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An Interview with Nancy Spiller

By Leslie Stephens

NANCY SPILLER, a fourth-generation California native, survived a childhood growing up in the East Bay suburbs that included celebrating her 16th birthday at Altamont. She went on to work at the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* and as a syndicated columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. The heroine of Spiller's first book, *Entertaining Disasters: A Novel (with recipes)*, is a food writer who makes up the fabulous dinner parties she reports on — until her editor comes to town. In her new book *Compromise Cake: Lessons Learned From My Mother's Recipe Box*, she takes the story-with-recipes form into the realm of memoir. Leslie Stephens spoke to her for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

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Leslie Stephens: You refer to your memoir *Compromise Cake* — a collection of memories as told through the recipes from your late mother's recipe box — as a “project.” What started you on this project?

Nancy Spiller: I had taken the recipe box out of my mother's house when we were closing that down to move her to a care facility in 2002, and I had even used it as a plot device in my autobiographical novel, *Entertaining Disasters*, but I really hadn't looked into it until a few months after she passed away in 2007. I started finding recipe titles that intrigued me, like *My Man Cookies* and *Dark Cake*. Recipes are a form of communication for women who possibly didn't have the strongest voices because of their place and time in the world. And then I found, buried in the middle of it, my mother's teaching credential. She had taught for exactly a year until she got married, moved to the suburbs, and had four children, at which point she grew very unhappy and became a mental patient and then a divorced mother of four. And so, when I found the teaching credential, I felt that that was a communication from my mother, that it was saying something about her identity and how it had become lost in domestic pursuit.

So that began my exploration of who she was before she became a mother. Writing my novel, which is autobiographical, was my effort to better understand the epidemic of mental illness among suburban housewives of the 1960s and 1950s because my mother was one of the statistics. The novel was a darker undertaking, and so in the memoir I wanted to also explore the good, which was the two of us in the kitchen together.

LS: Did reading the recipes do the work of invoking your childhood?

NS: Yes, and that was the fun part, my anthropological mapping of the recipe box. I laid the recipes out and numbered them, each one teasing out a different memory. For example, on New Years Eve we used to make that Scramble recipe, what today is called Chex Mix. When I was a small, it was thrilling to have that happening in the oven.

LS: I like the moment where you cook the Scramble mix for your granddaughters, expecting them to be as entranced by the magic of it as you were, but they weren't.

NS: Yes, it was an experiment in living. I was going to perpetrate this food reenactment on the next generation and see what happened, and, of course, nothing happened. Nothing and everything happened. I'm sure my mother had that same feeling that she was whipping up all of these things to an unappreciative audience. I mean she had these four rowdy kids that were just dedicated to annoying each other, so that had to be a little bit frustrating. Children are rarely "wowed" in the moment; it takes a while to find out what the ultimate effect was on them.

LS: You write that your mothers showed her feelings for you as a child through food, that sugar was her "sole expression of affection." Did the process of writing help you to better understand her?

NS: I think I have understood her my entire life on a certain level, but through this project I have articulated my understanding of her to a greater degree, and that's been one of the benefits of writing it for me. And I also hope that it's a benefit for the reader. I've had so many readers, across a variety of age groups, tell me that this was their story. An 80-year-old woman came up after a reading to say that it was the story of her mother. A middle-aged man said that after his mother was divorced she went to her room and the kids took care of themselves, and took care of her. And so I think it's something that continues to go on.

But back to your question, I think that for a long time all I examined was my compulsion to take care of her at my expense, and to feel nothing but sadness in regards to her; that's a compromise, and it's a bad compromise. We talk about women being compromised in marriage, and I think that there is a whole other arena where parents compromise their children, and oppress them in that way. As I say in the book, since I was a small child, she would say cruel things that would shut me down, clip my wings, and so to get anything done, I had to build barriers against that. When I came to the end of my book, which portrays the final visit with my mother, I didn't know how I felt. That came out in the writing. It had been a very confusing visit for me, and it wasn't until I wrote about it that I arrived at a place where I could see the whole, the whole of our lives together.

