

30 years of vigor, vision and virginity
Young writer retraces ups and downs of life
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There's something presumptuous about writing a memoir when you're barely 30. Or perhaps presumptuous isn't the right word. Perhaps inconclusive or unfinished or unresolved is. But Strawberry Saroyan, granddaughter of playwright William and founder of Bleach magazine, has crafted a precocious, evocative memoir, one that ultimately benefits from its lack of resolution.

Saroyan and a friend founded Bleach, a magazine targeted to contemporary hip, in-the-know, avant-garde folks. She'd worked at The Nation and at Conde Nast Traveler, but she struck out on her own, determined to create the perfect glossy, and the chapter called "Ambition" is "Girl Walks Into a Bar" 's most interesting. It is full of excitement, bursting with ideas and 20something vigor, the way that early brainstorming sessions so often were in the '90s. "We vowed only to cover (beauty) in a light, almost humorous way. We would never do a feature on 'how to wash your face,' " she writes of plans for the magazine. And, oh, the fantastic plans for success: "We'd have all the best tickets to the 'shows,' next to people like Anna and Tina and Liz," she writes of publishing doyennes Wintour (Vogue), Brown (Vanity Fair) and Tilberis (Harper's Bazaar), then dreams of telling her old boss how she was too busy to talk to him, that he'd have to hold. But the book is about far more than ambition -- it's about visions and fantasies of the perfect contemporary hip woman and her fantastic contemporary life. Despite the fact that Saroyan comes from a famous family, there's next to nothing about them. Instead she chooses to write about her friends, the family of the '90s. We get detailed stories of the nights, weeks, years spent in bars, hanging out with other ambitious 20somethings. The bad, depressed boyfriends, the end of her relationship with her best friend, as painful as any family split -- these are the lonely stories that have replaced the lonely family stories we have come to expect from memoirs.

Additionally, Saroyan's book opens with a discussion of her long-lasting virginity. Given that women today are meant to be the inheritors of the sexual power and freedom of the women of the '60s, Saroyan's frank discussions of her sex life -- or lack thereof -- are poignant and provoke questions about how much sex the modern single girl, weaned on Madonna, is having. I suspect that for lots of people, it's less than one might guess from watching episodes of "Friends."

The book wraps with Saroyan meeting a woman in England who seems to be living the life she dreams of -- a gorgeous manor, lovely husband and children. Then Saroyan discovers the woman lost a daughter, had a son in a cult, and realizes, one more time, that her fantasies of what a modern woman should be, what she should be, are just that: fantasies. "She seemed to be the idealized fantasy of what I've wanted to become, but she actually was someone I might truly become. She was happy in moments but heartbroken in others; she was in some ways perfect, but in others flawed; she had everything she wanted on some days but felt she had nothing on others. She was, again, real."

Unresolved is in fact the perfect word to capture Saroyan's memoir because it is a story of becoming. The woman who gave us *Bleach*, who struggled to find the great artsy friends, struggled to find perfect love with men and friends, who had a vision of womanhood should look like, realizes that there is no perfect vision and that to become the fantasy it must be let go. Saroyan's memoir is at once a bildungsroman and a keen portrait of a particular time and place -- the world of women in their 20s in the '90s, a place that, contrary to popular wisdom, can be as profoundly lonely as it looks glossy from the outside.

Frequent Books contributor Moira Muldoon is a poet, writer and teacher. She also writes the "A Girl Walks Into a Bar. . ." column in *XLent*.

Memoir

Girl Walks into a Bar: A Memoir

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