



Our Interview with Poet

Barbara Ehrentreu



Barbara at the David Hayes Sculpture Garden in Easton, CT

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Hi Barbara! Welcome to The Poetry Page! I'm so happy you could join us! You had submitted poems to the Norwalk Public Library's 2019 inaugural Art & Text Exhibit, and are included in the exhibit booklet, but I know so very little about you!

When did you first come to poetry? Did you enjoy poetry as a child?

Barbara: I loved Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* as a child. It was such a beautiful book, and I liked the verses. I wrote my first poem when I was in 3rd grade, and it got published in the school district newspaper!

I started writing for myself when I was in college; mostly about the war, and some love poems. I kept this all to myself except for sharing with my husband. Then I decided to share with friends; eventually, I shared with my brother. He then made copies of my poems in a booklet for me. It made me feel like a poet.

Sally: What role would you say poetry plays in your life now?

Barbara: Right now, poetry plays a very large role in my life. When anything happens to me, usually I'll write a poem to try to make sense of it. Poetry comes to me at all times as a way for me to express myself. Through poetry, I can tell things to someone that I can't tell them through prose.

I am the Regional Director of **Motivational Strips**, a facebook poetry group that has over 200,000 members. I write every two weeks for **The Garden of Poetry and Prose**, also on facebook. On most Friday nights, I read my poems on **World Poetry Open Mic**. I had a book of poems published in 2016 (*You'll Probably Forget Me: Living With and Without Hal*), and am thinking about publishing another one soon. I have been awarded **Best Poem for 2017** by the **Action On Film Festival**. My work was also chosen to be in the **Walt Whitman Bicentennial for 2019: Poets to Come**.

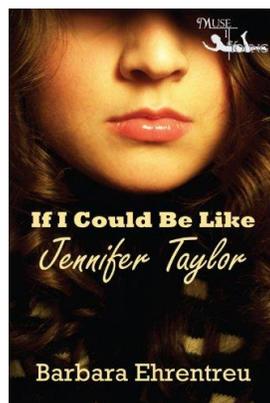
Sally: Barbara, this is so exciting. Who are your favorite poets? Why?

Barbara: When I first started studying poetry, I found Denise Levertov's poems; they immediately spoke to me. Here was someone whose writing I could understand. She actually inspired me to think my work had merit. Maya Angelou blew me away with her work, as well. The power of her words, and the strength of her diction really got to me. Recently, I have become friends with many poets. One whose poetry I love is a Canadian writer, Cynthia Sharp. Her images are so vivid and inspired by nature, and her themes are about self-discovery. Another favorite of mine is

Phillip Matthew Roberts whose poetry captures the angst of his painful history, and who uses classical references in his images. Of course, Robert Frost, William Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman (who I was also able to identify with because I could understand his poetry), and too many others! I read every day from all across the world. There is so much talent out there, and poetry is having such a wonderful resurgence.

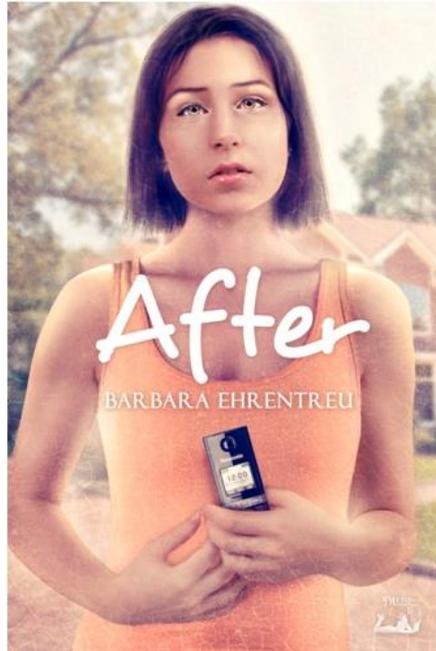
Sally: I know that you have a few novels published, including the Young Adult novel, *If I Could Be Like Jennifer Taylor*. Could you tell us about these?

