

Improbable Love: a Memoir of Our Lost 1950s Cultural Innocence

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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I just read John Wertime's steamy new memoir, *Improbable Love* (Printemps Presse, 2011, 187 pages). I knew it would be well written after his editing on various Culture Change pieces including my book *Songs of Petroleum*. (See his review of a book by Worldwatch Institute's Robert Engelman, *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want*).

Improbable Love offers a fascinating look at a teenager's 1950s world "inside the Beltway."

What sets Wertime's story apart from almost any other book is his torrid affair with a woman twice his age, and that he was her babysitter, becoming a de facto husband and stepfather.

I found *Improbable Love* fascinating in part because I am privileged to know the author. And since in this book he delivers an impressive succession of graphic love-making scenes, and I happen to share the appreciation of both heterosexual lust and fulfilling romance, for me the slender volume was really hard to put down. It is a simply told but well-written tale about a real life. John Wertime becomes your hero in the book, and perhaps half of the world's population can identify with our protagonist.

Apart from the intimate and exciting, unusual story he imparts, one gets a vivid picture of and sympathetic feeling for an interesting young man. He comes across as a good guy, good son, good brother and good citizen who was by birth constrained and controlled by family and community. At his age, 15-19, few boys have seen the world or thought about cultures comparatively. So naturally Wertime was an all-American boy, what with sports and family life (albeit without a TV, thanks to his intellectual and artistic father). How he found himself seduced by a beautiful widow and family friend makes sense, thanks to his story-telling ability and character-painting of family members. What is amazing is that he handled so well the clandestine affair -- indeed, a first marriage, virtually, for him. It was like a second marriage for his lover. Thanks to her experience and compassion, his emotional roller coaster did not risk serious damage such as thoughts of suicide. The reader feels his pain when he lost his true love to a sophisticated, wealthy older man.

For anyone who remembers the 1950s USA, or who wants to get a feel for it, *Improbable Love* captures the essence of the era marvelously. Post-World War II families were in great number becoming middle class consumers enjoying the indirect benefits of cheap oil, open space to "develop," and the near universal belief in the greatness of the American Way of Life in suburbia. The 1950s were a slice of American history that came back to haunt everyone, when those deluded -- to this day -- by the mid-20th century's transient prosperity and domestic peace insisted on a continuation or revival of sacred materialism. When Ronald Reagan came into the presidency after defeating the energy-realist Jimmy Carter, and said it was now "Morning in America" and that we would again "stand tall in the saddle," he was thinking of the 1950s -- when he benefited from "singing" to the McCarthy witch hunts for Reds.

Wertime lived in an enviably stable family, community and nation, but his most unusual domestic situation -- living in two homes that for years he alternated between -- could have undone many a lad. Indeed, each day for John Wertime offered the risk of exposure, shame or worse. Some of his present-day professional friends who learned of his youthful affair believe he was a victim of child abuse. Under the law, yes. But in many a culture beyond the USA, he was a consenting adult. After all, in some countries a very young man who has not yet learned love-making is taken to an older woman for sexual instruction and release. And young women just out of puberty are in some tribal societies set up with a suitable older male for sex initiation.

So for the reader to see John Wertime overcome his heartbreak from losing his true love -- with whom he had exchanged inscribed rings -- is heartening and a relief. He bloomed at college and in Iran where his parents had gone to reside for the U.S. government. The reader gets to learn of his later literary activities and happy "second marriage" with children. The ending of the tale is comforting, because by the time the sad young man has finished his story, we readers care

about him and wonder what will happen to this hurting, confused kid. Wertime's triumph over loss and the disruption of his blissful, erotic life, and the weird, shattering departure of his one and only woman -- he was of course a virgin as a teenager -- is inspiring.

He changed the names of his lover and her two daughters for the sake of "the girls'" privacy. The lady is long deceased, as are most of the players. (John Wertime is approaching old age, but you wouldn't know it to see him operate.) In this book, whose story he sat on for decades, he honored the mother and respected her need to move on when she needed to find security for herself and her daughters.

Wertime's writing style gets as deep into emotional nuance -- while staying matter-of-fact -- as anyone could have done. For a very young man, he seems to have had a real sense of what goes on inside other people and not just himself, as he somehow put himself into their position.

I would not be surprised if the book is a hot seller. Wertime's straightforwardness makes it easy to read and honest-sounding. One doesn't doubt the explicit and enjoyable sex details. Our author's experience with his lover was enviable for any red-blooded typical male, and now he is doubly lucky to be able to tell the story and do it well. Thus the public and humanity are lucky too. I can almost predict that Wertime's story will become a recognized sociological and psychological work of value to students and the general public.

For those Americans wondering what has happened to their country, seeing accelerating crises mushroom since the tumultuous 1960s on through the scandals, wars and environmental devastation, *Improbable Love* serves as a valuable reference point. The cultural context of white America in a time of innocence of a nation (except for those who were really aware of the actual United Paved Precincts of America, whether as dissident or greedy pig) is of great interest to anyone who isn't oblivious to history or the destructive "American Dream." Readers may enjoy putting this book into conscious cultural or historical context, for example environmentalists who will be amused at the many, happy car rides and also the unquestioned polluting from the new proliferating appliances in every home. Another value for the public from this book is that the author's liberal, independent philosophy, lacking the BS of hand-over-heart patriotism or ignorant religious fervor, gives courage and fortification to free thinkers who question the dominant paradigm. Integrity is what matters, as Wertime's life shows in the book and as I know personally from knowing him.

Readers may join me in finding that *Improbable Love* is a significant work of writing that enriches anyone experiencing the book.

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Improbable Love can be ordered in bookstores and can be ordered online at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). John Wertime can be contacted via email at [john.wertime "at" verizon "dot" net](mailto:john.wertime@verizon.net)