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# *A Dangerous Thing: A Memoir of Learning and Teaching* by Betty Krasne

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Betty Krasne's *A Dangerous Thing: A Memoir of Learning and Teaching* opens with her paternal grandparents, the Krasnoschezeks (the name means "red-cheeks" and probably refers to a beard), leaving the Ukraine and its pogroms for the safety and hope of America. Once here, they set up as retail grocers, then wholesalers, then owners of Krasdale Foods and Bernice Foods. Both sides of the family make a good living. Betty's mother's parents, the Goldsteins, own a Philadelphia brownstone with a Steinway grand in the living room; her father's family lives in a large apartment on Manhattan's Central Park West. They drive Packards and Cadillacs. The grandchildren go to Vassar, Columbia, and Mount Holyoke. In 1936, thirty years after their father's emigration, two Krasne sons and their wives board the *Queen Mary* on the first leg of a trip back to the old country, with sixteen bags containing dozens of coats, dresses, sweaters, and medical supplies to help their family in Odessa. The memoir begins as a Jewish-American success story.

For the third generation, values that were taken for granted by her grandparents have become problematic, and Betty finds herself engaged in an "insidious conflict, a war waged between family and school for our secular souls." At home, material values reign: "good taste" is everything. College isn't for women; what women need is to be able to "manage a household properly (meaning elegantly but efficiently)." Education for women, in a lovely turn of phrase, is "a kind of exterior decoration." The value placed on taste moves Betty to become a dilettante: "If someone does something that requires neither particular talent nor decades of intense training—not like dancing on point or playing a Chopin sonata—I feel I too must be able to do this . . . The elements that combined to make me a dilettante were ingrained by the time I was in elementary school: the understanding that life was founded on good taste, a competitive nature, the short attention span of a spoiled daughter. By the time I came upon Pope's warning about knowledge—'A little learning is a dangerous thing'—it was far too late to retool myself into a scholar."

After Fieldston, Mount Holyoke, and a Master's from Columbia, Betty juggled teaching at Mercy College, a Catholic school in Dobbs Ferry, with the demands of managing two sons, a twelve-room house, a cat, and a dog. As if

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this weren't enough, she became pregnant again, a circumstance described this way: "At 36, I was considered very old for the baby business, as though there were something rather disgusting about being pregnant at that age. Also, having a third child wasn't the smartest move for a woman trying to make a career in academe. It indicated a lack of intellectual focus; it indicated that teaching was a job, not a career." Not long after, she began work on a Ph.D. When asked how her name should appear on the degree, Betty Levine chose to become Dr. Krasne. "Along with my new name, there was a promotion and a new undertaking. I was asked to coordinate the College's honors courses. One issue had been settled: I did not have a job; I had a career, with all the shifting priorities that entailed. At work I was Dr. Krasne; when I stepped through the looking glass, I was Mrs. Levine."

This will be a familiar story to any woman who has, as Betty puts it, been "guilty of stealing time from work for family, but more often from home for work, and from both for writing." It is movingly told; it is also filled with humor. There is her maternal grandmother's attempt to find sour cream in a neighborhood where Jews are relatively new. "'Sour cream?' the dairyman wanted to know? 'Mrs. Goldstein, you think I sell my customers sour cream?'" As a new teacher at Mercy, Betty sat in on a colleague's course to see how things were done. Sister Joannes Christie's class began with "a rapid chant, reciting something at such speed that I could make out none of the words. They were, I guessed, reciting a prayer." When Betty asked if beginning class with a prayer was required, "She paused, puzzled. 'Well, my dear, how else would you get everyone's attention?' Answering this seemed obvious to me, so obvious I was afraid of being considered impertinent. Searching around in my memory bank of classes I had attended, I suggested, 'Couldn't I just shut the door?'" That she managed to fit in was confirmed when she received a letter addressed to "Sister Betty Levine."

To this Russian-Jewish middle-class boy from Queens who went to public schools and whose mother shopped at Alexander's and Klein's, Betty's description of how the other half lived—shopping at "the three B's: Bergdorfs, Bendels, Bonwits," going to Fieldston, riding at Aylward's Riding Academy, and summering in Bar Harbor—was a real eye opener. But, as they say, you don't have to be Jewish. Anyone "of a certain age" will enjoy revisiting the days of butterfly chairs, Space Shoes, and avocado pits sprouting in jellyjars. A younger generation of readers will be fascinated by Betty's description of college life at Mount Holyoke in the fifties, the heyday of *in loco parentis* and parietal rules.

"In the fifties," Betty writes, "it did not occur to most of us women tucked away in the middle of Massachusetts, trying to absorb the sum of human knowledge, that we could do anything about the shape of events, other than be spectators at the course of history." *A Dangerous Thing* tells of the many ways expectations and possibilities for American women have changed since Anna Krasnoschezek and Hannah Goldstein came to these shores a century ago. It is also the story of a dignified, thoughtful, accomplished woman—poet, teacher,

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author of children's books, honors director, and yes, wife and mother of three—  
and how she did, in fact, help shape the events of her time.

For more information about the book, go to [www.bettykrasne.com](http://www.bettykrasne.com).

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