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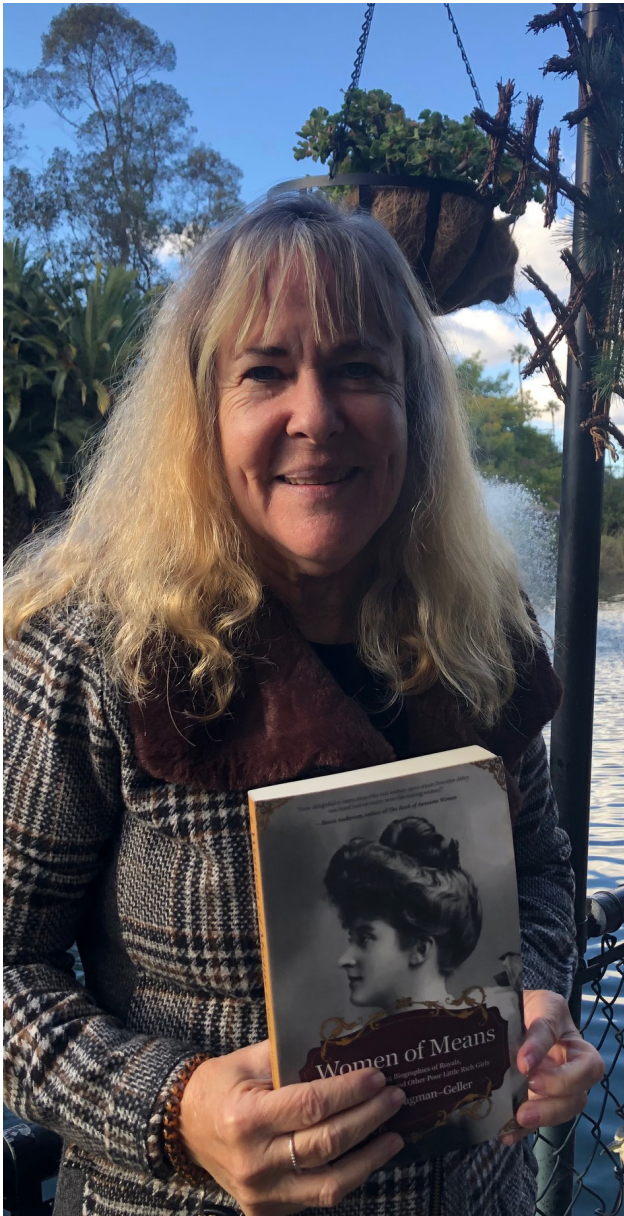
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Diane & Joe Musgrove

Meet San Diego's
Favorite Family





Photos courtesy of Marlene Wagman-Geller

Author Marlene Wagman-Geller

By Shelley Burbank

Sometimes when you are pursuing one dream, you accidentally stumble upon another, and your entire creative focus changes.

Author Marlene Wagman-Geller experienced this phenomenon firsthand back in 2008. After years of trying unsuccessfully to break into publishing with historical, literary fiction, the author's curiosity about the dedication page in one of the most notorious books in American literature inspired her to begin researching the stories behind famous dedications. She wrote a proposal, acquired an agent and sold the book to Perigree, an imprint of Penguin.

The genre turned out to be the perfect fit. She's now published eleven books of historical nonfiction, a twelfth manuscript is ready for submission, and she's researching her thirteenth.

One day in December, I met the petite, blonde, bubbly author at Anthony's Fish Grotto in La Mesa, a "ladies who lunch" kind of place with a dreamy blue-green interior, generous outdoor patio seating, and an extensive seafood-based menu.

We sat at a window booth overlooking a tranquil pond where a family of ducks paddled and a fountain sprayed in the center. Over lunch, we talked non-stop about our shared love of writing, books, and other authors. We also discussed the ups and downs of the writing life—publishing, marketing, and the best way to handle PR. Throughout the nearly two-hour conversation, Wagman-Geller peppered the conversation with anecdotes and stories gleaned from her years of researching and writing on

topics such as "poor little rich girls," wives of famous men, royal ladies, and the people behind the names of iconic, world-renowned brands.

"I've always been an avid, avid reader," she told me when I asked if she always wanted to be a writer. "Going from reading a book to wanting your name on the spine is a logical jump."

Once she understood she wanted to be an author, she began to write in earnest. But, despite submitting several literary historical novels while living in Toronto, Wagman-Geller did not manage to find an editor to take her on. "I tried and tried and got rejection after rejection after rejection," she said.

In 1986, she and her husband moved to San Diego, where Wagman-Geller taught English and history in National City. She was also parenting the couple's daughter. Those years proved to be difficult, creatively, for the author. "Every day, I'd switch from teacher mode to parent mode. I could not write for like 16 years. I just couldn't."

It would have been easy to give up, but she never forgot her dream. One day, serendipity lent a hand. "Someone told me that Gwyneth Paltrow was going to star in *Peyton Place*," the author said. "Before I see a movie, I like to read the book, so I bought Grace Metalious's book."

It wasn't the actual story that sparked Wagman-Geller's interest, however. Instead, as she flipped through the front matter, the dedication page caught her attention: "To George—for all the reasons he knows so well."

