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Dum Dum Bullets Swaddled in Angora

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Review of *Audition: a Memoir* by Barbara Walters. 624 pages. Publisher: Knopf

On April 22, 1976, Barbara Walters announced she was leaving her position as co-host of *The Today Show* on NBC. Named co-anchor of the ABC Evening News at the jaw-dropping salary of $1 million a year, she became the first woman to get that post on any TV network. Looking back at it now, however, it's most striking -- and significant -- that Walters' salary was divided equally by the ABC News and Entertainment Divisions. With a stroke of the pen, "infotainment", the convergence of news and entertainment, was born.

*Audition*, her comprehensive and dishy memoir, Barbara presents herself as a serious journalist. But her roots are showing. Show business is in her blood. The daughter of Lou Walters, the impresario who founded the legendary "Latin Quarter" nightclub, she was shuttled back and forth from New York to Miami, and rode the roller-coaster from rags to riches to (what seemed like) rags. Her older, autistic sister, Jackie, lived a lonely and isolated life, leaving Barbara with a Vesuvius of guilt.

*Audition* is by turns, inspiring, schmaltzy and sad. An audition, after all, is a petition for approval. Walters lacerates herself for three failed marriages and a wayward adopted daughter. And she senses, but does not fully understand, that determination and sacrifice made her a creature of celebrity culture. In the end, the accomplished woman is not that different from the beleaguered little girl: a victim and a beneficiary of the glitz and glamour of showbiz.

Sexuality was essential to her success. It got her interviews with Fidel Castro and an invitation from Panama's Omar Torrijos to stay the weekend. She was -- and is -- an old-fashioned flirt who, at some elemental level, defines herself as a man's woman. Her un-reporterly surmise about Bill Clinton says it all:

"I never felt I really got through to Clinton. I never experienced his renowned sex appeal. He never sparked with me. I remember from Katherine Graham's superb autobiography that she felt President John Kennedy more or less overlooked her because she wasn't young. I felt the same way about myself and Bill Clinton."

Little wonder that even now she won't disclose her age.

Nevertheless, you've got to love Barbara. Rickety writing ("the conversations were unsaid") and treacle aside, her vivacity, verve and willfulness are compelling. *Audition* provides a blow-by-blow account of an extraordinary rise in television, from her serendipitous selection at *The Today Show* to the creation of *20-20*, *The Barbara Walters Specials* and *The View*. The compulsories of a memoir are served -- we now know how Barbara Walters became the iconic "Barbara Walters."

While many readers of *Audition* will relish its Star (Jones) turns, we believe the book's real value rests with its (often unintentional) insights into infotainment. The phenomenon has colonized every corner of television, from *60 Minutes* to *Entertainment Tonight* to *Countdown*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Situation Room*. And it's migrated to newspapers, magazines, and the internet.

Infotainment and its fraternal twin, the celebritification of American culture, subordinate public policy to personality. Walters "loved the line" in a *Newsweek* profile that described the questions she asked as "some of the toughest in television journalism -- dum dum bullets swaddled in angora." Her questions, however, invariably concern lifestyles and emotions, whether they're aimed at Richard Nixon or Richard Gere. To be sure, she struck gold when the Shah of Iran proclaimed that women did not have the same intelligence or ability as men and Walters turned to his wife. Brimming with tears, the empress said, quietly, "I don't think you really believe that" and asked, "What have men done to the world, really?"

But far more often, whether they're softballs or hardballs, her questions get at things we don't need to know. She cringes now, she says, that she had the chutzpah to ask President-elect Jimmy Carter if he and Rosalyn slept in a double bed or twins. And she doesn't know what possessed her to close the Carter interview with the benediction: "Be wise with us. Be good to us." But decades later, her approach hasn't changed.

In the age of infotainment, thanks in no small measure to Walters, the interviewer has entered the frame. His or her relationship with the interviewee can be, well, incestuous. Walters' attempt to "induce some sympathy" for Richard Nixon, didn't come from Walter Cronkite's playbook. Nor did her decision to forewarn
George H. W. Bush she'd be asking about "the vision thing" because she "liked him a great deal."

Walters is willing to go all the way, it's clear, to "get the get." Her exploitation of power brokers is perhaps best exemplified by her relationship with Roy Cohn, whose politics she loathes. And she may not have intended to use her relationships with Alan Greenspan, John Warner, and Edward Brooke for professional gain, but it's hard to imagine they didn't become sources or that her reporting wasn't in some way affected by what they told her. Walters makes much of her "strict" adherence to ABC's "strict" policy prohibiting journalists from accepting gifts. Apparently, the network was not as scrupulous about shtupping.

Although she devotes hundreds of pages to her travels in TV news, in the end, the author of How to Talk with Practically Anybody about Practically Anything is her father's daughter. Thirty years after Anwar Sadat wrote "something in Arabic" as he autographed her notes, Walters hasn't had it translated. Yet she misses no nuance in reprising her interview of Oprah Winfrey and Oprah's interview of her -- perfect harmonic convergences of star interviewer and star.

Is Barbara Walters a journalist or an entertainer? Does it matter anymore? "I'm in a different category," Barbara once said. She certainly is. She has made an indelible mark in what she calls "the destiny business." But if you want to know the direction in which she leans, remember: the memoir is entitled Audition. And look at the back of the book jacket.

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"Her exploitation of power brokers is perhaps best exemplified by her relationship with Roy Cohn, whose politics she loathes." - At least, we can be sure that Roy and Ms. Walters never shtupped - or can we?

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