



BETTY ROLLIN INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Betty Rollin, Correspondent, NBC News (1973-1982)
September 6, 2022
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Total Running Time: 28 minutes and 14 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

BETTY ROLLIN:

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.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories
Berry Rollin
Correspondent, NBC News (1973-1982)

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NANCY STEINER:

So you wanted to be an actress?

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BETTY ROLLIN:



Well, I wanted to be an actress because. Somebody saw me in a play at Sarah Lawrence College that was very near New York and an agent and put me up for a part. And I got the part and I went to work as an actress the day after graduation. So did I want to be an actress? What did I know? I mean, I thought, well, this is fun, you know? But I got sucked into it, kind of. And then I luckily in time discovered what an awful profession that is. Horrible. I mean, you're constantly trying to get jobs and please people and look good. But then I. I was saved from it by a little job. I got doing research for a writer. A an uncle of a classmate of mine was a writer and needed a researcher. And somehow she mentioned it to me. And somehow I thought I could do that. And once I did that, I. I turned. I was on my way to writing at that point.

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NANCY STEINER:

So how would you describe your childhood?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Odd. My childhood was odd. I was an only child of a very ambitious mother and a very contented father. My father was from Ukraine, and he didn't come to America until he was 20 something. And he loved America and he didn't. And he loved me. And he really was happy with life. My mother, on the other hand, was a warrior. She was happy with life, too, but she always wanted more, especially out of me. So, you know, that was good. And that was bad for me. It was it. I mean, she loved me and but she wanted me to be as much as I could be. I mean, she researched what would be the very best schools. And in her opinion, that would be Fieldston Ethical Culture and Sarah Lawrence



College. And she when I was really too young, she brought me to a place on Fifth Avenue where there was some kind of makeup lady. And I mean, I wasn't a child then. I was teenage, but I mean, what mother is going to take you to a makeup lady and Fifth Avenue so that you know how to do that? Right. And and she sent me to sewing school so that I would possibly have a need for that and that would be covered. And on Saturday, when other children were playing my we were living in a section of Yonkers called Lincoln Park and kind of suburb place. I got on the train with my mother and once we were on the train, she had me looking at the ads so that she could teach me grammar. The remarkable thing about my mother's and on top with all of that. Push, push, push, push. She was a kind, loving person. She cared about other people. She would talk to me about other people and what they cared about. So I learned to be. I hope a person who is interested in cares about other people. I mean, I got that from her. If I have that, I it was from her and it was sort of a funny mix. That ambition of hers on the one hand, and her sweetness and her heart.

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NANCY STEINER:

When you first became a writer, how did that actually manifest itself?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Well. After I'd started doing research for writers. I thought, I'm going to try this myself and a friend of mine. A friend of mine's uncle worked at McCall's, and so I had a connection there. And so and she made an appointment for me with the editor of McCall's. But I came in with a whole bunch of ideas for



pieces, and they were ideas that I thought I could handle. And the one they chose was I thought I would do a piece for them on women who do commercials. I wasn't interested in women who do commercials, but I figured for my first piece, I was smart enough to figure out do something, you know, something about I was an actress, after all, had been. And so I worked on that piece for months. I mean, I was so hard because I didn't know how to do a magazine piece I was teaching myself. But anyway, it ran. The piece was published, and once that first piece was published, I was on my way. I heard that Joan Didion, a very wonderful writer, was leaving her job at Vogue magazine. Vogue magazine apparently had a in addition to all the fashion they had a. A features group, a little group of writers who wrote articles that had nothing to do with fashion. And Joan Didion was one of them. There were two others. And she was leaving her job. And I somehow I got an interview for that job, and somehow they hired me. On the basis of that piece that I had. One piece I had published in McCall's writing for Vogue magazine was an amazing experience because the editor of that department was a stern little lady who decided to improve my writing, and she did. She just took it upon herself to teach me what I needed to know. And I became a better writer under this woman. But eventually I was fired by this wonderful editor. And and she said, you know, you're a wonderful writer, dear, but you don't know enough. And I said, I think you're right. And I'm going to. Thank you, Miss told me and I cried a little and left Vogue.

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NANCY STEINER:

What was it like to be a woman in what was a man's world at that time?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Lonely. I mean, at my first job, Vogue, of course, there were plenty of women. That was Vogue magazine at Look Magazine. There were practically no women writers. There were no women senior editor except maybe one other. There was a woman in charge on this, not in charge, but on the second level. And she was my friend. Her name was Pat Carbine. And she she gave me stories to write that grew out of her sisterhood. For instance, I wrote a story that turned out to be a bit of a bombshell for a look about saying that you didn't have to have children. It was also a cover story, and there were a lot of canceled subscriptions, and she supported that story big time.

