

24. A Mum's Book?

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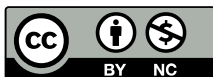
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

24. A Mum's Book?

A strange coincidence struck me as I sat in the garden one Sunday afternoon, pondering the impact of Danny on Norah's life. My younger daughter was tanning herself in the unexpectedly strong April sun whilst revising for her French GCSE. Her elder sister, home from university, was reading in the shade, next to her dozing grandma, an erstwhile sun-worshipper now unexpectedly sensitive to UV light. It will sound contrived, but it is absolutely true.

It has taken me a long time to finish this book, and my girls, aged six and nine when Norah died, eleven and fourteen when I began to write, are now a lot older. The youngest, sixteen that particular week, was exactly the age that Norah was when she began corresponding with Jim.

We've long laughed about the likeness between the two of them.

'Look at you two, peas in a pod!' we'd say, as Maddy the toddler clambered onto Norah's lap or, as a little girl, sat drawing at her feet, while her great-great-aunt stroked her hair.

'Poor little thing!' Norah would reply, clearly pleased. The dimples and the easy smile. The deceptive hint of shyness in their blue eyes. And now, the love of glamour and fashion. (The dimples. A recent chat-up on Snapchat from a boy at school: Hey dimples.)

The coincidence is this: at Easter 1941, just as Norah turned sixteen, Marsie was fifty-three, the same age as me, almost to the day. Had she known what would happen, she wouldn't have welcomed Danny into her home and her daughter's life. But when he came to Donington rather than meeting Norah in town, she didn't think twice about offering him a bed for the night. He was another mother's son, a brave airman and a Biblical stranger – and a lovely young man, handsome and polite.

Marsie enjoyed Norah's burgeoning affair. She was keen to see her daughter make a good match. Marriage and children were everything and a man who would treat his wife well and provide for his family was

the only route to a comfortable and happy life. Danny seemed to fit the bill. But she wanted Norah to take it more steadily and especially to not *have to get married*, to not be in the family way when she walked down that aisle, to have more choices in life than that would allow. And she could see already that it would be a battle. Norah was so passionate and headstrong, so swayed by romantic gestures and that awful Hollywood glamour, so set on throwing herself headlong into being 'modern'. Romance: Marsie distrusted it, found it so infantile. But the young, they pursued it like it was a new religion, the very foundation of life. How could she rein her in?

I'm interested in what Marsie could have done, so that Norah was less vulnerable to the kind of men that Danny and Jim turned out to be, but when I start to vocalise my thoughts, the girls quickly complain. Write your own book, they say, we've got revision to do/our own stuff to read.

Instead, my mum chips in. She thinks Norah should have known. Danny disappeared for months on end; clearly he was leading her a merry dance. Maybe she chose not to see what was going on. He was a man with prospects and she was so set on moving up in life ('that school' etc.). 'And it seems like she never got over him, let him affect the rest of her life'. A pause. 'Everybody has their heart broken some time. The rest of us bounce back, just get on with it. But not Norah, oh no'. It sometimes seems that my mum responds to Norah's love affair with Danny in the light of her later-life relationship with the aunt who seemed to have it all: elegant clothes, exotic holidays, a modern bungalow in the posh part of town, a husband who looked down on us. It is as if Norah has been posthumously brought down a peg or two.

One daughter bites. 'But it wasn't just a heartbreak, grandma. It was so messed up. If you think about what they did, it was totally deceitful. It was literally grooming. Jim wrote letters trying to persuade Norah to have sex with Danny – who wasn't who he said he was because he was actually a married man with no intention of having a proper relationship with her. That's not just a broken heart'.

'Catfishing', the other pipes up. 'When someone creates a false identity, to lure someone else into a relationship'.

'You don't think those terms are a bit anachronistic?' I ask. 'Too twenty-first century? Weren't they just two lads, having a bit of a laugh

that then got out of hand? Or two servicemen, under a lot of stress?' I don't really believe this but I'm interested to hear their response.

'Just because there wasn't a word for it then, doesn't mean it didn't happen. It might have been a laugh to them, but for her it was almost worse than it would be today. They were so cruel. They knew a girl's reputation could be ruined. There was so much at stake'.

'And she was so young and easy to manipulate', says the other. 'Danny could get away with his promises of marriage, because she was so innocent. I mean, would she even have known that people could behave so badly? And when it went wrong, she must have felt so humiliated. She couldn't confide in her family or friends'. She's big on humiliation, this one.

