

Sallie Bingham, Author at the Center of a Newspaper Drama, Dies at 88

A novelist and memoirist, she famously clashed with her brother, leading to the fall of a Kentucky publishing dynasty that her paternal grandfather established in 1918.



Sallie Bingham in 2015. She published novels, short stories and nonfiction books, including one about her storied family. Credit...Camila Motta

By [Anita Gates](#)

Aug. 7, 2025

Sallie Bingham, the author, playwright, philanthropist, feminist and political activist whose feud with her brother helped topple the Kentucky publishing and media dynasty into which she was born, died on Wednesday at her home in Santa Fe, N.M. She was 88.

Clara Bingham, a niece, said the cause was a stroke.

The family drama began in 1918, when Ms. Bingham's paternal grandfather, Robert Worth Bingham, bought two newspapers, [The Louisville Courier-Journal](#) and The Louisville Times. The money came from his second wife, Mary Lily Kenan Flagler, the widow of an oil and railroad tycoon. She died in 1917, less than a year after the wedding, and for decades there were suspicions that the elder Mr. Bingham, known as the Judge, had a hand in her death.

The newspapers, run next by Ms. Bingham's father, [Barry Bingham Sr.](#), flourished in the decades that followed. They won Pulitzer Prizes and became known for their liberal political positions. But by the 1980s, the newspaper industry was in financial trouble.

Ms. Bingham, meanwhile, had been living since college in New York City, where she made a career as a writer, publishing a novel and numerous short stories. But in 1977, after her second divorce, she went home to Louisville hoping to advance her playwriting career at a new theater there and to improve family relations.

Her brother Barry Jr. was now the newspapers' boss, the job having come to him after the oldest Bingham brother, Worth, died in a car accident in 1966.

Back home, Ms. Bingham dutifully attended board meetings for a few years before joining The Courier-Journal's staff, as book-page editor, in 1981. She soon began questioning the paper's treatment of its employees, particularly women and members of minority groups, and publicly joined a political committee, violating the company's ethics rules.



Ms. Bingham in an undated photo. She graduated magna cum laude in 1958 from Radcliffe College, and then married a Harvard man, a family tradition. Credit...Louisville Courier Journal, via Imagn

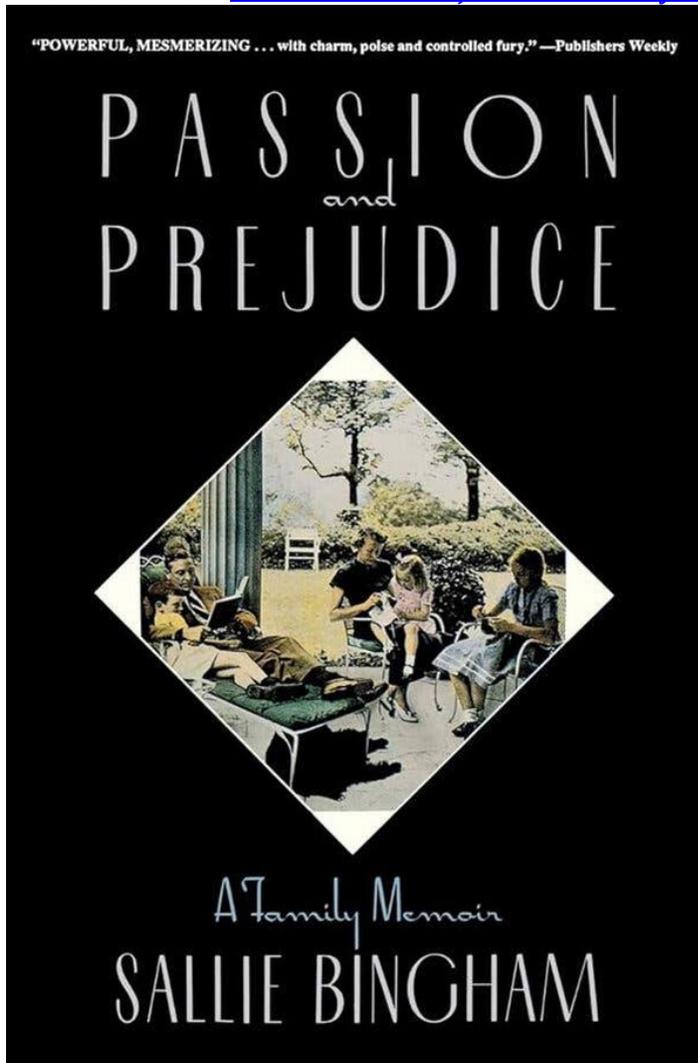
When her brother forced her off the companies' boards in 1983, along with her sister and their mother, Ms. Bingham had had enough. She offered to sell her shares in the business to her relatives. But they declined, so she put those shares (valued by one company at \$80 million to \$90 million) up for sale to the general public.

