

WHAT SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR HAS MEANT TO ME

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I went to university in 1969, a crucial year, a turning point for women, a time in which societies all over the Western world were undergoing fundamental changes. From the beginning, I was active in the women's liberation movement in South Australia. In our discussion groups, meetings, and workshops, we were challenging everything, passing around books, discussing *The Second Sex*, among other things. In addition, I had the good fortune to be studying French, and in my fourth year, my "honors year," I wrote my thesis on Simone de Beauvoir. It meant reading her entire work.

What a writer! What a mind! What courage she had to challenge taboos and rigid social conventions! And what a life she led! It began in the early 1970s, the inspiration she gave me, and it has never ceased. I can honestly say that no one has influenced me more than Simone de Beauvoir. She has profoundly affected my life. And she has profoundly affected my work.

I have always admired Beauvoir as a committed public intellectual who saw it as her responsibility to write and speak out about oppression, injustice, and the forces that militate against individual freedom. As we know, in addition to writing books, she spent a great deal of time selecting and editing material for *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded by Sartre in 1945 which until the late 1960s was generally regarded as the most stimulating and free-thinking left-wing journal on the European newsstands. She wrote articles, she gave interviews, she participated in demonstrations -- against the Algerian War, for women's rights --, she signed petitions.

As a writer, she was both prolific and pioneering. I think that we tend to forget how daring Beauvoir's books were when she wrote them. Not only *The Second Sex*, but also her fiction -- just think about *L'Invitée*, *La Femme rompue* --, her memoirs, *La Vieillesse*, her book on old age, and *Une Mort très douce*, her book about her mother's dying. She broached so many taboo subjects: the female body, female sexual desire, abortion, lesbianism, the double standard involved in aging. It is difficult for us, in an age when memoirs and personal frankness have become commonplace, to realize just how new it was then, particularly for a woman, to speak openly about herself and others. And for Beauvoir to talk about her open relationship with Sartre.

To me back then, the Sartre-Beauvoir relationship seemed a model of generous love. They never held each other back. On the contrary, they encouraged each other in the real sense of the word: they gave each other courage. They pushed each other to be bolder; they gave themselves unstintingly to each other's work, and their solidarity with each other was total. They took the view that love is not about possession, fidelity, or obligation, and that if you really love people, you should love them *in their freedom*. According to Sartre and Beauvoir, jealousy is a natural and understandable emotion, but that does not

make it good, and it should not become an excuse to make unreasonable demands on others. We have the willpower to control our emotions.

In the preface to my book *Tête-à-Tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, I write: "When I read Beauvoir's memoirs in the late sixties, I was exhilarated -- intoxicated, one might say. She made the impossible seem possible. Didn't we all want an intellectual partner with whom we could share our work, ideas, and slightest thoughts? Didn't everyone want to write in Paris cafes amid the clatter of coffee cups and the hubbub of voices, and spend summers in Rome in complicated but apparently harmonious foursomes? Who wanted monogamy when one could have freedom *and* stability, love affairs *and* commitment?" (*Tête-à-Tête* xii)

I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialist Biography." Sartre and Beauvoir shared a lifelong interest in autobiography and biography. The question that most interested them was *choice*. To what degree were they and their friends free, or not free, to choose their lives? In what ways do we make ourselves out of what we have been made?

In their biographical studies of themselves and others, they analyzed the person's *situation* -- the historical ties, social class, family dynamics, physical constitution, and so on -- while scrutinizing, as if under a microscope, any signs of rebellion or moments of compliance. They saw these as defining moments which reflected fundamental choices. They were also interested in our complicity in our non-freedom -- what they called "bad faith." In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir shows how tempting it is for women to slip into certain roles rather than taking the harder road, which is to assume the burden of their freedom.

I was living in Strasbourg in 1976, studying for my Ph.D. I wrote to Beauvoir at the beginning of the summer, explaining that I was from Australia, that I was writing a thesis on her and was involved in the women's movement, and that she had had a major impact on my life, and asking if I might possibly arrange an interview with her. I had almost given up when one day in October there was a letter in my box with an illegible scrawl on the envelope. I could hardly read my own name. Inside was a brief note, written in fountain pen, on that square-lined paper they use in France. I finally realized it was from *her*, Simone de Beauvoir. She had been in Rome for the summer and would see me for an hour in November. I couldn't believe it. I was going to meet the woman I most admired in the entire world.

That interview, needless to say, was a high point in my life. There I was, in Simone de Beauvoir's apartment on the rue Schoelcher, surrounded by her photos, books, sculptures, and art works. Light flooded in through the large studio windows. I was struck by the modesty and simplicity of the place, and the sense it exuded of the richness of her life. I was also struck by the beauty and energy of her presence. Simone de Beauvoir was 68 at the time. She talked fast and moved gracefully. That day she was wearing slacks and a pullover, her hair was up -- no turban --, her skin was creamy, and her blue eyes sparkled with intelligence.