It turns into a good discussion. About Norah as a sunny schoolgirl, a young woman hungry for love and life. How she had bought into a dream: life on the up and romance as part of it. How the relationship with Danny developed in his absence; in her head at least, she could make it make mean whatever she wanted it to be. And he could, too. We wonder whether Danny's letters created her dreams and expectations, if they set the bar high before letting her down, and how much wartime culture played a part: men as heroes, beyond reproach, women keeping their spirits up through letters and sock-knitting and looking pretty.

I want to push them on this grooming thing. Jim's penultimate round of letters trying to persuade Norah to have sex with Danny were written in 1945. She was twenty by then, not the schoolgirl of earlier exchanges.

But again: the certainty of youth. 'They knew what they were doing. They started when she was fifteen! They had a worldly experience that Norah didn't have. They were hiding the fact of Danny's marriage and were manipulating her into sleeping with him. That's why they felt guilty after the war'.

At the very least, I think they have nailed Norah's experience and I like that they have placed her centre stage rather than trying too hard to understand what it might have meant to the men.¹

'All that iceberg stuff', my elder daughter says. 'She's bound to have blamed herself, wondered what she did wrong. She'd grown up thinking Danny loved her. She saw herself as lovable, desirable. But then, when he disappeared, and it seemed like he'd lied to her, and sex was all he was really after, and that was all so loaded... well, she must have felt like

she was worth a lot less. It was as if she was playing by the rules, doing it all exactly right, and then he pulled the rug out from under her feet'.

The girls conclude that more was at stake than Norah missing the boat, never making up lost time. True, all the decent men were taken by the time she came on the scene. But she could have fallen lucky and met a man like Freddie the policeman or our own Uncle John. She could have had the life she'd imagined with Danny: got married, had children of her own maybe, been part of his family and he part of hers.

The bigger issue, they insist, is the deception. It would not have crossed Norah's mind that two men – two servicemen, both fighting to keep women and children safe from the Nazis, for heaven's sake – would behave in such a way. The shame and confusion of Danny's abandonment dented her confidence, made her doubt her own judgement, her ability to tell what was real, made her question her capacity to be loved.

I take this opportunity to get my question in. 'What could her mother have done?'

Talked about sex and relationships, they say.

'Not going to happen', I reply. 'This is working-class England in 1940. Milly is a deeply religious woman. She is fearful of so much about the modern world. She is well aware that marriage is a woman's only chance of having a decent life. Even for Norah's generation, on a clerk's wage, you couldn't support yourself. For a woman to be independent, she'd have to come from money. And in terms of social attitudes, it was probably harder to be a single woman in the 1940s and '50s. You were seen as a failure, without a man. A girl had to get married, and for that, she needed to be marriageable'.

I'm secretly pleased at their response, nonetheless. Norah's story has sharpened my parenting, especially my attitude to romance and sex. It is not enough, I realise, for sex education to be all about warnings – pregnancy, STDs, coercion, consent. My daughters may fake annoyance, but they secretly appreciate my railing against 'modesty' and confining femininity, against the be-all and end-all that is romantic love with its coy and sexist traditions, against porn-soaked representations of female sexuality and the centre stage given to male desire.

I'm backed up by a shed-load of literature, gems from which I occasionally fling their way. (It's horrifying, this stuff, for a parent who thinks they know their teenagers' worlds.) The gist is this: we live in

a culture, in the West, where young women are empowered to have sex but not to enjoy it. Where the pressure to conform to a pornified adolescence sees widespread shame, self-harm, depression, even identification out of girlhood. Where, in the places where boys get their sex education, girls get anal but no cunnilingus. The 'pleasure gap', a seemingly natural state of affairs, sets the bar set so very low that many young women describe as successful a sexual encounter that does not involve humiliation or pain. The awful, passive, contractual language of 'consent' – young women as granter or refuser – has little to say about their pleasure, or desire.²

'Giving in', I say, 'consenting to have sex done to you, for his pleasure. You weren't expected to participate, to even enjoy it. In fact, it was considered a bit unnatural if you did. There was no real counter-narrative to all of this'. Then, knowing it will raise a laugh: 'No 1940s *Dirty Dancing*'.

