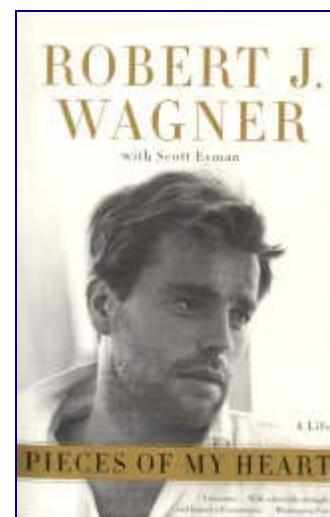


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## A READER'S JOURNAL

**Pieces of My Heart  
A Life**  
by  
**Robert J. Wagner**  
with Scott Eyman

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment  
Published by HarperCollins/NY in 2009  
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013



Several things had to happen for me to want to read the life of Robert Wagner. First, I had to learn to like him. Second, I had to be made aware of this book. And, third, someone had to give it to me

because I wouldn't have bought it on my own as I rarely read memoirs, especially of movie stars. When RJ appeared several times on NCIS, our favorite program, I found him almost playing himself and being very likeable. He played Tony DiNozzo's father and he delighted in calling Tony, Junior. In one of the DVD commentaries, Michael Weatherly, who plays DiNozzo, talked about reading RJ's book as homework for RJ's stint on NCIS and how much he enjoyed reading it. In an unlikely third part of the syzygy, someone gave a copy of the book to my wife and I watched as she read it, enjoyed it, and when she was finished, she gave it to me. When I began reading it, I immediately discovered that RJ was a junior himself, taking the nickname RJ to avoid it, and thus his apparent delight in calling Tony, "Junior".

The authors get this memoir off to a BANG! in the Prologue entitled, "He was Fred Astaire!" The title came from when twelve-year-old RJ slid down a hill of the eleventh hole of the Bel-Air Country Club on a piece of corrugated tin to sit and watch golfers go by. A foursome consisting of Cary Grant, Fred Astaire, Clark Gable, and Randolph Scott walked to putt out across the place where young RJ was sitting in the bushes.

**[page 4] I was transfixed! It was the most amazing experience, not just because I had grown up seeing these men at the movies, at the Fox and the Bruin Theaters in Westwood. It was because they looked . . . freshly minted! They say that some movie stars are disappointing when seen in the flesh — smaller, less prepossessing than they appear on the screen. Not these men. They inhabited life as securely as they inhabited the screen. Put it another way: they filled the room, even if the room was outdoors.**

Randolph Scott I knew as a favorite cowboy hero when I was twelve years old — the other three I would only meet a decade or so later in the movies — but he was one of our favorite cowboys when we played cowboys and Indians at that age. We fought to be him. To see those four mega-stars together, at close range, and to know who they were, was an incredible opportunity for any twelve-year-old boy. And yet, for RJ, it was just the beginning of his acquaintance with Hollywood stars. If you'd like to have had such a childhood and growing up in the movie industry, open the pages of this memoir and you can enjoy sharing the feelings, the excitements, and the thrills along with RJ as he grows up. You'll find yourself smiling, chuckling, and laughing out loud at some of his stories. Yes, there were times of sorrow, of tears, and of a deep sense of loss. These are the concomitants of life for anyone who hangs out with people who are older than they are; you will likely survive them and have to mourn their passing. And RJ had a lot of close friends who were older than he was. One of these was Clark Gable with whom RJ played a lot of golf later in life. On a great photo of himself, Gable inscribed, "To R. J., who taught me how to putt a decent golf ball — thereby saving me unknown \$. Clark." (B&W Plate between pages 86 and 87)

Photos such as this one grace many pages of this fine memoir, all from RJ's personal collection. Do you have a personal favorite movie or role of his? You'll likely hear it mentioned within the cover of this book along with so many of the illustrious stars he played along with. Want to be a fly-on-the-wall in the men's room with him when an inebriated Clifton Webb gives his *little friend* a drink of brandy? Or when RJ discovers the cosmetic enhancement Jayne Mansfield did to herself which led to a photo of Sophia Loren looking askance at Jayne's cleavage? Or when RJ caught Errol Flynn *in flagrante delicto*? It's all here awaiting your perusal.

Most of all the young RJ wanted to be a movie star. He learned to imitate them, but in the process learned an important lesson.

**[page 28] And then Stan Anderson, whose daughter I had entertained with imitations, sent me to see Solly Baiano at Warner's. I did my impersonation of Cagney, Bogart, and the rest for Solly, and all he said was, "Well, that's all very well, but we've already got Cagney, and we've already got Bogart. What about doing you?"**

**That rocked me back. I thought about it and sensibly pointed out that "I can't do me. I don't know who me is."**

RJ wrote about his introduction to jazz and how you can tell from the first few notes who is performing a given song.

**[page 36] You can listen to three or four notes on the trumpet and know it's Louis Armstrong — there are thousands of trumpet players, but nobody else has that unique Armstrong sound. It's the same thing every actor strives for — a tone that's all their own.**

Clearly RJ strove for and found out who he was, finding a tone of his own. He played the young handsome lover, but never became a Tab Hunter; he played a cowboy but never became a Randolph Scott; he played an evil doctor but never became a Boris Karloff; he played a nice guy and became and stayed a likeable Robert Wagner.

He met Barbara Stanwyck on the production of *Titanic* when he was 22 and she 45 and they were together for four years, the first woman RJ ever loved, and she was a major factor in his maturation. Finally she came to him and said that she loved him, but . . .

