

## The College at Brockport: State University of New York Digital Commons @Brockport

---

Writers Forum Videos

Writers Forum

---

2-18-1982

# Grace Paley: 02-18-1982

Grace Paley

Peter L. Marchant  
*The College at Brockport*

Mary Elsie Robertson  
*The College at Brockport*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers\\_videos](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers_videos)

---

### Repository Citation

Paley, Grace; Marchant, Peter L.; and Robertson, Mary Elsie, "Grace Paley: 02-18-1982" (1982). *Writers Forum Videos*. Video 42.  
[https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers\\_videos/42](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers_videos/42)

This Video is brought to you for free and open access by the Writers Forum at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writers Forum Videos by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

**PALEY:** "This story is called "Wants."

I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.

"Hello, my life," I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.

He said, "What? What life? No life of mine."

I said, "Okay." I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.

The librarian said, "\$32 even and you've owed it for eighteen years."

I didn't deny anything because I don't understand how time passes. I have had those books. I have often thought of them. The library is only two blocks away. My ex-husband followed me to the Books Returned desk. He interrupted the librarian, who had more to tell.

"In many ways," he said, "as I look back, I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams to dinner."

"That's possible," I said, "but really if you remember, first my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn't seem to know them anymore. But you're right. I should have had them to dinner."

I gave the librarian a check for \$32. Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will not do. I checked out the two Edith Wharton books I had just returned because I'd read them so long ago and they are more apropos now than ever. They were "The House of Mirth" and "The Children," which is about how life in the United States in New York changed in twenty-seven years fifty years ago.

"A nice thing I do remember is breakfast," my ex-husband said. I was surprised. All we ever had was coffee. Then I remembered there was a hole in the back of the kitchen closet which opened into the apartment next door. There, they always ate sugar-cured smoked bacon. It gave us a very grand feeling about breakfast, but we never got stuffed and sluggish.

"That was when we were poor," I said.

"When were we ever rich?" he asked.

"Oh, as time went on, as our responsibilities increased, we didn't go in need. You took adequate financial care," I reminded him.

"The children went to camp four weeks a year and in decent ponchos with sleeping bags and boots, just like everyone else. They looked very nice. Our place was warm in winter, and we had nice red pillows and things."

"I wanted a sailboat," he said. "But you didn't want anything."

"Don't be bitter," I said. "It's never too late."

"No," he said with a great deal of bitterness. "I may get a sailboat. As a matter of fact, I have money down on an eighteen-foot split-rigger. I'm doing well this year and can look forward to better. But as for you, it's too late. You'll always want nothing."

He had had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber's snake, could work its way through the ear down the throat, half-way to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment. What I mean is, I sat down on the library steps, and he went away. I looked through "The House of Mirth," but lost interest. I felt extremely accused. Now, it's true. I'm short of requests and absolute requirements. But I do want something. I want, for instance, to be a different person. I want to be the woman who brings these two books back in two weeks. I want to be the effective citizen who changes the school system and addresses the Board of Estimate on the troubles of this dear urban center. I had promised my children to end the war before they grew up.

I wanted to have been married forever to one person, my ex-husband, or my present one. Either has enough character for a whole life, which, as it turns out, is really not such a long time. You couldn't exhaust either man's qualities or get under the rock of his reasons in one short life. Just this morning I looked out the window to watch the street for a while and saw that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives.

Well, I decided to bring those two books back to the library, which proves that when a person or an event comes along to jolt or appraise me, I can take some appropriate action, although I am better known for my hospitable remarks."

[ Music ]

**Announcer:** "Brockport Writers Forum presents another in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries. Today, the writing of Grace Paley. Here to introduce the participants and guest is today's program host, Peter Marchant, Director of the Writers Forum, Department of English, State University of New York, College at Brockport.

**MARCHANT:** "Welcome, Grace Paley, to Brockport, and welcome Mary Elsie Robertson to interview Grace Paley with me. Grace, I'd like to ask you the first question. How exactly did you start writing? Were you always a writer? When were your first writings and your first publications?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I always was a writer. I guess I was a-I wrote poetry most of my life and, I mean, it wasn't such great poetry, but it was poetry, and I did that from the time I was a child actually, and I did very little publishing. I may have published a couple of poems at some point in my 20s, but I didn't begin to write stories until I was in my 30s, and that's when I began to write the stories in these books, and they were published, but they were never published-they were not published in periodicals. "The Little Disturbances of Man" was published as a book really and only appeared, maybe a couple of those stories, in "Accent," a small magazine.