LS: Although you quote from your mother's diary, you chose to use the recipe box instead as the focal point of the memoir.

NS: Yes, though I'd had that diary for years it wasn't until this project that the pictures started falling into place. I was hesitant to use the diary because, operating in the vacuum in which writers often find themselves, I started having doubts and thinking, "Oh no, this is just too, too personal." Then I talked to an artist friend of mine who lost her mother when she was two, and she said, "Oh, that is such a gift. How can you not use that?"

LS: You do use some of her diary, from when she was 17 years old.

NS: Yeah, because I think that it helped deepen the portrait — she was this spirited young woman who was troubled on a very profound and fundamental level.

LS: That must have been disturbing to revisit.

NS: In some ways it was, of course. I got a kick out of the recipe called “Dark Cake;” it fit some of my memories, the feelings of fear and anger and anxiety over being trapped in the kitchen with my mother. For a while I thought I’d come back to this place, this place that I had been fleeing since I was a teenager, and I’d be stuck here forever. So I found “Dark Cake” a lovely metaphor in that sense.

LS: Describing your mother you use phrases like “trapped” and “unable to escape,” and you say that, in her struggle with depression, she was something of an Everywoman of the 1960. Is her situation still relevant today, only with different trappings?

NS: Yes, I think that the mad housewives of the 1950s and 1960s were the pioneers of the mental illness that we’re all dealing with today. Mental illness is a reaction to an impossible situation, and I think that across the board, whether it’s men or women or children, we are sometimes placed in impossible situations.

It’s also strange that today “compromise” is this dirty word, with politicians on the right refusing to use the word. Back in the mid-twentieth century, it was a sufficiently benign word that you could attach to the word “cake.” That was another journey of the book, investigating the word and all of its different meanings and ramifications. I think we need to reacquaint ourselves with its original meaning, something that is a mutual sacrifice and mutual benefit for the greater good.

LS: You use several of your own sketches and paintings in the memoir and I was wondering why you chose to include them.

NS: They were somewhat prompted by my father's life-long desire to be an artist. At age 16 he was profiled in the local weekly paper where he regularly published panels, and proclaimed with great certainty his intentions to be a cartoonist. But he never pursued it professionally and instead he went into the family business, the phone company, moved to the suburbs and poured his creativity into our home and family. He taught me to draw with pen and ink and encouraged me to paint. That said, he never led me, the budding artist, to believe it was ever possible to be one, and that I'm sure came from his own frustrations with life.

After I finished my first novel, I published some illustrations in a magazine, and that gave me the courage to propose this memoir as an illustrated project. So for each of the 13 chapters I made a painting, and, after I was done, I saw a range of influences, the Warner Brothers cartoons of my childhood in one, Indian street art in another [the painting in the *Recipes by Heart* chapter]. Some influences I did not see until I had the actual book in my hands. When I saw the Sugar Cookie painting, I thought, “Oh that’s Georgia O’Keefe!” The cookies are like one of Georgia O’Keefe’s cloud paintings, with the sugar bag taking the place of the cow’s skull, which was perfect because the chapter was about my family’s march westward. So I enjoyed how it all came together; it was also fun to do the little spot drawings and drop them in at surprising moments. And then there are the photographs of the recipes at the end of each chapter, and, to me, they’re beautiful. I love decaying, distressed things. They bring a whole other level of reality to the story. W.C. Sebald, who used photographs mysteriously in his books, talked about them bringing a whole other level of reality to the text. I don’t mean to be pretentious by bringing W.C. Sebald into the conversation about my little memoir, but you know, I think that that’s what it did. And I think that when people

see those actual cards, they see what a touching human endeavor it is to write out a recipe card and then give it to someone, and that it has an existence long after its usefulness.

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