

Shmanners 345: Barbara Mae Watson

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: For a second I had it in my head that I said "And you're listening to... " And then you would say "*Shmanners*." And I'm like, "Wait. That's not it."

Teresa: That's not it.

Travis: That's not how that works. How are you?

Teresa: I'm great!

Travis: We just got back from the gym.

Teresa: We did, and you took a shower, and you smell nice.

Travis: Thank you. It's my purple shampoo.

Teresa: Ooh.

Travis: That smells very minty.

Teresa: I didn't take a shower, because unlike most people, I just get red like a tomato.

Travis: Yeah. Doesn't really sweat.

Teresa: I don't really sweat.

Travis: You have zero—you have no pores.

Teresa: [laughs] That must be it.

Travis: Which is always weird.

Teresa: But our trainer sometimes looks at me and says, "Do you need a break?" [laughs] Because my face is all red.

Travis: So, what are we talking about today?

Teresa: Well, so today we have a biography, and we are talking about a fine, upstanding... how does the song go in *Bye Bye Birdie*? "[singing] Fine upstanding..."

Both: "[singing] Patriotic, healthy, normal, American..."

Teresa: Person.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. Her name is Barbara Mae Watson.

Travis: Okay. I don't know this person.

Teresa: Well, I'm excited, because she was a lawyer, a diplomat, an ambassador, a teacher, a business person, and the first Black person to serve as Assistant Secretary of State.

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: Yeah! So, like I said, fine, upstanding, patriotic... healthy, normal.

Travis: Yeah. That all sounds very important, too.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: I'm just gonna say it. And listen, this is bold, but I'm just gonna say it. More important than me.

Teresa: Mmm.

Travis: Maybe has contributed a little bit more to history than I have so far. I don't know. Was she in *Trolls: World Tour*?

Teresa: [laughs] I can emphatically say no.

Travis: Okay. Okay.

Teresa: So, Watson was born in New York City, November 5th, 1918. The oldest child of James and Violet Watson, both immigrants from Jamaica.

Travis: Okay, cool, cool.

Teresa: Immigrants...

Travis: To get the job done. Like from *Hamilton*.

Teresa: That's it, yes, that—yeah. I'm just—

Travis: I figured that was in everybody's head.

Teresa: I'm on a kick. I'm on a kick to want to name every song in the Broadway lexicon.

Travis: Okay. Is there any way that Barbara relates to *Phantom of the Opera*?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Did she ever attend a [singing] masquerade?

Teresa: I don't think so.

Travis: Aww, darn it.

Teresa: Um, so her parents had very impressive careers as well. Her father was the first Black judge elected in New York State. Her mother was one of the founders of the National Council of Negro Women, which is a nonprofit organization founded in 1935, with the mission to advance opportunities and quality of life for Black women and their families and their communities, and it is still in operation today.

Travis: Awesome!

Teresa: I know, right? That's, like, 90 years. That's awesome.

Travis: I can already tell this is gonna be one of those biography episodes where I just spend, like, 90% of it going "What? Cool! Whoa! Awesome! Really? Wow!"

Teresa: "I can't believe we haven't heard about this person before."

Travis: Yeah. That's just—just assume that as an underlying, like, undercurrent, the whole thing.

Teresa: Uh, her brother James also became a judge, and she's cousins with very successful entrepreneur J. Bruce Llewellyn and former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Travis: Wow, okay! A very prestigious family, I would say.

Teresa: Indeed. So, she attended Barnard College and got her Bachelors in 1939, and during that time she was also the first Black woman to participate in the school's Greek games. What do you think those are?

Travis: It's the fraternity games. It's the competition where the fraternities compete against each other? Is that it?

Teresa: Mmm, no.

Travis: No?

Teresa: I mean, that's what one would think, right?

Travis: That's what I thought it was!

Teresa: It is a campus-wide athletic competition.

Travis: Oh, okay. That actually is more prestigious. I honestly thought you were like, "She was the first Black woman to participate... " and they had, like, a flip cup, and they were doing, like, toga races.

Teresa: [laughs] No. So it is freshmen and sophomores compete against each other in neoclassical-inspired games, like dance, discus throwing, hurdling, hoop rolling, torch races, and chariot races.

Travis: And lion fighting.