**ROBERTSON:** "What made you shift from poetry to short stories?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I really liked poetry the best, and I loved doing it, and I wrote it all the time, but there was something really wrong with the way I was working. I never-I never-I never got it really-I never got my own throat working with it, you know, and I think one of the reasons was I liked it so much and I read it

so much and I had a very strong literary sense as far as the poetry was concerned, but as time went on I couldn't-I couldn't-I couldn't-I won't even say talk about it, all right. I couldn't think about what I wanted to think about in poetry. I couldn't begin to think about what interested me, what made me write the stories, which were the lives of women and men and especially women at that time, and I had no-I don't mean that it can't be done in poetry, and a lot of people did it, but I couldn't do it, and I had to do it in stories, and that's really what made me do it. The pressure of subject matter, which people don't talk about a lot, but that pressure really made me really move."

**ROBERTSON:** "One of the things that strikes, well any reader of your stories is that you have command of all these voices, and I just wondered, is that how a story starts for you? Do you hear the voice in your head and then the rest follows from the voice, or something--?"

**PALEY:** "You've got it. I mean, in a lot of the stories that's what happens. I really-it's as though in a way that that's how I began to be able to write stories was because I heard enough voices so I could make my own out of them."

**MARCHANT:** "How did you find your way to this particular form, which seems very much you, very original? Was there any model you followed or did you just find your way?"

**PALEY:** "Well, no. I think first I had been writing a lot of poetry. So, and the short story in a lot of ways seems more connected to poetry than it does to the novel. It never entered my mind. I had small kids at the time, little-they were maybe four and three or something like that. It never entered my mind I could ever in a million years really have the time or, you know, that kind of long forward time to do a novel. So I just didn't enter my mind, and I just-and since I hadn't been writing prose, I naturally tried to write short prose when I began writing prose. I mean, and so that the first stories-the first story I wrote was "The Contest," which is in there, and then the second one was "Goodbye and Good Luck." So it just, it seemed, because of poetry, I think, really that that short form was appropriate. It was something I could handle."

**ROBERTSON:** "Do you tend to do a lot of revision, or do you write rather quickly and that's--?"

**PALEY:** "No. No. The story I just read was something that I thought about and thought about and wrote pretty quickly. There are very short stories in here. The ones that are two and three pages in either book, I've really done that way, but once they're five pages, it takes me a long time. Some of them I-a lot of them I just write the first couple of pages and then wait six months or a year for the rest of the story to come. I've been working-I have one short story I have been working on now for a long time that I just don't imagine when I'll finish it, and it's really never going to be more than fifteen pages. So I do do a lot of that, revising as I work and then finally more of it."

**MARCHANT:** "You sound-it sounds as if when you wrote those short short stories, it was partly because of the children. You had no time to attend anything much longer. Did you write in spite of the children or as an escape from the children?"

**PALEY:** "Oh, no. I liked having them. I enjoyed them. No, I didn't write as-I wrote those stories because I was thinking about-I was accustomed to thinking like a writer, that is I was accustomed to writing when I-in order to help myself think about things and as a poet by always, even when the kids were young, I always had hunks of paper or something in my back pocket or car or wherever, you know, so that I was always writing, but when I sat down to write the stories, it so happens that I had been sick before that

and the kids were in daycare, and I'm going to really throw in that piece of politics right now that I don't know what I would have done really without that daycare center, which was near us. So that in that period I was able to begin this very hard task of working in another form very seriously in a way that I hadn't done before, and I had really-I didn't have months ahead of me, but I did have the whole day for a couple of weeks for several weeks so that I was able to work. I never think-I don't think like that. I don't think in spite of the children or anything. I mean, I see life is what you live, and you do everything you can in it, you know, if you're normally greedy, and I wouldn't-there's hardly any of these things that I would wanted to have done without. I would have never wanted to do without the writing or without the children. So maybe I had the children in spite of the writing or the writing in spite of the children or politics in spite of the two of them." [Laughter]

**MARCHANT:** "But women have been terribly hampered by lack of daycare centers."

**PALEY:** "Sure."

**MARCHANT:** "And social custom kept them in the kitchen and in the nursery and hard at it. Do you think there's been much waste of talent that way over the last few years?"

**PALEY:** "Of course, but in a way it's really been-it's really been-I mean, that's a very-that's a very specific way of looking at it, but most of it has been because of what women-of women's own horizons for themselves. That is-and also what they do in their spare time. I mean, if you-I mean, men have tried to be writers and have worked in brickyards and so forth and so on and, you know, have been doctors or, you know, whatever and had very little bits of time, but they were really allowed to use the extra time in that way. I mean, the idea that my father, say, would use his extra time to paint, but my mother would use her extra time to do something for my father. I mean, it would-and people would've thought-think it strange for a woman really if she had two hours in the evening to really go to her own room and work. It's almost as though the idea that a woman could be doing that work was the greatest wall before-between her and the work itself, so that whatever time she ever used for herself was stealing it from the family, whereas whatever time a man used for himself was for the enhancement of the family.

