

MEDIA'S PERILOUS PATHS

Lauren Graham '88 talks with Anna Quindlen '74 and *Barnard Magazine* about writing and acting

The day her debut novel landed on bookstore shelves, actress Lauren Graham sat down for a Q & A with Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Anna Quindlen to talk about—well, everything: work, writing, life, relationships, New York City, and even their Barnard days. Graham's book-launch event featuring not one but two famed Barnard alumnae packed the upper level of the Barnes & Noble in Union Square, with several disappointed fans turned away.

Graham is perhaps best known for her role as the quirky, fast-talking single mom in the TV show *The Gilmore Girls*. She currently stars in the NBC drama *Parenthood*, which follows the ups and downs of a sprawling California family. But her new book, *Someday, Someday, Maybe* (Ballantine Books, 2013), about an aspiring actress trying to make it in New York City, is her first serious foray into writing.

Quindlen started the Q & A by saying how glad she was to meet Graham in person. "For a long time I felt like there was barely one degree of separation between us," she began. "We both went to Barnard,"—this drew a loud cheer from the audience of almost 500, in which there were several Barnard alumnae and students. "You were in the movie version of my novel *One True Thing* with Meryl Streep and Renée Zellweger," to which Graham responded that the part was one of her first big acting roles. And when Quindlen called Graham's book "absolutely phenomenal," Graham fell serious; there is nothing funny about receiving such praise from the grand dame of novel writing. "I could die now," said Graham. (Not the only one, the writer confesses that her favorite television character is Graham's

Lorelei Gilmore.)

Graham arrived at Barnard as a transfer student. She started out studying acting at NYU, but its conservatory-oriented program didn't demand enough reading and, she recalled, "I felt at a loss without schoolwork." After that, Barnard was the only place she considered. "Barnard had a theatre major, and I wanted to stay in New York." She began a sprint to graduation, the speed of which she now regrets. "I was so ambitious and driven and dying to get started, I crammed four years of requirements into three," thinking "the career I want is right outside my window." Still, she said, "I somehow found time to do a play and musicals and usher at theatres."

Graham's favorite part of Barnard was singing with the Metrotones, Columbia's then-new all-female a cappella group, "a crazy mix of people." Two Metrotones members are still her best friends, including Kathy Ebel '89, a television writer who just published her own first novel, *Claudia Silver to the Rescue*. (See *Barnard Magazine*, Winter 2013.) Ebel attended Graham's New York book launch, where Graham said that in *Someday, Someday, Maybe*, the character Jane, whom Graham describes as the "sassy best friend," recalls Ebel. "That's really what college is ultimately about. Who did you meet, who you then write the rest of your life story with? There were some amazing people [in Metrotones]. I traveled on weekends, we were sort of a sorority," Graham recalled. "It was a huge part of my social life."

Books have always been another huge part of Graham's life, and she ended up majoring in English, not theatre, at Barnard. "It felt practical and I wanted to be reading the literature I was reading

anyway. The department was so strong—it was the right move."

After Barnard, Graham took odd jobs to pay rent like her book's heroine, Franny Banks. But she realized, "I could spend years doing this, so I got into a graduate program. I had a full scholarship which was the only way I could do it." She earned her MFA in theatre at Southern Methodist University in 1992. Then followed TV appearances, including recurring roles on the mid-1990s sitcoms *Caroline in the City* and *News Radio*. She was cast as leads in two other 90s shows, neither of which lasted a full season. Before *The Gilmore Girls* pilot aired, she learned the show was slotted for Thursday night. "And I was like 'Wait, opposite *Friends*?' We're going to get cancelled! I laughed," she said.

But the show developed a devoted following, earning critical acclaim not only for the program, but for Graham herself. It was perhaps the perfect role for a voracious reader; her dialogue was peppered with myriad cultural and literary references. "The amount of speaking and memorizing was huge. But you want a character who speaks to your strengths, and I felt like there was a great overlap of sensibility for me with that kind of very verbal, comedy-drama mix." Graham said she misses the show's snappy banter, which was delivered at a faster-than-normal pace, but added that doing *Gilmore Girls* took considerable stamina. "I don't know if I could do it now. A 12-hour day was a short day."

In comparison, *Parenthood* provides Graham with stretches of time. As part of an ensemble cast of several main characters, she often goes hours or days without being on set. Other actors with

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SALON: ELENA SEIBERT

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took every class she ever taught for the rest of my [years] there. It really was a major turning point in my life.”

