

A Conversation with Barbara Delinsky

The following conversation with Barbara is excerpted from an interview by Margaret Wappler for *Goodreads*.

The main characters in *Sweet Salt Air*, Nicole and Charlotte, are old friends now in their mid-thirties. Is there something about that age for women that particularly interested you?

Absolutely. I had my kids in my early twenties when we were young and stupid. But for a lot of women now, their early-to-mid-thirties is a time for saying, “OK, is this the career I want? Or should I be heading in another direction?” In Nicole’s case, she’s built a whole career, but it’s about to take off in a different way because of her contract to write a cookbook. Charlotte, on the other hand, is just not sure if she’s satisfied with where she’s been. I think the mid-thirties are a vulnerable time for a lot of women. They aren’t so stuck in what they’re doing that they can’t change. I like change in my characters. I like to see them grow.

You’ve returned to coastal Maine, a setting you’ve used in many of your novels. What’s the allure of that landscape?

I am my quintessential reader. I need to be in a setting that speaks to me. When things are really hectic, I love nothing more than to be able to go and stand by the water. The North Atlantic coast is a bit wild and there’s a rocky shoreline, but it does soothe me. There is also something very romantic about it.

Nicole’s husband has MS. How does this impact their lives?

Nicole’s husband is a prenatal cardiac surgeon. His work requires intricate detail, and suddenly his hands shake. He is hoping that there is some kind of cure. He’s done a lot of research, being a doctor, and he knows that there might be some things on the horizon, such as umbilical cord blood transplants, but he also knows that everything is experimental. He wants to preserve his future, and to do that he needs to be very secretive. He doesn’t tell anyone that he has MS—and that means Nicole can’t tell anyone either.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer almost twenty years ago, I didn’t tell anybody except for close family and very close friends. Honestly, I didn’t want publishers in New York to think I’d be dead in five years and not bother pushing my books. That’s the blunt bottom line. For that reason, I perfectly understand why he didn’t want to say anything.

What are some of the other dynamics at play in their relationship?

Nicole doesn't have a parallel career to his. That's a biggie. My husband and I do have parallel careers—he's a lawyer and I'm a writer, and we each have similar clout in the marriage. My career has given me a kind of courage to speak up when I need to, even though we got married at a time when marriages were more conventional. When my kids were little, my husband never changed a diaper, but my sons all change diapers and they cook. In so many regards, Nicole and Julian adhere to more traditional gender roles. Nicole defers to him.

Your characters Charlotte and Nicole are collaborating on a cookbook in this novel. Are you much of a whiz in the kitchen?

No, I'm not. Isn't that hysterical? I was just talking with my publicist about why I chose to discuss the farm-to-table movement. The reason I did is because I like to deal with things that are current and in the news. Also, as a breast cancer survivor, I wonder about environmental factors. I am glad my granddaughters drink organic milk. My being a non-cook was only an issue when my publisher asked if I had any recipes I could share. I had to say no.

So the dark secret of Barbara Delinsky is that she hates to cook?

That's it! I love reading cookbooks, and I love eating out, but I don't like cooking. I buy a lot of stuff ready-made—dinner tonight is chicken cacciatore from Whole Foods.

You've written traditional romance novels as well as contemporary women's fiction. Are those genres closer than we think? What are the differences?

Length is the first. The romances I wrote were two hundred pages, as opposed to four hundred like my more recent novels. The other difference is scope. I wanted to deal with topics that were considered a little too serious for the romance genre. My romances were always 80 percent romance, 20 percent something else. When I moved into mainstream fiction, the equation reversed. Actually, at my publisher's request, *Sweet Salt Air* has more romance in it than the books I've written in the last ten years. When I write contemporary fiction, I can divide the book as I want, as opposed to being restricted to the romance.

That said, you have a lot of experience writing sex scenes. What's the key to writing a believable one?

Emotion. If a sex scene is purely physical, it doesn't work for me. Conversely, when a sex scene incorporates the emotion ongoing in the story, it can be richer. I don't write gratuitous sex scenes, as in sex for the sake of sex. Every scene has to move the plot forward.

Do you ever read them aloud to your husband?

No. My husband doesn't read my books, but then I don't read his law briefs. He knows

what every book of mine is about. I talk my plots through with him and he may help with legal matters in them. But my books have no place in our bed at night.

I read that your first book took you three months to plan and draft. Are you always this fast?

Try three weeks! That was one of the category romances and they were very short: 55,000 to 60,000 words. At the beginning I was that fast. I had three young boys at home. We didn't have any money. My husband was a lawyer in public service at the time. With a house full of boys, it was constantly noisy and dirty. Writing was my escape. I spent every spare minute doing it. There were a couple of years early on in which I wrote eight books!

Describe a typical day spent writing. Do you have any unusual writing habits?

Unusual? Not really. A typical day writing is probably 6 a.m. to noon, Monday through Friday, and my office is pretty standard. It's a room above the garage; a nice, bright room with skylights. There's a sitting area, lots of bookshelves, and Post-its everywhere. They are the best invention since bagged lettuce.

What authors, books, or ideas have influenced you?

I read a very eclectic selection of books. I'm in a book group that's been meeting for twenty-six years. My own reading choices are usually new releases which show me what other writers are doing right now.