The siblings' parents conferred, soul-searched and decided that their only path forward was to [sell the entire family business](#), which also included television and radio stations

and a printing plant, in 1986. [The newspapers went to the Gannett](#) chain, the owner of USA Today and the nation's largest newspaper publisher. The Louisville Times ceased publication in early 1987.

Barry Bingham Jr. [told Adweek magazine](#) in 1985 that he had been justified in ousting his sister from the boards, saying, "Sallie had very little to offer to the companies' direction." Speaking [to Ms. magazine](#) in 1986, Ms. Bingham disagreed: "It's just that for Barry, anyone who was not marching in step was a big threat."

Then she wrote ["Passion and Prejudice: A Family Memoir"](#) (1989).



Ms. Bingham's 1989 memoir ultimately condemned the Bingham family, and the system in which it operated, as immoral, misogynist and racist. Credit...Alfred A. Knopf

That book laid out the family's history, including vivid details about Mary Lily Kenan Flagler Bingham's death: She had a heart problem, which had been treated by a dermatologist, who prescribed unusual amounts of morphine. There was an exhumation by her family and a secret autopsy.

Ultimately the book condemned the Bingham family, and the system in which it operated, as immoral, misogynist and racist.

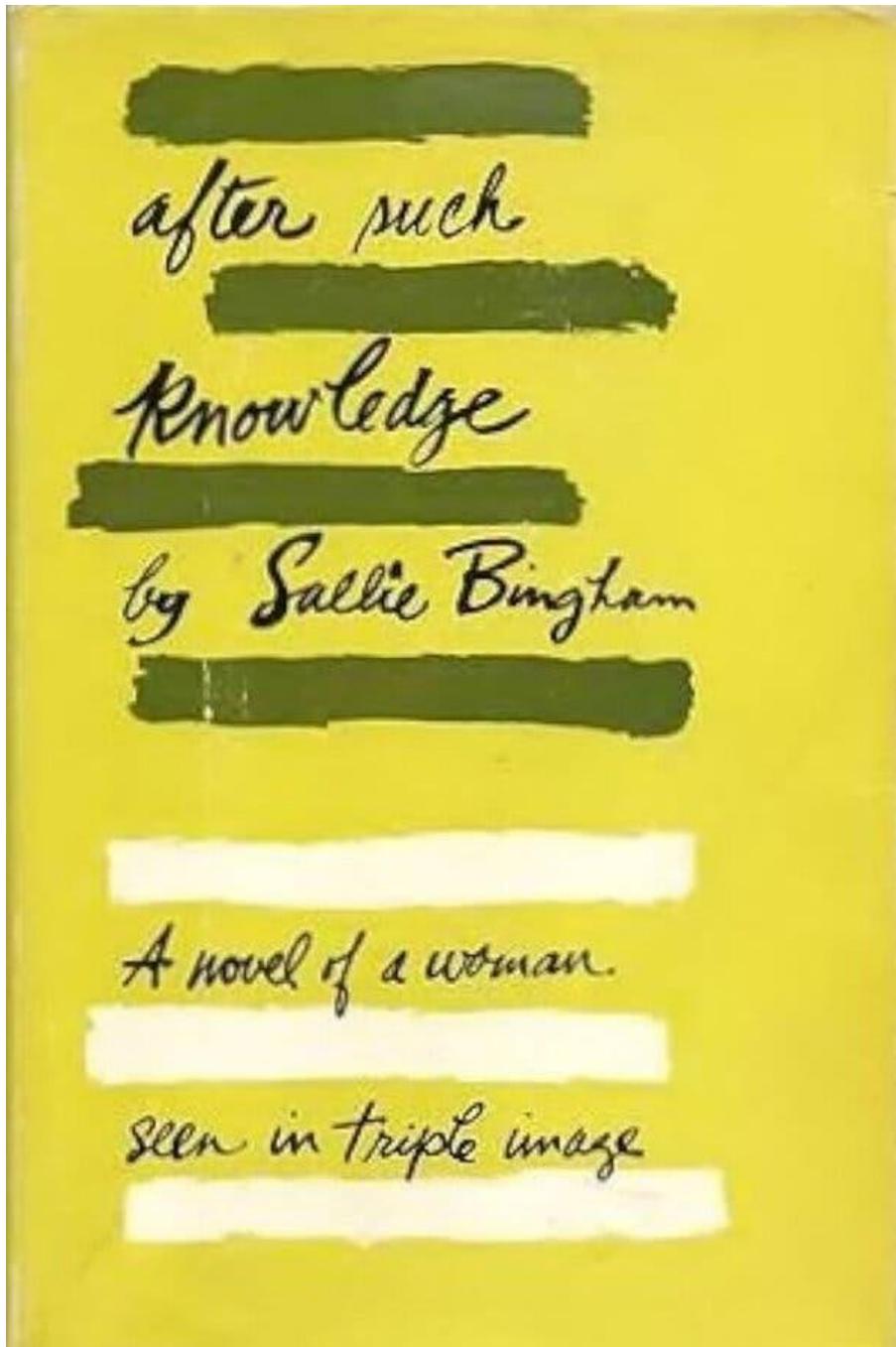
