

On creating without fear



Writer Erica Jong on working in different genres, finding kinship with other writers, and what it means to to write honestly about your own life.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2537 words.

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Your work has been translated and interpreted in a variety of different ways. Recently Vanessa Daou's *Zipless: Songs from the Works of Erica Jong* was reissued for its 25th anniversary. How does it feel to see your work exist in these different forms?

It's wonderful. At the time that record was made, Vanessa Daou was married to my nephew Peter Daou, who is a musician and the second son of my elder sister. He's extremely talented and he was married to one of my favorite people in the world, Vanessa. So, I gave them a book of my collected poems and I said, "Okay, kids. Do with them what you want." I gave them complete freedom. I also appear on the record, but mostly, Vanessa and Peter set my poems to music, and they did beautiful work.

I've actually had these sorts of collaborations many times. With classical music, I've been collaborating with Richard Danielpour, a distinguished classical composer. He's set a number of my poems as songs. We're good friends. The last thing he set was "Talking to Aphrodite," a poem in which Aphrodite is talking about her tricky life and how she brings people together who fall in love. However, she also brings people together who end in suicide because the Greeks believed that the gods were not always kind. It's from a book called *Sappho's Leap*. The classical idea is that Sappho committed suicide because she was in her 50s and she had an affair with a much younger man and he dumped her. In my Sappho book, Sappho has an affair with a much younger man and he jumps off a cliff when she is bored with him. I turned the story upside down because I actually believe that the "older woman and the younger man" is a sexist story that came down through the ages. My experience has been the same with younger men—that they get very attached and I get bored. You can quote that.

You're a novelist, essayist, and poet with a new collection, *The World Began with Yes*, out this Spring. What can you tell me about your creative practice as it relates to working between these different genres?

I've published nine books of poetry. I've published 10 novels and 10 books of nonfiction. I always believed that I wanted to be like a female John Updike or a female Philip Roth or a female Saul Bellow. Of course, there were already many women like this, but people don't know about them because we live in an age of sexism, unredeemed. I just wanted to be a woman of letters. I was told I couldn't write essays, poetry, and fiction. In America, we're supposed to choose a major in the great graduate school of life and people get very suspicious if we do more than one thing. Of course, I didn't listen. I did it anyway.

Do you find that the economy of language that happens in poetry has any correlation to the way that you think about writing fiction?

Well, you're more aware of language if you're a poet and when you edit yourself, you're more fierce mostly because you don't want to overuse the same verbs. You don't want to say, "I shrieked. He shrieked. She shrieked." You look at the verbs and you say, "Can I vary them?" Then you're also aware of the patterns of speech with different

characters, because you can really *hear* the patterns of speech.

The average novelists who makes a fortune, let's say someone like Danielle Steel, are completely unaware of things like that. Usually these writers are much richer than me, but I can't be them and they can't be me. They don't mind reusing the same word over and over and that's the difference. They'll say, "He was a tall and handsome man." I would never write that. I would maybe write, "He was six foot four, extremely thin, and had a walleye. I wondered as I got to know him if he didn't want to correct it or did he only want to be different. I wound up thinking 'Well, he liked his walleye and he liked wearing a patch over it at times.'" The usual commercial novelist doesn't think that way and I find them completely unreadable.

I once tried to read a book by Danielle Steel and I was amazed. In this book, a woman doesn't tell her husband that she puts on a wig every morning and is secretly a TV broadcaster. So, she leaves very, very early in the morning having put on her wig, her makeup, and various pieces of exotic underwear. Every morning she goes and becomes the same television personality and they've been married for 50 years and he doesn't know. I read that and thought, "I don't think this is believable, but many women all over the world don't give a shit."

You teach writing workshops. As someone who's written famously and frankly about sex, do you find that people have an easier time writing about sex and sexuality now than they used to? I find that my own writing students will often write about sex, but rarely in a way that feels joyful or articulates happiness. I'm always a little surprised and bummed out by that.

Boy, that is fascinating. It makes me think of something Gore Vidal said, referring to the place where we live as the United States of amnesia, the United States of puritanical thinking about sex. Our country is still very puritanical and we're made to feel ashamed of our sexuality. That's the true answer. We're made to feel guilty about feeling lust. We're made to feel guilty about the kind of lust we practice. For gay people, it's even harder. For straight people, it's hard enough to be joyful. For the whole LGBT community, I think it's a nightmare.

Can you write joyfully about making love to a person of your own gender? It's very hard to do it. I shouldn't say hard, it's completely possible, of course, but it's really hard to do it because everybody in the world is telling you that you *shouldn't* be doing it. It's hard to shake those external attitudes when it comes to writing honestly about our own experiences.

How do you write honestly about your own life? Not just about sex, but about yourself as a person?

When it comes to writing about sex, the important thing is carnal detail. Mary Karr, in her book, *The Art of Memoir*, talks about this. She says that when you write about your life, you should write about the carnality of your life. As I interpret it, it means that we are spiritual beings inhabiting a meat body and we're not yet in a place where we don't have to worry about the body. The body is where we live. If you don't write honestly about the body, your writing is not honest.

I think it's in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* where he describes a character who has a terrible case of the runs. He's running around in an airport looking for a bathroom before he gets the next wave of diarrhea. He's got to find a bathroom, so he won't shit in his pants. That's what I mean by carnal detail. We are physical beings and if you run away from that in your writing, your writing is not honest.

