

Children raised by entertainers don't always follow in their parents' footsteps. But Alison Arngrim did, finding fame overnight at the age of 11 playing bratty Nellie Oleson in the hit NBC series "Little House on the Prairie." Arngrim's parents were captivated by the entertainment industry in their native Canada.

Her father, Thor Arngrim (1928-2009), began working in theater and later became a Hollywood manager to entertainers such as Liberace and Debbie Reynolds while her mother, Norma Macmillan, (1921-2001) was best-known as a voice actor. She was, according Arngrim, delightfully eccentric.

"They were both crazy show business folk," said Arngrim, from Los Angeles, laughing loudly.

"She was the voice of Casper the Friendly Ghost (in the 1963 series 'The New Casper Cartoon Show'), Gumby in 'The Gumby Show,' and Davey in 'Davey and Goliath.' And she was Sweet Polly Purebred in 112 episodes of 'Underdog.'" Those voices and others often made it home when young Alison asked for a bedtime story, which was never conventional.

"She didn't know any of the usual ones. Instead, she tended to retell plots of movies or historical dramas. I remember a favorite about Czar Nicholas, Alexandra, their hemophiliac son and their friend Rasputin - which was a hell of a bedtime story for a 6-year-old. Another featured a cowgirl with crazy friends and they tried to hang her but she escaped. It was years before I realized she'd been describing the movie plot to 'Cat Ballou.'" While young children of actors can initially find it confusing to see a parent on television, Arngrim readily accepted it.

"My mother took me to the studio a few times when I was very little, so I saw what she did and she explained it. She was in all the Saturday morning cartoons which I thought was great. She had a very distinctive almost childlike highpitched voice which was perfect for cartoons." Mother's Day gifts were also a little unusual for Alison.

"I had the weirdest Mother's Day gift list.

She loved the opera, so there I was, a 10-yearold in a record store asking for specific opera company recordings of Die Fledermaus or Der Rosenkavalier - it was hysterical." Not surprisingly, says Arngrim, even her mother's funeral was unique.

"She left pages of explicit handwritten instructions for her funeral which were so hilarious that the priest actually read them during the eulogy," recalled Arngrim. "She was an Episcopalian and they would usually sing Abide with Me, but her instructions read "I cannot abide Abide with Me" and she left a list of acceptable hymns." Norma's death from an intestinal blockage was sudden and naturally devastating to the family. "True to form, she had not complained but was obviously much sicker than we knew." Her wish was to be cremated and the ashes scattered in the Strait of Juan de Fuca off the coast of Canada (Victoria), a region her mother would often travel to by seaplane and tugboat and stay in remote island cabins doing research for a book ("The Maquinna Line") published after her death.

"We had tickets to fly up to Vancouver on September 12, 2001. We were half packed, and the morning of September 11 comes and all flights are grounded. So my mother remained in a box until next June when we took a yacht to the area with friends, a priest, and a bagpipe player. It was a fabulous ceremony." Even though her mother was unconventional, Arngrim still has high praise for her.

"She didn't do many of the normal mother things. But she was still a loving, kind, and good mom - exciting and different, like having a fascinating, historical character as your mother. She may have been Norma Macmillan professionally, but when she'd pick me up from school she was always Norma Arngrim." Arngrim is author of the best-selling biography "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch" and currently tours with a presentation of storytelling and stand-up. She will be appearing on Mother's Day at the Laurie Beechman Theatre in New York City (her official web site: www.howiegreen.com/alison) Nick Thomas teaches at Auburn University at

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