

David W Fletcher, March 2005

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LOIS W. BANNER'S *INTERTWINED LIVES:*
MARGARET MEAD, RUTH BENEDICT, AND THEIR CIRCLE

When the Library of Congress, from December 2000 thru November 2001, released a large body of Margaret Mead's personal papers, Lois Banner decided the time had come for a new biography of the illustrious twentieth-century anthropologist and her equally famous mentor, Ruth Benedict. Banner, a professor of history and gender studies at the University of Southern California, had considered the project much earlier, as early as the 1980s. But restrictions on public release of both Mead's and Benedict's private correspondence, at the Library of Congress and Vassar College respectively, influenced her to abandon the effort. Prodded by the appearance of men's studies and gay and lesbian studies in the 1990s, as well as a shift in focus toward gender in women's studies, Banner recommenced her biographical work. In *Intertwined Lives: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Their Circle*,¹ she produces a lengthy, if not exhaustive, comparative biography of the two women or, better, a cultural biography that revolves around the two academics as distinct but evolving foci in their struggle to give voice to pertinent issues of modernity in regard to self-consciousness and identity-formation—gender, human sexuality, and feminist identity.

To get at their "life story" in the context of *Their Circle*, Banner uses what she calls "first and foremost an exercise in detection" (4), an investigative approach not unlike that found in

¹New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003, 540 pages, with prologue, notes, index, and photographs.

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detective or courtroom novels. She reveals what is “on the surface” or explicit and plain, but she constantly pries deeply to discover hidden meanings, innuendoes, and subtle implications. And because she sets the story within the context of unfolding, layered meanings about gender and sex—taken from culture, psychology, religion, and society—her *Intertwined Lives* reads a lot like contemporary romance or love stories full of intricate intrigue and rich characterization. In fact, Banner purposely writes to elucidate the labyrinth she calls “geography of gender” and its effect on Benedict and Mead. This “geography” she sees as “the complex terrain of gender and sexuality” that includes political, social, professional, familial, individual, and psychological aspects (7). As a proficient investigator, Banner rigorously leaves few angles unexplored.

Beginning with ancestry and childhood experiences, Banner traces each woman’s family background and early development, particularly in regard to each one’s sexuality. Conflicting versions pervade Mead’s own accounts of her childhood, while Benedict left only a short, stylized version of hers (Parts I & II). Each girl grew up under strikingly different circumstances, understandably, since Benedict was fifteen years senior to Mead. Banner further elaborates this difference in the record of their early post-secondary educations—Benedict at Vassar College and Mead at DePauw University and Barnard College. Through the practice of “smashing” or female romantic relationships and the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, “the first modern feminist,” Banner traces the movement of her characters away from society’s Victorian mores toward greater openness, even erotic behavior, in same-sex friendships (Parts III & IV). Sometimes these influences were elusive and fleeting, but often they became lasting and permanent, as was

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the case when Mead befriended Benedict at Columbia University in the fall of 1923. From this point forward, “their association deepened” even though “the feelings between [them] developed slowly” (180-181).

For the next quarter of a century, until the death of Benedict in 1948, Banner details the growth of this bond, as their lives truly became intertwined. She reveals the dynamic nexus of each women’s intellectual pursuits (i.e., of gender, race, and sexuality) with their personal struggles to identify as homosexual versus heterosexual or as bisexual, their friendships with other women, their partners in marriage, and their intense and intimate affection for one another (Parts IV, V, & VI). Banner assumes an enormous task, but she does so with prodigious use and explication of her source material—letters, poetry, and writings of Benedict and Mead, published and unpublished.

While sometimes speculative, Banner’s story remains quite introspective of the feelings, thoughts, and actions of Benedict, Mead, and their close associates, including their husbands and female lovers. So much so, her narrative holds together in tension variant storylines which cannot be untangled, contradictory worlds with contrary meanings—interlaced but seemingly disconnected. Although this might leave some readers bewildered, particularly those unversed in gender studies or the history of early anthropology, Banner’s style positively alerts the reader to the complicated nature of human sexuality and its dubious interpretations. Banner, though, approaches the delicate subject with joyful playfulness.

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With a bit of classical nostalgia, she first introduces the two “Sybils” via their encounter at the Sistine Chapel in Rome. She then alludes to “Apollo and Dionysus” (Benedict) and “The Young-Eyed Cherubim” (Mead) to illuminate their childhoods. In somewhat Victorian fashion, Banner toys with notions of unicorns, free love, bread and wine, “two strings,” “squares,” and ripeness to show how each one’s ideas about human sexuality and their romantic attraction for one another changed and matured over time. *Intertwined Lives* sustains this poetic quality throughout, albeit arranged thematically and structured chronologically, and crescendoes to the end of the matter—Benedict’s death. Even in closing the drama, Banner retains this poetic style. For instance, in reference to Mead’s grief at her mentor’s death, Banner notes:

She had loved Benedict beyond measure; she would miss her friend and lover, her sister, mother, and mentor. Now they would truly have to meet in dreams. Without Benedict, Mead would never have attained her brilliant career: Benedict gave her the inspiration to build upon her insights and to extend them, to go beyond her in her thinking while retaining her affection and support. A woman raised in the Victorian era, Benedict had confronted and embraced the modern era, while retaining the integrity of the past. “We shall not look upon her like again,” Mead concluded. Now it was time for Mead to go ahead, to forge a career that would continue. . . . She would, indeed, construct the brilliant career that Benedict had expected of her and, by achieving it, come full circle to fulfill the dreams of her friend” (443).

If anything, Banner is devoted to her characters as she lifts their stories out of the dry dustbins of academic anthropology to the lively interchange of passionate human intercourse. The former seems to be more objective and knowable; the latter tends to be mostly subjective and mysterious. Banner’s peering over hundreds of personal letters from the two scholars probably caused this. So if subjectivity in intimate human relations is any cause for alarm, especially in historical studies, Banner ought to accept the charge as congratulatory. Banner also

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seems obsessed with characterization by way of context building—sometimes germane to her “intertwined lives” but sometimes not. If by “their circle” she means to portray the minuscule cliques of her anthropological elites, then well and good. But, by giving us more and not less and by showing the interlaced lives of the cultured few, Banner has offered us a rare and realistic portrait of two early twentieth-century notables—a grand achievement.