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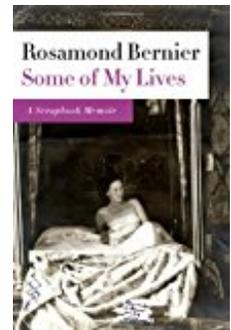
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Eloise Grows Up: The Charmed Life of the Charming Rosamond Bernier

Like that clever, witty, audacious inhabitant of the Plaza Hotel, the notorious children's book heroine Eloise, Rosamond Bernier acquits herself in every situation, no matter how extraordinary, with a grand measure of aplomb. Zelig style, Bernier cruised through the greater part of the twentieth century hobnobbing with the western hemisphere's best and brightest artists, writers, and composers while building her own successful career as writer, editor, and art curator. Accurately described as "a scrapbook," her memoir is a motley collection of anecdotal snapshots, genteel and tantalizing, of her dear friends and acquaintances, among them Aaron Copeland, Leonard Bernstein, Malcolm Lowry, Paul and Jane Bowles, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Henri Matisse, René Clair, Vittorio De Sica, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, Max Ernst, Mary McCarthy, Louise Bourgeois, David Hockney, Jerome Robbins, Janet Flanner, Philip Johnson, Richard Avedon, and Irving Penn.



Bernier was born in 1916 to an English mother and a Jewish American father whose family never forgave him for marrying a non-Jew, and would have little to do with Rosamond. She was brought up in the Philadelphia suburbs as if to the manor born with riding lessons and an English governess to educate her at home. When she was ten, by herself she boarded the *Orduna* and crossed the Atlantic to England where she would attend The Sherbourne School for Girls, as her mother, who had died two years earlier, had wished. After attending Sarah Lawrence for three years, she married Lew Riley (first husband of three), and moved to Acapulco. Barely five pages into the book the aptness of Bernier's title, *Some of My Lives*, becomes apparent: by the age of twenty she had already lived several lifetimes, and her life had barely begun.

In Mexico, Bernier learned to fly a plane, hosted a zoo of exotic animals in her house, witnessed the birth of a volcano, struck up what would become a lifelong friendship with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and rescued a gringo drunk, a chunky, blond fellow, ragged and bleeding, after he had been thrown off the bus from Cuernavaca. He turned out to be Malcolm

Lowry. During her stint in Mexico, she convinced Nelson Rockefeller, the president of the Museum of Modern Art, of the little known artist José Clemente Orozco's great talent. The result was Orozco's commission to paint the panels *Dive Bomber and Tank*, still in the museum today. Another artist she recommended to MoMA in the late thirties was the Venezuelan Armando Reverón. She wistfully notes that it would take the museum until 2007, when they mounted an exhibition of Reverón's work, to act on her advice.

Bernier left Mexico and her marriage and went to New York City where she got herself hired, with zero experience, as a features writer for *Vogue* and other Condé Nast publications. She then managed to have herself sent to post-war Paris where she would live on and off for the next sixty years, founding along the way, with a second husband, an art magazine called *L'Oeil*. Bernier's European adventures begin immediately and never flag. In 1947, she and the photographer Erwin Blumenfeld head mid-August to Normandy "in search of Proust." Not a hotel room is to be found. She ends up sleeping in the bed on display in the Madame de Sévigné Museum on the top floor of the Auberge Guillaume le Conquerant. Blumenfeld photographed her the next morning in her underwear amid the grand drapery -- the image on the cover of *Some of My Lives*. On another occasion, she accompanied Horst to photograph Gertrude Stein and her poodle, Basket, in Pierre Balmian's salon in Paris. In the much-reproduced photograph of the "massive unmovable monument," Bernier is one of two very small figures in the background. When the pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale went to Paris to perform, Virgil Thomson asked Bernier to throw them a party: "Alice B. Toklas came, almost disappearing under an exuberantly flowered hat... Truman Capote sat on Janet Flanner's knees."

Bernier's association with *Vogue* along with her inimitable charm, intelligence, and chutzpah gave her access to Europe's premier cultural icons from Coco Chanel, who told her "Americans are wrong to overestimate very young girls -- these are not the only beautiful women; for me, women become interesting after forty" to Fernand Léger, who suggested she "go to Barcelona and look at the Catalan Romanesque frescoes." Bernier took Léger's advice, arranging for Joan Miró to be her guide. She developed a lasting friendship with Pablo Picasso who allowed her to publish in *Vogue* the first images of his Antibes paintings now housed in the Antibes Picasso Museum. Likewise with the reclusive and guarded Matisse, who gave her exclusive access to photograph and write about his decoration of La Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence. In 1955, for her own new magazine *L'Oeil*, Bernier commissioned Mary McCarthy to write an illustrated profile of a city, which became *Venice Observed*.

In 1975, Rosamond Bernier married the British art critic John Russell (they would remain together until his death in 2008) at their close friend Philip Johnson's notorious Glass House. Across the perfectly manicured lawn of the architect's forty-seven-acre estate in Connecticut, photographs remind Bernier of the scene that day: "Lenny walking arm in arm with Virgil Thomson, Andy Warhol feeding his little dog a cocktail sausage, Louise Nevelson with her usual triple layer of eyelashes, Leo Castelli chatting with John Ashbery, Helen Frankenthaler sitting on the grass with her shoes off..."

Reading Bernier's memoir of delectable outré morsels from the lives of icons, I found myself

imagining that her book was the memoir's equivalent of a tasting menu at the Fat Duck. In the end, however, above and beyond all those stars in whose limelight she so frequently found herself basking, I was most impressed by Rosamond Bernier herself. Her inspiring gift of a combined self-confidence, ambition, and determination to enjoy her life to the fullest is something I wish she could, perfume-like, bottle and give away. She might call it "Eloise."

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