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NANCY STEINER:

How did you shift from print to television?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I arrived at Look magazine one day and there were cameras. The cameras, it turned out, were there because Look magazine was about to die. And I knew that the magazine world was not healthy because of television. News particularly, and just television in general. Maybe I ought to think about going to television. And I lived across town on the crosstown bus line from NBC News, from NBC. And so I thought that would be a good, convenient place to work. So I went I made an appointment with the president of NBC News, and he hired me on the spot because at this point, it look magazine, I had a column of my own. I was, you know, a bit of a known writer. I looked okay. I



could speak. Remember, I've been an actress for 5 minutes. And he just hired me. And I said, But I don't know how to do this, You know, I should tell you that. And he said, Yeah, well, we'll teach you. And they did. They taught me. They hired me. They attached me to a local news anchor. And then I went on to be on the network. Television has something to do with showbiz and writing has nothing to do with showbiz. Writing is in your head. Completely. And your heart. And I. I realized after a long time doing television that I'm a writer, not a television person. But I got through it somehow. And I. I mean, I had a very interesting time. On television. I mean, I certainly had adventures that I wouldn't have had if I just sat home writing.

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NANCY STEINER:

And then cancer came along, which changed everything, including your marriage.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Yeah.

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NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about how cancer intersected with your work and how you navigated your life.

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BETTY ROLLIN:



Cancer improved my taste in men. It definitely did, because after I had cancer, I didn't want I really didn't want any more punishment of any kind. And I think I had been previously a bit of a masochist. There are women like that who fall for men who kind of hurt them. When I got breast cancer, I realized I couldn't be married to Arthur Herzog, who has since died. Because he was such a child and I wound up running off with. Another man who wanted to marry me. And who. I felt. Good about. And. It turned out. He was a bit of a fake. So I wound up leaving him and I returned to work to be a correspondent at NBC News. It was one. New Years. And I. They took me back. I had this rubber thing in my bra that was masquerading as a breast. And I continued my life as a correspondent. At some point after I went back to NBC News, my book *First You Cry*, was published. It was about having breast cancer. Nobody wanted to publish it because it was about cancer. One editor at a small publishing house fell in love with it, mainly because it was about cancer and it was funny. And she made them publish my book.

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NANCY STEINER:

There's a quote that I like where somebody said, Betty Rollin made cancer funny.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Uh huh.

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NANCY STEINER:

How is that even possible?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Oh, yeah. Well, I guess my way of dealing with difficult things is to laugh, or at least see the joke if I possibly can. And there's very often a joke where you would not think there would be a joke. And so there are. There are funny parts. A first you cry. And one of the most wonderful things that happened to me as a result of of those jokes is that, of course, I heard from many women who had breast cancer and I was so happy for them that they were finding funny stuff. And I felt and they made me they thanked me. And that was very nice because I wasn't writing this book to help anybody but myself. But it turned out it did. And, you know, I just that was really nice.

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NANCY STEINER:

It was a runaway bestseller. What do you think made the book so enormously popular and impactful?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I guess first you cry work because first of all, it was the only book I knew of that was about a woman who had breast cancer and who was writing honestly about herself and also who was weirdly funny about it, and also was having a romance. And somehow that became a big seller. And then what didn't hurt was that Mary Tyler Moore, who was very big star at that time, decided she wanted to make a TV movie of First You Cry, starring herself as



me. And I remember how I found out about it because the phone rang and a voice said, Hi, this is Betty Rollin. And I said, What? And she said, I'm joking. It's Mary Tyler Moore. A deal had been made and she thought it would be fun to call me. And that was fun.

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NANCY STEINER:

What did having cancer teach you or even give you?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I had cancer, actually, two and a half times. I had one breast and then nine years later, the other breast. And then I had a growth in my neck somewhere. I forget exactly where and but I happened to recover. So lucky. It taught me that you can be lucky in life. That's what it taught me. And it taught me that good things can come out of bad things. Because I really feel good about my book. First you cry. And I wouldn't have written that book if I didn't have breast cancer. And. It taught me that I could laugh about the cancer. I also learned that not all diseases have pain involved. Amazingly, the breast cancer that I had, which did not include chemotherapy, did not involve pain. I mean, I had the surgeries. When the surgeries were over, I felt groggy. But it was not a it was not a painful experience, which I wouldn't have guessed that.

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NANCY STEINER:

But later on, your mother developed an incredibly painful cancer. How did your experience with your own illness help you and help her through this?



