

Pam Rosenblatt

**WHLR interviews Cambridge artist
Sylvia Maynard**

On one rainy October 2, 2012 afternoon, *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor Pam Rosenblatt stood in the entrance way of an old but regal looking apartment building and was about to push the door buzzer of Cambridge's Sylvia Maynard's apartment when the large, heavy wooden door slowly opened. Who was the unexpected person letting Pam into the aristocratic building but artist/writer Sylvia Maynard, the woman whom Pam was to interview shortly. The two women proceeded up the stairs to Sylvia's apartment. Several minutes later, the 35 minute interview began. And edited portions of this enlightening conversation are written below:



WHLR: Today is Tuesday, October 2, 2012. And we are interviewing Sylvia Maynard for *Wilderness House Literary Review*. Sylvia lives in Cambridge. And now we will start the interview. How would you like your name spelled in the *Wilderness House Literary Review* article? Sylvia Maynard?

SM: That's all there is to it. Yes.

WHLR: You live in Cambridge. For how many years have you live here?

SM: About eight years.

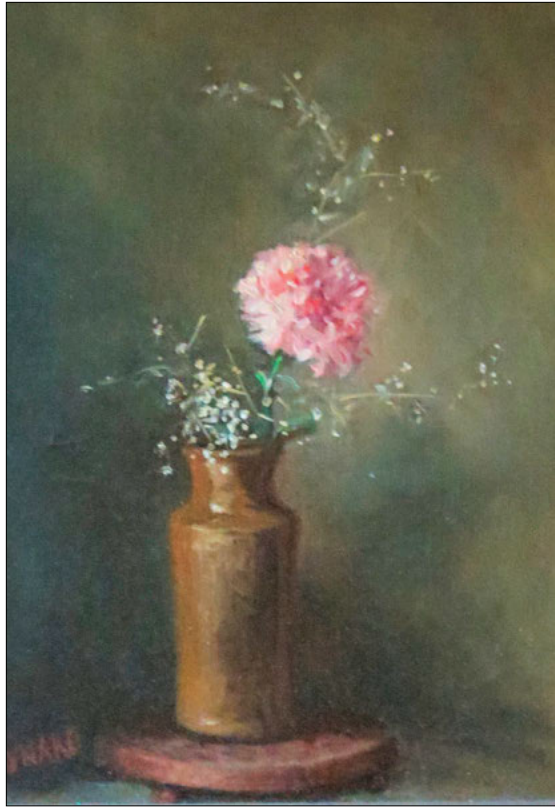


WHLR: Where did you live beforehand?

SM: About seven years out in Weston, Massachusetts. Before that, I lived in New York City for most of my life. I have had two marriages and two divorces, two children. And now I have three grandchildren.

WHLR: Why did you choose to live in Cambridge?

SM: I went to Radcliffe College here when there was a Radcliffe College. I mean this is ancient history. I always loved Cambridge and wanted to come back. So when I moved from Weston, I came here.



WHLR: I looked up your name online. There was one article that you wrote – if you are a member of the Class of 1944 ...

SM: Yes. It was an article about my memories of being at Radcliffe. That was written for the Fiftieth Reunion of my class. It was published in *The Harvard Crimson*. I had no idea that was online!

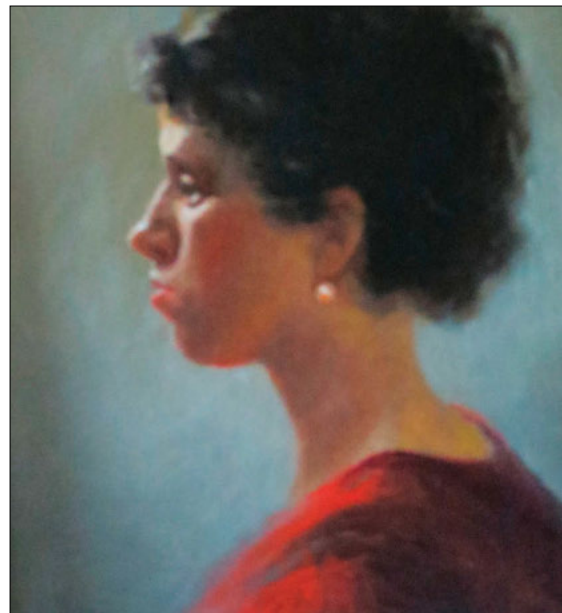
WHLR: What do you like about Cambridge?

