

# ‘Losing her is like losing an arm’: my sister, Nora Ephron

**Delia Ephron grew up in the shadow of her brilliant sibling, film-maker Nora Ephron. She tells Helena de Bertodano how her death has freed her**

The worst thing about the death of Nora Ephron last year, according to her younger sister Delia, is that she cannot even imagine how she would react to any given situation. “For ever and ever in my life she was there for me on the other end of the phone. I miss her on so many levels, but the worst thing is I can’t even guess what she would say.”

Nora Ephron, the writer of romantic comedies *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*, died in June last year aged 71 after a long (and secret) struggle with acute myeloid leukaemia. Delia was one of the few people who knew how sick her sister was for the last six years of her life.

“It was Nora’s decision [to keep her illness secret],” Delia says today, when we meet for dinner in New York. “When you’re famous it certainly makes sense. Given the way people reacted to her death, I can imagine how horribly difficult it would have been for her if every time she walked down the street somebody said something. She liked to have as much fun as she could.”

Delia, 69, although overshadowed by the achievements of her older sister, is also a successful writer. She collaborated with Nora on the films *You’ve Got Mail* and *Bewitched*, starring Nicole Kidman, and has also written several novels, including *Hanging Up*, which was turned into a film. Her latest book is a memoir entitled *Sister, Mother, Husband, Dog (etc)*, a moving and witty series of essays, including *Losing Nora*, a tribute to her sister. “Losing her is like losing an arm, it’s that deranging. Writing is the only way I know how to move on.”

Yet despite her grief at losing Nora, the essay is not an exercise in sentimentality. She talks about “the talent and the terror” of Nora and describes how hard it was to please her. As an example she describes going to a shop — on Nora’s instructions from her hospital bed — to buy a particular hat and, uncertain if she has the right style, buys one of every sort. “All wrong, she told me. Every one.” A few days later, Nora sends someone else to the same store who comes back with one of the same hats — which is deemed perfect.

“Really Nora could be a total frustration, as hard to please now as ever,” writes Delia. “She was the same person, only a very sick same person, and I was grateful for that crankiness because it meant she was still there.”

Nor does Delia evade the competitive nature of their relationship: “With sisters, is the competition always marching side by side with devotion? Does it get to be pure love when one of them is dying or is the beast always hidden somewhere?”

“The sibling relationship is such an uncivilised relationship,” says Ephron tonight as she toys with a tomato and watermelon salad. “You’re so aware of everything about them. I will always know that Nora’s math SAT scores are higher than mine. But I also know that my hands are better.” Better at making things? “No, prettier,” Delia says, shaking her head at the absurdity of it. “I also know that I was the better tennis player — marginally. I mean we’re both so terrible that it’s ridiculous to even know that.” Although Nora and Delia have two younger sisters, Hallie and Amy, also writers, Delia says that she doesn’t compare herself to them: “I just accept my other sisters as part of my life, I don’t notice as much.”

Delia looks like a less angular version of Nora — perhaps a gentler, kinder version. Dressed from head to toe in black (just as Nora used to be — “That’s New York women,” she comments), she is warm and friendly. It took Delia many years to realise that she had to carve out an identity separate from Nora’s. “I went through life as a kid imitating her. If she ran for office, I would run for office. If she lost, I would lose.” Or as she puts it in her book, “It didn’t cross my mind until I was out of college that my job as a younger sister was not to imitate but to differentiate.”

The four Ephron sisters were born in Los Angeles to parents Henry and Phoebe Ephron, both screenwriters themselves — and alcoholics. In one of her essays, *Why I Can’t Write About My Mother*, Delia describes the increasing misery of their childhood home and her parents’ “hellish relationship”, complete with “drunken brawls and raging fights”. She writes about her mother’s “staggering self-absorption” and how she and her sister Amy would try to combat the drinking by diluting the liquor in the bottles.

She still feels the repercussions of those early years: “If you are the child of an alcoholic you have a lifetime of anxiety. You start worrying at a very young age and it becomes a habit; you worry what’s going to happen that night. I was always decoding.” In her book she expands: “I was hyper-alert. Noticing emotional shifts, infinitesimally small tremors that flit over another person’s face, the jab in a seemingly innocuous word, the quickening in a walk, an abrupt gesture — the way, say, a jacket is tossed over a chair.”

When she was lying on her deathbed with cirrhosis, Phoebe Ephron famously told her daughter Nora to “take notes”. To Delia, she had something different to say. Delia, then 27, was just about to publish her first book, *The Adventurous Crocheter*, a craft book about crocheting. Chatting at her bedside, Delia reminded her mother how much she hated math. “I didn’t hate math,” her mother replied. “I hated crocheting.”

“Was she settling a score?” Delia wonders. “My misplaced loyalty to my



dad, or was she simply scattershot mean, or did she just not like me?”

