

books

Knock Wood

A controversial new biography of Natalie Wood alleges that among the gay and bisexual men in her life was hubby Robert Wagner By Michael Giltz

A scandal-filled new biography of Natalie Wood is garnering attention by claiming Wood was raped by a famous actor-producer (who is not identified) and that her first marriage to Robert Wagner ended because she found him in bed with another man. "There was so much in Natalie's life that was so astonishing, and so little of it had been written about," says author Suzanne Finstad, who has written a handful of other non-fiction works, including a true-crime book turned into a CBS movie and a biography of Priscilla Presley.

Natasha: The Biography of Natalie Wood notes that one night in 1961, after going to bed with R.J. (as Wagner is known to friends), Wood "awakened to find R.J. missing. She went to look for him, and found him in a compromising position with another man, Natalie went into hysteria, screaming and running to the bar, where she picked up a crystal glass, squeezing it in her hand until the glass broke and blood oozed from her skin." Later that night, the book claims, Wood took an overdose of sleeping pills and went into a coma. It also states that Wagner, "through representatives" denies this version of events and any allegation of bisexuality.

He isn't the only one. Gay playwright Mart Crowley met Wood while working as a production assistant on *Splendor in the Grass* and became a longtime assistant and friend to her and Wagner. He's co-operating on a biography of Wood by Gavin Lambert—who also knew her—she cut from *Knock* down the road.

As for Wagner's being bisexual and cheating on Wood with another man, "Well, that's absurd," says Crowley, who wrote *The Dogs in the Bend* and laughingly makes clear that he would have known if Wagner were gay or bisexual. "Just absurd. Those kinds of accusations were hurled at R.J. well before the end of their first marriage. He was so extraordinarily good-looking, I think he was just a single man to

target, and that's fine. It just happens not to be true."

Though Crowley hasn't read the book, he also takes issue with the way he's been told it describes her death—Finstad implies that one possible scenario for her drowning involves a drunken Wagner watching Wood flounder in the water. "I find the most horrifying thing that I've heard about it is the idea that R.J.—who loved her dearly, beyond love—would stand on the side of the boat and watch her be in the water," says Crowley. "He knew about her fear of the water. That just seems inhuman and so unlike him. No one that you would ever talk to would say that sounds like him."

Beyond those points of dispute, Finstad shows that the star of such classics as *Miracle on 34th Street* and *West Side Story* had plenty of tragedy and drama in her life before drowning in 1981. Finstad claims suicide attempts, numerous car crashes, a revolving door of lovers, and insecurities such as a fear of being alone and a (well-founded) fear of "dark water." Among the other revelations: Wood's father was a violent drunk, and her mother was obsessed with turning

I have a love...

Natalie Wood's performances in classic films such as *West Side Story* (above) and her two marriages to Robert "R.J." Wagner (left) made her a Hollywood legend over several decades.

her into a star at any price.

"Her mother gave Natalie a series of bizarre warnings about having sex with boys," says Finstad, "whereas sex with men was acceptable to her mother if they were wealthy or powerful. She was encouraging Natalie to go to Frank Sinatra's parties when she was 15 or 16 and advising Natalie on how she can get abortions." Her mother also tacitly allowed a 16-year-old Wood to sleep with director

Nicholas Ray—who was 43—when she was desperately trying to snag the role of Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Finstad also details a touching relationship between Wood



Natasha: The Biography of Natalie Wood
 ■ Natalie Finstad ■ R.J.
 ■ Robert ■ E

and actor Raymond Burr. Though Burr was generally considered gay, even his companion of 30 years would tell Finstad that Burr had really loved Wood. The author suggests that their friendship might have turned into marriage if the studio hadn't broken them up. "When I was talking to Dennis Hopper about that," says Finstad, "he was saying, 'I just can't wrap my mind around that one. But you know, I saw them together. They were definitely a couple. Who knows what was going on there?'" Crowley insists, however, "She was simply his board, and she knew exactly what she was."

Driven, intelligent, and sweet-natured throughout her career, Wood made great movies like *The Searchers* and was nominated three times for an Oscar but never quite seemed to realize her potential. Still, you have to love a woman who can focus intensely on her career even as a teenager, as one great anecdote

makes clear. When Wood still had not been officially cast in *Rebel* (Ray wasn't convinced she could pull it off), she got into a drunken car accident with Hopper and was rushed to the emergency room. Police asked for her parents' phone number, but Wood told them over and over to call Ray. When he showed up and rushed to her bedside, Finstad writes, "Natalie pulled him next to her face and whispered, 'Nick! They called me a goddamn juvenile delinquent. Now do I get the part?'" ■

Giltz writes regularly for the New York Post and other publications.

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