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Tete-a-Tete
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Q: As a hypothetical exercise, do you think Beauvoir would have objected if Sartre proposed fidelity and marriage from the very outset of their relationship?

A: Interesting question, isn't it. I doubt that she would have objected. She was only 21, and she was in love. The people she knew were all married. I think she would have been very happy with the idea. She says herself that the idea of a non-monogamous "free union" was shocking to her at first.

But nor did she want a traditional marriage based on hypocrisy and double standards. Sartre could have married her and had mistresses behind her back, like many men she knew. Her father had done that, and Simone de Beauvoir had seen how her mother had suffered. But here was Sartre insisting that she enjoy her freedom, just as he intended to do! The prospect rather frightened her, but she knew, instinctively, that this man would open up her life in every possible respect. And I think she was right.

Q: Brief quotes from Sartre's unpublished correspondence were allowed for the North American edition, but were excised entirely for the European publication. Why did Arlette Elkaim withhold permission?

A: Arlette Elkaim Sartre is Sartre's adopted daughter, legal heir, and literary executor. As I say in the section of my book called "Note on Sources," she is famous, among Sartre scholars, for being obstructive. I don't know why she refuses to see people, and why she systematically refuses copyright permission. Her behavior could not be more different from Sartre's, who was tremendously generous to scholars, and who was a firm believer in "transparency."

As Sartre's literary executor, Elkaim Sartre holds the copyright for all Sartre's unpublished writings, including his letters. I saw hundreds of these. In actual fact, I knew from the outset that she would never give me permission to quote from these letters, so I used paraphrase, and merely quoted tiny phrases—which I knew would pass under the "fair use" copyright law. What we didn't realize until the book was in production was that this copyright law applies to North America only. European copyright law is stricter. One day, out of the blue, we received a letter from Elkaim, insisting that I cut this and that. It seemed rather a lot, and came as a shock to me.

My U.S. publishers consulted with a French copyright lawyer and, in fact, most of the cuts she demanded did not have to be made. Still, it was a nuisance. In the end, we decided to produce two editions of the book. The North-American edition (this one) would be unadulterated. For all other editions, I had to go through the book and cut out the odd quote here and there. Not much, not much at all. But still, it's too bad, isn't it? And it seems awfully pointless.

Q: Your previous books are highly praised biographies on Christina Stead and Richard Wright. What attracts you to biography?

A: I guess there is nothing that interests me more than people. I love the excuse to go to a place and walk through a door and meet someone I would otherwise never meet. I enjoy interviewing people. I love history, I have a strong interest in politics and psychology, and above all, I love turning life into story. I can honestly say that each of these books has changed my life quite dramatically. They have made me travel to places I would not have gone to; they have caused me to pack my bags and go and live somewhere else for a time, and they have given me dozens of new friends.

I put a lot of passion into my writing. For me, biography is rather like a love affair; my energy, imagination, and empathy go into trying to understand that person. That is deeper and more interesting, I always feel, than judging him or her.

Q: Reviewers appear to have a visceral response to the secrets revealed in Tête-à-Tête. Some feel betrayed by Sartre and Beauvoir, while others find them more complicated and human for their frailties. How did you feel upon seeing their clay feet?

A: There were days when I intensely disliked them both. I hated the way they systematically told lies to their young women friends. To this day, I don't know how they managed to reconcile that with their Existentialist emphasis on truth and morality. But you know, they inspire me nonetheless. There is so much about them that is refreshing. They were courageous people, who dared to think beyond conventional frameworks. They dared to invent their lives. Simone de Beauvoir lived life with such extraordinary passion. Both of them worked incredibly hard, and both of them changed the world in important ways. They were generous to a fault. When I think about it, I ended up feeling a sort of tenderness toward Sartre. There is no doubt that he was really quite fragile, emotionally. Simone de Beauvoir was too, in many ways. And that made me admire her courage even more.

Q: Do you have plans for another book?

A: Yes, I am having a break from biography. I am just beginning a book about New York. Aspects of life in New York. This crazy city has me fascinated. I must say, after three biographies, I'm enjoying writing short pieces. I meet lots of people, but I talk to them about a particular aspect of life in New York, and then I move on! It makes me feel as light as a summer breeze.