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BETTY ROLLIN:

After I married my prize husband, whom my mother adored. My mother got cancer. A bad cancer. She went through the treatments heroically. They were horrible at the time. Horrible. And then the cancer came back. And when the cancer came back, she was given. Six months to live. And she told me very clearly, which was her way, that she thought she had had a wonderful life, but that now it was over and she was finished and I had to help her get out of this. That is to say, life. So we managed to help her die. Which was dangerous. It was dangerous not only for us in terms of breaking the law. It was dangerous for her in case it didn't work. We were horrified by that possibility. We were terrified. That's all we thought about. But it did work. And she. Died looking at. I'm embarrassed to say it. My baby pictures. And looking at us. She closed her eyes and went to sleep and then died. And then I wrote a book about that because I thought there must be other people out there who want what she got and who are unable to get it. And I'm going to tell her story.

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NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about the grief that you suffered. How did you get through your mother's death in terms of your own grief?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I have to be really honest. I did not grieve for my mother. I missed her. I miss her now. But I. I didn't grieve for her because I saw her get a death she



wanted. And it worked smoothly. She didn't suffer in the dying. But she was saved from the suffering she would have had had she remained alive.

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NANCY STEINER:

How have you been able to heal yourself?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I guess I try to heal myself when I have pain or discomfort or anxiety. I guess I try to step back and be reasonable about it. And if I can see the humor, it doesn't always work. It is not working for me now with my husband's death.

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NANCY STEINER:

Tell me about.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

And I had the most wonderful husband imaginable. He was a brilliant mathematician. He was smart. He was funny. He was kind. He was generous. He was interested in other people. And he loved me and I loved him. I have a lot of unhappiness right now is that happens because of my husband's recent death. And that's because. My husband didn't have to die, that is. He had a colonoscopy and the doctor missed the cancer that was there. And he wound up stage four and he was told that he had two years to live, which turned out to be correct. We came home from learning that he had two years to live, and



I said, I'm going to write to that doctor now. And Ed said. You are not going to write to the doctor. I'm not going to do right to the doctor. We are going to forget about the doctor. We are going to be as happy as we can for two years until I die. And that's what we did. He did it. I pretended.

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NANCY STEINER:

What did you do with your anger?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

My anger, unfortunately, is festering right now. I am not doing well with that. I confess that. But I feel that I have no right to it because obviously, first of all, I'm old. He was old. We had a great life together. 42 years. How can I be anything but grateful? And I wish I were only grateful. And I am grateful. But I'm also very sad and. Upset about how it happened. Part of my misery now is that I'm miserable and I don't think I deserve to be.

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NANCY STEINER:

How has your own mortality affected your attitude about life as you get older? You've thought about your own death.

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BETTY ROLLIN:

I have thought about my own death. And frankly. Now that my husband is gone. I'm not interested in life the way I used to be. It would please me if I got



something quick and painless and just died sometime, maybe after this summer. Because I like this summer. And I mean that because I've had such a wonderful life. But it's it's kind of over for me, I feel. And I say that not sadly. I do say it sadly because I miss my husband so much. But I mean, I don't say it sadly in terms of not feeling lucky. I feel totally lucky and pleased with the life I have had and I don't really feel that I need anymore. But I'll take it for a while.

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NANCY STEINER:

Would you be willing to take your own life if you could?

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BETTY ROLLIN:

Would I be willing to take my own life if I could? I would like the ability to be able to do that. Yes, but that's that's not going to happen. The most, I hope. Is that sick, dying people, suffering people. Can, for heaven's sakes, get out of life sooner than the end. That will come naturally, which will torture them.

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NANCY STEINER:

You so well understand. Personally and professionally, the tremendous value of storytelling about one's life. How would you describe that? How would you describe the incredible value of life storytelling?

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BETTY ROLLIN:



I've had a lot of response from readers. About the books I've written, and it has taught me that people want company in their misery. They want to be released from the pain of not only having misery but of hiding it or of being ashamed of it. Or being not allowed to have it in some way. Are not telling the truth about it. All of those things. And when you write honestly about your own pain. With some humor. It does help people. I found out. To release them. And I feel very good about that and I feel very good about that. People don't want to just hear or read about sadness and misery. That's not a comfort. They want more than that. They want to hear and read about some recovery in that misery. Some. Some victory in that misery, some learning from that misery. When I hear other people tell stories about their lives, if they're well told. I benefit. I feel that I benefit and I learn even still, even as an old lady. I'm still learning and I'm still comforted by others. In their writing. And. I'm still a big reader, and that's how I get my information about people. And from my friends, I'm a big question asker. And I'm. I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful. When people share. What's happening with them. Whatever it is.

END TC: 00:28:14:00