Teresa: I mean, not that one.

Travis: Okay, not that one. Okay. Got it, got it, got it.

Teresa: Graduated in 1939, went to New York Law School we she not-graduated third in her class in 1962.

Travis: Wait, what?

[pause]

Teresa: Right.

Travis: She not-graduated?

Teresa: No. Because—

Travis: It's opposite day?

Teresa: Uh, there's a huge gap in there, and Ms. Barbara was working.

Travis: Okay? Wait. So she—wait. I'm confused. So she went to law school, but didn't graduate?

Teresa: She didn't graduate until 1962. She went to law school in 1939.

Travis: Okay. Okay. And then she graduated in...

Teresa: 1962.

Travis: She time traveled.

Teresa: [laughs] No! She had—she worked in between there. She attended law school.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Here's what happened. After graduating from Barnard, she worked as an interviewer for the United Seamen's Service.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She did that '43 to '46 until she, along with Jamaican commercial artist Edward Branford and stylist Mary Yarbo cofounded the first licensed Black modeling agency.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Branford models!

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She taught etiquette and charm school courses at the academy's modeling school, and taught young girls how to appear perfectly poised for their potential shoots.

Travis: Okay. A lot of good alliteration in there too, which made me very happy. Perfectly poised.

Teresa: Indeed. So she and Edward worked together, and then Branford founded a advertising agency, and so in 1948, Watson took over the modeling area, right? And then served as director until 1956, when she closed down both the agency and the modeling school.

Travis: Can I just say, if you're gonna run a modeling agency, also running an ad agency seems a little bit like a monopoly. But I'm, like, for it. Of like, "Oh, you know who we should get for this? One of our own people? Yes, absolutely."

Teresa: Indeed, indeed. And then 1958 to '59, she worked as the student activities coordinator at Hampton Institute, and then did her law degree.

Travis: Okay. Nice.

Teresa: Yeah. So she got a lot of stuff there in between. After she got her law degree, she was appointed as Assistant Attorney in the New York City Law Department. That's 1963.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She went on to work as Executive Director of New York City Commission on the United Nations from '64 to '66, and then she left the UN, because... she began to work for the department of state.

Travis: So she just, like, kept moving up, right?

Teresa: Oh yeah.

Travis: Like, she—like—okay. Okay.

Teresa: As Rihanna would say, "Work, work, work."

Travis: I find that it sounds like people were like, "Hey. Could you please go get your law degree, 'cause we really want to hire you," it seems. And she's like, "Well, I'm doing other stuff right now." And they're like, "Oh, please. Please, please, please, please get your law degree." And she's like, "Okay, fine." And it's like, "Okay, good. Now that you have your law degree, can we hire you for 16 things?" "Yes, you may."

Teresa: Yes, indeed. So she joined the Department of State in 1966 as Special Assistant to the Deputy Undersecretary of State for administration.

Travis: Can I also just say right now we've been joined in the booth by special guest Buttercup.

Teresa: [wheezes] Yeah.

Travis: And it's the—the first time I can remember in a long time that Buttercup has joined us in the booth, 'cause we left the door open to get some cool air 'cause it's getting warmer, and now she's just, like, sitting in front of us, just like "When are you guys gonna be done?"

Teresa: She just needs some scratches.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Which luckily I can read and scratch Buttercup's head at the same time.

Travis: You're amazing. Truly, truly incredible.

Teresa: Um, so she was brilliant. And July of 1968, President LBJ nominated Watson for a promotion. He wanted her to serve as Assistant Secretary of State for Security and Consular Affairs.

Travis: Oh, that sounds important.

Teresa: Yeah! So this made Watson both the first Black Assistant Secretary of State and the first woman to work in the role.

Travis: Wow! You know what? I can't wait to hear more about her. But first, how about a word from some other Max Fun shows?

[theme music plays]

[music plays]

Jordan: I'm Jordan Morris.

Jesse: And I'm Jesse Thorn.

Jordan: On Jordan, Jesse, Go we make pure, delightful nonsense.

Jesse: We rope in awesome guests and bring them down to our level. We get stupid with Judy Greer.

Judy: My friend Molly and I call it having the space weirds.

Jordan: Patton Oswald.

Patton: Could I get a Balrog burger and some Aragorn fries? Thank you.