**ROBERTSON:** "But I'm struck in your stories that it seems to me that all of your women characters, they know what they want, even the 13-year-olds. There's the story-is it she's 13 or 14, and she knows she wants to get married. She picks out the man, and, you know, the women seem very sure of themselves. In a way the men seem much less certain. They sort of follow the lead it seems to me often of the women. They try to do what the women want, or, in some cases, they just skip out, but the women are the sender I feel in these stories. I mean, they are-they're the strong ones. Do you-"

**PALEY:** "Well, I don't think-I guess I don't think it's true in all of them. It seems like to me like in "An Interest in Life," she is really trying to do everything the man wants, but she is the strong one all the same. He just leaves, but partly that's because that's what I was mostly interested in. I was mostly interested in the lives of women, and that first book came out in '59 and I hadn't seen-people write what they want to read. I mean that's sort of a funny thing, but in a way without really, you know, I won't push it too far, and I'm sure there are answers. They say, "Nah, I hate to read my own stuff." I don't believe that anyway, but I wrote about things that I hadn't been reading about, and one of them-one of the things was the lives of the women around me at that particular time, many of whom were alone without men. I mean, they had already parted from them, and it was not my case, but I did know them well and also the children and the lives of women and children. So one of the reasons maybe that I

didn't write earlier was that it seemed to me also although that's what I wanted to write about, and that's really what I wanted to read about. It seemed to me that coming after in the 50s, after the Second World War, there's some very heavy, strong masculine literature, which was natural if the guys had been to war. I mean, that's what they'd write about. I mean, what else were they supposed to do? But, on the other hand, it made women feel or made me feel like what I really wanted to write about was really so trivial and so-who could possibly be interested in this kind of kitchen life or yard life or whatever it was, you know? So there-I didn't really do it until there was tremendous pressure in me to do it. I really, really built up until the point came when I didn't really care if nobody was interested or not."

**ROBERTSON:** "It's your work."

**PALEY:** "Yeah, it's what I had to do, and since I had been writing poetry without publishing it, I thought I could just as soon write fiction without publishing it." [Laughter]

**MARCHANT:** "You've touched that same chord before that you do what you have to do and you felt you had to write, so it was no big deal. You just had to do it."

**PALEY:** "Well, it was a big-I mean, it was-I mean, it took a lot of time. It was-but it was something that I had to do, and I knew I was going to do it."

**MARCHANT:** "But you weren't consciously being an artist, a writer with a capital W. You just-but you said what you wanted to say."

**PALEY:** "No, I mean despite all this interest in poetry, you know, I was scared to death of the literary life. I mean scared of it not in the sense that I was shy of it, although I was, but I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I really just-I really wanted to write but to continue to be the neighborhood person I was. Your kind of local, municipal PTA politics and stuff like that."

**MARCHANT:** "But politics are very important to you. Are women's rights your foremost interest?"

**PALEY:** "Well, to me these things are all connected very powerfully, and I would say that my feminism is strongly connected to my anti-militarism and so that it's all very close. So writing, I-as far as writing was concerned, I wrote mostly about women. That's where my deepest thoughts went, and my early politics was all municipal. I mean, it was really related to my life, like the schools where my kids were, the street, the parks, the city in general, and then it moved into, well, by the end of the 50s, beginning of the 60s into a lot of anti-war work."

**ROBERTSON:** "Do you consider-"

**PALEY:** "I stuck with that, with both, all those things. I haven't really-I do less municipal work, and I miss it a lot because that's the street. That's where the life is, and I'm lonesome for that."

**ROBERTSON:** "Do you think of your stories as political stories? Do you make any sort of distinction, you know, in political art and that which is not?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I think-I think-I think they probably are just as whatever subject matter anybody takes or form, whatever, all of art is political. I mean, everything you write is either-if a person writes and says "This is not political," well, that's probably the most political thing that he could be doing, and, I mean, that's a statement of alienation probably. So, but I would say that, that, that my interest in ordinary life

and how people live is a very political one. I mean that's politics. That's what it is. So, so they seem close to me, but I can't say I thought, "Oh, I'm going to write these political stories." I didn't think that at all. I just thought, "I'm going to write about this woman and man and how they live."

