

Know No Bounds

Replacing conformity with creativity and limits with courage, the women whose stories are told in **Angella Nazarian's** new book, earn their place in "Visionary Women."

BY SABRINA WIRTH PORTRAIT BY TIERNY GEARON



In her new book, Angella Nazarian tells the stories of visionary women from poet Maya Angelou to artist Shirin Neshat.

There's always a danger, when writing about inspirational lives, of hitting that obsequious note, the part where admiration morphs into idolatry. In her latest book, "Visionary Women," (Assouline) Angella Nazarian artfully avoids that all-too-common trap, tackling her subjects with high regard without pushing the needle to the point of awe.

Still, given her choices of standout women as models of talent and achievement—among them Marina Abramović, Miuccia Prada, Shirin Neshat, Zhang Xin and Doris Lessing—Nazarian might have been forgiven had she stumbled in her objectivity. All 20 of her subjects have had remarkable lives, walking similar paths from obscurity to accomplishment and propelled not only by their own determination but by large doses of courage and wit.

Nazarian, a former psychology professor who trod similar ground in a previous book, "Pioneers of the Possible: Celebrating Visionary Women of the World," has made a specialty of highlighting the achievements of women who, in many cases, had

to battle an entrenched discrimination that provided little room for the possibility that they might succeed.

"These women were more willing to be brave rather than be comfortable," says the Iran-born Nazarian, "always pushing the limits without knowing whether they would have control over the outcome."

Many were inspired by parents and mentors. Nazarian writes that Maya Angelou, who rose from pauper to prostitute to Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, often said that she had "become the woman I am because of the grandmother I loved and the mother I came to adore."

"If you track the paths of these trailblazing women, they went through a lot of changes in their lives," Nazarian says. Some, she goes on, "started having these ambitious careers in their midlives."

She cites the Iranian visual artist Shirin Neshat, who "started becoming very serious with her art when she was 40 years old," a progression inspired by the birth of a son. "Before she came

on the scene," Nazarian asks, "who was really looking at Middle Eastern contemporary art?"

Others blossomed only in the face of tragedy. Shy and insecure, and "terrified of asking silly questions and making mistakes," Katharine Graham was forced by her husband's suicide in 1963 to assume control of *The Washington Post*. And yet in her nearly three decades of leadership, Nazarian writes, Graham transformed the company into a conglomerate of newspaper, broadcast, cable and magazine properties that went from grossing an annual \$84 million to an astounding \$1.4 billion.

A unifying factor of many of the women profiled in Nazarian's book is that they refused to conform to traditional roles.

"When you are working towards something that is at the core of your passion, and you put some serious discipline and creativity behind it, it can lead you to places that are unexpected," she says. "When you live an inspired life, you inspire other people."