

LIFELINES

Lifelines

Romance writer troubled by memories

Barbara Brouse added depth to bodice rippers
Memoirs recall mother's abuse, servants' kindness

GATHERINE DUNPHY
OBITUARY WRITER

As Abra Taylor, she created a world in which love's raging passion always overcomes deceit, betrayal and flame-haired predators (*aka* the other woman), in which the oh-so-handsome (but distant) count will finally sweep our heroine, the small grey-eyed governess, into his rippling arms and, with a shudder, a groan low in his throat, cover her mouth with burning kisses.

She was one of the world's best-selling romance writers. As Barbara Brouse she had to be her own marriage was disintegrating and she was single-handedly keeping four children and a grand house going in Rosedale.

It was the early '80s and she was part of a romantic revolution, one of a stable of writers injecting new realism — and more than one plot line — into bigger and bolder love stories. Now there were throbbing groins, restless hands, sex scenes and heroines who were definitely not virginal.

She wrote the first Harlequin's Super Romance novels: *End of Innocence* ("Rafael's eyes had darkened and directed their attention toward the region of her breasts ... her heart beat like a winged thing ..."). Later she was a solid performer for Silhouette and wrote as Araby Scott for Avon publishers.

"My editor-in-chief met Barbara at a Romance Writers of America conference and I remember her calling me with so much excitement in her voice saying 'Guess who I signed up for our list? Abra Taylor.' It was a coup at the time," said Alicia

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Condon edited Taylor's book *Hold Back The Night*, which became a huge seller for the U.S. publisher.

"It had an emotional depth and drama to it that was not common at that time in contemporary romance; it was a book that really struck me," Condon remembered.

The story featured a young woman who falls in love with a sculptor. There is a misunderstanding and she has his child without him ever knowing.

The copy editor who worked on the book told Condon it was the best book she'd ever read. Condon herself wrote to Brouse in a letter: "This book brings tears out of me every time I read it."

From 1979 to about 1984, Brouse wrote dozens of romance novels, many of which were translated and published in Japanese, Italian, French, Portuguese and Swedish. They were never just tales of girl-meets-older-n'-wealthier-man, and she was never just a dilettante tossing off fanciful froth between lunch engagements.

"She was up every morning at 5 a.m. writing until 5 p.m. and then she would make dinner for all of us. We'd all descend on her in her study after school wanting to know what we were having for dinner. She really did keep it all together," said her daughter Gillian Brouse.

A former advertising copywriter, Barbara Brouse thoroughly researched the locales for her stories, whether she had been there or not. She displayed all her books on a shelf behind her desk and enjoyed getting letters from her fans. "They would tell her that she touched their lives," said Gillian. "They don't say that when you write an ad for a refrigerator."

But five years after she began writing, she stopped. She never wrote another romance. It was years before she wanted to write another book — and when she

did, it consumed her.

After she fought her way back from a stroke that robbed her of her ability to speak, Brouse began a long journey of introspection that resulted in her need to tell her own story. She wrote three volumes, *The Drumming*, *Lion In The Drawer* and *Dolly*, of polished but raw, painful stories of childhood abuse.

More than anything she had written, she wanted these published. After immersing herself in the fiction of love conquers all, she wanted desperately to tell a true story of overcoming cruelty. But when she died at 73 of a heart attack on Feb. 23, she still hadn't found a publisher.

Brouse was born in Indore, India; her Canadian father was a missionary doctor who tended to many of the prisoners of war made famous in the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. He was also Lord Mountbatten's physician. She was sent away to an Irish boarding school when she was six, then came to Toronto to attend Brown public school, Bishop Strachan School and the University of Toronto.

She was hired by Simpson's to write advertising copy, but after she met and married Leo Brouse, the couple started their own advertising agency, Lionel T. Brouse and Associates. It was a good time to be in the advertising game. "It was very creative and a lot of fun then," said Margaret Break. She and her husband Paul were great friends with the couple, who were at the centre of the social set of the '60s. They were golden: he was urbane, witty and charismatic; she was beautiful and talented. She wrote the lyrics for the jingle "It's hard not to think of the Bay" and "Kleenex knows noses."

She worked from home, where she looked after their four children: Andrew, now a researcher and PhD candidate at University of Plymouth; the twins Gillian, a marketing consultant currently on maternity leave, and Susan, a casting director in



Barbara Brouse paddles with son Terance in undated photo. In her last days, she was seeking a publisher for her memoirs.

Vancouver, and Terance, a communications consultant.

In a house teeming with books and children, she made up stories about a gang of crazy alley cats for her own brood. But when their ad business took a downturn, her marriage showed the strain. Leo Brouse, who died in 1999, took to sleeping all day and roaming the house at night, a drink at hand. Barbara Brouse bought a box full of romance novels, studied them and started writing. The marriage officially ended when she stopped writing them.

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"I remember Gillian saying to me 'I just want my Mom back,'" he said.

Her children recall her trying to tell them something after the stroke. Someone handed her a piece of paper so she could spell it out. She wrote "moves," then crossed it out, "waves," crossed it out as well. They started guessing words. Finally someone said "loves." "Yes," she said, pointing in turn to each of her children: "Love, love, love, love."

Her love of language may have saved her: she read and memorized the poetry she loved until the sound of those words became familiar to her again. When her father died in 1994, she turned to writing to revisit her childhood and recover the memories of the abuse she remembers receiving at the hands of her mother. It was also the way she wanted to thank the servants in the family home in India, whom she was convinced saved her from even worse trauma.

"Nobody was helping her do this, her writing was helping her," said her friend Peggy Stamp, who is a therapist. "It turned out to be the route to her unconscious."

But many of her friends were uncomfortable when Brouse talked about her latest writing. They had been fine with her escapism writing, the romance novels with the inevitable happy endings, but were threatened and frightened by her memoirs.

Some of them didn't believe her, and she spent years researching and trying to verify her memories.

The three unpublished volumes are her life's work. Not the hundreds of thousands of novels sold round the world by Abra Taylor or Araby Scott. Her children understand that; they say they are determined to find a publisher for their mother's last and most important words.

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She sold the big house in Rosedale and all the antiques. "Barbara scoffed at all that anyway," said her friend Buck Henry, a hairdresser. They met when he came to look at some of the antiques she was selling.

Brouse was barely into her 60s when she was felled by a massive stroke in 1997. Her carotid artery completely closed down; she could not remember any words and she had to learn how to speak all over again. No one understood the process. In fact, doctors told her she might never be able to walk or talk again.

Henry and the four children took turns being with her in the hospital. He remembers the despair of watching his friend struggling — and failing — to say even a one-syllable word.

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