Jesse: And Kumail Nanjiani.

Kumail: I've come back with cat toothbrushes, which is impossible to use.

Jordan: Come get stupider with us at Maximumfun.org.

Jesse: Look, your podcast app's already open. Just pull it out. Give Jordan, Jesse, Go a try.

Jordan: Being smart is hard. Be dumb instead!

[music and ad end]

[music plays]

Hal: Hi, I'm Hal Lublin.

Mark: And I'm Mark Gagliardi.

Hal: And we're the hosts of We Got This with Mark and Hal, the weekly show where we settle the debates that are most important to you.

Mark: That's right. What arguments are you and your friends having that you just can't settle?

Hal: Apples or Oranges?

Mark: Marvel or DC?

Hal: Fork versus spoon.

Mark: Chocolate or vanilla.

Hal: Best bagel.

Mark: What's the best Disney song?

Hal: We Got This with Mark and Hal, every week on Maximum Fun. We do the arguing so you don't have to.

Mark: Oh, all answers are final for all people for all time.

Speaker 3: [singing] We got this!

[music and ad end]

Travis: Okay. So at this point, what has she left to do except conquer the moon?

Teresa: I mean, she's crushing it. So she held that position until 1974, and that year she received the Luther I. Replogle Award for Management

Improvement, and chaired an international consular office in Mexico City that same year.

Travis: Okay. Busy. Busy, busy.

Teresa: So, so busy. And then—well, her political career takes a little bit of a snag here, because Nixon enters office.

Travis: Oh, that guy.

Teresa: And in '74 they began to try and bully Barbara out of her position.

Travis: Like, the worst thing Nixon's ever done.

Teresa: Wanted to replace her with a Republican lawyer from Buffalo.

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: And the NAACP rallied behind Barbara Watson, condemning Nixon's decision to replace a Black woman Democrat with a white male Republican.

Travis: Mm-hmm. Good, I agree.

Teresa: So in the end Watson submitted her resignation, at Nixon's demand.

Travis: Ugh.

Teresa: And the Republican took over as Assistant Secretary for State of Consular Affairs.

Travis: Boooo!

Teresa: Okay. Can't keep Barbara down, because she remained in Washington, where she took a job with a legal consulting firm, and spent a lot of time lecturing at colleges and universities.

Travis: Buttercup is now attempting to climb up fully into our laps.

Teresa: [laughs] Should I let her?

Travis: Come here, Bubba. Come here. Come here. Good—good girl. Okay, but you gotta sit. Okay.

[mic thumping]

Travis: Oh, gosh. Oh boy. Okay, keep going. Everything's fine.

Teresa: Alright. In January of '77, President Jimmy Carter asked her to return. I mean, obviously she is so good at this job, right?

Travis: Resume a mile long!

Teresa: Exactly. And asking her to return to her exact same position, because she's perfect for it. Um, and...

Travis: I mean, she won the Replogle Award! So you know she's doing a good job.

Teresa: Yeah! And he liked her work in that office so much that he appointed her United States Ambassador to Malaysia.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Alright. She resigned from office and ended her political career when Reagan took office, and then started to practice law in DC with firms specializing in international law, business development, and trade. So by the end of her career, she would be a member of the American Bar Association, the District of Columbia Bar Association, the Bar of the State of New York and the Bar of the District of Columbia.

Travis: Wow.

Teresa: I know, right? She was lauded with several honorary doctorates. University of Maryland, Mt. St. Mary's College, and in addition to her other awards, she was the recipient of 17 other awards from varied organizations.

Travis: Wow!

Teresa: Decorated as Commander of the National Order of the Republic of the Ivory Coast.

Travis: Wow! Okay.

Teresa: If she had a shelf for all of these trophies, it would be bowed.

Travis: Oh, okay. Why didn't she buy a better shelf, would be my question.

Teresa: I'm saying no shelf could handle it.

Travis: No sh—! Okay, wait, hold on.

Teresa: Steel rebar.

Travis: Couldn't handle it?

Teresa: Couldn't handle it! Too heavy!

Travis: What about adamantium, like Wolverine's skullington?

Teresa: Umm, that's not real.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She went on to serve on the board of several universities, and the Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe and the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts. Needless to say, her legacy—the breadth and depth...