**[page 64] I couldn't argue with her reasoning. There was simply no way we could have been married at that time. I would have always been Mr. Stanwyck, and we both knew it.**

**She was an enormous influence in my life, and still is. I remain immensely grateful. I gave her things, nice things, such as a four-leaf clover necklace made out of platinum and diamonds, a piece of jewelry she always set special store by. But the things I gave her were dwarfed by the things she gave me. If I had to limit it to just one thing, I would say she gave me self-esteem. To have a woman of her beauty and accomplishment see value in me and give herself totally to me couldn't help but have a powerful impact on my psyche. Barbara was the first savior in my life.**

When RJ stuck his neck out with the studio to add Fred Astaire to his show "It Takes a Thief", it proved to be a successful addition. One day RJ and Fred were in Rome and returning from lunch together to the villa where they were shooting, and the crew saw them coming.

**[page 190] One guy began clapping his hands rhythmically and called out "Fred!" The rhythm and the call were quickly picked up by the rest of the crew, and as "Fred! . . . Fred! . . . Fred! . . . Fred! . . ." reverberated around the ballroom, Fred began to dance. He did incredible little combinations and twirls, kicked the piano, and danced around the ballroom to the clapping of the crew. It was pure dancing, for his own pleasure and the**

**pleasure of the people he was working with. I just stood there and thought, *Remember this.***

There was a fourth reason for my reading this memoir by Robert Wagner, which I have saved until now. The circumstances of Natalie Wood's death seemed suspiciously like he might have been involved with her death. Nothing in the book helped to clarify what happened that night on the boat when she disappeared into the water, but his love for her was so heart felt, when they were married the first time, when he missed her so much while they were divorced, and when they found each other and married a second time, that there is no way he could have wanted her to be anything but alive and with him for the rest of his life.

After a party at the Foremans where neither spouse was able to attend, RJ drove Natalie home, he felt the feelings they still had for each other, but the subject never came up. In front of her house, they sat for a few minutes.

**[page 195, 196] "I guess I shouldn't come in," I finally said.**

**"I guess you shouldn't," she said. She got out and went in the house. I drove down the street, then had to stop. I was crying, and I couldn't see the road anymore. I sent flowers the next day, and Natalie sent me a thank-you note.**

They were eventually remarried, on a chartered boat, the Rambling Rose, on the water in Catalina, with Frank Sinatra present who sang for them "Second Time Around" and things were "more lovely, the second time around" for RJ and Natalie. When Courtney, their daughter, was born to them, Natalie showed her off to all their Hollywood friends, saying, "Who needs movies?" They were truly happy to be back together. It was easy to see how and why RJ loved her, and as for why she loved him, we have his own testimony.

**[page 214] You can tell why I loved her. Why did she love me? I think it was because I made her laugh. Natalie had this great, boisterous guffaw, and I could always make her roll over with laughter. And she knew that I was there for her. A friend of ours once asked her how she managed to keep herself together. "Because I always had RJ behind me," she said. "I always know he's there."**

On the stage, actors are always told before a performance, "Break a leg!" Ever wonder why that is such an old tradition? It's because one cannot break a leg on purpose! When someone tells you to do something which can only be done spontaneously, you will be unable to do that very thing under command. "Smile!" is a great example — and decades of photographing pretend smiles have taught photographers to say anything else, like "Say Cheese" or "Say Underpants" anything which will create a spontaneous response will make for a great natural-looking smile. In movies, directors will sometimes drop the final syllable from "ACTION!" into "ACT!" and create a "be spontaneous" paradox, causing Actors to *act* instead of *be*, a potentially deadly career move.

**[page 235] You get up in the morning, and you're thinking about the scene you have to do, and you keep thinking about it while you're being made up. You tell yourself to keep the scene in perspective with the whole of the film and not to push it. And then you go on the set, and sometimes the director will say, "Act!" And that's the thing you don't want to do.**

**You do not want to *act*. You want to *be*.**

The inclusion of the story of how Bill Holden died because of an accident which occurred while he was drinking seems to be RJ setting the stage for the accident which took Natalie's life later.

**[page 259] He had gotten drunk, fallen, and hit his head on a table. Not realizing how badly he had been cut, he had lain down on the bed and bled to death. He had been dead for four days before he was found. It was a terrible, ignominious death for a fine man and underrated actor who had been unable to shake his addiction to alcohol.**

One night they were together with Christopher Walken, Natalie's co-star on *Brainstorm*, and all three had been drinking, not a lot, but several glasses of wine on shore and a couple of drinks back on the *Spendour* anchored offshore of Avalon. Natalie had gone below and Walken began to lecture RJ on how Natalie should devote herself to her career the way he was doing. RJ got upset with Walken's "total pursuit of a career" and told him to leave Natalie alone, slamming a wine bottle at one point. They later moved up to the top deck and things cooled off, but unbeknownst to anyone Natalie had left the boat. When RJ finally went below, Natalie was nowhere to be found. RJ called a shore boat and went to search for her, thinking she must have gone back to the restaurant on Catalina Island. The next morning the missing dingy was found and two hours later she was found. His beloved wife was dead. Her death was ruled accidental, but the Tabloids made a lot of money publicizing every other imaginable and unimaginable possible explanation for her death.

As a writer who writes reviews, I learned not to read other people's reviews of any movie or book that I planned to review. Hard to be original when someone else's words are reverberating through your head. RJ learned not to read the reviews others wrote of his work.

**[page 308] When I was a kid and just starting out, I read my reviews, but I came to realize that if you believe the good reviews, you have to believe the bad ones. Rather than focusing on what other people thought of me, I chose to concentrate on the work, the job, and my commitment to that work.**

RJ said that he learned that "there is no such thing as 'what if . . .' There is only 'what is'." He had lost Natalie, the woman he loved, twice in one lifetime, her death taking "pieces of his heart" away, and the only way to steer one's ship of life after a devastating loss is to point it into the *what is*.