Nor does she think the much quoted “Take notes” was everything it appeared. “It was clever, it was ironic, it was pithy, but it was also a way not to be intimate. In my family everyone was clever and cleverness was admired, but cleverness was often confused with wisdom. It’s saying: ‘I am on my deathbed and you should deal with this by writing about it.’ It’s creating the myth that my mother was this totally remarkable person.”

Her father, whom she describes as “a manic depressive”, also brought up his daughters to understand the importance of the written word, saying at the dinner table, “That’s a great line, write it down.” Delia remembers happy moments in the early years. “There would be these amazing dinners with charades and 20

questions.” And she acknowledges that her parents must have done something right. “In the end I came out of that family to seize the day.”

One wonders if any members of the family, the younger generation perhaps, mind the torrent of words from the Ephron sisters, both the fact and the thinly-disguised fiction. In *Heartburn*, Nora changed the names but wrote acidly about the breakup of her marriage to the investigative journalist Carl Bernstein — which occurred after she discovered that he was having an affair with her friend Margaret Jay, the wife of the British Ambassador, while she, Nora, was pregnant with their second son. The book was made into a 1986 film starring Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. In *Hanging Up*, Delia “created” Georgia, “a wildly opinionated, wildly successful, self-centered older sister. I

thanked Nora for not getting upset about it.” “We would never ask each other permission,” Delia says now of her family. “We might alert someone but we just allow everybody to write what they want. You have no idea what could set off a family member.”

Indeed, it seems the younger generation has taken up the mantle. One of Nora’s sons, Jacob Bernstein, recounted his mother’s final days in *The New York Times*. Only Phoebe Ephron, the very one who said, “Take notes”, seemed to mind what her daughters revealed. “I hope you never tell anyone what happens here,” she said to Delia once, a phrase that Delia repeats again and again in her essay about her mother, doing precisely the opposite of what her mother wanted.

I ask Delia if she lives her life any differently, knowing that it can all be used as fodder in a book, even the most trivial things. Among her essays is a disquisition on what the weather does to her hair.

“I think all writers get their stories from their experiences,” she says with a shrug. I don’t do anything differently but if it turns out to be something worth writing about, I write it.”

In recent years there has been an array of well-written books about deceased loved ones, from Joan Didion’s *Blue Nights* about the loss of her daughter (which followed *The Year of Magical Thinking* about the death of her husband) to Julian Barnes’ *Levels of Life* about his late wife. Ephron is dismissive about any

**Nora and Delia Ephron, above, and, left, on the set of *Bewitched* with Michael Caine and Nicole Kidman. Below: Nora with Meryl Streep, who played her alter ego in *Heartburn***



unifying thread. One thing, though, is certain: “There’s no way to go around grief, you have to go through it.”

Delia does not have children. “I was upset about it for a period of time but I don’t think that it was ever a burning thing for me.” She lives in New York with her second husband, Jerry, who had two young children when she married him, and her dog, Honey. In a very Ephronesque aside, she quips in her memoir: “If you are a step-parent, rush right out and get yourself a dog. Because it’s very nice to have someone in the house that loves you.”

Sometimes in conversation, she still mixes her tenses when referring to Nora: “She is so indomitable, it just didn’t seem possible that she would die first.” One of her most abiding memories is meeting her older sister for tea in New York. “I had just bought these adorable large Italian sunglasses and I went to meet her for cake and I

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sat down and she said: ‘You should never take those glasses off.’” Delia laughs and shakes her head. “That’s such a sister compliment; you have to be a sibling to understand it.”

She claims she does not mind that Nora will always be more famous. The benefits of having Nora as a sister far outweighed any disadvantages. “I don’t know how I would have gotten through life without her, especially given my parents. If I got into problems at college, it was Nora I would call, crying.”

Although Delia stresses that she is never recognised in public, I notice a woman on a neighbouring table trying to take pictures of her on her mobile phone. “No, that’s not possible, not possible,” Ephron says in a fluster. She glances round and the woman catches her eye and smiles. “I do not think of myself as famous. I cannot get a reservation at ABC Kitchen and you can only be famous if you can get a reservation there.”

Having spent most of her adult life trying to “differentiate”, Delia has noticed herself recently taking on some of her sister’s characteristics, especially her outspokenness. “Nora told the managers of the theatre where our play *Love, Loss and What I Wore* was performed that they needed better toilet paper. Recently I told the Marriott Hotel in Miami that they shouldn’t have cocktail napkins at their breakfast buffet, they should have cloth napkins.”

Although she would do almost anything to have more time with Nora, Delia appreciates the extra space she finally feels she has: “She’s just given me a little more room. Either that or she’s channelled her energy into me.” **Sister Mother Husband Dog (etc) is available now, published by Simon & Schuster. To buy it for £9 (rrp £10), free p&p, call 0845 2712134 or visit [thetimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thetimes.co.uk/bookshop)**