Publishers Weekly called “Passion and Prejudice” a “powerful, mesmerizing autobiography” about disillusionment, written with “charm, poise and controlled fury.” But reviews ran the gamut: The Los Angeles Times critic complained that the book was “more Freudian than Faulknerian” and might have been more aptly titled “Sallie’s Revenge.” As the journalists Alex S. Jones and Susan E. Tifft noted in their book “The Patriarch: The Rise and Fall of the Bingham Dynasty” (1991), many people in Louisville saw Ms. Bingham as the villain.

Ms. Bingham saw her parents as the bad guys, portraying them as having created a cold home life and raising their children with rules but no sense of responsibility. Learned helplessness was one result. In the Ms. article, she recalled that when she was learning to type — in the pre-computer days — she almost never changed her own typewriter ribbon. Her father insisted that office workers do it for her.

Sarah Montague Bingham, nicknamed Sallie, was born on Jan. 22, 1937, in Louisville, the third of five children of [Barry](#) and [Mary Clifford \(Caperton\) Bingham](#). She grew up outside Louisville with her parents (who traveled frequently), her siblings and five servants in a Georgian-style mansion on the [family’s 40-acre estate](#) on the Ohio River.

Sallie attended a private high school, Louisville Collegiate, and graduated magna cum laude in 1958 from Radcliffe College. Then she married a Harvard man, which was a family tradition, and started her adult life in New York.

She was 23 when she published her first book, “[After Such Knowledge](#)” (1960), a novel about a young New Yorker in an unhappy marriage. Her short stories were published in Mademoiselle, Redbook and other magazines, and in hardcover collections.



