

The Ranger Who Told All About Anais Nin's Wild Life

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The story goes that their love affair began the moment they laid eyes on one another, in the elevator of a swank Manhattan apartment building in 1947. A few weeks later, the exotic-looking writer and the strapping young actor were driving to California on an adventure that would eventually lead to marriage.

There was one problem: Anais Nin, the prolific diarist who would become a feminist heroine, already was married. Rupert Pole, the actor who left New York to become a forest ranger -- and eventually guardian of one of literature's most labyrinthine legacies -- spent years pretending not to care that his wife was a bigamist.

"We had a wonderful, deep relationship," Pole, who was 16 years younger than Nin, told the Vancouver Sun several years ago, "and that is what counted."

Pole, 87, who was found dead in his Silver Lake home July 15 after a recent stroke, was Nin's literary executor. After her death in 1977, he oversaw the publication of four unexpurgated volumes of her erotic journals, which exuberantly detail her affairs with such men as novelist Henry Miller, psychoanalyst Otto Rank and her own father, Spanish composer Joaquin Nin. Seven previous volumes, which had been purged of much of the salacious material -- as well as most references to her husbands -- had established Nin as a cult figure, revered by many in the women's movement for her embrace of sexual freedom and exploration of the female psyche.

The uncensored diaries overseen by Pole sold thousands of copies and introduced Nin's work to a broader audience. Writer Erica Jong, a latter-day advocate of women's sexual freedom, called them "one of the landmarks of 20th century literature." That they would be ushered into literary history by an actor-cum-forest ranger, who later taught science for many years at Thomas Starr King Middle School in Silver Lake, gave a uniquely Los Angeles tale an unexpected twist.

Pole, born in Los Angeles, was the son of actors Helen Taggart and Reginald Pole. Young Rupert spent his early childhood living among Native Americans in an adobe house in Palm Springs, where his father had moved to obtain treatment for a respiratory problem.

After divorcing his father, Taggart married Lloyd Wright, the architect-son of Frank Lloyd Wright. The younger Wright had designed a house for Taggart's mother in Griffith Park, where Pole lived before moving into Lloyd Wright's house in Beverly Hills about 1929.

A music lover who played the guitar and viola, Pole studied at Harvard University and earned a degree in music in 1940. He was briefly married to a Wright cousin, Jane Lloyd-Jones, and performed in USO shows with her.

According to Nin biographer Noel Riley Fitch, Pole had just completed a run on Broadway in "The Duchess of Malfi" and was working as a printer when he met Nin in the elevator. Both were heading to a party given by Hazel Guggenheim McKinley, an heir to the Guggenheim fortune.

Nin chatted all evening with Pole, who was "stunningly handsome, with the finely chiseled facial features and slim, muscular body found more frequently on Greek statuary than human beings," wrote Deirdre Bair, another Nin biographer. Not only did Nin find him physically irresistible but she was impressed by his emotional sensitivity and knowledge of Eastern philosophies. The night she met him, Nin, who was 44 to his 28, wrote in her diary: "Danger! He is probably homosexual."

To her vast relief, she soon discovered that Pole was not only thoroughly heterosexual but far more adept in bed than Hugh "Hugo" Guiler, the New York banker whom she had married in 1923. When Pole, who was under the impression that Nin was divorced, asked her to go west with him, she told Guiler that she was going to help a friend drive to Las Vegas. That pretense was her first step toward bicoastal bigamy.

She accompanied Pole to Los Angeles, where he enrolled at UCLA to study forestry. After a year, he transferred to UC Berkeley and lived with Nin in a San Francisco apartment. Upon graduation, he joined the forest service and was assigned to a station in the San Gabriel Mountains. In contrast to her pampered life in New York, Nin lived with Pole in a cabin in Sierra Madre, where she scrubbed the floors, baby-sat the neighbors' children and was known as "Mrs. Anais Pole," though she and Rupert were not yet married.

Still legally Mrs. Guiler, Nin juggled both relationships by shuttling between the two coasts every few weeks. She told Guiler that she needed to spend time on the West Coast to escape the pressures of New York. She told Pole that she had to go to New York on writing assignments.

Once, when Pole called her at the New York apartment she shared with Guiler, she convinced Guiler that Pole was a deranged admirer.

Both men apparently chose to believe her lies, which became so numerous that she wrote them down on index cards and locked them in a box so that she could keep her stories straight. She referred to the web of lies as her "trapeze."

She often said that her first marriage was an "imprisonment" and she was loath to take on a second. When she finally married Pole in 1955, she said she had "exhausted all the defenses I could invent," according to a diary passage quoted by Bair. The ceremony took place before a justice of the peace in the tiny Arizona town of Quartzsite.

