



# Betty Rollin, Author

## First, You Cry

### Lesson Introduction

**Interview Log:** Interviewed on September 6, 2022 by Nancy Steiner

- ▣ Access *The Thread* episode of Betty Rollin on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- ▣ Access her long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

### Learning Objectives

#### Social Studies Focus

- ▣ Learn about moral courage from a very personal point of view
- ▣ See the power of storytelling to decrease stigma and shift understanding

#### English Language Arts Focus

- ▣ Explore the emotions of loss and grief and the capacities of resilience and courage
- ▣ Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one author
- ▣ Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- ▣ Use Betty Rollin's episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

## Episode Overview

In her last interview, Betty Rollin reflected on her life journey, marked by career shifts and personal challenges. She discussed how she used humor in her book *First, You Cry* about her battle with breast cancer. Rollin opened up about assisting her mother in peacefully ending her battle with cancer and trying to cope with the loss of her husband.



## Biography

Betty Rollin was a TV correspondent, accomplished author, and captivating speaker. She published seven books, including *First, You Cry* (1976), a moving story – the first of its kind – about her breast cancer and mastectomy. It received wide critical acclaim and was made into a television movie starring Mary Tyler Moore as Betty Rollin. In her bestseller *Last Wish* (1985) Rollin deals with the suicide of her terminally ill mother. One critic called it “a document of personal compassion and public importance.” The book has been published in 18 foreign countries and was made into a TV movie, which aired on ABC in 1992, starring Patty Duke and Maureen Stapleton. Betty Rollin joined NBC in 1972 as a reporter for *Chronolog*. She later created and anchored a series of NBC News special programs for and about women titled *Women Like Us*. In January of 1973 she was named a correspondent for NBC News, reporting on human-interest stories, which remain her main focus as a journalist. Her series on the Native Americans of Pine Ridge, South Dakota won both a duPont and an Emmy award. Rollin passed away on November 7, 2023.



## Teaching Tip: First Take

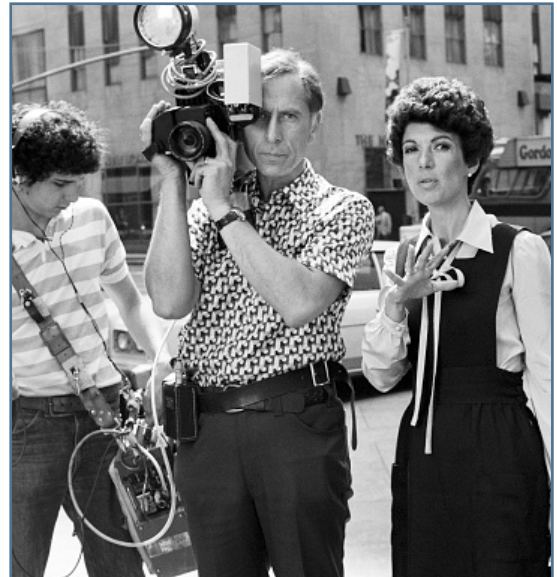
A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

### Suggested Steps

- Read the opening of Betty Rollin's episode aloud to students:

"I certainly never second-guessed myself about the rightness of helping my mother die. We were both afraid of getting arrested. Of course, the notion that we might get arrested did a lot of good for the bug, ironically. I mean, suddenly I became a maybe felon. You know, nice little Betty Rollin who's on the news."

- Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Betty Rollin from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.
- Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?





Teaching Tip:

# THE THREAD Up Close

After watching the interview, have students debrief her life story with these suggested questions:

- How do you understand the title *First, You Cry* after meeting Betty Rollin and listening to her life story? Why do you think she chose this as the title of her first book?
- How did her mother and New York childhood shape Rollin’s character and career?
- What were some of the challenges Betty Rollin faced as a trailblazing woman in journalism?
- What is your response to helping her mother die on her own terms?
- Reflect on how she faced the presence of cancer in her own life and the lives of her mother and husband. What lessons can you take away from this aspect of her story?

After discussing, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage them in a close read and analysis of her interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of *A Thread* connection: If you are introducing a unit on storytelling, or the power of a story, this one sentence from Betty Rollin is a powerful statement for an opening conversation:

“When I hear other people tell stories about their lives, if they’re well told, I benefit.”

## Connections

- How do you use humor to navigate difficult times in your life? What was your reaction to the line attributed to her, “Betty Rollin made cancer funny?”
- What are the different ways you understand grief and the grieving process after learning from Betty Rollin?
- What did you learn about sexism and misogyny in the workplace from her stories?
- What new insights or life lessons did you gain about (yourself, your community, your world) from her story?



Photos: Diana Vreeland Editor-in-Chief of “Vogue” magazine selecting designs for an issue of the magazine May 1, 1963. (Getty) left; The editorial workroom at “Look Magazine” 488 Madison Avenue New York City, 1969. (Alamy) right



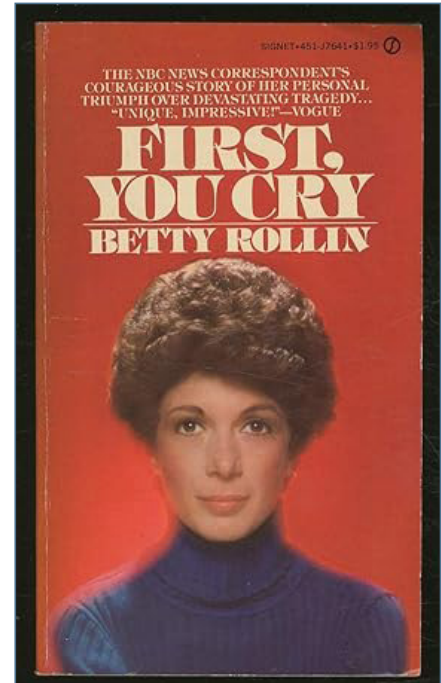
### Activity: First, You Cry

We learn from her THREAD episode that *First, You Cry* was the only book at the time that chronicled a woman’s experience with breast cancer, and as she recalls, “made it funny.” She also recounts that it taught her “that good things can come out of bad things.”

**This is a universal life lesson to examine more closely. In this exercise you have the opportunity to choose one of two options:**

**Option One:** Select a character from a novel or from a period of history you have studied, where a good thing came out of a bad thing that happened. Sometimes you learn about this as “the hero’s journey,” but it does not need to be limited to this idea or adhere to every step of the hero’s journey. Once identified, compare this character/historical actor to Betty Rollins and write about what was similar and what was different.

**Option Two:** Select an event or experience in your own life where a good thing eventually unfolded after a bad thing. Reflect in writing on this experience and on the life lessons you learned that you carry with you today.



#### Additional Resources

- ▣ [Radio interview](#) from 1993 with Betty Rollin speaking about *First, You Cry*
- ▣ Watch Betty Rollin’s [reporting and advocacy work](#) in action
- ▣ Read an editorial from [The Washington Post](#) about assisting in her mother’s last wish to die with dignity
- ▣ Learn more about [Compassion & Choices](#), an advocacy group that supports expanding access to end-of-life medicine

**Photos:** A made-for-TV movie “First You Cry” featuring Anthony Perkins as Arthur Heroz and Mary Tyler Moore as Betty Rollin. October 19, 1978. (Getty) upper left; “Life Stories” Interview. (Life Stories) lower left; Cover of “First You Cry”, by Betty Rollin. Sept 6, 1977. (Signet) left