I looked for a long time for a film (for anything, actually) that might assist me in my then-tentative, perfectly futile quest to give my girls as much of 'an untamed beginning' as might be possible in a culture that encourages them to be prematurely sexual and simultaneously to feel such shame.³ I knew it would be an uphill battle. But then my younger daughter handed it to me with her repeated viewings of the film *Dirty Dancing*, about Frances 'Baby' Housman (Jennifer Grey), a teenage girl on holiday in the Catskills with her doctor father, housewife mother and conformist, girly sister, in 1963. While sheltered and middle class, Baby is bright, opinionated, ambitious and, on being taught to dance by resort-worker Johnny Castle (Patrick Swayzee), up for sexual adventure. The film is an unexpected feminist masterpiece. Baby seeks out Johnny, initiates sex. He, an older, experienced man, is responsive, considerate and the object of the gaze. There is no declaration of love, no gesture towards marriage; no regrets, just respect and pleasure.⁴

In *City of Girls*, her novel set in America during the Second World War, Elizabeth Gilbert wanted to write about 'girls whose lives are not destroyed by their sexual desires'. Her main character, Vivian Morris, has been kicked out of Vassar and taken on by her aunt Peg as a costume maker in the down-at-heel vaudeville theatre that she owns in Manhattan. Vivian, for whom it is more important 'to feel free than safe', is soon bucking an age-old literary trend. 'Not even in fiction', Gilbert

writes, 'is a woman allowed to seek out sexual pleasure without ending up under the wheels of a train'.⁵

Yet such girls did exist, in real life if rarely in novels or films. 'The 1920s and 1930s were a bit of watershed', I say to my daughters. 'Girls of Norah's generation, they wanted the adventure of sex and romance'. They look at me like this is no news. So I tell them about the Melbourne 'Yank Hunters', the American 'Victory Girls', the young Danes who roamed the streets of Esbjerg looking for German men and the 'good-time girls' of Bristol with their GI lovers, resisting attempts to fence them in. We all enjoy the stories, although I note that the most uproarious laughter hails from my mother.

They are keen to know this stuff, young women. I recently persuaded one of my daughters to come with me to a lecture on women's cycling in the nineteenth century. It's my interest, and she was bored. Driving home, she asked why women rode side saddle.

'I don't know for certain', I said, 'but I'll hazard a guess. Having your legs apart wasn't considered ladylike. That leather seat might rub against you in an unseemly way. And there's the worry that spreading your legs and the vigour of cycling might tear your hymen. No wedding night deflowering, no proof you were a virgin. And ta da! the end of civilisation as we know it'.

She snorted, sat upright, perked up. 'Why didn't she tell us that? I'm interested now'.

In her book *The Body Project*, historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg explores the gradual shift from good works and character to appearance as the priority in American girls' lives. Girls in the nineteenth century 'rarely mentioned their bodies in terms of strategies for self-improvement or struggles for personal identity', Brumberg writes. 'Becoming a better person meant paying *less* attention to the self...' By the twentieth century, American girls were increasingly focused on their bodies. She found it to be a struggle at first to nudge her students on from naïve claims about how much better things were for American women, now they had shed corsets and could enjoy sexual freedom, to think more critically about

how being 'seen, admired and "asked out"' had emerged as the central goal in young women's lives.

And of course – back to my question about what Marsie could have done – it is bigger than individual girls and their mothers; much more than a mother's work. The ideals of feminine glamour and beauty, promoted in films, newspapers and magazines in the years of Norah's childhood, were part of a wider encouragement to shape bodies and sex-appeal through affordable fashion and cosmetics. 'Instead of supporting our early-maturing girls', Brumberg writes, instead of protecting them from the 'unrelenting self-scrutiny that the marketplace and modern media both thrive on, contemporary culture exacerbates normal adolescent self-consciousness and encourages precocious sexuality', treating women's bodies in 'a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way'.⁶

'How could she have prepared me for this?' asks Melissa Febos, the 'she' being her own mother. In her powerful memoir, *Girlhood*, Febos reflects on the sudden, shocking, overwhelming difference between her twelve-year-old body as experienced at home and as newly received in the world, by men. 'You cannot win against an ocean. There is no good strategy in a rigged game. There are only new ways to lose'. And girls' compliance with this? As Annie Ernaux wrote in *A Girl's Story*, 'we need to push on, define the terrain – social, familial, and sexual – which fostered that desire, seek the reasons for the pride and the sources of the dream'.⁷

Can history help with this? Might Norah's story speak to us now? Historians want our work to do some good in the world but how can it happen if, as academics, we only write for each other? I'm no fan of trite statements about 'learning from history', but might intergenerational conversations about past lives, another kind of 'history from the inside', allow us to feel differently engaged with both past and present?⁸

My conversations about Norah with a PSHE (Personal and Social Health Education) Advisor in Derbyshire schools led us to write a sex education resource for younger secondary age pupils. On reading Jim's letters, she had identified the hallmarks of grooming: the compliments and continual stress on how special their relationship was; his pushing at boundaries, as with the schoolgirl photos and then the 'curl'; his encouragement of secrets, that he could then use against her. Norah's story enabled good discussions of issues that otherwise might have felt too close for comfort or clarity. The students themselves made the links:

comparisons between letters from an anonymous Jim and online stuff today. They talked about the peer-pressure that might have shaped his behaviour, as well as the age difference and Norah's innocence. And we were forced to consider the widespread victim-blaming assumptions that the kids brought to the classroom: whether or not Norah's flirtations – with Norman, mainly – made her blameworthy, 'asking for it'.⁹