The same is true when writing about sex. If you run away from the physical details, you're not writing about human beings. I just taught a course where students asked, "But can I write about my pussy getting wet or my cock getting hard?" I say, "Why not?" They say, "But if I write that, my mother and my father and my kids will be shocked." I say, "Your kids will be shocked that you have a cock? How do they think they got here?" We spend a lot of time talking about what it means to write about sex and what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. I believe that honesty is always acceptable.

It's a tricky thing these days. People want to feel emboldened to write honestly about their experiences, but there is still this fear about doing so in the right way, especially if you are teaching writing in an academic

setting. That fear of being offensive/offending becomes another hurdle.

Right. You're not allowed to say pussy, I think. Are you still allowed to say cock? Are you allowed to say penis? You're allowed to say vagina because of Eve Ensler, but that doesn't change the fact that vagina sounds medical to most ears. So, I always said cock and cunt because that's the way people talk in intimate situations. If I said vagina and penis, it would sound medical and false. I try to write the way people talk. Now, of course, you don't talk that way to your teacher, but you do talk that way to your lover. My belief is that if you talk in writing the way you talk in actual intimate conversations, it will sound real. It's about the context.

Are you always juggling multiple book projects?

Yes. I started a very political book about women the day after the election. I submitted it too soon and it hadn't really gelled yet. My fiction publisher read it and they were horrified. They said, "It's too soon for this book." They were scared. So, I took it back and I said, "Okay, I want to work on it in a different way." Then I worked on another novel, which is set during the French Revolution and is called *Liberty and Blood*. It's about an artist who painted portraits of all the royalty, including Marie Antoinette. I worked on that, a book I've tried to write for years, because I come from a family of painters and it was a way of my dealing with that.

Then I started *another* book which is an autobiography. It's called *Fear of Lying*. It really seems to be catching fire. I really love it and it will also become a way of me commenting on the times in which we live. I think it's really hot stuff. I'll probably finish that first and then I'll go back to the historical novel set in the French Revolution. Then, if the goddess spares my life, I will still write *Pussies Grab Back*, which is the book about Trump—or as I prefer to call him, Impotus—and women.

In terms of knowing what to work on next, is it just a matter of going where the energy is?

It's a matter of going where the energy is and being in tune enough with the zeitgeist to know what people want to read next. You can often be wrong about that, by the way.

What will the rest of this year be like for you? You're going to be doing readings with another poet, right?

I have a friend named Kim Dower. She was the City Poet Laureate of West Hollywood. Believe it or not, there is such a thing. She became my friend when she was doing PR for a book company. She wrote me the best letter I ever got, writing, "If you'll forgive me for saying so, Erica Jong, you are a woman who loves too much." She was promoting a book called *Women Who Love Too Much*. I'd loved it and it became a runaway bestseller.

We became friends and whenever I was in L.A. we would have lunch. We liked each other enormously. She's a gutsy smart woman. One day she called me up and she said, "I've always wanted to be a poet and when I was at Emerson College, Thomas Lux told me I was really talented and somehow somewhere I just stopped writing." I said, "Kim, why did you stop writing?" She said, "You can't be a poet past the age of 40." I said, "Says who?" She said, "Well, I gave it up for so many years that I'm out of touch with everyone." I said, "Well, I think that's really not a good reason and I give you permission to be the poet you are." She began sending me poems. When she'd send a poem, I would send a poem back. Not always on the same subject. So, we began turning each other on with poetry, and I began to see that she was really good. Rather than giving her criticism, I'd just send another poem. For years, we've been doing that and we continue to do so.

Now, she's published four books of poetry. She credits me with giving her permission. She was my PR person for *Fear of Dying*. What we've decided to do, because we both have poetry books coming out at the same time, is we're going to do every independent bookstore from San Diego to Seattle. We're going to read five poems each and then talk about our process of encouraging each other and how we feel that rather than giving bitter criticism, you should encourage a person who wants to write. You should respond to them with a poem.

This is in keeping with my way of teaching, which is just to try and find out who you are and help you be that. Just write whatever you can. You can copy edit later. You want to bring out whatever is in the person that needs to be expressed.

Nearly 46 years after it was published, your book *Fear of Flying* remains a hallmark of feminist literature. You took a lot of heat for the book at the time, and it's clearly something that people are never going to stop asking you about. How did you deal with that attention? Would it be different if that novel was being published now?

37 million copies of that book have been sold. I've seen all the eyes and opinions turn around. Would it be different now? I don't know. I see how they're torturing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez because she's young and pretty and can't afford an apartment in Washington. That sort of thing happened to me with *Fear of Flying*. I lived through that. How I lived through that I know not, but I did. I thought I would kill myself a few times, but I didn't. I think about someone like Paul Theroux saying I was nothing but "a giant pudenda" in *The New Statesman*. While I found that awful then, now I find it funny. What was Paul Theroux trying to do? He never saw or touched my pudenda. He had no idea whether it was big or small or little and cute. Now, I laugh.

Selected Erica Jong:

Fear of Flying (1973)

How to Save Your Own Life (1977)

Sappho's Leap (2003)

Fear of Dying (2015)

Seducing the Demon: Writing For My Life (2006)

Becoming Light: New and Selected Poems (1991)

The World Began With Yes (2019)

Name

Erica Jong

Vocation

Writer

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