

Judith Rossner, Author of 'Looking for Mr. Goodbar,' Dies at 70

By [Douglas Martin](#)

Judith Rossner, a novelist who used crisp, piercing prose to tell of women pushed to often grotesque extremes, most famously in her 1975 book "Looking for Mr. Goodbar," died on Tuesday at New York University Medical Center in Manhattan. She was 70.

The cause was not immediately determined, Rayner Pike, her brother-in-law, told The Associated Press.

Ms. Rossner marshaled intriguing plot twists, precise description and deep empathy to examine women's experiences, addressing situations like pregnancy, sex with strangers and the introduction of a man into a single-parent household.

"Many of her novels offer a clinical dissection of America's failed marriages and of a culture that has not permitted women to have a life apart from their children and husband," said the reference book Contemporary Novelists.

"Mr. Goodbar," the fourth of Ms. Rossner's 10 novels, sold four million copies and in 1977 became a popular movie starring Diane Keaton. The book was based loosely on the 1973 murder of a young schoolteacher in New York who frequented singles bars and could be read as a particularly harrowing caution for the sexually adventurous.

Her seventh novel, "August," published in 1983, was also a best seller. It is about of the complex relationship between a troubled teenager and her psychiatrist, with much of the story told in what seem like transcripts of analytic sessions.

Ms. Rossner's vivid imagination is suggested by the circumstances of the young analysand: Dawn Henley was raised by a lesbian aunt and her lover after Dawn's mother killed herself and her homosexual father drowned in a boating accident. Her foster parents have since separated.

Other fanciful plots include a woman who falls in love with a young man who turns out to be her illegitimate son in "Emmeline" (1980), and conjoined twins who marry two women in "Attachments" (1977), with the curiosity-inspiring sexual gymnastics hardly ignored.

John Leonard in The New York Times called "Attachments" an "ambitious, disturbing novel by a best-selling author who might have written a trashy book, but decided instead to mess up our minds."

Judith Perelman was born in Manhattan on March 31, 1935, and grew up in the Bronx. Her father was a textile merchant and her mother a schoolteacher who nurtured her daughter's early interest in writing. At 19 she dropped out of the City College of New York to marry Robert Rossner, a teacher and writer whose name she kept after their divorce in 1972.

She later married and divorced Mordecai Persky. She is survived by her husband Stanley Leff; her children, Daniel and Jean Rossner; her sister, Nancy Pike; and three grandchildren.

Her first marriage broke up after an ill-fated move to a New Hampshire commune, and she returned to New York, where she supported her family with secretarial work, carving out time to write her first three novels. These included "Any Minute I Can Split," finished just before her first divorce.

"My abiding theme is separations," she said in an interview with The Washington Post in 1983.

Ms. Rossner became fascinated by the murder of Roseann Quinn, the 27-year-old schoolteacher killed after an encounter in a singles bar, and proposed an article for a special women's issue of Esquire magazine. Esquire's lawyers, fearing the article might jeopardize the accused man's defense, killed the story.

Ms. Rossner, who was recovering from a car accident, found herself pondering the extent to which people are to blame for their own misfortunes. She wrote a one-sentence proposal for a novel on the episode to Simon & Schuster. It read: "I want to write a book about a schoolteacher who's murdered picking up someone when she's cruising a singles bar."

According to some published reports, she received a \$5,000 advance; others say \$10,000. "Mr. Goodbar" was sold for \$300,000 as a paperback and for \$250,000 as a movie, making her financially independent.

Christopher Hawtree, writing in The Guardian of London in 1990, described the book's bleak theme: "Some of the raunchiest sex scenes ever written lead to a despair that makes death almost inevitable, perhaps even sought."

Ms. Rossner's other books included "To the Precipice" (1966), "Nine Months in the Life of an Old Maid" (1969), "His Little Women" (1990), "Olivia" (1994) and "Perfidia" (1997).

Her works repeatedly explored but never explained what she considered an unsettling quandary.

"It's astonishing what some women will put up with just to have a warm body -- some of the brightest women I know are obsessed with that search," she told The Washington Post. "It's very sad."