

[Kolb on Glusker, 'Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own'](#)

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Susannah Joel Glusker. *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. xvi + 298 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-72810-3.

Reviewed by Charles C. Kolb (National Endowment for the Humanities) **Published on** H-LatAm (April, 1999)

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Glusker, Anita Brenner's daughter, has written an informative, fascinating, and lively biography of her mother, born as Hanna Brenner, to a Latvian-Jewish immigrant family in Aguascalientes, Mexico on 13 August 1905. In the main, this work covers the middle years of Brenner's life, 1920-1942. Brenner, educated in San Antonio, Texas and New York City, would become an independent liberal, political radical, advocate of political prisoners, and a champion of Mexican art and culture. Some readers may recognize her as an historian, an anthropologist, a self-taught political journalist, a creative writer, or an art critic--she was all of these and more. Anita Brenner numbered among her friends many of the elite and intellectuals of Mexico City and New York, among them socialists, communists, poets, artists, and political figures. She moved easily in three cultures--Mexican, Jewish, and American--and wrote with authority on aspects of each, often with acid tongue and a sense of humor.

Her close friends included the famous muralist and artist Diego Rivera, and his equally talented wife, the painter Frida Kahlo, as well as the artists Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Miguel Covarrubias, and Henry Moore. She had a closer relationship with the illustrator Jean Charlot (he is characterized as "teacher, father, and mentor") and Maria Sandoval de Zarco, then the only practicing woman lawyer in Mexico. The poet Octavio Barreda and the writers Mariano Azuela, Carlos Fuentes, Lionel Trilling, Katherine Anne Porter, Frank Tannenbaum, John Dewey, and Miguel Unamuno were part of her life, as was the journalist Ernest Gruening (later Alaska's first governor and U.S. Senator). In addition, political figures such as Leon Trotsky, John and Alma Reed, and Whittaker Chambers; the photographer Edward Weston; cinema directors Sergei Eisenstein and Bud Schulberg; and the archaeologist-diplomat George C. Vaillant were notable in her life. Indeed, as Glusker writes, "the names of the people in Anita's extended family read like biographical dictionary of intellectuals and artists active in Mexico in the twenties" (p. 44).

In preparing to write this volume, Glusker used her mother's three major books and hundreds of published articles, but also relied upon unpublished journals documenting the period from 1925-1930, an autobiographical novel written in 1923, correspondence (in the main with David Glusker, Anita's husband-to-be), personal observations, and interviews. However, this is not a biography in the usual sense of the word. Susannah Glusker recounts not only her mother's life, but also describes Brenner's lifelong devotion to her native Mexico and to disadvantaged Mexican workers, the stellar array of international artists and literati, and her advocacy of Mexico as a haven for Jewish immigrants in the early 1920s. The biography contains numerous and, sometimes,

extensive quotations from Brenner's writings and correspondence. Gusker also incorporates information about Anita's ultraconservative sexual relationships and her series of suitors, as well as her accomplishments as a writer and activist.

Anita was also the translator and editor for one of Mexico's most famous anthropologists, Manuel Gamio, a one-time student of the "founding father of American anthropology," Franz Boas, at Columbia University. Without having earned either the bachelor or master's degrees, Brenner completed the doctorate degree in anthropology at Columbia in 1930. Although she had not intended to enroll for a doctorate, she was motivated and encouraged by "Papa Franz." Her 93-page dissertation (published in 1931) concerned the analysis of potsherds that Boas had collected in Mexico, and was not based upon original fieldwork--the normal requirement to obtain the Ph.D.

However, at the age of twenty-four, Anita had already published her first book, *Idols Behind Altars* (1929). This study incorporated her very observant analysis of the "transposition" of Pre-Conquest cultural and religious practices into those brought by the Spanish (p. 92), what social scientists call syncretism. Likewise, there was a systematic analysis of Mexican art, artists, philosophy, and religion, and she drew parallels between the Spanish Conquest and the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. The volume was received favorably by reviewers, intellectuals, and the public.

In 1930, she completed her doctoral examinations, wed David Glusker (her "Prince Charming"), and was also awarded a Guggenheim fellowship to study Precolumbian art in European museums and in Guerrero, Mexico. The "Guggenheim honeymoon" permitted the newlyweds to undertake protracted travel on both continents, while the success of *Idols Behind Altars* soon led to other commissioned writings. The Mexican Revolution and the subsequent Mexican Renaissance were much more than bandits, oil, revolution, land reform, expropriation, and the Roosevelt "New Deal," so that Brenner often became the English-language spokesperson for the Mexican people, civil rights, and Latin American art and literature. David continued his medical studies and became a physician in private practice and taught at the Cornell University Medical School. Since 1924, Anita had been a writer for *The Nation* (seventeen articles) and the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (twenty articles), a columnist for *Mademoiselle*, and an art critic for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (fifty articles). In her later years she was the founder-editor-publisher of *Mexico/This Month* (1955-1972) and would also write five children's books.

