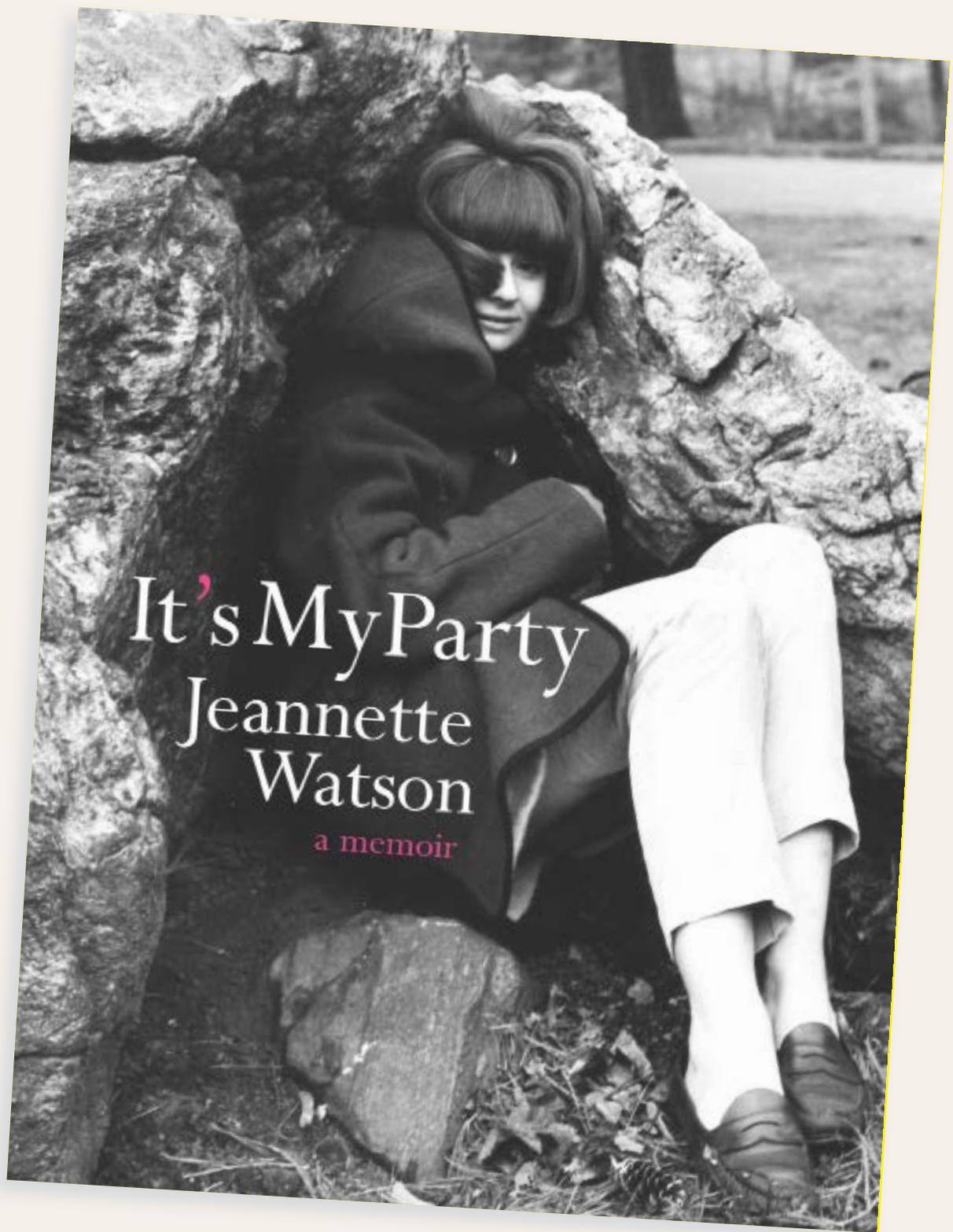


A STORIED AMERICAN LIFE

BY DAVID PATRICK COLUMBIA



This page: Jeannette Watson Sanger and her husband, Alex Sanger, at the Casita Maria Fiesta in October 2012. Opposite page: The cover of Jeannette's newly published memoir, It's My Party (Turtle Point Press).



