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Interviewer: BETSY NEWMAN
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Betsy Newman: Would you talk about what it must have been like for Belle Baruch as a gay person and the daughter of a famous, wealthy man, in her era?

Harlan Greene: The thing is that love is a beautiful thing, speaking in clichés, and it must have been stirring in her, that conflict, that, “Wow, I feel this love, this beautiful thing for another human being but society tells me this isn’t beautiful.” So what a psychological problem that should be - usually love should not be a problem – you want to go around screaming it from the treetops, but in her case society was saying no – this should be, to quote Oscar Wilde, “the love that dare not speak its name.” So obviously nothing came easy to her – we think of love as a gift and a secret thing – so how confusing that would be for any person and particularly for someone who is so in the public eye, someone whose any variance from the norm is going to cause a conflict not only in her own life, but just imagine that the person you love might have a conflict or repercussion in your father’s life. So it was a tough tightrope sort of walk that she had to do – instead of being able to dance about giddily she had to sort of choose her steps very carefully – so I think we feel for her in that regard.

BN: Talk about Paris in the 1920s, when Belle was living there.

HG: It was the time of Gertrude Stein and Hemingway and the Fitzgeralds, but even they lived in a different world. Many scholars now recognize that there was an incredibly energetic and artistic and intellectual lesbian circle in Paris among the many other circles – where women who loved women, loved the world, congregated

together. And because Belle was of a wealth and intellectual integrity we can't help but conjecture, was she part of that circle? But so many of those women were well-known and the thinking that I do on that makes me realize, though, that she was very straight-laced. Even though by society's definition those people – she didn't choose to love – but those people whom she loved - would raise eyebrows. But I think she was very straightlaced. And I think even her father was to some extent. She may not have deigned to move in those circles. I'm not sure if she moved with artists – she seemed to be more comfortable with people of her own set, her own social milieu, people who were interested in horses. As a leftover from the Victorian era, those people who were very wealthy and of a certain social standing may have admired art but they didn't mingle with artists.

Some of those women - Natalie Barney and others – they were Bohemians, so I don't think it would be unusual for someone of Belle's social standing not to have mixed with those women. Obviously they would have had a lot of things in common, but I also think the way she was bred might have kept her from those artistic Bohemian circles. Even in New York you don't get her necessarily mingling in the intelligentsia or the artists. She seems to be more the social set, and maybe later in life people interested in a cause. But one thing about Paris in the '20s – certainly there were people like Gertrude Stein, but there were also people like Hemingway who was violently anti-homosexual. And even Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, even though they might have had gay friends who mixed in their circle, they actually said very snide things in their correspondence.

So even among the intelligentsia many of their gay friends were still considered second class citizens, and even though sexuality has loosened up and they were flappers, they were rolling their stockings and bobbing their hair and demanding their sexual freedom, it was sexual freedom for them and not for minorities. And I was surprised to see that even people like Scott and Zelda said very snide things even though they're considered the epitome of the Roaring '20s. In his novels there

are the wan, effete men and he's not showing gay people in a very honest or a very positive light either.

I don't see her anywhere, she would have had to really cover her tracks, because she would have been a catch, she was so much in the public eye that people would have bragged that they saw her at a party or something. So she was very Victorian in certain respects – and these women were not.

BN: Still, Europe would have been liberating for her in some ways.

HG: Certainly Europe as a much freer place to be. France in particular had abolished its laws outlawing homosexuality, I think going back to the Napoleonic code. And also she was so far from home, away from her parents, so not only did Europe not criminalize homosexuality the way the U.S. did, but she was moving far away from her parents' shadow. They must have had some contemporaries there, so obviously she must have felt a lot of freedom there, but just the fact that she felt comfortable to move in those circles – just as she wasn't bothered by her gender identity, she wasn't bound by her cultural identity either. She could move back and forth between circles as she wanted to. So she crossed all boundaries – international, gender, sexual and I think that's one of the things we find intriguing with her, especially doing it in the time that she did, when it was unusual for women to be professional horsemen. So in many respects I don't know what she would have wanted to be considered a trailblazer, but we can look back and claim her.

BN: Can you talk about her liaisons with men, particularly her plan to marry Monroe Cuthbertson?

HG: She's long past the marriageable age then, at 30 – she's moving to what I guess people around her would call spinsterhood, the subject of gossip. She and he certainly did not invent this custom, or this way of escaping society's criticism or

wrath. I mean, so much of what a social construct is, is a façade. People don't care, you're supposed to enter the party with a man on your arm or a woman on your arm and this would answer that demand of them. They could be good friends - there have been terrible marriages that have begun in passion and have burned out. So they were good friends - this would be a way they could get the press and annoying people off their backs and they wouldn't lose that much. It's not like they were going to be living a lie - they would put up a façade and people would judge them by the façade, but they were not going to warp their interiors by trying to do something that they didn't feel natural doing. But they said, "If society demands this convention maybe we could do it - it might be fun to do it. It would be like putting on a costume and when we came home we could take that costume off."