For years I, like others, had tried to emulate Beauvoir's couple with Sartre. Time passed. The world changed. So did I. When I turned fifty, I felt an urge to look again at this famous relationship which had had such a major impact on my own life. I was completely open to what I might find. Would I admire them as much as ever? Would I be disappointed? I did not know. For me it was going to be a voyage of discovery.

People said to me, "There has already been so much written about Sartre and Beauvoir. Do you really think that there is any need for a new book?" But the existing biographies were out of date, and anyway, no one had honed in on their relationship, as I wanted to do. It is true that Simone de Beauvoir wrote several thick volumes of memoirs, but she gave *her* picture of things. In a way, her memoirs allowed her to control their public image, to talk about the things she wanted to talk about, and not talk about others. As for Sartre, he had said very little about their relationship over the years. I was curious to know more about his side of the story. Did he need her as much as she needed him? Was he never jealous of Simone de Beauvoir's handsome boyfriends?

I was also interested in the other members of the "family," as Sartre and Beauvoir called the friends who surrounded them, all of whom had been a lover of one of them at some stage, and sometimes of both. In her memoirs, Beauvoir mentions Olga and Wanda Kosakiewicz, Jacques Bost, Michelle Vian, Claude and Evelyne Lanzmann, Sylvie Le Bon and others, but only in passing. I was curious to know more about the people with whom Sartre and Beauvoir had chosen to spend their spare time. What would they have to say about those torrid times? Looking back, would they say that they had been very lucky, or would they see themselves as duped?

I moved to Paris, rented a fifth-floor walk-up looking out over slate rooftops and terra cotta chimney pots, filled it with my books, and went out to talk to those who remained from Beauvoir's and Sartre's intimate circle. The only person who would not see me was Arlette El Kaïm Sartre, Sartre's adopted daughter. Other people were generous with their time and their reflections, and in most cases we met several times. In the course of my two-year stay in Paris, I perused hundreds of unpublished letters that no one else had ever seen.

I was writing a book about people I admired and I was acutely conscious of the danger of trivializing them. The fact is, Sartre and Beauvoir's love life does not always show them in their best light. I took pains to sketch in the broader picture -- their philosophy, their extraordinary capacity for hard work, their courage as public intellectuals as they often became the target of hostility.

Sartre and Beauvoir have always aroused passion -- admiration and hatred -- and the reaction to my book shows that they still do. Some reviewers praised me for my lack of judgmentalism and then proceeded to dance a furious little jig themselves, denouncing Sartre and Beauvoir as monstrous, immoral, and sexually depraved. A reviewer in *Le Monde* surmised that we were once again experiencing American puritanism. Rosemary Sorensen wrote in the *Brisbane Courier Mail*: "I do wonder if some of the animosity is envy hiding

behind prissy puritanism." I agreed.

For me, the surprise was when the book came out in the U.K. and a couple of reviewers there reacted like maddened seventeenth century Salem witch hunters -- raging against me, as well as against Sartre and Beauvoir. One of the problems with biography is that it attracts reviewers who already have strong views about your subject and sometimes, as their pontifications make clear, they scarcely even read your book.

What *do* I think about Simone de Beauvoir after writing *Tête-à-Tête*? I admire her just as much today as I did in my twenties. I know of no other couple that better symbolizes equality between the sexes than Beauvoir and Sartre. It is to the credit of both, but particularly to Simone de Beauvoir. Their equality was not a given.

Back then, society was far more patriarchal than it is today. As Beauvoir showed, women are not the "other sex," but the "second sex." And as she once wrote about herself and Sartre: "Between two individuals, harmony is never a given; it must be constantly conquered." This is the quotation chosen for the plaque at the entrance to the Hôtel Mistral on the Rue Cels, where Beauvoir and Sartre both rented rooms many years ago.

For Beauvoir, writing about her life made the experience of living sharper. As an adolescent, she had dreamed of turning her life into a grand story that would inspire others: "By writing a work based on my own experience I would re-create myself and justify my existence. At the same time I would be serving humanity: what more beautiful gift could I make it than the books I would write?" (MDD 142).

When she wrote this in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the fifty-year-old was smiling at her youthful dreams. But in fact, she never lost them, and she was right not to. It is impossible to read about Simone de Beauvoir's life without thinking about your own. You find yourself wanting to live more courageously, with more commitment and passion. She makes you want to read more books, travel across the world, fall in love again, take stronger political stands, write more, work harder, play more intensely, and look more tenderly at the beauty of the natural world. That is a beautiful gift.

WORKS CITED

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Hazel Rowley is an independent writer brought up in England and Australia and currently living in New York City. She has written three books to date: *Christina Stead: A Biography* (1993); *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2001), and *Tête-à-Tête*, which was chosen as a *Washington Post* Best Book for 2005 and named “the best literary essay of 2006” by the French magazine *Lire*. The book has been translated into more than a dozen languages and has been the object of both international acclaim and controversy. She is currently working on *Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: An Extraordinary Marriage* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