Seibert also spent a year in Paris in a Columbia program, falling in love with the city and awakening her visual sense. Still, she didn't become a photographer right after college. She worked in TV and considered documentary filmmaking for a few years before her husband, Alan Goodman CC '74, encouraged her to move toward photography. Starting at age 28, she gave it her full attention, attending the International Center of Photography and spending a year apprenticing with freelance New York photographer Jill Krementz. Then came years photographing for *Newsday* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Seibert only left the 24/7 on-call life of a photojournalist for portraiture when her son, Perry, was born in 1994. Perry has just graduated from high school, daughter Lily is 16, and Seibert is at the top of her field, with a whole host of celebrities out there who aren't interested in ever working with anyone else but Elena Seibert again.

SALON: PETRA COSTA

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universities, but once accepted into the College, she knew it had everything she wanted.) “The moment I arrived in New York, the phantoms of my sister quickly dissolved,” she says, and she no longer feared that Elena's tragic fate would become hers. “I quickly started to make my own path and really fell in love with the whole atmosphere, just being in such a rich environment, exchanging so many ideas, and being challenged intellectually in so many ways. I felt clearly that I found my identity,” she says, and remains indebted to Bruce Robbins, a Columbia University professor in the department of English and comparative literature.

Costa found work after graduation with a television company, but it left her unsatisfied. She enrolled at the London School of Economics and Political Science, earning a master's degree in 2008 in health, community,

and development, with the idea of aiding trauma survivors in Brazil. “That educational background and the related research inspired me and helped me, and was a kind of theoretical background for *Elena*,” she says.

Filmmaking, though, proved irresistible. Costa directed and produced *Undertow Eyes* (2009), a 20-minute film about her grandparents before turning her focus on her late sister. *Elena* took two-and-a-half years to make and was funded with support from the Tribeca Film Institute, the Ford Foundation, and the Brazilian telecommunications company Oi. It is being screened at film festivals around the world and slated to be shown in Brooklyn on August 10 as part of the Rooftop Films series.

Costa initially was concerned about how her mother, Li An, would react to seeing painful, intimate family history played out on the screen. But Costa says her mother encouraged her to make *Elena*—and participated in the project despite her enduring grief—because her daughter's suicide had been looping endlessly in her brain for years. “After the release of the film, she had some very therapeutic effects of having it seen by so many people, releasing a lot of good energy,” she says. “In some way, she celebrates and feels redeemed from her guilt. That was completely unexpected.”

For her next film, which is being shot in France and Denmark, Costa is collaborating with Danish filmmaker Lea Glob. The directors met through a Danish initiative that pairs non-European filmmakers with European ones. Another hybrid of documentary and fiction, the film will follow a pregnant woman exploring how her sense of self changes as she prepares for motherhood. It will dig deep into the themes that Costa says she finds irresistible: womanhood, motherhood, identity and relationships.

For more information about the Brooklyn screening of Elena, visit rooftopfilms.com.

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that much downtime, she joked, might “go get a massage.” But Graham needs

creative outlets; “It has been hard to not work every day, so that drove me to figure out something to do with the time.” She considered writing a memoir or humorous personal essays, but decided “I don't want to write about myself. It feels too personal. But I'll do the fictional version, and I'm interested in the world of show biz as I've seen it, with its beats of success and failure.”

At the Barnes & Noble event Quindlen asked Graham: “Someone once said to me that the two most perilous and challenging lines of work are being an actor and being a writer. So now you're one of the few people...who's done both. Why did you want to do this?”

Graham laughed, “I kept saying to friends and family: ‘Whose idea was this? Why didn't I pick up a nice instrument, a new language, a craft?’ Something that isn't so vulnerable. But I was a voracious reader as a child and I think it's part of the reason I ended up as an actor. There was nothing more important in our house than a good story. My father was an excellent storyteller and I lived in the world of fiction...a world as real to me as my own in some ways.”

IT NEVER FELT LIKE WORK

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she continue her education. Instead of returning to the doctoral program at Columbia, Denburg enrolled in Teachers College where she earned a master's in student personnel administration with a concentration in counseling, and a doctorate in higher-education administration.

After about a decade serving in various advisor roles, Denburg became dean of the College. In a recent letter to alumnae and the Barnard community, Spar describes Denburg's 17 years as dean as “legendary.” Among her accomplishments were enhancing student services, strengthening financial aid, and shoring up health and wellness programs. She also taught courses in the first-year seminar program and the Centennial Scholars program. Being in the classroom helped her gain more insight into the dynamics of the College.

Denburg has certainly seen Barnard