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ACHIEVERS

# Mystery Tours

Barbara Mertz (a.k.a. Elizabeth Peters) takes her readers on suspenseful trips through Egypt

By ANDREA SACHS FREDERICK



**\*HOUSEHOLD GOD**  
 "Most writers are cat people," says the author, with Ellery (as in Queen)

Unlike most dreamy adolescents, she went on to earn a Ph.D. in Egyptology from the University of Chicago by the time she was 23. That was in 1950, when the possibility of a woman's becoming a working archaeologist seemed remote. "We took it for granted that women couldn't do some things," she says.

Instead, over the next 20 years, she poured her considerable energy into tak-

**BARBARA MERTZ** has as many aliases as a bank robber. But her profession, although equally lucrative, is more honorable. Mertz is the author of 65 books, most of them mysteries written using the pseudonyms Barbara Michaels and Elizabeth Peters, some of them books about Egypt under her own name. It is her Peters alter

ego who has the latest book out: *Children of the Storm* (Morrow). It continues the Egypt-based saga of heroine Amelia Peabody, a spirited archaeologist, and her headstrong archaeologist husband Radcliffe Emerson.

The glamour of Egypt, the mummies, the pyramids and the shifting sands ensnared Mertz, 75, when she was 13.

ing care of her husband, whom she met in grad school, and their two children. "I was very good too," she says. "I made my own bread, I sewed clothes for my children. I cooked. I washed my own diapers." But something wasn't right. Mertz was bored and restless. "I just couldn't vocalize or define really what the problem was," she says. "There was something missing."

Mertz credits feminist Betty Friedan with turning her life around. "It wasn't until *The Feminine Mystique*," she says, "that I began to get those 'clicks' that she talks about, and they came like a machine gun." By the time the epiphanies stopped, Mertz's marriage was over, as well as her days as a housewife. "I'm not knocking homemaking," she is quick to say. "I would have hated to miss my children's first words and first steps. I just wish there

had been more options for us women."

Mertz's success as an author came like a machine gun as well. Her talent surfaced early, while she was growing up in Oak Park, Ill. Called on to write a sonnet in high school, she produced something so professional that her teacher suspected her of plagiarism. When she took up writing again, after being inspired by Friedan's polemic, she wrote three books for which she couldn't find a publisher. With the fourth she was successful, and has remained so ever since. She turns out about one mystery a year, and tries to go to Egypt just as often. "I'm still fascinated by the romanticism of Egypt," says Mertz. "Part of me never grew up."

At this point in her life, Mertz is the epitome of an independent woman. Her royalties have enabled her to live in a converted 1820 farmhouse near Frederick, Md. On her nine acres, she has built a gazebo, a waterfall, an Egyptian lotus pond and even a reflecting pool with a life-size copy of the famous ancient Greek statue *The Discus Thrower*. Inside the house are mementos of her travels, with images of camels everywhere. A bust of Nefertiti sits on her mantel. On a chair is an embroidered pillow that reads **BEHIND EVERY GREAT WOMAN IS HERSELF**. Lively and energetic, Mertz surveys it all with justifiable pride, queen of her property. "It took me a long time to get here," she says. "Sometimes I didn't think I would make it."

The ancient Egyptians were the first to domesticate cats, which they regarded as sacred. Mertz carries on the tradition. In her two-story solarium, dappled with sunlight, it seems as though cats are everywhere, strutting and preening as household gods. "They're all a little mad at me, because yesterday was the day for the vet," confides Mertz. In all, there are five felines: Dorothy, Nefret, Emerson, Ellery and Sethos.

Mertz is a bountiful grandmother to her six grandchildren. But she is no one's clichéd idea of a 75-year-old. "I've become more like Amelia as the years have gone on," she says. "I created a heroine who is aggressive and independent. I used to be very mealy-mouthed and very polite. It's partly a matter of getting older, I think. Do you really care what people think, as long as you are doing what you think is right? The answer is no." ■

