

R. Bruce Larson. *Secrets and Rivals: Wartime Letters and the Parents I Never Knew.*
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Secrets and Rivals: Wartime Letters and the Parents I Never Knew, by R. Bruce Larson, is an intimate view of courtship during World War II and the author's own relationship with the memory of his parents. Larson worked from letters his mother, Ruth, saved, dated between 1941 and 1944, which included correspondence from his father, Bob, who enlisted in the Coast Guard. Ruth also saved letters from her parents, friends, and boyfriends, including some she dated while dating her future husband, Bob. Because the collection is Ruth's, it includes mostly letters she had received, so the main voice in the book is Bob's. This forced Larson, and therefore the reader, to create an image of Ruth from letters to and about her, and those she kept as most meaningful and significant. This book is a good supplement to broader social histories of courtship and sexual practices, non-combat military work, and women's lives in World War II.

Secrets and Rivals is the author's narrative of learning his parents' history, and it is Larson's attempt to understand them as individuals rather

than parents. It is best described as something between a history and an ethnography. Larson regularly pauses the discussion of the letters to include statements about his personal connections to his parents. For example, he compares the culture shock of traveling to Chuuk in Melanesia for his anthropological research to his father's culture shock of a small-town man arriving in San Francisco.

Larson's willingness to share how he processed his emotions offers an example to scholars invested in their subjects. When working with the letters as a scholar, his subjects were Ruth and Bob. When discussing his own emotions and memories of them, they were mom and dad. He had uncomfortable moments confronting the messy, fallible humanity of his parents, and he passes that discomfort on to the reader. Discovering that his parents had premarital sex with each other and other partners distressed him as their child though it piqued his interest as a scholar. The biggest revelation for Larson was less of one for the reader, yet the structure of the narrative

helps the reader understand its significance for Larson. The realization that Ruth lied for many reasons, to many people, about major things—when she finished her nursing degree or her husband's war record, for example—shook Larson deeply. Recognizing his mother's imperfection helped him come to terms with his parents as people, rather than as the paragons of family lore.

Larson built the characters of Ruth and Bob in a series of brief sections on letters, intercutting Ruth's other correspondents and boyfriends in chronological order, as he rebuilt their courtship. The reader must bring a layman's knowledge of the general history of World War II in the United States to contextualize this story, as Larson provides little additional secondary research in the text. Larson makes good use of the few secondary sources necessary to illustrate the larger forces at play in Ruth and Bob's courtship but maintains his focus on the correspondence. He also provides little historical analysis. He relies on other scholars for necessary context and keeps his work to ethnographic discussions of the forces at play in the correspondence.

Secrets and Rivals is a clear look at Larson's family history, as well as an exercise in breaking down his family mythology. The focus on Bob and Ruth's courtship creates a powerful and engaging story. The letters offer a window into the emotional life of one man as he courted his future wife. Larson makes no sweeping statements about larger forces at work, instead focusing on his personal feelings about the correspondence and what it reveals about his parents. This book is an excellent choice for undergraduates in history and ethnography to explore how to understand a historical actor's humanity.

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