Travis: And width.

Teresa: ... and width...

Travis: And height.

Teresa: ... and height.

Travis: And whatever you say for time.

Teresa: Duration?

Travis: There it is, yeah, you got it!

Teresa: I got it, I got it.

Travis: And I think the fifth is smell, if I remember correctly?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: The scent of her legacy?

Teresa: I mean, it is astounding to me. We do a lot of "If you don't know it, you should know it" kind of biographies. But, like... I cannot believe this woman's career. And I had no idea.

Travis: So I assume the way that you're talking about it, she has passed.

Teresa: Yes. Um, passed away in 1983 at 64 of pneumonia.

Travis: Oh, bummer! So young, comparatively!

Teresa: Comparatively, yes. But what a career.

Travis: Yeah, man.

Teresa: In that length of time. So the Secretary of State at the time, George P. Schultz, said that the State Department was deeply saddened by her death. She was a public servant of unusual dedication and distinction. Her long service as Assistant Secretary of the State for Consular Affairs and her tour as Ambassador to Malaysia made important contributions to American Foreign Policy.

Travis: Wow.

Teresa: Um, her papers and photographs are at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, and they are enshrined for generations to enjoy and study. She has several very amusing and tender pieces of correspondence there. And in 1994, the Consular Officer of the Year Award was renamed the Barbara M. Watson Award for Consular Excellence.

Travis: Wow!

Teresa: Very, very cool. It's clear, I mean, that she was known and loved by her peers.

Travis: And respected!

Teresa: Definitely.

Travis: I mean, that's the thing, once again. You talk about a bowing shelf of awards. It seems like people were falling all over themselves to give her awards.

Teresa: Indeed. Um, and it is—like I said, it is so—it's really great to find these people, and it's also maddening that I didn't know about them before. She should have a stamp. I wonder if she has a stamp.

Travis: She should have a state, is what I thought you were gonna say.

Teresa: [wheeze-laughs]

Travis: The Barbara state.

Teresa: [through laughter] Maybe—maybe not—not quite that much.

Travis: We'll make DC a state, but rename it Barbara.

Teresa: Barbara. [laughs] Sounds great.

Travis: I'm just saying. We called a state Virginia! That was named after a person.

Teresa: Well, so is Georgia.

Travis: There we go.

Teresa: And Carolina.

Travis: There—thank you! Barbara-ra.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Is what it will be now. Thank you so much. This is a bit shorter than normal, but I think so much of it speaks—her legacy speaks for itself so much, and we just wanted to tell you about it, and Buttercup is getting very warm in my lap, and very wiggly.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So thank you so much. I want to say thank you to our researcher Alex, without whom we would not be able to make this show. I want to say thank you to our editor, Rachel, without whom we wouldn't be able to make this show. And I want to say thank you to you.

We could make this show without you, but we wouldn't, 'cause it would be weird, right? I think Teresa and I would just probably sit down and just probably talk about stuff, if nothing else.

I want to tell you, just a couple days left before The Adventure Zone: Eleventh Hour graphic novel comes out. It comes out February 21st, and we're gonna do a live virtual event on February 21st at 8 PM Eastern Time to celebrate the release. We got special guests Aabria Iyengar, Mega Ran, Gabe Hicks, Janet Varney, Jean Grae, and Kristina Arielle. There's event-exclusive signed copies available from Brookline Booksmith and Left Bank Books. You can get that by going to bit.ly/tazgnlive2023.

Teresa: Bebe was very excited to get the trading cards out of our advance copy.

Travis: She loved that. Also, a My Brother, My Brother, and Me live virtual event, it's our first 20-sun and sea live show. It's gonna be live virtual, so you can attend from anywhere, on March 17th, 9 PM Eastern Time. Tickets are only \$10, and Sawbones is gonna open for that, so it's like two shows for the price of one, and video on demand is available for purchase for up to two weeks after the event. Go to bit.ly/mbmbamvirtual. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. Also, we are always taking topic submissions. If you have a biography idea of someone that you would love us to tell the internet about, you can send those ideas to shmannerscast@gmail.com. And make sure that you say hello to Alex, because she reads every one.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: [through laughter] Manners, *Shmanners*. Get it.

[theme music plays]

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