SM: Oh, what do I love about Cambridge? Well, it just seems to be in the middle of everything. I look out of my window. [Sylvia points to one of the windows in her apartment.] And I have my breakfast there. I see people going by of all ages on bicycles, with dogs, walking children. All kinds of people. There is so much happening here. I like being in a city. It is also like being in the

country because I am surrounded by trees. And I like my view of two church towers. [Sylvia points to another window located in a different part of the room.] There are so many things to do and go to here. I walk through Harvard yard almost every day. That reminds me of my youth.

WHLR: You are an artist and a writer. That's a wonderful combination! For how long have you been an artist?

SM: My father was a portrait painter. His name was Richard Field Maynard. I grew up surrounded by paintings. I always had crayons and paints. I did art from a very early age. But I did not seriously consider being an artist. Well, I always wanted to be a writer then an artist. I got married. I was so busy raising children and doing housework that I didn't do either. Then eventually after I became divorced, I got this hankering to paint. And I went out and painted a little church spire across the meadows in Nantucket. I liked that. So then I was living in New York. I went



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to the Art Students League of New York off and on about five years and studied with David Leffel who taught Rembrandt's techniques – light and shade. I grew up doing that type of old fashioned – not modern – art.

And my mother, Lorraine Huling Maynard, had four books published. I'm trying to organize her letters that she wrote to my father, when she was a star of silent movies. Those letters are fascinating partly because she gives so much of the technical background in that age of primitive moviemaking. She was in early Hollywood with Mary Pickford, and Charlie Chaplin was just starting.

WHLR: And your father and your mother lived from when to when?

SM: My father was born in 1875, and he didn't marry my mother until he was 42. And she was 20 when they married. And then I was born and then my sister was born. He lived to be nearly 89. My mother, born in 1897, lived to be 74.

WHLR: Were you painting in oils [when you studied with David Leffel]?

SM: I was painting in oils all the time then. But then I went on painting trips with groups of artists. By the time I had unlocked my Julian easel and pulled out all of the legs and turned all of the screws and set up my palette, everybody was quitting for lunch! So I thought, "This is not working." That is when I started doing watercolors because they were portable and quick and dried fast.



WHLR: What type of writing do you do?

SM: Fiction. Sometimes poetry (which I don't show to anybody). But I have written two novels yet to be published. And, I guess, five or six short stories. They are very long short stories usually. I am more of a novelist. I have just sent out a short story to a contest at the *Glimmer Train*. But who knows what will happen with that because I have not done that before. But I love painting. When I'm painting, I don't want to do anything else but paint. When I'm writing, I don't want to do anything else but write.

WHLR: What style of painting do you do?

SM: Realistic, I'd guess. [Sylvia points to some paintings near the wall, across from her couch.]

WHLR: Why do you create art? For what reason?

SM: Why? I don't know. You do it because you do it because when you are doing it, you get interested. You know, I have been sketching since I was a child. I have always been fascinated with people's faces. And when

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I was a child, sometimes a visitor would come to the house and talk to my parents. After he left, I would do a picture of him. [My parents] said it looked just like him. And it was from memory! I don't think I could do that now. Now I work from life more. The faces are interesting to me.

WHLR: From where do you get your inspirations to do art?

SM: Oh, you know, that's mysterious. When I was in art school, the inspiration was there from the set-up – the model. And you were [assigned] a space. You were probably stuck with [that space]. But when I'm out painting landscapes or towns Yes, that's a very interesting question ... This is one thing I have in common with John Singer Sargent: some woman told him, "Oh, Mr. Sargent, there is this wonderful view. You should paint it." And he said, "I don't paint views!" [Sylvia laughs.] I feel the same way. I'm not interested in views like a vast valley in mountains. I think it's there and I like it. How could I improve upon it? So I don't paint views.



But I paint something that somehow catches my interest. I can't explain exactly why it

does. But it might be some little corner of something. Something about the juxtaposition of this tree and that old barn or whatever seems interesting. I can't define it exactly. I have never been able to analyze it.

WHLR: Do you have any mentors in the field of art?

SM: I studied one or two years [at the Art Students League] with Frank Mason who has since died. And then I went back 22 years later, after my first divorce, and studied about five years with David Leffel. I think he now teaches out in New Mexico. But they were both interested in realistic painting like Rembrandt and Vermeer and people like that.

WHLR: Where have you travelled?