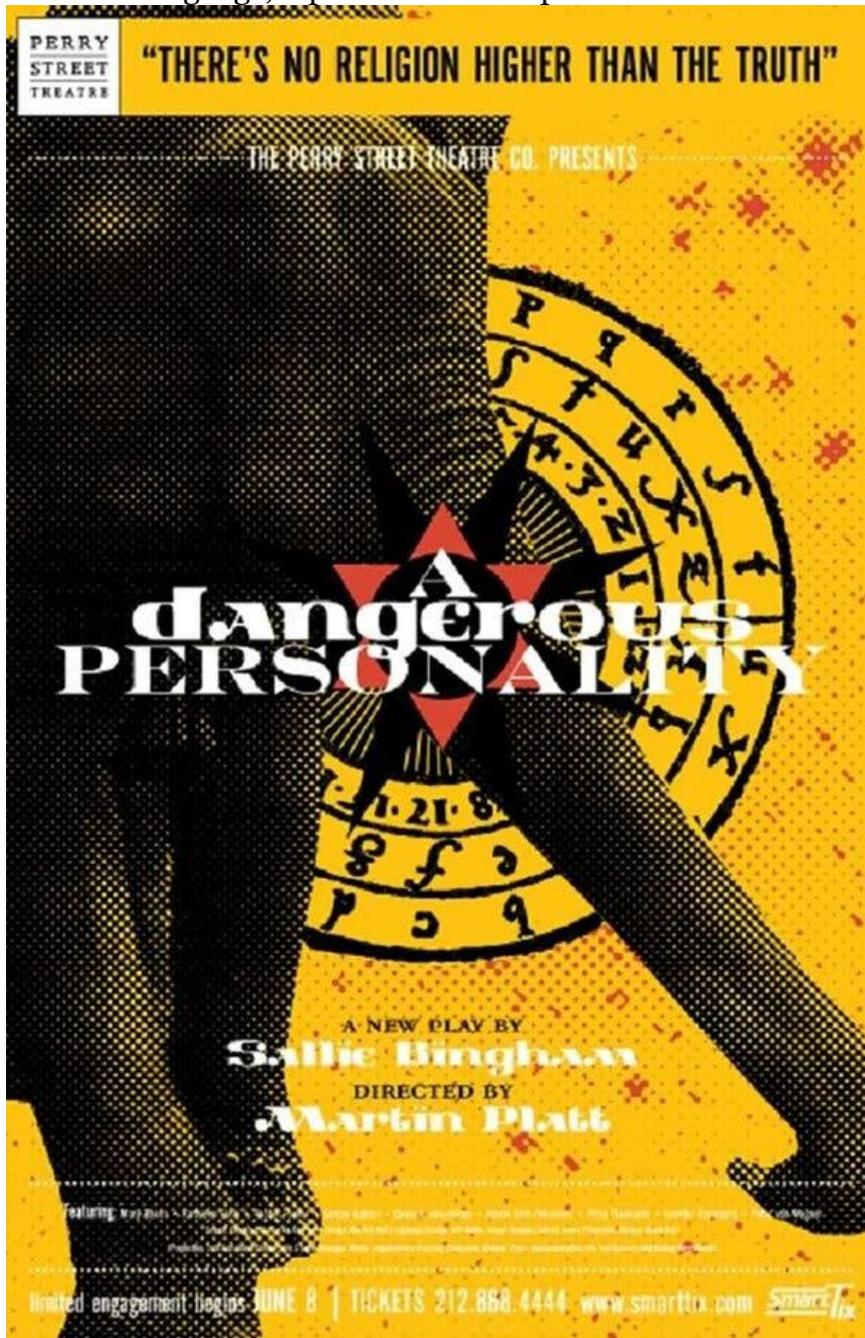
Credit...Houghton Mifflin Company

When her father retired, in 1971, and her brother took over the family business, Ms. Bingham was enthusiastically occupied elsewhere.

“There was a real feeling of ferment, possibility and change” in New York in the late 1970s, she said in a video interview on her [website](#).

Ms. Bingham began her career as a playwright for the 1979-80 season. “Milk of Paradise,” the story of a rich adolescent girl longing to escape her hermetic existence,

was produced by the Women's Project and Productions at the American Place Theater in New York. In [her New York Times review](#), Michiko Kakutani, later the paper's chief book critic, found the production static but praised Ms. Bingham's "colloquial and often beautiful language," "poetic ear" and "precise and observant eye."



Ms. Bingham's 2006 play, "A Dangerous Personality," is about Helena Blavatsky, the Russian founder of theosophy. Credit...Perry Street Theatre

The Women's Project produced two more of Ms. Bingham's plays in the years ahead. "[Paducah](#)" (1985) was a marital comedy whose cast included Tammy Grimes; Mel

Gussow of The Times found its characters “a tiresome foursome.” “A Dangerous Personality” (2006) was about [Helena Blavatsky](#), the Russian founder of theosophy.

