

ÊTRE GUEST ESSAY!

BE BRAVE . . . SOONER

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about what my life might have been like had I been braver *sooner*. . .

When I was a girl and young teenager, I was fortunate to have a wonderful aunt -- who also happened to be an English professor and a rebellious nun -- determined to expose me to the larger mysteries of the past and the different truths and perspectives lurking in history. While she fed me a steady diet of phenomenal literature, it was Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon with its groundbreaking female-centric telling of the famed Arthurian legends that really opened my eyes to the hidden world of women's stories. I began asking myself how "history" is really fashioned, and I became fascinated — obsessed might be a better word — with unearthing the unknown stories of women from the past.

When I headed off to college, I followed this passion and became a history major, always assuming I'd become an archaeologist or historian. But I got detoured along the way. When it came time to elect a career path, I silenced my inner voice and paid attention instead to louder societal cries that I should attend law school -- that it was my duty to reach for the law's golden ring because so many women before me had made sacrifices so that I could stand on their shoulders. After all, wasn't I lucky that I even had the chance to study law at the highest levels? So I put all my energies into excelling at law school, and became an associate at one of the nation's top law firms. From the start, I felt fortunate to be sitting at the table with some of the country's brightest lawyers. Maybe because of this, I buried my true passion for history, and toiled away to prove that I was indeed worthy of the opportunity. Certainly, I felt grateful for the chance. Ultimately, I spent a decade practicing at two of nation's top firms and rising to become an executive at a Fortune 500 company.

But, I could only silence myself with what felt like the handcuffs of success for so long. While practicing law, I tried to appease my inner voice with nighttime university classes in archaeology and history. Yet, as the years passed, my voice whispered, then spoke normally, and finally screamed -- until I could no longer ignore it. Only then could I put the tremendous guilt of breaking from me legal career behind me, lean into my own voice, and start walking down the riskier, more authentic path of writing fiction about hidden historical stories. Now, it seems clear that I became drawn to secret tales because my own story had been buried for so long.

I relived a bit of this journey while writing THE OTHER EINSTEIN, the intriguing and important story of Albert Einstein's little-known first wife, Mileva Maric, who was a university classmate of Einstein's and a physicist in her own right. I initially became captivated by this tale when I learned that Mileva's role in Einstein's theories became the focal point of debate in the physics community after a cache of love letters between the couple from 1897 to 1903 was discovered that hinted at their collaborative work. But, as I excavated more of Mileva's own history, I discovered that she was fascinating in her own right, not just as a footnote in Einstein's story, and that she was incredibly brave. Her rise from the relative backwater of misogynistic Serbia to the all-male university physics and mathematics classrooms of Switzerland was nothing short of meteoric and unbelievably courageous; after all, at that time, it was illegal for Serbian girls to attend high school. I felt honor-bound to tell Mileva's tale and share her intellect and bravery with others.

So what would be different if I'd been braver sooner? What advice would I offer my younger self? Quiet down, and listen to your voice. The voice that comes from your real self, not the self you create for teachers and friends and family. This is hard, maybe even one of the scariest steps any of us could ever take. It requires great courage to pay attention to our voices; we must grow quiet and ignore the cacophony of others. Then write down what that voice tells you. Take a risk, seek out like-minded people, and share your visions. Act on them, define your own authentic path, and then put your whole self into pursuing it at its highest level. This is your one life. Only when you lean in toward your own voice can you write your own story. The life story uniquely meant for -- and designed by -- you. Not the tale crafted by others for you. One thing I've learned about researching the past for my novels is that too many true stories of women have been buried or altered or, worse, gone un-lived. Like that of Mileva Maric. Don't let this happen to *your* story. Be brave. . . sooner.