diagnosis prompted me to make this dream come true. It made me realize how fragile and short life can be, and that there's no time like the present to live out our dreams.

Around that time I succumbed to my first real bout with depression. Losing a breast is a huge physical and psychological loss for a woman. I began reflecting on the other

losses in my life, including the loss of my father and the loss of my grandmother nearly 40 years before.

My depression led to some suicidal thoughts and that drove me to reread my grandmother's journal. I learned that she also suffered from years of depression. I wanted to understand why she took her life at the age of sixty-one.

To fulfill the requirements for my graduate thesis I had to draft a 75-page piece of non-fiction. Afraid of the same fate as my grandmother, I wanted to study her life and depression, in order to come to grips with my own demons. This study became the basis for my MFA and the beginnings of **Regina's Closet**.

Q. What did you learn about your family's history as a result of reading the journal?

A. I knew that my grandmother was orphaned during World War I at the age of twelve, but I had no idea as to the extent of the horrors she'd witnessed. Researching her life and painting the historical backdrop to WW I, helped me examine my own life from a different perspective.

Q. What are the most surprising discoveries you made about your grandmother as a result of reading her journal?

A. The most surprising discoveries were the horrors she witnessed as a young spirited girl, her independent sensibilities, her love of writing and reading, love of medicine, her love of learning and her nurturing sensibilities. The parallels in our values and lives were amazingly similar.

Q. Are there any messages that you are trying to give to your readers via your book?

A. My message is to convey the importance of journaling - not only to share stories across the generations, but also to be used as a healthy and cathartic measure during difficult times. Journaling can be incorporated into the lives of both the young and old.

Q. If you could ask your grandmother any questions about her life after reading through her journal, what would they be?

- What internal forces pulled you through the difficult times in your life?
- Why did you marry my grandfather?
- Did your husband ever raise his voice or hand to you?
- Were you faithful to your husband?
- Why did you only have one child?
- What was my mother like as a child?
- Were you disappointed that your daughter did not want to go into medicine like you wanted her to?
- What role (if any) did religion play in your life?
- If there was anything you could change about how you lived your life, what would it be?

Q. What artifacts or mementos do you have of your grandmother?

A. My office shelves are lined with a collection of old typewriters that remind me of her old Remington on which she taught me to type. I also keep a photograph of my grandmother on my desk. I have her magnifying glass, and some years ago, I was able to locate her perfume at an antique dealer in London. I also had her favorite ring replicated.

Q. What was the most difficult part about writing this book?

A. Deciding how to organize all the material. In addition to the journal, I found many other pertinent documents that I wanted to include in the book. It was also challenging to weave my life into hers and to rely on my memory to describe our relationship.

Q. What advice do you have for those looking for answers about their future by delving into their families' past?

A. Ask yourself which issues you are interested in studying about your family. What questions do you have? What do you want to solve? Interview family members by starting with the older folks. You might not immediately use the material, but at least you'll have it, and can file it away until you're ready to use it. When they're gone it will be too late to ask questions, and you will be happy to have taken notes while you could!