

PRAISE FOR *PRICKLY ROSES*

“Prickly Roses: Stories from a Life may just as well have been called *The Unimaginable, Fascinating, and Unspeakably Magical Life of Joyce Abell*. Her childhood adventures rival those of Harry Potter, except her stories are better because they’re true. The world she recounts is all but lost to us now, and so I am doubly grateful to Joyce Abell for writing her history down.”

ANN PATCHETT, author of *Commonwealth* and *Bel Canto*

“Joyce Abell is a wonder! To write such a potently frank, luscious, character-rich memoir is no small thing, at any age. But to be able to describe childhood mysteries of abuse and neglect without an ounce of blame, but with a brilliantly clear, calm, long-ranging eye is astonishing. Abell has known a life in which odd things continued to happen, people like Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes managed to show up, and her gusto for new surprises and new days remained unshaken. I adore this book and this author and you will too.”

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE, author of *Habibi* and *The Turtle of Oman*

“Abell has an engaging, straightforward style . . . Charming snapshots from a lost age.”

KIRKUS REVIEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

First Book by 92-Year-Old Author **Passager Books publishes *Prickly Roses* by Joyce Abell**

Passager Books announces the publication of *Prickly Roses*, a memoir by 92-year-old Joyce Abell.

Among many adventures that she chronicles, Abell crossed the Atlantic at the age of five on her own when her preoccupied parents decided to ship her off to live with her grandfather, the U.S. ambassador to Albania. In a later chapter, Paul Robeson sings a hymn at the funeral of Joyce's black stepmother.

Novelist Ann Patchett, author of *Commonwealth* and *Bel Canto* says that "Abell's childhood adventures rival those of Harry Potter, except her stories are better because they're true."

In its 28 years, *Passager* has shared the work of more than 1,000 writers in its 63 issues and 24 books, gaining a reputation for longevity in a field in which few magazines and journals last more than a handful of years. With *Prickly Roses*, *Passager* continues its tradition of bringing the compelling writing and insight of older writers to the public. Passager editor Kendra Kopelke says that what stood out in the book was Abell's "grit and courage and optimism about life from the moment she

was born. She's not a victim of circumstance. It's a refreshing story in this time of pessimism and anxiety about the state of the world."

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye says, "To be able to describe childhood mysteries of abuse and neglect without an ounce of blame, but with a brilliantly clear, calm, long-ranging eye is astonishing."

Passager Books is a not-for-profit press dedicated to publishing the work of older writers, encouraging the imagination throughout life, and creating beautiful and welcoming publications. Its literary journal, *Passager*, founded in 1990, has featured work by nearly 1,000 poets, fiction writers and memoirists, many in their 80s and 90s. Passager's mission is to "bring attention to older writers to and encourage imagination throughout our lives."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

photograph by Christine Drawl



Joyce Abell was born in 1925 in New York City and spent her childhood shuttled between parents and grandparents, living many places, from a farm in Connecticut to an embassy in Albania. After teaching anthropology and psychology in the public high schools, she and her husband retired and moved to Rappahannock County, VA where they became organic farmers. Joyce was a founding member of Rappahannock County Community Theatre. In the early '90s she created and co-directed "No Ordinary Person," a dramatic reading series highlighting autobiographical stories by local citizens, still running as of 2017. Her recent acting roles were the leads in *Driving Miss Daisy* and *The Gin Game*. This is her first book.

FROM THE AUTHOR

This book had its beginnings in 1984 when I met the award-winning actress-director Julie Portman who had settled in Rappahannock County, with her husband the same year that we came here. A few years later, after taking one of her life stories workshops, I was inspired to create an annual autobiographical storytelling show at our local theatre, a show I called “No Ordinary Person,” featuring the life stories of our county residents as told by them. This show has been running for nearly 20 years as of this writing.

The stories here are closely based on the ones I have told over the years at the No Ordinary Person show. They are mostly stories of my childhood. I’ve written little about my life as a teacher, a farmer, a wife, a mother, a member of the Rappahannock community, or how things have gone since the death in 2002 of my husband, Richard Abell. I left out most stories involving people still living.

One of the main reasons I have written this book is because, in my old age, I am acutely aware of how close to me Death lies. I also know that after death most of us are quickly forgotten or, at the very least, changed so much in people’s memories that there’s not much of our “true” selves left to pass on to the generations after that. I can attest to how surprised I sometimes am when I happen to read today’s descriptions of famous people who were alive and well in the first half of my life. I invariably wonder, when some reporter describes a certain Late Great Someone, who the devil is he talking about? I am aware there was plenty about those LGSs that I didn’t know about when they were still alive, so my own picture of them is undoubtedly skewed, but all too often people from the past are described in ways that make them almost totally unrecognizable.

I understand why we forget. We want life while we can grab it and to hell with the past. I don’t object. (Not that it matters if I do.)

But, truth to tell, that hasn't kept me from wanting to be remembered for a while longer.

The first truly overwhelming joy in my life was giving birth to my son, Crispin Sartwell, and then having had the privilege to watch his delight in discovering and understanding his new, amazing world. Now, more than 50 years later, I realize he has never stopped. My hope is that Crispin's children, my grandchildren Emma, Sam and Jane, will read this book some day and pass it on to their children, who might pass it on to their children, forever and ever and ever.

Amen.

A handwritten signature in dark ink. The name "Joyce" is written in a cursive style on the top line, and "Abell" is written on the bottom line, also in cursive. The signature is positioned in the center of the page.

Joyce Abell
June, 2017

ORDERING INFORMATION

Prickly Roses: Stories from a Life

Paperback: 168 pages

Publisher: Passager Books

ISBN 978-0-9969726-5-9

Product Dimensions: 5.25 x 0.5 x 8 inches

\$18

Bookstores: Order through Small Press Distribution at spdbooks.org, or directly from Passager Books. Passager offers a 40% discount on retail prices, as well as consignment options. Please email editors@passagerbooks.com to order.

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