Barbara: My first YA novel, *If I Could Be Like Jennifer Taylor*, started out as three pages that I wrote as a submission to Paula Danziger’s creative writing workshop for children’s writing. In the novel, Carolyn Samuels—who feels bad about her body—and who has hair like stringy spaghetti, and is too large for fashion—doesn’t want to go to school on the first day of her freshman year. She worries she will see Jennifer Taylor, a thin, blonde, aspiring Olympic gymnast whose father owns half the town, and who has been bullying her since middle school. When the two girls are paired for a math class project, Carolyn thinks her day couldn’t get worse until she faints in gym, and then Jennifer blackmails her to keep the secret. As the girls get to know each other, Carolyn realizes Jennifer has a big problem no one knows about. But Carolyn wants to learn to tumble so she can be a cheerleader, and so she worries about telling her secret to her BFF’s Becky and Janie. Add to this that Carolyn has a crush on Jennifer’s boyfriend, Brad, a Junior quarterback.



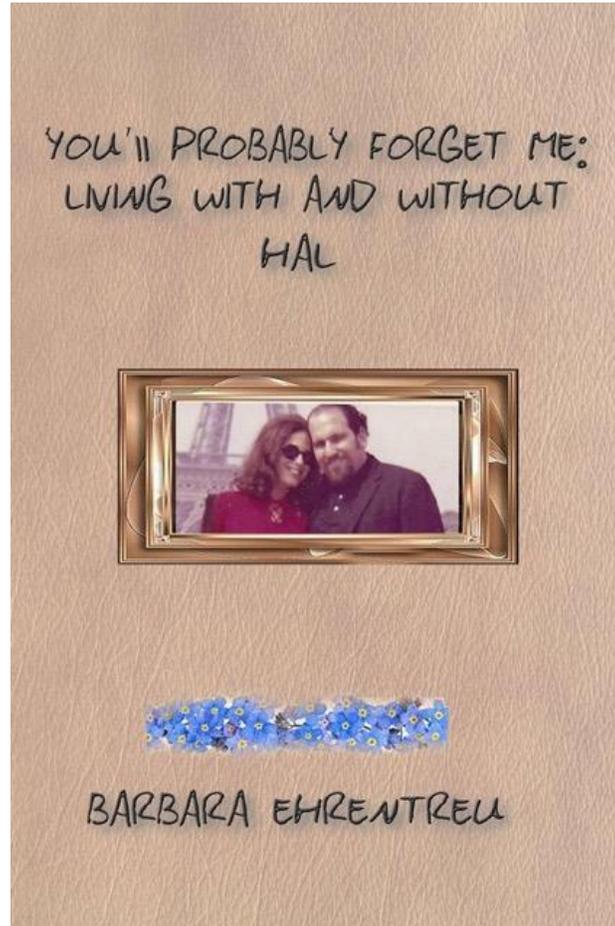
There are two more sequels to this story: *Jennifer’s Story* and *The Mill Valley High Five*. I have finished the first one, and it is with my publisher. The second one is still in progress. When all three are published together they will be *The Mill Valley High Series*.

My next Young Adult novel is called *After*, and is based on my husband's heart attack. Teenager Lauren Walstein answers the phone during a Mets game, and her father is on the line. He is having a heart attack, and her world completely changes in that moment. She begins to think of everything in her life as "before the phone call," and "after the phone call." She rushes to the hospital with her family to meet her father, and the next few weeks are devoted to visiting him. Joey, Lauren's best friend, hasn't been seeing her very much anymore: he has a girlfriend, Amber, who doesn't like Lauren. But Joey drops everything after Lauren's father's heart attack, and rushes to her side. As the weeks continue, and while her father is recovering from bypass surgery, Joey becomes more than just a friend to Lauren. It is a beautiful, young love story. Not everything is rosy, and Lauren learns a lot about her friends and her family as they all try to cope with her father's illness—and Amber causes a problem with her Sweet Sixteen.



Sally: Barbara, I am so impressed. These novels sound wonderful, and please make sure that our library has copies! Tell us about your published poetry collection!

Barbara: *You'll Probably Forget Me: Living With and Without Hal* is a book of poems dedicated to my late husband. The poems begin with our wedding, and move toward his passing, and then become about "afterwards."



I have poems in many different anthologies. The latest one is the *Walt Whitman Bicentennial for 2019: Poets To Come*. I have several poems in *World Poetry Open Mic Anthology* for 2017, 2018 and 2019. My poems are also published in various online magazines.

Sally: I read that you have your Masters in Reading and Writing K-12, and have taught for seventeen years! What grades did you teach, and which subjects? (My own sister is a teacher, so I understand the level of commitment and dedication required. Such an accomplishment!)