The lives and causes of accomplished, often wealthy people seemed to inspire Ms. Bingham. “In the Presence,” first produced in Baltimore in 1984, was about [Anne McCarty Braden](#), the Kentucky-born journalist and civil rights worker. “Treason” (2006), produced at the Perry Street Theater in Manhattan, focused on the later years of the poet Ezra Pound.



Ms. Bingham in 1986, the year her family sold its entire newspaper and media enterprise. Credit...Pat McDonogh for The New York Times

Her plays were produced in the 1980s at the Kentucky Repertory Theater, also known as the Horse Cave Theater, named for the small Kentucky town where it was founded. As for the prestigious [Actors Theater of Louisville](#), a longtime family favorite (the Bingham Theater was christened there in 1994), only one Sallie Bingham play was ever staged

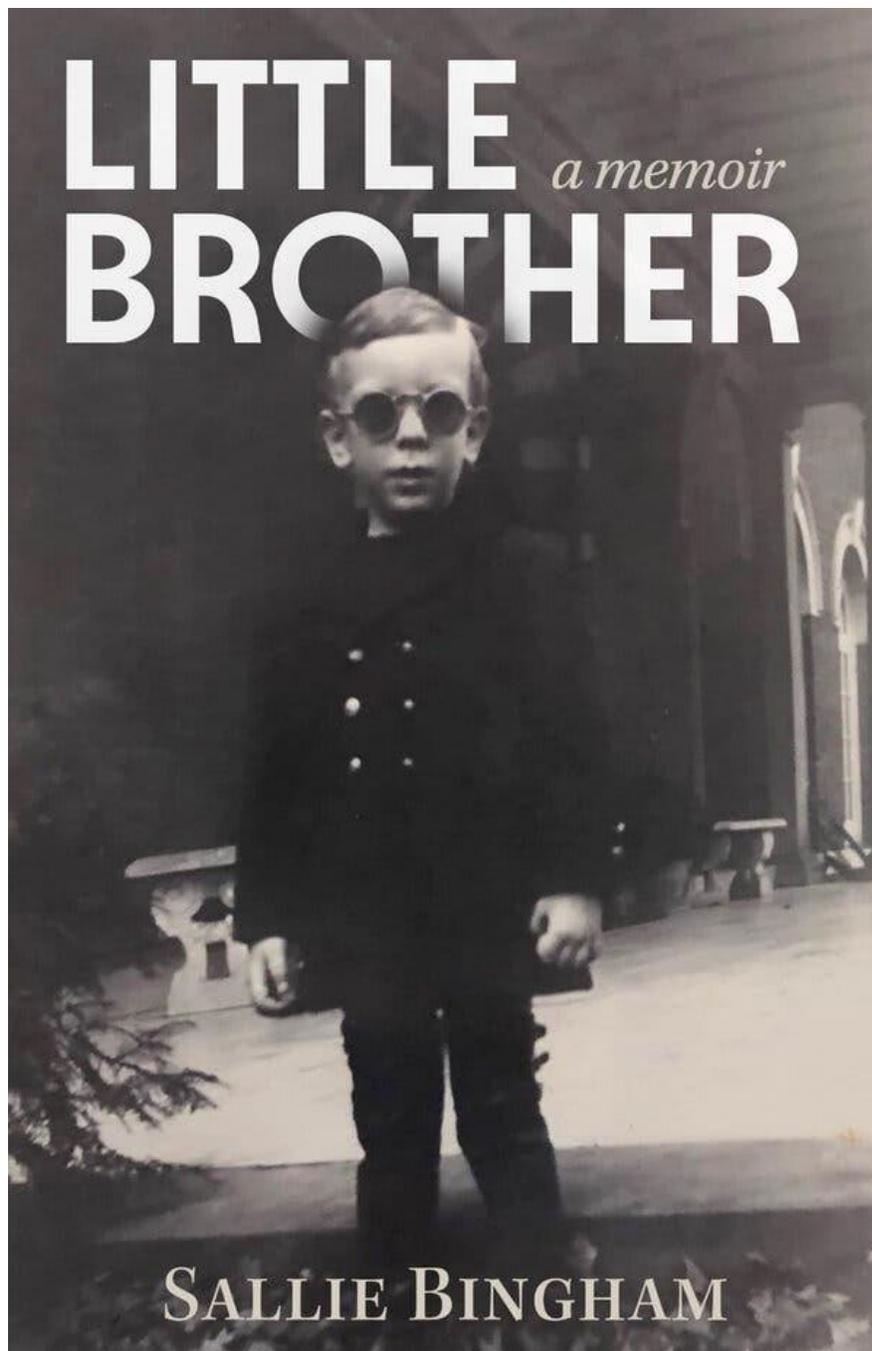
there: “Couvade,” in which a man simulated giving birth onstage, was part of a 1983 festival of one-acts.