SM: I was thirteen. My parents took my sister and me to France and then England. That was the first trip. I have been going back ever since more or less whenever I had time. I'm going to England this fall mostly to write this time. I have been on six or eight more group painting trips. There was a woman in Rockport, Massachusetts would lead a group of artists (about twenty) for two weeks to some particular place in Ireland or France or once in Greece and Italy a couple of times. We would go out to paint every day for two weeks. I loved that! It was fun, and also we got a lot of painting done. Besides painting on these trips, I did some sight-seeing – exploring streets and alleyways and old churches – and eating, which was delightful in some of these places.

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WHLR: Do you name your paintings?

SM: Names? Sometimes I label where they were done ... Some of them won prizes. Some of them were exhibited in shows in New York (group shows), in Rockport, Massachusetts (summer shows). One painting – the little watercolor – that was done in a little town in Provence (south of France) called Colombières. [Then Sylvia points to another painting.] And that one was in Camogli in a seaside resort of Italy's "Cinque Terre". And that next painting was my sink in Nantucket one summer.

WHLR: What sizes do your paintings range in?

SM: The biggest one I ever painted and sold was about 28" x 36". It was a standard size. I can't remember exactly. It was of a night scene in Nantucket. I had observed this view in the daytime and I sketched it on the canvas. Later, I painted it as if it were a night scene of a church tower lit up, illuminated over the dark houses. And the houses – you see the rooftops. Then the white trim of the rooftops and the white windows. But all in the dark with one street lamp, I think. Kind of a dramatic painting that sold at my only one-person show.

But I have not done many big paintings. Most of the portraits I did would be 20" x 24" – that's standard size. It was difficult to get a very large canvas to the studio at the Art Students League because the easels were crowded together. If you brought a huge canvas into the room, nobody could see around it. So 20" x 24" was the biggest piece that I ever did.



WHLR: Are there any paintings that you would like to discuss technically? Any artworks that you did that you find interesting?

SM: Technically, I like that painting of the single flower. I would say that the best paintings that I have done seem to paint themselves. There wasn't a struggle. And I guess it is maybe because I started right and continued on right. The ones that you have a big struggle with aren't always that successful. But I wish I could do it every day. Maybe I will ... I'm thinking of just taking a course at the community center here in painting just so I can paint.

WHLR: Who is that woman in that portrait over there? [Pam points to a framed painting on the mantel.]

SM: This was in art school, when I studied with David Leffel. My easel was placed so that all I saw was her profile. So that's how she got rim-lighted – with the light from the skylight coming down on her face. This won a prize somewhere out in Westchester.

WHLR: What about this painting? Is it a boat or a car?

SM: That's a boat. I shall I bring it down so you can see it? [Sylvia

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walks over to the framed painting on the wall.] That was when I was painting with my pal up in Friendship, Maine. And this was an old ship that was grounded. It was called "The Jane". So I call the painting "The Jane of Maine". I also call it "Home From the Sea". It was a hot day in July, I think. So it was this feeling of heat in the sun. There's kind of a haze from the heat seen in the painting, I think.

WHLR: What are the colors in the painting? There are greens, yellows. There are reds. There are blues. There are browns. Do you tend to have muted colors more than very bright colors?

SM: Probably. I don't think I paint bright red or many bright colors, because in nature usually things are more subtle. Like his painting instructor told my father, "It is a color unnamable by you." And most of the colors are unnamable by me. [She smiles.] They're impossible to copy! But I just try to roughly approximate. The main thing is trying to get the values right. That is, the correct degree of lightness and darkness of that color in that moment. It's like translating to another language, without words, because you can't paint reality. That's impossible. And you can't paint the real range of light which is thousands of times more than the range of pigment. So it's all a matter of translating and guessing and approximating. And then adjusting to make the whole painting hang together in some believable way.

WHLR: I heard from a mutual friend that you are in your nineties.

SM: Yes. I'm 91. And people seem surprised. I have been very lucky. People seem to think of me as younger than I am ... I still take a ballet class once or twice a week and a tap dancing class. I get tired, more tired than I did when I was eighty-one. But it still feels fun to do.

WHLR: You mentioned to me earlier that you are learning to play the guitar?

SM: I just bought [the guitar]. I start with the lessons next week. I don't know how I will do with that. But I have been playing Spanish guitar music on the tape, and I am just hoping ...

WHLR: There's always a time to start something new!

SM: Yes. Right!

WHLR: Thank you for the interview.

SM: And thanks for the honor of the interview!

