In 1926, a family friend arranged an audition for an aspiring actress with David Belasco, the icon of the Broadway theater.

As she read for Belasco, the young woman wondered "what the hell" she was doing there. She was "scared pink" when the old man told her she didn't know how to walk.

Nonetheless, Belasco saw enough talent in her performance to advise her to change her name, because Ruby Stevens sounded too much like a burlesque queen.

As she later told it, Belasco looked through old theater programs, settled on the play "Barbara Frietchie," starring someone named Jane Stanwyck, and christened Stevens "Barbara Stanwyck."

The name stuck. And the actress had a long, long run on stage, screen, radio and television.

In "A Life of Barbara Stanwyck," Victoria Wilson, a senior editor at Alfred A. Knopf, takes her subject from birth to 1940. Her book, which exceeds 1,000 pages, takes the reader through every one of Stanwyck's movies and examines her relationships with her two husbands, Frank Fay and Robert Taylor.

It is a valentine to Stanwyck, whom Wilson characterizes, not always persuasively, as a strong, audacious woman who had contempt for Hollywood, knew what parts were good for her, "didn't play by the rules and made up (her) own," a woman to whom money and possessions "meant nothing."

Wilson's biography is extraordinarily, and at times delightfully, detailed. Her stories about Fay, the silent movie actor John Gilbert, the director William Wellman and Columbia Pictures tyrant Harry Cohn, for example, are fascinating, even if you have reason to suspect that some of them aren't true.

Nonetheless, the book is unlikely to appeal to anyone who is not an ardent Stanwyck fan. Most of her movies, after all, are eminently forgettable. As one reviewer noted, Stanwyck had been "an invalid in pictures," saddled with "a chronic attack of bad stories," and wasted in "light society flim-flams or shoddy underworld tales."

It's hard to know, moreover, what Wilson means when, in characteristically melodramatic prose, she attributes Stanwyck's Academy Award nomination for "Stella Dallas" to "vindication for the work she'd
put into the picture and of her triumph over her childhood and the years she'd defied Hollywood's indirect dismissal of her" and then explains that she didn't win because she made things look easy, drawing on her skill as an actress "to create women on the screen whom audiences admired and knew to be true."

Stanwyck's Stella Dallas, Wilson adds, "was naked, honest, disturbing. It took courage to go that far with her."

Surveys of the biggest draws in Hollywood invariably listed Stanwyck well down the list. The actress, it's true, did on occasion turn down scripts and get suspended by the studios.

But claims that she lived life "her own way," blocking out as much of Hollywood, which "didn't know what to make of her," as she could, seem more appropriate to her publicist than to her biographer. Nor do they leave you in eager anticipation of volume two.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.