AN ACCIDENTAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

If I had not been asked to review Barbara Grizutti Harrison's An Accidental Autobiography, I might have bowed out. From the get-go the tone shifts between being academic to sarcastic to tabloid confessional. At times it is overindulgent and haphazard (on page 52 Harrison calls Elias Canetti an Italian novelist: He is a Bulgarian Nobel Prize Winner who wrote in German!). Often, I had to check back to determine if I was reading Harrison's own words, or if she was paraphrasing or quoting someone else's. But--on about page 95--I caught her peculiar humor and found I was no longer pushing but was being pulled by her story. The remainder of ...Autobiography was eccentric, sassy and entertaining.

The book is not structured chronologically but alphabetically by topics beginning with Breathing Lessons, and ending with Swimming Lessons. Readers get an immediate feel for the precocious young Harrison girl who is at odds with a mother who spoons out cod liver oil, who proselytizes for the Jehovah's and who "slept in my bedroom but could not bear to touch my flesh." Her father is a mysteriously abusive man who at one point attempts to kill Harrison.

The author's parents are children of Italian immigrants; they live in Brooklyn. Harrison notes: "I have never lived with people who were in love" and "In the home of my family, I was not safe." Little that is obvious about Italian culture seeps through the parents to Harrison. She experiences it by food--"Grandma's gravy." And Italianness as food reappears throughout the memoir in the lists that Harrison is so fond of writing: "...Parmigiano Reggiano, wild mushroom ravioli, basil baguette loaves, prosciutto di Parma, broccoli di rape..."
A curious link exists between food, Harrison's body, and her yearning for "the buoyant Italian greed for experiencing deeply, everything in a roaring way." Harrison loves food. "It is also the agent of my destruction," she writes.

Harrison has successfully "wreathed and shrouded her body in fat" and abundantly writes about eating, overeating, her big "tits," and her acceptance of immensity. The reader gets the impression that her long, long sentences and the longer lists that she indulges in coincide with her love of food and the mouth. This is both funny and painful: When her mother dies, she writes: "I forgot how to eat."

The book's core, and humor, is the contradiction of Harrison's "loving something that can hurt you." This is depicted in her relationship with her parents, food, the Jehovah Witness Cult, a black Jazzman, and an alcoholic Irish lover. In fact, duality colors most all of what she reports. Readers witness her battles between pleasure and pain, fear and hate, angels and devils. She is a wife to a man she doesn't love.

The man she does love is married--and a Jesuit friend assures her that their love is not adulterous. She loves Jazzman, a black musician. Harrison and Jazzman take up with each other once when she is a young, virginal woman and again when she is menopausal. Both times they engage in a passionate and fiery affair that heals both of them. Then, "he leaves me...or I leave him. It doesn't matter," she writes.

Repetitively, and with self deprecation, the author calls herself a freak, an oddball, an outsider. She says of herself as a teenager, "I was very smart and I was very strange." When she travels to Africa, India, Guatemala, and Italy this quality serves her observations.

What Harrison doesn't include in ...Autobiography is much information about her career as a journalist. Too, we certainly find out a lot about the men in her life--including her fornication--but we know little of the women who are important to her, besides the mother.
At biography's end we are left knowing a rather outlandish and intensely verbal woman who has a strong grip on herself and runs with her curiosity, intelligence, and sexuality. She writes that she has never tried to be ordinary, that her life is rich, that God eventually granted her a certain peace, and that her children are tender and bright. She loves the child she was and the 60 year old woman that she is, who still has her passion and wants "everything and more."

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