TURTLE POINT PRESS/JOYCE RAVID; ANNIE WATT (OPPOSITE)

JEANNETTE WATSON SANGER and her husband, Alex, were neighbors of mine for the first couple of decades I lived here. They moved to a new apartment in Madison Square just a few years ago. They had lived around the corner on Gracie Square in an apartment overlooking Carl Schurz Park. We'd see one another on the street from time to time, and occasionally stop for a chat. We'd probably met before at some social event I was covering. And Jeannette owned a well-known bookstore where I loved to go—Books & Co.—on the Upper East Side.

I knew something about her family background because she

was from a famous family of the last half of the American 20th century. Her grandfather, Thomas Watson, was the creator of IBM and her father, Thomas Watson, Jr., was later president and CEO of the company.

IBM was then to the world what Henry Ford was to the beginning of the 20th century. Everything changed after that. In those days of the Watson administrations, there was a serious dignity about the company's universal image. It was said that on everyone's company desk—or at least on the Messrs. Watsons' desks—was a small sign on a pedestal with the word: THINK. As simple as it sounds, that “motto,” if you



want to call it that, was taken very seriously by many millions of people, especially young adults. There was a collective unconscious agreement that IBM (i.e., computers) was the FUTURE.

I recount this because the Watson name was highly regarded as serious—and democratic—among Americans, and evidently in many other countries across the world. Their family wealth, unlike a lot of self-created wealth, seemed to elude the frivolity that frequently follows the acquisition. Jeannette, who is the eldest daughter of six children (five girls), articulates that in her presence. That’s how, and about as much as, I knew her.

Until I read her memoir. *It’s My Party* is just out. Someone sent me a copy, as frequently happens with new books that publicists think might appeal enough to be written about. It’s often a challenge to read many books because of my daily schedule, but I opened this one just to see what the first pages read like since I personally “knew” the woman.

I hadn’t thought of Jeannette Watson Sanger as an adventurous girl or a troubled and therefore dramatically inclined woman who might have a tell-all confessional. First

of all, she’s definitely—just from observation—a very stable person who carries herself with self-assurance if not self-confidence.

So I opened it up to have a look. The first page of copy is this single paragraph:

Last night I had a haunting dream about my father. I dreamed I was in an elderly friend’s apartment, waiting for her, when suddenly a closet door opened in front of me and out walked my father: not my old father, now deceased, but my young father, from when I was a little girl...I was terrified at first, but then noticed how lost he looked, gliding past me as though he didn’t see me. I said, “Daddy can I help you? How are you?” At which point I woke up, heart pounding, and tried to sort out my feelings.

Hmm. Well, it goes like this. I’m a frequent reader of histories, biographies, memoirs. And I’ve read more than a few about heiresses and daddies’ daughters. But that paragraph was far more curious because it didn’t quite match the Jeannette I knew as a neighbor and with whom I occasionally had a pleasant passing conversation—nor her husband, Alex, who always had the same friendly demeanor as his wife. This paragraph, however, indicated something I couldn’t see. Those kinds of “somethings” I know,

of course, indicate the core, the source, the truth of a person.

So I turned the page to chapter one. That was on a Saturday morning for a few hours. And a few more later in the afternoon, and ditto again on Sunday morning and afternoon and, finally, before bed, I finished it. Two hundred pages—not long, as these books go. Simply, beautifully told. Clear, sensible, stable, forthright, honest, funny, even moments of laughter, I just kept reading. It had the quality of a personal letter from a close friend that I couldn’t put down. There was one moment, not a long description, around the death of her father where a touch of personal grief welled up inside me. “Really,” I said to myself.

It’s My Party is also a document of the last half of 20th-century America and the role of women as well as their rights. The Watsons were indeed a very rich and prominent family. They lived very well and conveniently, if not extravagantly. They knew their roles and they acted them out with self-respect, but Jeannette’s account also conjures up *Father Knows Best*, along with the laughs. And a serious look at ourselves and who we were. I loved this book. ♦

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This page, counterclockwise from above: The Watsons in 1922 (Jeannette's grandmother, for whom she was named, is at left; her father, Thomas, Jr., stands front and center; and grandfather, Thomas, Sr., at right); Jeannette's mother, Olive Cawley Watson, a great beauty and model, was flown to Hollywood to be in Walter Wanger's production of *Vogues of 1938*; Jeannette's father, Thomas Watson, Jr. (left), president and CEO of IBM, in 1966 with the IBM System 360 mainframe computer; Jeannette on the town with the New Yorker writer Brendan Gill; Jeannette's grandfather, Thomas Watson, Sr., who built IBM from its founding in 1914 until his passing in 1956. Opposite page: Jeannette Watson Sanger photographed by Joyce Ravid.