But one thing I admire about her is that she never really surrendered her soul - she wasn't going to give up who she loved because society told her not to do this. Just as she wouldn't wear corsets as other women her age were doing, she wouldn't put on society's corsets either. You know she wasn't going to deform her shape based on what society thought she should look like and I think that about her is very admirable.

BN: Yet Barbara Donohoe dumped her for a man.

HG: The human heart is hard to fathom and all biographers - even friends - we sit there and make suppositions about what prompted people. But we do know that Belle was deeply hurt by that, but there's not that analogy of cupid and his arrow for nothing. I mean, people fall in love for mysterious reasons, and all of a sudden as well, so we're just left here to speculate. But again, she followed her heart, she was not militant, she did not say I only love women, I only love men - she loved individuals, and again, she was not going to be trapped, she was not going to be boxed in, and again, it would have been very confusing for her at her time because there were not a lot of people for her to look at - there weren't biographies like hers

for others to read. I think every gay person at that time probably thought he or she was the only one in the world that felt these things, and again she had that stiff backbone - she was over 6 feet tall - so she had that backbone that really allowed her to navigate where she had to go regardless of what society said was good or what was bad.

BN: Would you talk about the gulf between Belle and her mother?

HG: It would again depend on the expectations of the parent, and I think her mother was disappointed in many aspects of her life. Maybe if she'd had a more faithful husband, she would not have deserted her daughter over her partners. But I think the most tragic thing about it was the silence - that they didn't discuss it - and if you don't discuss something the silence just gets bigger and bigger, and I think that silence, like cancer just starts eating away at other parts of the relationship. If you can't talk to your parent about a primary relationship in your life, if that is off-limits, I'm assuming it starts eating away at other things as well. So I think that is the tragedy - parents putting expectations on their children to fulfill emotional needs that have not been met. But we have to be, you know, very Freudian as well, we have to grow up and I think it's very sad. People talk about Belle being a closet lesbian, and her mother was a closet drinker, so they were probably alike in more ways, and it's so ironic that often what drives people apart is their similarities.

BN: Yet Belle did remain true to herself in the end.

HG: I think Belle's progression gives us all hope. Somebody said "Age has its compensations...it needs them." So maybe as she was losing her looks, as she was losing her athletic prowess, she comes to realize what's truly important, it doesn't matter what people think, so she's finally reaching some sort of wisdom and she can just relax. I think so much of age is just relaxing and saying, "No, I'm just going to

follow that voice inside my head, instead of all those voices hounding me from outside – what my parents expect of me.” It’s sort of the calm after the storm instead of the calm before the storm that she had this tumultuous life. But you know I think we all envy her, that she could relax into a relationship and then really see what was important – and she stopped giving in to convention – she didn’t dress up as much, she didn’t put on that role as a socialite because she didn’t want to. And I think South Carolina gave her that comfort, that sort of tactile, mother earth comfort, so she didn’t want to leave Hobcaw Barony for any other place in the world because she had found a home – so I think she found an emotional home and a geographical home at the same place.

BN: What about Belle’s racism?

HG: She was imperfect – she did get some of her parents’ prejudices and she managed to avoid some of the prejudices foisted off on her by society – she was told that being gay or lesbian was not a good social norm but she could reject that. Unfortunately she did accept some of the other things in society – her view of African Americans maybe being second class citizens and being deservedly so. Again, she wasn’t a paragon – she was flawed, but it’s those little flaws, those burrs in people’s characters that really catch us literally and catch our attention-- and again, she was very kind to individuals. You wouldn’t have seen her leading marches for integration, but she did do good things, and whites and blacks have benefited from her. She may have been mean upon occasion, but she certainly was not with the oligarchs. She did not bear a great political burden of racism or anything like that. She could have been kinder in her personal life, but if that’s the worst thing she did – it was a charmed life.

You know, she managed to filter out a lot of things that she was told were bad, and I wonder how she could embrace her sexuality and embrace it without a lot of guilt, for which I admire her, and I think it was linked possibly to her Judaism as

well. Being any part of a minority, you want to belong to the larger group, you just want to belong, and I think that in the milieu she grew up she probably was told that being Jewish was a little “less than.” And I think she could translate that into her acceptance of her sexuality. Because she could realize, looking at her Jewish family and say, “No, that’s absurd, what people say about Jews.” And I think she could probably translate that, when she heard whispered things about what it was like to be gay or lesbian, again, she could realize, no that’s not the case. So I think being a minority in many respects made her stronger than if she had been just merely Jewish or just merely gay. There is a book called “Twice Blessed” about being gay and Jewish, that it’s those two minority facets of your personality that actually make you a stronger person.

END OF INTERVIEW