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Reader's Guide

from Sallie Bingham
author of *The Blue Box*

Author Asks:

1. Although I knew little about my grandmother and my great-grandmother when I started my research among the letters and papers in the actual blue box, found by my sister in the top of our mother's closet after her death, I was anxious about starting to write about their lives. Why?
2. I was disturbed and even angered by the attitudes expressed in these letters before, during and after the Civil War, although these attitudes are far too familiar. Yet I did not want to ignore other aspects of these women's complex personalities. Have you encountered the same problems when dealing with your family, either as they are now or as they were?
3. My grandmother and my great-grandmother lived at a time when women did not seek public office, seldom received more than a high school education, and worked at the bottom of the pay scale as housecleaners, nannies or perhaps librarians. Could this happen today?
4. The men in my mother's family were often silenced by illness, alcoholism or early death. Women were their caretakers, totally dependent on them for money and status. Was this fair?
5. William Faulkner said that the past is not past; it continues to influence us in many ways. Is this true for you?
6. Status for these women did not depend on money but on family history. Could this also be true today?
7. My grandmother was indulged as a child, yet her mother recommended that her playmates treat her roughly, pull her hair and knock her around. Why did she suggest this treatment?
8. Three generations of this family often lived in one small house. Can you imagine living with three generations of your family? If there were conflicts, how would they be resolved?
9. My mother was the first woman in her family to go to college, on a scholarship that made it possible, yet she never worked. Was this wasting a college degree?
10. My parents met in college, but my father was having a good time and did not want to be married. I often felt that my mother made many concessions and betrayed some of her own dreams in order to catch him. Have you ever seen the same behavior on the part of women today?

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author of *The Blue Box*

Writing Exercises:

Exercise A.

Imagine a day in the life of your grandmother or grandfather, beginning in childhood; find their birthdates, look at photographs if possible, and research what was going on at the time in their town, their state and their country. For example, was your grandmother able to vote when she turned eighteen? If not, would it have mattered to her? Did your grandfather serve in World War Two, Korea or Vietnam? This exercise does not depend on an interview.

Exercise B.

Write the scene of your parents' first date. Again, research what was going on at the time, and imagine how local or national events might have influenced them. Interviewing is not necessary.

Exercise C.

If you plan someday to have children of your own, write a brief description of positive and negative lessons you learned from your own parents about child rearing, and how you might use these lessons with your children. For example, would you punish by hitting them?

Further Reading:

Books That Might Have Influenced Me While Writing *The Blue Box*

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One by Blanche Weisen Cook

Wild: From Lost To Found On The Pacific Coast Highway by Cheryl Strayed