Her curiosity piqued, Wagman-Geller researched the book online and discovered George was Metalious's long-suffering husband. Unfortunately, it turned out, the man had lost his job as a high school principal because of his wife's scandalous book. George also ended up raising the couple's children alone because of Metalious's alcohol addiction.

Even in better days, Wagman-Geller learned, Metalious wasn't focused on housework and childrearing duties, preferring to concentrate on her writing. The dishes were rarely done. The food in the refrigerator was expired. These must have been the reasons George "knew so well," Wagman-Geller realized.

Discovering all this, she was struck with the idea that the story behind a book was often as interesting as the book itself. So she started exploring other dedications of famous authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ayn Rand. The more she explored, the more she believed she'd hit on a viable topic for a nonfiction book.

She told her husband about her book idea. Her husband's reaction? "Don't quit your day job."

Undeterred, she worked on a book proposal and sent it off to Penguin. They wrote back with an acceptance—and a nice advance. Once Again to Zelda: The Stories Behind Literature's Most Intriguing Dedications came out in 2008, the beginning of Wagman-Geller's career as a historical nonfiction writer.

"One of the favorite moments of my life was getting a Penguin deal. I told my husband, 'Does Penguin Publishing mean anything to

you?' And he said, 'Well, still don't quit your day job. We get benefits.'"

She didn't quit. The author laughed. "I was at my [teaching] job for 40 years!"

She continued writing, too. More titles quickly followed. She focused each book on a unique theme: world-changing

cations such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and The Telegraph. When these sources do not provide enough information—such as when she researched Gandhi's wife, Kasturba Mohandas Gandhi, for her book on women behind the men—she turns to biographies. For Mrs.

I was so upset," she said. But then she got the idea for Behind Every Great Man: The Forgotten Women Behind the World's Famous and Infamous, and she knew she wasn't ready to throw in the towel. "It was so much fun. I liked the idea for a book. I believed in the concept. I had to find another literary agent."

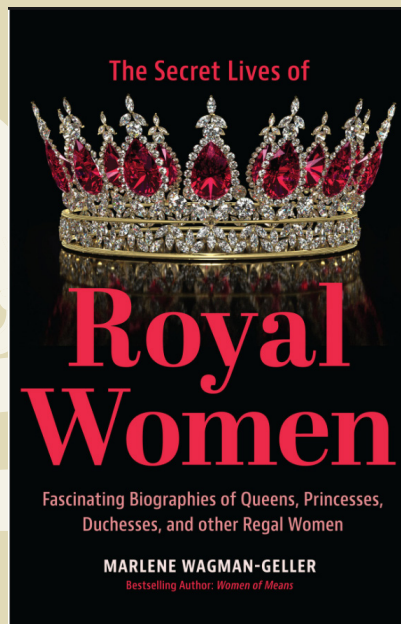
She was able to connect with an agent who shared her passion for history. He secured a book deal with Sourcebooks. (Ironically, her editor there ended up leaving to take a job with Penguin. It's an insular world, publishing.)

A fifth book idea intrigued Mango, a small press with a female-centric list. That book, Still I Rise: The Persistence of Phenomenal Women (Celebrating Women), celebrates women like Maya Angelou and Winnifred Mandela, who overcame difficult—sometimes seemingly insurmountable challenges—to become successful luminaries and historical figures.

Her eleventh book, The Secret Lives of Royal Women: Fascinating Biographies of Queens, Princesses, Duchesses, and other Regal Women, is out now and covers the fascinating secret lives of royals such as Princess Grace of Monaco, Queen Noor, Queen Elizabeth II, and more.

Wagman-Geller herself is an example of persistence. Rather than give up when literary fiction didn't pan out, she pivoted to nonfiction, found a publisher, and established the literary life she envisioned.

To learn more about Marlene Wagman-Geller and her writing, please visit <https://marlenewagmangeller.com>.



ideas, famous couples, the women behind great men, phenomenal and/or privileged women in history, and royal women, to name just a handful. The ideas for new projects just kept coming.

"The idea is everything," she told me when I inquired about her writing process. After coming up with a potential theme, she brainstorms a list of historic persons who fit the topic. It's also important that the subjects' lives are interesting. She explains: "Happy lives make bad stories." Schadenfreude, anyone?

Once she's settled on a list of people, she turns to online newspaper archives, specifically reputable publi-

cations such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and The Telegraph. When these sources do not provide enough information—such as when she researched Gandhi's wife, Kasturba Mohandas Gandhi, for her book on women behind the men—she turns to biographies. For Mrs. Gandhi's chapter, she found a hagiography written by Kasturba's grandson. While it was slanted to show her in a positive light, Wagman-Geller was able to glean enough facts to create an enlightening and entertaining chapter.

As for the business of publishing, the author experienced the usual shake-ups inherent in the industry. After her first three books came out, her agent decided to become an editor. At the same time, the Penguin imprint decided to focus more on craft and self-help rather than history. Suddenly, the author was adrift.

"I didn't have a publisher. I didn't have a literary agent.