**ROBERTSON:** "Yes, I agree that they are political, but they are not didactic. They are not, oh, well, I'm certain, as you say, you didn't sit down to write a story, an anti-war story. That's not it, but that is nevertheless, that's, that becomes a part of the story in a very quiet way, but not in an, oh, blatant sort of way."

**PALEY:** "That's because some of the people are doing that and some of them are not."

**MARCHANT:** "Well, I am-They don't seem to me directly political at all. You write about people, and your point is it happens to be because it's about people. You're right about people who happen to be women and who happen to be Jewish or happen to be Italian or who happen to be Irish, but they're people. Or do you think that your women are-they don't happen to be women. They are women, that that's more important?"

**PALEY:** "Well, it was very important to me to be-to write about those women. I mean, I, you know, it was consciousness or political consciousness from what-up to before however the stories, I would say that I would, you know, I hung out with my buddies, my friends in the park or whatever we took the kids around then or before that I always had very good women friends, but I really would not say that until I was in my late 20s that I had, say, a woman's political consciousness. So what's the beginning of that? The beginning of that is to know that your life is common with a certain class or a certain group, you know, so that one of the things that made me begin to write the stories, and this is all hindsight, you know-I mean, I'm telling you this this way-was the point at which I really felt my life in common with all of these women. That's-that was it. So, and that's when I felt - began to write. So I have to-I have to look back at that point with some gratitude for that consciousness having happened to me because I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

**MARCHANT:** "But when does the comic come in? Where does that derive from? You look at these characters, and they're these-"

**PALEY:** "Well, you're either funny or not. [Laughter] I mean people try to write very serious. I mean, sometimes I write awful serious stories, I think, and I see they're funny. Well, I don't know how I feel about that. [Laughter] But, you know, that's a sort of-my father was very funny and my mother had no sense of humor at all, but that was sort of-that sort of worked to make him even funnier because he would always be able to say my wife or my mother would always say, "Well, I have no sense of humor," and that would make everybody laugh."

**ROBERTSON:** "In the story that you read, the character says, "Oh, well, there were the Tuesday night meetings. I had the children. Then there was the war." I know that you've spent a great deal of your time and energy during in those years in the anti-war movement, and indeed there is-there's a gap between the publication of these two books. Is it the war that falls between these two books?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I think probably, yeah. I mean, just in terms of not my saying particularly, "Well, I'm making this choice. I will do this and not this," it's just where the pull is strongest for me, and there are these-there have been these three pulls of the politics and of the family life, you know, and the writing. So it's the three pulls, and at different times you-Right now the family pull is the smallest really except I

like to go see my grandchild a lot. I mean that's really the least. So it's-now it's just between the other two, and I really-I really move and not in a particularly conscious way. I just don't seem to be that wide awake to what I'm doing, so to speak, but I do move more towards one than more towards another. We spent a lot of time organizing something called the Women's Pentagon Action, and that used up, you know, an awful lot of time, which I considered it very important to give because life is really just a circle, and everything you do is right in it. So, so I write a one book, the one book less than I would have written. I'll write another book."

**ROBERTSON:** "Yes, I think that's really remarkable, but I think not too many writers probably do have this sense that, well, the writing is simply one part of my life. It's a part, but it isn't, maybe at a given moment, it's not even necessarily the most important part. It's just a part."

**PALEY:** "Yeah, but it really is more important than that somehow. I mean, when I say there are pulls, I mean the pulls are strong in either direction and also because I have these two books out now, suppose I was a woman who was struggling just to be published, you know. I would take another view. So I have to recognize that I have this good fortune, you know, of having produced a couple of books with the things I wanted to say about life in them, you know."

**ROBERTSON:** "Yes."

**PALEY:** "And people who haven't done that really could, you know, could be in both pain and rage and feel that everything else is against them, and of course, it's probably the publishing companies more than their families or anything like that, but it's hard. It's just--"

**MARCHANT:** "But you seem not to feel regret because of the books you might have written if you hadn't been so politically active or if you hadn't had children. You have the three pulls, but you accept them easily. You're pulled in the way of writing. You're pulled in the way of political activism. You're pulled in the way of family, and that's the way it is. You don't feel bitterness."

**PALEY:** "Well, it isn't that simple. If you remember, I was supposed to be here a few weeks ago, and I got awfully sick. One of the reasons I got awfully sick was I hadn't been writing six months. I mean, so I mean, I don't want it to be too light. It's just there are those pulls, but at the point at which you're pulled, you know, there's a tear as you're taken from something else, you know. So that it's not that easy. It's a real-it's a real one, but as for regrets, I chose to live this way, you know, and so, you know, what happened to me two months ago, I got sick and miserable and so forth and so on and had to stop going to so many meetings and had to go away for a few weeks, and I had to write, and I did. So that happens. So, or suppose you have kids. There's a point at which they get into trouble, you know. Well, you have to stop everything. You have to stop going to-you have to stop writing for a while. You have to stop going to meetings, and you have to pay attention to the kids because you put them in this world. You like them, too."