Barbara: I started teaching in 6th grade and then taught 5th grade, 3rd grade, Developmental Math, kindergarten, 1st grade, 7th grade, Developmental Reading and Computer.



Sally: Did you teach poetry? How important would you say it is to instill poetry in young people?

Barbara: I did teach poetry, and that was when I was happiest. I taught poetry to several different grades, including kindergarten and 1st grade.

Yes, I think it is very important to instill a love of poetry in young people. Any time you give children a chance to learn about a subject early on they will have the skills by which to keep building upon it as they move through the grades. Plus poetry itself teaches so many things that are so important about writing: children learn to use metaphors, and similes, and to rhyme.

Sally: Would you say teaching has enriched your life? Please elaborate!

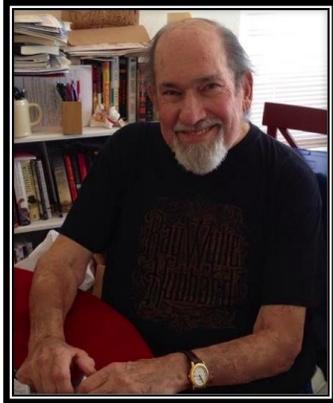
Barbara: When I was teaching I learned a lot from my students; so, yes, it did enrich my life. I met a lot of very intelligent students, and learned to work with lots of different people. I always loved when a student who was having trouble all of sudden had that light come on in their eyes, and they suddenly knew what I was talking about. That is why I kept teaching. Although it could be rough at times— when I felt I wasn't getting through— but then there were those moments when I helped a child to learn, and those were the best! Now I use my teaching skills to tutor, and love working one on one with students. These days it is over a computer screen, of course, but you can still help students this way.

Sally: When you were teaching, did you find time to create? I think you are retired from teaching now, aside from tutoring? Do you find that your writing life is more alive?

Barbara: When I was teaching, my time was mostly spent creating lesson plans. I had very little time for myself at all, and rarely did I create anything new. However, at times I was moved and inspired to write poetry. In the classroom, sometimes I would write along with my students— and then we would compare! After I retired, and I started to have more time, I worked on finishing my novel. I was able to take advantage of National Novel Writing Month for my second novel, and for the second and third sequels for my series.

After my husband passed, I was so sad that only poetry could help me. I

wrote forty poems. Those are all in my poetry book.



Barbara's husband, Hal

I made a lot of friends through writing, and soon I was sharing my poems on facebook and then started sharing them at a few open mics. I began entering contests with my poetry, and some of them won prizes.

Besides writing poetry, I also wrote a short screenplay called *The Kiss*. It's about seeing my soon-to-be-husband when he came back from the Army. It won 1st prize for **Best Short Romantic Comedy** at **Indie Gathering**, and **Honorable Mention** for **Best Dialogue in a Short Film** at **Action On Film**.

I joined [Greenwich Pen Women](#) letters group, and that has enriched my writing very much. They helped me with *Jennifer's Story*, and are helping me with *The Mill Valley High Five*.

In addition to everything, since I retired I began to edit other people's work. So now I have my own company **BarbEhr Editing**, and I also edit for **4RV Publishers** and **3B Press**.

I am always wanting to be writing, but most days I don't get a chance to do my own writing except for writing a poem. Prose writing gets done for letters meetings though. The good thing about being retired is that I make my own schedule. But many days, my life is so full that I don't get a chance to write. It's knowing that I can write that makes me happy.

Sally: Tell us about your other interests! I know that several of our poetry patrons love to garden, and to spend time in nature. Is this true for you? It is always such a joy to learn about the person behind the poetry!

Barbara: I do love to garden, but where I live it is difficult. When we lived on Long Island I had my own vegetable and flower gardens. I have a poem about that experience, and I miss that.

My other interests are baking and cooking. I love to bake and to try new recipes, and especially love anything chocolate. I am always bringing the refreshments to meetings.

I also collect Betty Boop dolls of all sizes, and have been doing that since my children were little. Also, I love lions. Since my birthday is in late July, I am a Leo. For one of my birthdays, my mother bought me a gold lion. I wear it around my neck all the time.

I am in a Book Club at my apartment complex. We met once a month for awhile, and recently had our meeting on Zoom. I have done several discussion groups on books at the Perrot Library.