History can move us beyond the individualised concern of much sex education, taking us past the language so beloved of psychologists – of Norah made 'resilient' because of her solid family life, her friendships and interests, and Jim as an individual bad egg. History forces us to look at the wider cultural factors that made Norah vulnerable – ideas about male and female sexuality, their intersection with commercial culture. History invites us to ask questions about how these play out in the world today, as, in the wake of #MeToo and the subsequent backlash, we attempt to process and transform individual experiences into a social movement, to create a philosophy of 'intimate justice', a sexual ethics, and stem the rising anti-feminist (and meninist) tide against attempts to centre female desire, autonomy and consent.

Historian John Demos tells a story of a student who had enjoyed his study of Eunice Williams, a Puritan girl from Deerfield, Massachusetts, abducted as a seven-year-old in 1704, during the French and Indian Wars, and who chose to remain with her adoptive Kahnawake family rather than return to her birth-family fold. *The Unredeemed Captive*, his student had commented, was 'a dad's book'. This was not so much a reference to the fact that in the absence of evidence from Eunice herself, Demos had relied on her father's narrative of her kidnap and later life. It was a more personal insight. As Demos confessed, the book was researched and written as his own children were flying the nest, embarking on lives as yet unknown, and different from his own.¹⁰

This, I suspect, is a mum's book. I read Norah's diaries not only as a historian, but as a mother too. When I first encountered the vital, feisty adolescent Norah of 1938, I had the strongest sense of how well she would fit into our family, an older sister to my girls. It is a very strange sensation, feeling maternal towards your late great-aunt's childhood self, but I

wished she was mine. And I want to know what I could have done, as a mother, to protect her; what I can do for my own daughters, now.

It has always been a fine line for feminists to tread, between danger and exploitation and agency and desire. How, on the one hand, in stressing our vulnerability, the full extent of the violence against us, we might paradoxically victimise ourselves. In *Unwanted Advances*, her polemic about what she terms 'sexual paranoia' on university campuses, Laura Kipnis makes a similar point. Consent guidelines, she writes, are 'restoring the most fettered versions of traditional femininity through the backdoor', representing women as undesiring and non-sexual. I agree with her, and with Mithu Sanyal when she says that in ensuring that so many women 'live in constant fear', we are almost doing the Patriarchy's work for them. Ann Snitow sums up the challenge: 'We're trying to clarify that violence against women is unacceptable, trying to make it visible without terrifying ourselves. Tough trick'.¹¹

Is this a tenuous connection to Norah's story? To me, it isn't. It's absolutely at the heart of it. And my daughters get it. When one was going off on her first overseas adventure, a close family member suggested she watch a film about the abduction, rape and murder of a young woman traveller, just so she knew what could happen, if she did something as outrageously risky as take a train through France. And Norah? We could choose to see only the danger: Jim's dodgy letters, Danny's (now) obvious lies, her foolhardiness in her plans to go away with him that weekend. We could seek to rein her in for her own safety, and when she doesn't listen, blame her, tell her she is a silly, naïve, girl; that she brought it on herself.

'Feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents', writes Carole Vance; 'that sexual pleasure without the threat of danger is a fundamental right'. Yet while so many women found aspects of life in wartime sexually liberating, it was not without risk. As Katherine Angel so eloquently argues, we discover our sexuality in relation to others. 'To be met in one's desire, and to be surprised in one's desire, is an exercise in mutual trust and negotiation of fear. When it works, it can feel miraculous; a magical collusion...'¹² Yet in England in the 1930s and 1940s, where girls were taught that sex equated to shame and fear, where they were to have their sexual feelings awakened by a man on their wedding night, or in our twenty-first-century world,

where so many girls have contextless, pleasureless sex: tough bloody trick indeed.

‘Imagine a world where girls are brought up to see their first love affair as a kind of debut’, I say to my daughters. ‘Where they aren’t “losing” anything, but gaining entry into an adult life with all manner of other adventures in store. Where they can enjoy their bodies but not be reduced to them. Where their own desires are centre-stage in their own lives, their self-worth is not dependent on pleasing men...’ I’m starting to get on a roll, but I sense them drifting away.

‘Alright mum’, they say, picking up their phones. And then that cruel parting shot: ‘You do know that Aunty Norah wouldn’t approve of this discussion, don’t you?’