"She thought it ironic that the huge book on the ceremonial table between her and Rupert was 'The Arizona Criminal Record' and laughed silently, thinking her name should be on the very first page," Bair wrote.

She was Mrs. Pole for 11 years, until she grew too fearful of the legal consequences of having two husbands who claimed her as a dependent on their tax returns. Before invalidating their marriage in 1966, she told Pole about Guiler, explaining that she could not divorce the banker because of his decades of financial support and remarkable tolerance of her many absences and indiscretions.

Eric Lloyd Wright, Pole's half brother and grandson of Frank Lloyd Wright, said his family was never sure of the couple's legal status. "Rupert and Anais were very secretive with our family about the marital arrangements," Wright, a Malibu architect, said in an interview last week. "It was difficult at first.... My mother and father felt it was a very sort of bohemian life. But after a couple of years, we felt she was really part of the family."

Ultimately, Pole was the man with whom Nin chose to spend her last years. After scrimping from his salary as a forest ranger and later as a teacher, he built a small house in Silver Lake that he hoped would entice Nin to stay with him permanently in California. Designed by Eric Lloyd Wright in 1962, it featured an open floor plan, with the master bedroom flowing into the living room, a Japanese garden and a sandbox where Nin liked to make sand art. When she was diagnosed with terminal cancer in the mid-1970s, she gave up her bicoastal shuffle and lived exclusively with Pole until her death in 1977 at age 73.

Accounts vary as to whether she ever admitted her bigamy to Guiler. According to Bair, who had access to Nin's unpublished diaries for her 1995 book "Anais Nin: A Biography," she did not. But Tristine Rainer, a Los Angeles writer who knew Nin and Pole, said the famous diarist told her that she finally did confess to Guiler.

"When Nin was dying," Rainer said, "she asked both husbands to forgive her, and they did."

Asked once how he endured such an unorthodox relationship for 30 years, Pole acknowledged that he had often felt jealous. Nin had bifurcated her life so successfully that her obituary in the Los Angeles Times named Pole as her husband, while the New York Times named Guiler. Yet Pole appeared to hold no grudges.

"Her heart was her life, she would say, and that was true. Her life was her masterpiece, and I am honored to have been a part of it," he told the Vancouver Sun in 1998.

After Nin died, he vowed to publish uncensored versions of her diaries. Although Nin's brother, the late Joaquin Nin-Culmell, would argue to the contrary, Pole said Nin wanted her diaries to be published exactly as she had written them. He typed up each handwritten page himself and, according to the agreement he made with her publisher, Harcourt Brace, omitted only material that had been previously published.

"The result of the first unexpurgated volumes -- 'Henry and June' and 'Incest' -- was shocking and mostly successful," said Rainer, who teaches memoir writing at UCLA. "because there was so much material that Nin had expurgated from this wild period of her life in Paris" in the 1930s.

In "Incest" (1992), for example, Pole included accounts of Nin's incestuous relationship with her father and a late-term abortion of a child with Miller that Nin had characterized as a stillbirth in her first published diary in 1966. Pole prepared the unexpurgated editions with the help of Nin's longtime agent, Gunther Stuhlmann.

"Together they kept her name alive," Fitch said of Pole and Stuhlmann, who died several years ago. "The only aspect of Pole and Stuhlmann's service to the Nin legacy that was detrimental," Fitch said, was "its greediness in asking for large sums for reproductions of her work" -- in particular, essays about Miller, whose controversial novel "Tropic of Cancer" drew in part from Nin's diaries.

The uncensored diaries, collectively titled Nin's "Journal of Love," received mixed reviews, with some critics, such as Katha Pollitt in an assessment of "Incest" for the New York Times, questioning their reliability. In a published reply to Pollitt, Pole denied tampering with the material and invited skeptics to check the original diaries, housed in a special collection at UCLA.

According to Wright, Pole completed work on another unexpurgated volume -- one that covers Nin's last years -- but arrangements for its publication have not been made.

Pole finally met Guiler a few years after Nin's death. They communicated periodically "on a friendly basis, or a mutual husband basis," Wright said.

When Guiler died in 1985, Pole honored his wishes and sprinkled his ashes in Santa Monica Bay, not far from where Pole had scattered Nin's remains eight years earlier.

Pole left no instructions about his own burial, but he may come to rest in the same spot. His survivors -- Wright and Wright's sons, Devon and Cory - are holding his ashes until a decision is made.

For The Record

For The Record Los Angeles Times Friday July 28, 2006 Home Edition Main News Part A Page 2 National Desk 0 inches; 26 words Type of Material: Correction Rupert Pole: A story about Rupert Pole and Anais Nin in Wednesday's Section A said Tristine Rainer teaches memoir writing at UCLA. She teaches at USC.

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