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Autobiography & Memoir

An Alphabetical Life: Living It Up in the Business of Books
Wendy Werris
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> *Mad poets. Gay men. Hilarious alcoholics … They all worked at Pickwick and would soon become my extended family.*

In this humorous and moving memoir, the author charts her journey from summer clerk at the legendary Pickwick Bookshop in Hollywood to sales representative for high-profile publishing houses such as Phaidon and Oxford University Press. Werris's candid look at the changing landscape of the book business during the past thirty-five years, coupled with insights about how literature has shaped her personal life, paint a portrait of a lady who truly loves her job.

Readers with ties to the publishing industry will get a particular kick out of Werris's insider stories. She describes early friendships with luminaries such as Fran Lebowitz and George Baxt; the revolutionary shift from manual inventory to computers; and her exasperating attempts as a rookie rep in 1978 to convince booksellers that an odd-sounding novel by an unknown author named John Irving was a guaranteed bestseller.

As one of the first female book reps in the business, Werris pioneered the way for a future generation, enduring a mix of hostility and condescension as she navigated the old boys' club of publishing. Both then and now, the author credits her sense of humor as her coat of armor. Recalling her stint as the sole female rep in the early days of Microsoft Press, Werris relates an embarrassing sales meeting in which she innocently asked her new male) boss where the company built its computers.

Just as the author struggles to shed her label as a "lady salesman," so too does the story of her life defy categorization. What begins as a jolly ride through the Los Angeles literary scene soon transforms into a thoughtful exploration of the trials of young adulthood. In subtle prose, Werris describes her rocky relationships with her wisecracking mother and brooding father, who informs the author, shortly after her mother's death, that he wishes she'd been a boy.

Even in such intimate territory, books are never far from Werris' mind, providing a constant source of laughter, insight, and healing. In one of the memoir's most affecting chapters, she tells of her painful road to recovery after being raped in her apartment in 1981. As she tries to make sense of the forces that drive humans to violence, Werris finds unlikely solace in the mysteries of William Trevor, Ruth Rendell, and Michael Connelly.

This book is a rare treat of a memoir, conveying the raw honesty of real life with the flavor and pacing of a good novel. After a lifetime devoted to literature, Werris reveals a latent talent all her own. As she writes, "We never know what may happen when we pick up a book to read."