

Life story of Astra

Born in 1927, in Manhattan, New York, Astra has been living in London, England, since 1962, when she and her husband came here to start a new life. Their marriage ended in divorce, and Astra has been on her own for many years now.

For about twelve years, while living in New York City, Astra taught kindergarten – she has a BA and MA in Childhood Education from colleges in New York. She found working with young children hard work, and had thought that she would find being a mother easier but discovered later, “When you’re a mother you don’t have a minute off.”

Once here, Astra and her husband started a family, but their marriage did not survive the changes she went through, nor the difficulties of their family life, despite marriage counselling. She tells about the disillusionment of raising a family: “I thought there was more to motherhood ... I had unrealistic expectations ... so I was enormously disappointed and angered and felt I had been conned – by the culture... I had no idea that motherhood would subsume me, that it would take me over and demand so much ... and there was no one I could talk to about these things – these feelings.” Discovering other women who felt the same way was an enormous relief.

The Women’s Liberation Workshop, a loose federation of London area and UK groups, formed in 1969 in London. Within two or three years Astra had joined them, she says, “because in New York I had had a circle of women friends, and when I came here I felt isolated. I couldn’t find like-minded women... And finally I just found women I could talk to and listen to, and it was very exciting. And there were conferences and workshops and seminars and marches – it transformed my life.” The Women’s Liberation Movement became a huge influence on her life, changing the way she viewed the world and women’s place in society, seeing how women’s accomplishments had often been written out of history, and leading her to understand her own experiences in a different light.

After she became divorced Astra took on part-time work, usually in the area of child-care. She says, “I worked with the under-five’s or under-seven’s, in community centres, in refuges for women, in nurseries – so it was work with children and with their families ... a break for all concerned.” She found the work very demanding and was ready to retire at sixty, not taking up the option to stay longer.

Writing poetry is one of Astra’s main passions in life. The poem *Assessment*, about being on her own, growing older, and the passing of time, is from *Older and Bolder* (1990). Motherhood is a favourite subject for her poetry. Besides writing about her own mother and their life together, in *Back You Come, Mother Dear* (1986), her two sons have also been an inspiration since the early days. She has worked at trying to understand her own feelings about the lack of emotional support by her husband and her own shortcomings when her children were little, and the challenge as the two boys grew up with each of them developing his own identity. One son, who is gay, had come out, and as well as this being a milestone in his life she sees it as one in hers, as it took some time to assimilate. Astra says that when she first started writing – in the early seventies when she became involved with the women’s liberation movement – “poems poured out of me, for many, many years,” adding, “and I’m

still writing poems, although fewer.” Astra has several other interests, including photography, and drawing, painting, and sculpting, which have been interests since she was a child.



Ms Astra Blaug . Photo Sue McPherson 2003

bereavement counselling and taking on active roles in several older women’s organisations in London. As a volunteer for the Befriending Network, she received training several years ago on “death and dying,” at the same time exploring her own feelings and fears, and went on to provide emotional and practical support to a terminally ill woman. As a trained Buddy Volunteer, she went on to give support to a man who is HIV positive. She is also one of four editors of the Newsletter of the Older Feminists’ Network (OFN), a social and political organisation for older women that is located in London but with links to women internationally.

Age 76 at the time of the interview, a year earlier—in 2003—Astra had fallen and suffered a cracked thigh bone. This threat to

Since retiring, Astra has become more involved in volunteer activities, including her mobility and her lifestyle has not been easy to accept. Even before the fall she noticed she was “walking more slowly,” she says, “forgetting more things, needing more rest, and having more wrinkles on my face,” all aspects of growing older that also required some adjusting to. Much as she enjoys living on her own, with her two cats for company, she says, “I may not always want this, and I may not always be able to live in this fashion.” Her main concerns are the twelve steps leading up to her flat and living alone, should there be an emergency.

Some of Astra’s recent poems reflect the effects of living with the consequences of her fall – the limitations on her life and the accompanying fear of further crises – as well as her thoughts on the wider theme of growing older. She has also written poems about death, specifically about her mother’s, and poems proclaiming her resistance to her own death, and her fear of that.

In her private life, for many years now, there has been little opportunity for an intimate relationship based on emotional closeness and companionship, with or without the sexual aspect, although she thinks perhaps that knowing “it’s not possible to get everything—to get all one’s needs met—from one person” has something to do with it. Having already been married and raised a family, and experienced the limitations that can come with that, as well as the pain of endings, she seems to have set aside any expectations of having an intimate relationship in the future.

Astra’s involvement with feminism has been more than just an influence on her life. Talking with other like-minded women and being involved with the OFN over the years, since its

inception in the early eighties, has been a focal point of her life. She says, “It’s done a great deal in terms of friendship and consciousness-raising and all kinds of things for the women

who have been and still are involved.” During this time, she says, she has become more confident and assertive. She also confides, “I’m very heartened ...when I see men with their children now, whether they’re small children on their chest or on their back, or older children. And I also feel envious, that there are men who are doing the sort of thing that I wanted to have done in *my* life. But I am glad that changes are taking place.”

Astra. (1986). *Back you come, mother dear*. London: Virago. Republished 2005: Third Age Press.
(1990) *Older and Bolder*. London: Third Age Press.

Life story of Astra Blaug written by Sue McPherson following interview in 2003, amended 2005.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.

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