Brenner's travels through Mexico were reflected in *Your Mexican Holiday* (1932), a volume which went into five editions through 1941. But her carefully-crafted analysis of recent Mexican political and social history, *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution 1910-1942* (1943), earned her a rightful place as a Latin American historiographer and keen observer of the contemporary scene. This work, one hundred pages of text and 184 historical photographs (the latter assembled by George Leighton), was first published as a series of articles in Harper's Magazine. Brenner's astute political essay characterized the Mexican Revolution as vigorous and ongoing in order to warn the United States to focus more attention on Mexico "before it was too late" (pp. 201-02), so that Mexico would not become another Spain and experience yet more civil strife (paralleling the Spanish Civil War). Brenner wrote these words from a knowledgeable perspective; in Spain she had written dispatches for *The New York Times* during the conflict between the Fascists (and their Nazi German and Italian Axis supporters) and the Republicans (sustained by Russia and Mexico). In her sympathetic view of the Mexican Revolution, Brenner examined the Mexican conflict

from the perspectives of the poor, peasants, women, and workers. In the narrative she identified herself as an American--"we Americans" [e.g., Norteamericanos]--rather than as a Mexican or as a citizen of the Americas (writ large).

Susannah Glusker's well-documented, scholarly biography contains a preface, an introduction, eighteen chapters, five appendices, extensive and detailed end notes (26 pages with 511 entries), an eighteen-page "Anita Brenner Bibliography" (367 listings of published articles, columns, books, and unpublished manuscripts), a "General Bibliography" (164 items), and a twelve page double-column conflated proper noun and topical index. The text is emended by 63 images (in the main from the Brenner archives or the collections of Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona) and nine drawings. In the initial chapters, Glusker documents Anita Brenner's early years in Aguascalientes, the Mexican Revolution and the Brenner family's relocation to San Antonio, her education at Main Avenue High School and brief attendance at the University of Texas at Austin and at the University of Mexico, both in 1923. Her enrollment at Columbia University from 1927-1930 and aspects of her marital life are recounted into the early 1940s. Entire chapters are devoted to each of her three major books. We learn that the Brenner family lost everything during the Mexican Revolution "except their lives and their land" (p. 76), and that Anita was the family confidant and adviser. Returning to Aguascalientes, she revived the family farm (asparagus and garlic were specialty products). Marital separation in 1951 was followed by the death from cancer of Anita's father in 1952 and her own diagnosis of cancer and a hysterectomy. David died in 1961 and Anita herself met an untimely death in an automobile accident in Mexico on 1 December 1974.

Glusker, a graduate of Brandeis University, is a scholar, journalist, translator, and multimedia computer programmer, and also serves as a professor at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico. There is an interesting parallel between Susannah Glusker and the American anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson. In her book, *With a Daughter's Eye* (1984), Bateson documents similar life experiences with her own famous mother, Margaret Mead--both daughters lived in the shadow of internationally-known scholars and interpreters of popular culture, and each emerged as scholars in their own right. Of interest to your reviewer is that Mead and Brenner were friends and colleagues at Columbia University, but I would liked to have known more about this relationship and possible connections with other well-known students of Boas, especially Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzel, and Elsie Clews Parsons. Although Glusker's biography of her mother details the key period from 1920-1942, I wished to know more about her marriage to David Glusker and about her children, as well her life during the post-World War Two period and the revival of the farm.

Many, many years ago for a high school English class book review, I first read *The Wind that Swept Mexico*, and later reread this work and her anthropological analysis of Mexican religion, *Idols Behind Altars*, for an undergraduate university course on the history of Latin America. I then found Brenner's description and interpretation of Mexican culture to be compelling, and I continue to hold this view. It is gratifying to know that *The Wind that Swept Mexico* is still in print; it makes a splendid companion to the Brenner biography. Susannah Glusker's biography is a balanced and well-documented analysis of the middle period of her mother's life. She demonstrates that Brenner was a significant Latin American writer, a cultural hybrid and major figure in Mexico's cultural renaissance, and a political activist who sought successfully to document the dynamics of the country of her birth. This volume is informative and intriguing, and sheds light on Anita Brenner as a complex, assertive woman who, indeed, had a "mind of her own." Scholars, students, and anyone who is interested in the

Latin experience, literature, or biography will benefit from reading this book. It is of particular value to historians of art and politics, as well as to anthropologists and to those professing gender studies.

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