

# Rebecca Wilson, scribbler on the 'Roof'

Fairfax author's gripping memoir of a family bolder than Bolinas

When Rebecca Wilson was 3-1/2 years old, her father took two bullets, in the chest and head, on South Van Ness Street in San Francisco. Dow Wilson, 40, had been the militant leader of the 2,500 strong Painters' Union. He and his wife, Barbara, were labor organizers and class warriors; when Dow was gone nights on union business, Barbara opened the front door shotgun in hand. Dow could not be bought by the unscrupulous, and clashes with a corrupt union official led to his assassination in 1966.

Becky, the baby of the family—her older brother, Lee, was 18, her sister, Amalia, 14—was told that her father had been shot by robbers. She writes, "[M]y father's murder fractured the family and set us madly in some motion that we've never stopped." The remaining family, each member with a personality big enough to take over a room, descended into chaos and remained there. In *A House with No Roof*, Wilson's sad, funny and remarkably unbiting memoir coming out from Counterpoint Press this fall, Wilson describes growing up with grief, bewilderment, domestic violence, drug abuse and death. Oh, and the Wilsons moved to Bolinas, the West Marin town that she says, "seemed to welcome crazy people." The book is in some ways a portrait of the late '60s and '70s in Marin County.

Union contributions and proceeds from a small life insurance lawsuit paid for a house to be built for the Wilsons on the Mesa. While they were living in rental accommodations during construction, Lee, then 20 and a handsome Robert Redford look-alike, began to shoot heroin. Barbara's response when told about this by Amalia? To slap her face and tell her to shut up. Writer Anne Lamott, who came to know Barbara 30 years ago when she spent time visiting Lamott's dying father—she was a fierce and caring friend—writes in the book's introduction that she was "extraordinary in her brilliance, artistic eccentricity, and ferocious plain spoken feminism," but could, nonetheless, "be impossible."

In spite of her feminism, Barbara set no boundaries on Lee, whose bursts of drug-induced violence against his girlfriends (and more shockingly, his young sister) would have driven most mothers to call the authorities. But "Wilson's Are Bold," **by Elizabeth Stewart** read the banner Barbara sewed to fly over the house—and furthermore, would have no truck with cops. (When, as a 5-year-old, Becky got lost in Mill Valley and wound up at the police station, her mother was furious. Confiscating the lollipop given to Becky by a policeman, she lectured, "We don't ever go to the police.")

Lee may have reminded Barbara of her lost husband; certainly Dow appears to have been impatient and mercurial in his temper. She let Lee get away with what could well have been murder. On one occasion, a fight broke out between Lee and Becky. After he had punched her in the head, and kicked her in the stomach, he kicked her head-first down the stairs. "You must forgive him," Barbara told the sobbing Becky, "Lee feels terrible guilt." She went on to explain, without irony, that on the night of Dow's murder, Lee and his father got into a fistfight at the dinner table—over table manners. Lee ran out of the house and thus was not present at his father's murder, which he felt he could have prevented. "Things have never been easy for Lee, not since that night."

"My throat closes up," Wilson writes, "I want to yell, 'What about me? Make him stop.' But I know she won't. Lee will come back. She'll always let him come home."

Sure enough, as Lee's drug smuggling (he began by bringing back a surfboard full of cocaine, and went on to organize huge shipments of marijuana into the port of San Francisco) led to trash bags of cash, he and his mother engaged in violent dish-throwing fights. Meanwhile, the voluptuous Amalia departed for Woodstock and was not heard from for "a long, long time."

Becky was now 10 and the owner of a beloved bay mare named Shaheia. In lovely contrast to the mayhem of her life at home, Becky and Shaheia would escape into the wild beauty that is West Marin. Alone or with girlfriends she rode the hills and beaches—even riding across the channel to Seadrift at low tide. Wilson gives the reader lyrical descriptions of the lives of little girls surrounded by flowers, shells and butterflies, running wild in nature. (It's a safe bet that there is a movie somewhere in the future for *A House with No Roof*.)

Time passed and Wilson somehow made it to high school—a dubious achievement, since tradition at Tam High dictated that students from West Marin were hicks and "Boho Burnouts." But worse followed: Barbara was diagnosed with breast cancer and, in a not uncommon scenario in '70s California, decided to take the "alternative" route to healing. Becky was thrown into the role of parent as they endured the misery of fruitless travels to Mexico and elsewhere in search of cures that inevitably disappointed. Barbara grew ever sicker and finally died two weeks before Becky's graduation.

In meeting the adult Rebecca, it is hard to square this composed and beautiful woman—now in her 40s—with the girl who grew up amid such grief and pain.



ROBERT VENTE

*Bolinas 'seemed to welcome crazy people,' though that was before the town had met Wilson and her family...*

She lives with Malcolm, her kind-looking, handsome older partner, and a very tiny cat in a secluded sunny cottage in Fairfax. After college at Scripps in Southern California, she spent two years in the U.K. interviewing Scottish and Irish women poets for her first published book, *Sleeping with Monsters*. Returning to California, she began work with Don Deane at the *Coastal Post*. "When I first interviewed with him, I said I had an idea for a book and pitched the idea of trying out some of the material in the paper, and he let me try it in column format. It was called 'Raising My Mother.'" These days Wilson is deputy editor at Tiburon's *Ark* newspaper.

In the 12 years needed to mold *A House with No Roof* into its present publishable form, it took various versions and received much editorial input. Wilson herself grew and changed. At the age of 30 she became the

owner of two wolf/malamute/husky dogs—her wolves as she refers to them. The wolves gave her a much needed sense of home and protection—and in fact rallied 'round her with wild barking and ruffs erect during an encounter with an angry Lee. (Lee died five years ago, of cancer.)

When Wilson finally met Malcolm in a yoga class, it was the wolves' reaction to him that sealed the deal. He held out his arms to them on the beach, and they raced toward him, knocked him into the sand, and with wild barks and wagging tails licked his face in welcome.

When asked if she has felt changed by the writing of *A House with No Roof*, Rebecca Wilson thinks for a moment, then says:

"I do feel changed by it. Strangely enough, it's made me feel closer to my family. And I have a sense of freedom from the past. I feel free." \*