

When All the World Was Young **By Barbara Holland**

A mesmerizing portrait of American life during World War II and a chronicle of social mores of the 1940s and '50s, **WHEN ALL THE WORLD WAS YOUNG** is a candid and page-turning account of Barbara Holland's life from age four to twenty. Set against the backdrop of Washington, DC and its sleepy, middle-class Maryland suburbs, this introspective memoir is by turns humorous and poignant, heartbreaking yet unsentimental. Young Barbara has an insatiable curiosity about the issues of the time—gender roles, patriotic duty, socialism,—and explores them with frankness and unexpected insight. Holland moves effortlessly from humorous discussions about sibling rivalry and the torture of gym class to meaningful examinations of parental approval and the cruelty of children.

While reared in a household with a brilliant but emotionally detached mother and a resentful, domineering stepfather, Holland never resorts to presenting herself as a victim, even when tackling the most painful events in her life. Revelatory and prolific, Holland's coming-of-age memoir illustrates that adolescent experiences have an important impact on who we become as adults.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Barbara Holland begins her memoir when she is four years old, “living in a vast old house near Dupont Circle that my new stepfather shared with some law school or Labor Department cronies...In our new life, I was to stay as much as possible out of sight...I was to call this man by his first name. Not call him directly, since I wasn't encouraged to address him directly, but refer to him.” Does Barbara's immediate reticence about her stepfather affect the tone of the memoir?
- 2) “Sometimes to relieve the tension, Mother gave me a sandwich in the kitchen and put me to bed very early, before Carl came home...” Is Barbara's relationship with her mother affected by the dynamic with her stepfather? How would this mother/daughter relationship be described?
- 3) What role does Barbara's grandmother play in her life? What does she offer that Barbara's parents do not?
- 4) Holland describes kindergarten as a time where “groups of girls jeered at me; boys threw mud and snowballs and stuck out their feet to trip me.” How much does Barbara's home life influence her interaction with other children?
- 5) By age eight, Barbara slides helplessly into daydreaming and finds it difficult to focus in school. Was her short attention span due to boredom or a learning disability?

6) Why does Barbara seem older than her years? How does Barbara's curiosity and observations demonstrate her maturity?

7) One Christmas, Barbara's long lost father sends her a deluxe, illustrated edition of Peter Pan, which she's outgrown. She hears from him again the following Christmas, via the exact same gift. When she is twenty-years-old, she visits him in New York, where they get drunk together. She doesn't mention the books or the long stretches of non-communication. Holland notes that back then, "ex-parents didn't hang around; the children of divorce were expected to forget them as quickly as possible, like a bad dream...forgetting was the therapy of choice for most wounds." What affect did her parents' divorce, and specifically her father's absence, have on Barbara's self-esteem?

8) With men serving in World War II, the government told all women, even married ones, to enter the workforce. Barbara's mother went to work as a display artist in a department store and began earning her own money. "Mother came home sparkling all over as if from a light fall of snow. She got prettier. She laughed. She never went so far as to sing in the house, but on Saturdays, setting out on errands or to take me to Grandmother's, she started signing when she turned the key in the ignition, all the nonsense songs from her college world." What did this situation teach Barbara about gender roles? Personal fulfillment?

9) In junior high school, Barbara meets a kindred spirit named Gloria. They are introduced by a mutual classmate who tells Barbara "there's someone in my class who's just as weird as you are. You ought to know each other." Holland says that "in the flick of a moment I was saved." What bonds Barbara and Gloria? Is their mutual interest in the arts and travel the primary binding force?

10) After the war, the focus in Washington was immediately replaced by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. "My leftish family and their lefty friends searched nervously through their pasts and found unacceptable friendships, meetings, donations, magazine subscriptions, and radical girlfriends therein." What impact does this political climate have on Barbara's family? How does Barbara's grandmother react to the hysteria?

11) In her high school years, Barbara finds school immeasurably brightened by an English teacher named Mrs. Casey. Barbara writes an essay about pigs and truffle hunting, which Mrs. Casey returns with the comment, "It's never too soon to think about publishing, you know." How did this experience alter Barbara's attitude about herself and her future?

12) Barbara's best friend, Gloria, develops rheumatic fever. How is their relationship changed by the illness?

13) While in high school, Barbara has an abortion, which is arranged and paid for by her grandmother. Does this episode have any effect on Barbara's view of sex and motherhood?

14) Despite her acceptance at prestigious liberal arts college, Swarthmore, Barbara does not attend, and instead, runs away from home and marries. She and her young husband live in squalor and she wrestles with depression. What causes her to turn her life around?

15) Even after she puts her life on track, why does Barbara continue to be attracted to unemployable, unmotivated men? How optimistic is Barbara about her future?

Suggested Reading:

Katharine Graham's *Personal History* and *Katharine Graham's Washington*; Francine du Plessix Gray's *Them: A Memoir of Parents*; Gloria Vanderbilt's *Once Upon a Time*; Slim Keith's *Slim: Memories of a Rich and Imperfect Life*; Christopher Ogden's *Life of the Party: The Biography of Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman*

Barbara Holland is the author of fourteen previous books, including *Gentlemen's Blood*, *Hail to the Chiefs*, and *They Went Whistling*, and has written for *Smithsonian*, *Glamour*, *Playboy*, *the Utne Reader*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, and the *Washington Post*, among many others. She lives on a mountain in the Virginia Blue Ridge.