I was using the gym until they closed it here. When they open it again I will be back on the EFX machine! I had my left knee replaced three years ago, and so that is the best machine for my exercise, along with the stationary bike.

I love to take walks along the path here at our place. A few of my poems have been inspired by that.



Now, Three Poems by Barbara Ehrentreu...

My Thoughts Turn to You

I don't think of you often, except when I do
a glimpse of a Klondike bar reminds me how
we used to buy those for you sugar-free
and the memory brings tears as if a violet
mist had suddenly formed in front of my eyes
other memories slide in pushing this one away
your smile a beacon reminding me of
sunrises we caught together the sky brightening
as purple clouds tinged with orange and the
sun peeked over the horizon
my sleepy eyes wanting the darkness to stay for
a few more hours so we could slip into bed

and now I skip the sunrises and the mornings
when your voice would be telling me current
events as you went about your routines
and I forced myself to wake and join you sometimes
so I could feel the energy you emoted
Or on days when I remained half asleep
you cooking eggs for yourself —the smell remaining
as a reminder of your presence
the pan and your utensils in the sink
left as remnants of your lonely repast
and now I sleep through sunrises and wake to the
middle of the day when morning is over
no smells of eggs loiter and thoughts of you are not present
except when I look around the room
and remember each day you are not here

and so the day begins as sunlight fills
the bedroom and I wish to slide under covers and
sleep until memories of your face and your voice
no longer flood my head and the stark reminders
of your loss are not around my space
And though I kid myself into believing
I can accept you are gone
What I would give for the feel of your bearded face beneath
my hand and the brush of your lips on my cheek.

Copyright by Barbara Ehrentreu from: *You'll Probably Forget Me: Living With and Without Hal*, 2016. Scriggler Poem of the Day - May 14, 2016,
Best Poem – Action On Film – August, 2017

Giving Up To Hope

No one can predict from moment to moment
how our day might be
We can hope for the technicolor dream
we imagined as we prepared to venture out
but many times it turns into a B movie
with sad black and white scenes we can only
blot away with tears

It's uncertain each day as we attempt to
navigate the everyday of our lives
and sometimes the outcome doesn't match
our expectation and we must adjust
or the disaster becomes a minefield

On days like those it is up to us
to find within ourselves that spark of hope
and to blow on it to ignite a larger fire of faith
for that will sustain us as we try to live through them

It is not easy and sometimes we give up
because it is so difficult to keep going
when it seems like nothing is going right
but we must persist and in that persistence
we will find our strength

This strength will sustain us as we combat
the forces that try to pull us down
We can rise and we can move forward
if only we listen to the voices telling us to push on
And never ever give up
To ignore the negative and embrace the positive
And to look beyond our own lives to the hope that
is in the distance and will always be our touchstone.

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A Walk Down the Path of My Memories

I walked today upon the often trod path
it's wooden slats once so comforting to me
in a time where my world had turned on its end
and I was searching for an answer to the pain
The vista surrounding me—a comfort for
my aching soul

I remembered standing near the railing
looking down at the scene below in the water
of the comings and goings of the sea birds
for whom this was home
and I was an interloper along with the
massive buildings and boats clogging
their access to the shoreline

The memory of one particular day before
I lost him and before I had lost hope of
ever seeing him in his old self
when I wandered onto the connecting
boardwalk with tears ready to be shed
and gazed into the depths of blue gray water
below me — hoping for a way to get through
the misery and praying for an answer that
would make him whole again

No answer came and I didn't know it then,
but the bubble of the dream we had together
was soon to pop and its pieces would scatter
as the ashes must have done when the Coast Guard
placed them into the depths of that bay in New Jersey
on a chilly October day when they handed me the flag
under which they had buried him and a framed map
of the place of the ash's burial

But today was warm and sunny as spring finally
peeked out from under its winter blanket
and I was able to walk the path twice
re-exploring the newly lain brick near the
restaurants where happy strangers
took advantage of this first day of fine weather
And I was thankful that though it is almost four years
that he is gone, my legs are stronger and my heart

has been patched enough to enjoy the day and
not succumb to sorrow as we passed the place
on that path where benches lined the small inlet
where I used to watch the egret as you did
your New York Times puzzle
content to rest as we enjoyed the last moments
of peace — though I was ignorant that they were.

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Thank you, Barbara!

