

## Dr. Barbara G. Mertz, Colleague & Friend

Barbara Louise Mertz, novelist and Egyptologist, was born 29 September 1927 and died 8 August 2013. She made Egypt come alive for her legions of fans who eagerly followed the fictional exploits of Amelia Peabody Emerson through 19 books written under the nom de plume of Elizabeth Peters. She was also a good friend to ARCE. Her dear friends, Ray Johnson and Salima Ikram, share some of their fondest memories of Barbara:



Barbara and dahabiyeh at Gebel Silsileh, December 5, 2003. Photo by Ray Johnson

### *From Ray Johnson, Director The Epigraphic Survey/Chicago House*

I unashamedly admit that I have belonged to the cult of Egyptologist groupies devoted to Barbara Mertz and her writings, both fiction and nonfiction, for many years. While I love her carefully researched and lovingly written novels (particularly the Amelia Peabody series), my primary interaction with Barbara was Egyptological, and with her nonfiction. Like many of us, my first exposure to professional Egyptology as a young adult (in high school)

was through her two introductory books on Egyptology, *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs*, and *Red Land, Black Land*, both tremendously stimulating to an eager young mind. Long after Barbara and I had become friends (we met for the first time at Chicago House in Luxor), one of the greatest pleasures—and honors—in my professional life was to be asked by her to take a look at some revisions she had made to both books. The revised editions are even stronger now, and I know will influence in a most positive way even more generations of budding young Egyptologists.

Barbara will live forever through her writing, but I will miss her personally more than I can say. Her joy in life was infectious, and her visits to Luxor over two decades were always jolly, stimulating, and much anticipated. I will forever cherish the memories of the dinners she attended at Chicago House, the uproarious 'soirees' in her suite at the Old Winter Palace, and of participating in one of Margie Fisher's wonderful Nubian Sea cruises where Barbara and fellow mystery-writer Joan Hess were the guest lecturers and held raucous court in the ship's lounge in a cloud of blue smoke. One of my fondest memories is the time in 2003 when I accompanied Barbara and our friends Dennis Forbes and Joel Cole on Bill and Nancy Petty's vintage, two-masted dahabiyeh from Luxor to Kom Ombo, with a memorable stop at the Gebel Silsileh quarries to see the Amenhotep III rock-cut stelae, unfinished sphinxes, and Amenhotep IV talatat quarries. I will miss my visits to Lorien Court, her beautiful country 'manse' in Frederick, Maryland where she lived—and wrote—with her beloved menagerie of cats and dogs, surrounded by her magnificent rose gardens. Those gardens were one of her greatest joys, filled with fragrant, multi-hued antique rose bushes and twisting paths through a magical sculpture-filled landscape. Taking a walk through these gardens one might encounter an Osiris figure peering out of the shrubbery, or a regal Egyptian cat, or a lifesize, marble copy of 'the discobolus' in a columned poolside sanctuary. I will miss Barbara's insatiable curiosity and passion for all things ancient Egyptian; her fabulous, throaty laugh and razor-sharp wit (that was always tempered with kindness); and her keen, perceptive intellect. I cherish the memory of our regular phone conversations, where we talked for hours about burning Egyptological issues like co-regencies and royal succession. We did not always see eye to eye on everything, but she always offered insights, some startlingly fresh. She was modest, but that mind was sharp. She was larger than life, that is for sure, and will forever be one of Chicago House's, and my, most beloved friends.



Barbara and dahabiyeh at Gebel Silsileh, December 5, 2003. Photo by Ray Johnson



Salima Ikram and Nicholas Warner with Barbara at Abu Rowash. Photo courtesy of Dr. Salima Ikram.

*From Salima Ikram, Professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo*

I first met Barbara Mertz, aka Elizabeth Peters, aka Barbara Michaels, in Cairo where she was giving a talk at ARCE, in the old library. At first I was wide-eyed and awed to be in the presence of one of my favourite authors, but after the lecture, once I had summoned up the courage to say 'hello', we found that we hit it off rather well (small clue: neither one of us would shut up and people were rolling their eyes at our snorts of laughter). After that evening (that continued on for some time, in the way of Cairene evenings) we became fast friends, and whenever Barbara was in Egypt or I in the US, we would meet.

*Egyptology is a strong choice for high school*

Barbara's trips to Egypt were generally with her 'entourage:' regularly Dennis Forbes, Editor and founder of Kmt magazine, and George B. Johnson, the photographer, and latterly, Joel Cole, and all of us would trundle from site to site, visiting places that were to feature in the next Amelia (Peabody) book or were of interest to one of the gang. On one visit, much time was spent wriggling into holes so that Amelia's experiences (at Mazghuna in particular) were an accurate reflection of the reality. At the end of the experience Barbara emerged filthy but triumphant, confident that she had all the first-hand knowledge needed on that subject for the rest of her life. On one of her last trips we had a picnic at Abu Rawash, a site she said that she had "pined to see before her legs rebelled." Her



Barbara practicing to be a statue in the Djoser complex. Photo courtesy of Dr. Salima Ikram.

enthusiasm to look into the pit was so great that we had to hang onto her clothes as she moved to the edge of the pit and craned her neck to see into the bottom of the burial chamber.

All over Egypt, Barbara was enthusiastically received by archaeologists, worshipped by her fans (just as they ought to), and within moments of arrival would charm all and sundry, from the basket boys to the director, as well as any stray cats, dogs, and donkeys (and all attendant fleas) in the vicinity. She was open and accessible to aspiring or young (especially female) Egyptologists (myself included, at the time), and was a role model to many. She never lost any of her youthful enthusiasm for Egypt and Egyptology—every time she came to Cairo, she

would stand on her balcony at the Nile Hilton, look out at the river, wonderstruck, and repeat, “I am really, really here, and that is the River Nile.”

Evenings were spent in good company, with good food, and lashings of gin--Barbara had a gift for gathering together like-minded people and her graciousness as a hostess was only exceeded by her humour, warmth, wit, energy, and charm. She was the sun that we all gravitated toward, whether it was in Cairo, Luxor, at an ARCE conference, or her home. Barbara is deeply missed; her death has left a gaping hole in the fabric of our lives. However, there is some comfort in knowing that by opening one of the Amelia books we can reconnect with Barbara, and hear her voice, loud and clear, once again.