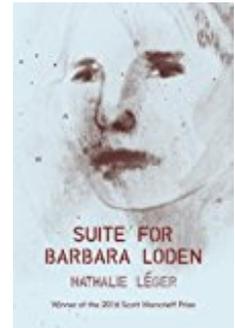


A Miniature Model of Modernity: Suite for Barbara Loden

"It seemed simple enough," writes French author Nathalie Léger in the opening of her extraordinary new book *Suite for Barbara Loden* -- and the reader immediately knows, whatever it will be, it won't be simple -- "all I had to do was write a short entry for a film encyclopaedia." Her editor tells her: "No need to put your heart and soul into it." Thus begins an odyssey into the heart and soul of the female artist.



The subject of the encyclopaedia entry Léger was commissioned to write was Barbara Loden (1932-1980), pin-up girl, model, dancer, actress, theater and film director, and second wife of Elia Kazan, who "discovered" her while she was taking classes at the Actor's Studio in the late '60s. Loden is best known for *Wanda* (1970), a film she wrote, produced, directed, and starred in. Made on a budget of \$115,000 and a critical success, it won the International Critics Award at the Venice Film Festival. Léger's obsession with the movie -- she analyzes the film almost shot by shot and travels to the locations in rustbelt Pennsylvania where the filming took place -- is a stupendous leitmotif in her narrative.

In preparation for writing the entry, Léger immersed herself in US history, read sociological studies of women in the '50s and '60s, studied avant-garde movements, the New York Theater movement, *cinéma vérité*, the history of self-portrait, researched Polish immigration, and coal mining. Virtually none of this background information winds up in the book; its absence, however, is an appreciable and gratifying presence. "I find myself wavering between wanting to know nothing and wanting to know everything," Léger writes, "writing on condition that I know nothing, or writing only on condition that I omit nothing."

The slim, riveting volume that resulted instead of the encyclopaedia entry might be variously described as an extended prose poem; a meditation on compulsion; an autobiographical biography; film criticism; an idiosyncratic travelogue; an investigation into the mother-daughter relationship; a feminist reflection on the female gaze; an instance of *écriture féminine*; a palimpsest of Duras, Sebald, Perec, Plath, Chopin, Dickinson, Godard, Beckett, Woolf, Rhys; an interrogation of the act of writing and the impulse to create.

The narrative, a collage of fragments, coalesces into something that aspires not to be whole.

Léger compares the book's composition to "managing a huge building site, from which I was going to excavate a miniature model of modernity, reduced to its simplest, most complex form: a woman telling her own story through that of another woman."

The narrative's strange, brooding, rhapsodic flow is ingeniously captured by translators Natasha Lehrer and Cécile Menon. And the book's publication marks an auspicious beginning for the small-press initiative Les Fugitives whose mandate is to introduce and promote the voices of established French-language female authors whose work has not been translated into English.

Barbara Loden was born, Léger tells us, "six years after Marilyn Monroe, two years before my mother, the same year as Elizabeth Taylor, Delphine Seyrig, and Sylvia Plath," thereby establishing her own particular, and particularly female, frame of reference. Included in her precise physical description of Loden during her blonde bombshell '60s heyday, is an acutely female observation: "To defend herself she smiles a lot." Drawing from her own experience as well as Loden's, Léger often provides sharp, funny extrapolations such as this one:

The typical 1970s woman is a woman who's wondering what she's actually going to be able to do with the freedom that everyone keeps telling her about; a woman who wonders what new lie she'll have to make up now, how she's going to pretend to be cool, so that all these men will finally leave her alone.

The narrative is also packed with odd, fanciful, enriching juxtapositions: for example, Léger points out that while Loden was earning a living dancing at the Copacabana in 1950, George Sanders, as the suave, charming, cynical theater critic Addison DeWitt in *All About Eve*, snidely introduces his date Miss Casswell, played by Marilyn Monroe in one of her earliest roles, as "a graduate of the Copacabana School of Dramatic Art." The parallels with Marilyn continue: in 1964, Loden is cast in Arthur Miller's play *After the Fall* as Maggie, inspired by Monroe. "The whole of New York is stunned by her ingenuity and skill, by the way she gives herself up to some nameless desire, the way she has of standing up against herself, of being both dramatic and needy, she is Marilyn." Loden acknowledges to a journalist, "I thought it was about me. When I read the script I thought, oh, but how did he know who I was?" She wins a Tony Award for her performance.

Reflections of reflections, stories within stories abound: *Wanda* is the story of a thirtyish woman, an alcoholic, who has abandoned her coal-miner husband and children to become a drifter. She exhibits little emotion, little desire beyond her next drink. Astoundingly passive, she is deeply wounded, distressed, and lonely, passing her time aimlessly wandering. She meets Mr. Dennis, a thuggish, abusive petty criminal in a bar and becomes involved in his increasingly ambitious crimes, eventually robbing a bank. Mr Dennis winds up dead and Wanda in prison. In an interview, Loden mentioned that she had gotten the idea for *Wanda* from a news item about an actual female bank robber. Speaking of Loden's own obsession with Wanda, Léger writes, "Her own story, enmeshed in this one, is probably no more than the ordinary story of a lonely, unloved child, a child who has been silenced, forced to submit to someone stronger than they are."

In researching Loden's life, Léger repeatedly hits blank walls. The Elia Kazan archives hold surprisingly little information; most of the people who worked on *Wanda* are either dead or don't want to talk; there is little to be found about Loden in cinema histories. Léger consults

the renowned documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, telling him of her frustration. He tells her, "Make it up. All you have to do is make it up."

Wiseman's advice contains one of those truisms that we can never quite accept or hear enough: Hard as we try to gain some definitive or objective understanding of who we are and how we got here, the imagination is as close to the truth as we'll ever get. Ultimately, what Léger offers us is a rendition of the female imagination. She accomplishes this not by claiming to speak for all women but by revealing how one woman can use another to see herself through the other, setting off a chain of seeing and reflecting. Loden wrote of her protagonist: "Wanda's character is based on my own life and on my character, and also on the way I understand other people's lives. Everything comes from my own experience. Everything I do is me." Léger, writing of Wanda, of Loden, observes, "We accept her the way we accept ourselves, in blind ignorance, unable to put a name to the grief of existing."

At the end of the book, in what is by now for the reader a typically astonishing oddball encounter, Léger meets Mickey Mantle, who was a friend of Loden's, in the Houdini Museum in Scranton, PA. The Yankees legend is struggling with writing his memoirs, having refused a ghost writer, explaining he wouldn't let anyone else take his bat. "The hardest thing," he tells her, "is the words, how long it takes, the concentration you need to work out what goes with what, how to put together a single sentence. I had no idea that shaping a sentence was so difficult, all the possible ways there are to do it, even the simplest sentence, as soon as it's written down, all the hesitations, all the problems. How to describe the trajectory of a baseball?"

Nathalie Léger's book reminds us just how difficult making art is, as a woman, as a human being, while dazzling us with all the tantalizing ways there are to do it.

Jenny McPhee's books include [A Man of No Moon](#), [No Ordinary Matter](#), [The Center of Things](#), and [Girls: Ordinary Girls and their Extraordinary Pursuits](#). She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She grew up in New Jersey and lives in London, but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.