A year after the sale of the family newspaper business, Ms. Bingham founded the [Kentucky Foundation for Women](#), dedicated to fostering feminist expression in the arts through grants and artist retreats. She financed it with \$10 million of her own money.

After the success of “Passion and Prejudice,” she returned to writing novels. When “Small Victories” (1992) appeared, Publishers Weekly, the industry’s bible, praised her for “communicating bone-deep truths” but criticized her “florid overwriting.” The same publication called “Matron of Honor” (1996), about the women in a wealthy family coming to terms with their personhood, “her best yet.” Ms. Bingham’s last novel, “Taken by the Shawnee” (2024), was inspired by an ancestor’s 18th-century experience.

“After 30 years as a writer, I’ve done all I can do in fiction,” she told the Santa Fe., N.M., arts magazine Pasatiempo in June 2024, promising to write only historical fiction in the future. “I’m kind of tired of my own point of view.”

Two of her last books were, in fact, nonfiction. “[The Silver Swan: In Search of Doris Duke](#)” (2020) was about the 20th-century tobacco heiress. In 2022, she published “[Little Brother](#),” a memoir about her sibling Jonathan, who [died in 1964](#) at the age of 21 after being accidentally electrocuted.



“Little Brother,” from 2022, is about Ms. Bingham’s brother Jonathan, who died at 21 in 1964 after he had been accidentally electrocuted. Credit...Sarabande Books

Ms. Bingham married and divorced three times. She met [A. Whitney Ellsworth](#), the first publisher of The New York Review of Books, in college and was his wife from 1958 to 1963. She married [Michael Iovenko](#), a Wall Street lawyer who headed the Legal Aid Society, in 1965. They divorced in 1976. In 1983, she married Timothy C. Peters, a Louisville contractor. They divorced in 1990.

She is survived by two sons — Barry Ellsworth, a film producer and art gallerist, and Christopher Iovenko, a writer — and five grandchildren. Her youngest son, [William Iovenko](#), disappeared in 2017; his remains were found 16 months later in the Colorado mountains, where he had frozen to death.



Ms. Bingham in 2018. “After 30 years as a writer, I’ve done all I can do in fiction,” she said last year. “I’m kind of tired of my own point of view.” Credit...Camila Motta

She is also survived by a sister, Eleanor Bingham Miller. Ms. Bingham’s younger brother, Jonathan, was accidentally electrocuted in 1964, two years before her brother

Worth died in the car crash. Barry Jr. died of complications of Hodgkin's disease in 2006.

Ms. Bingham's relationship with her mother, who died in 1995, was contentious, but in later years she often mentioned her sympathetically.

Mary Bingham, a Virginian who was the first in her family to attend college, married a man whose job came with overwhelming social obligations, had children and, in her daughter's words, never had a chance to fulfill her "early promise."

"We seemed part of her role, like the golden plates on the company dinner table," Ms. Bingham wrote in her family memoir. "She had been meant for another kind of life, a life of the mind."

In a prologue that Ms. Bingham added in 1991, she concluded: "Somehow the chickens do come home to roost. And the hens, at least, tend to sprout new tail feathers."