**MARCHANT:** "But if you don't write, you do get physically sick. You feel a malaise."

**PALEY:** "You know, you get a, develop a lot of pressure at certain points, and then as you get older, you do want to make sure that you get your work done a little bit. See, I don't want to make it too light, but I don't regret having spent the time I did, and I have to add to the fact that I also have a strong streak of indolence, which, you know, which probably is important to writers, you know, but because how are you going to daydream all this stuff into paper? You know, wander around looking stupid."



**MARCHANT:** "Well, do you-are you very disciplined?"

**PALEY:** "No. That was fast." [Laughter]

**MARCHANT:** "Do you-do you have a regular time for writing?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I have-I try to do some work every morning a little bit, and I - once I have a story that I'm really working on, I work very hard. But if I'm not really, really working hard on a story, I'll do a little bit every morning, but I won't really-until it all comes together. I probably would just do other things as well."

**ROBERTSON:** "You-we talked a little bit about your working on a long thing, a novel perhaps. You were feeling that you probably won't do this."

**PALEY:** "Well, it's getting late. [Laughter] I mean, I could do it. I guess I'm almost 60, but I don't have the-I don't know that I have the-that I have the novelist determination to do certain things. My husband, Robert Nichols, wrote a very long book, so I have the opportunity to see somebody who does it, you know, and I know the kind of thinking it takes and the amount of paper that has to be hung on the walls and characters to be taken care of, and I have- I don't see myself doing that at all. I do see myself dealing with the same people a lot so that I have a lot of the same characters, and anybody who wants can go and make a novel out of it in their heads."

**MARCHANT:** "May I ask you what are you working on now? What were you working on in Mexico?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I have a couple of long stories that I've started long ago, and that's before, well, during last summer, and I've been working on them. They're pretty-they're pretty long, but nice thing that happened in Mexico was I wrote a very short story totally, which was-which I hadn't expected, and it's the stories you don't expect that are very thrilling in a way, and there are always those little ones that just come I guess like poems, and so that I'm working on those two long stories, and when I finish them, I guess I'll have a book. I don't have enough-I have enough stories for a book, but I don't have a book because these are books, and I want a book. So I have this-these two stories will make a book, I'd say."

**MARCHANT:** "It sounds as if you've spent a lot of time dreaming about your characters. When you say you think about them, you're really dreaming and listening to the characters talk. And then you're ready and you write them rather fast then?"

**PALEY:** "No. No. No. No. The long stories take an awful long time. I mean they really take a long-they take, as I said, years sometimes. I mean, "The Long-Distance Runner" in there, I wrote the first page and a half, you know, and then I didn't know what the devil to do for, oh, about a year. I didn't know which way it was going, and then about a year later, I wrote the next three or four pages, and then maybe a few months after that, I finished it."

**MARCHANT:** "Who have been your mentors, your actual teachers and writers, from whom you've learned?"

**PALEY:** "Well, I can't-it's hard for me to say that, and it really is a longer subject because I really, I think that I was a big reader as a child. So I read everything, and, you know, everything that people read and read, and they all had a lot of influence on me, but I really think that the language and all of that really comes from the form in a way, comes from literature, but the language and the subject matter, it really

comes from the neighborhood and the street and my family, and that's an influence that's hard-it's never given quite enough credit, I don't think, and if certain Russian writers had some influence on me, it's only because they had the same grandparents I have. That's my theory."

**MARCHANT:** "Do people come into your stories recognizably?"

**PALEY:** "Sometimes, but I'm not-I'm not good enough to make them recognizable, thank God."

[Laughter]

**MARCHANT:** "So nobody—"

**PALEY:** "Once in a while, you know, my father once in a while or something like that."

**ROBERTSON:** "And yourself?"

**PALEY:** "I'm not that woman, but I'm close to her. I mean, she was about over here, [laughter] but she's mostly my friends, more of my friends than me."

**MARCHANT:** "Grace Paley, thank you very much for talking with us here, and thank you, Mary Elsie, for joining in. It's been a pleasure to have you both."

**PALEY:** "Thank you!"

**Announcer:** "This exclusive Brockport Writers Forum program was recorded on videotape on February 18, 1982 as part of the Writers Forum, a Department of English presentation, State University of New York, College at Brockport. This has been a production of the Educational Communications Center, State University of New York, College at Brockport."

[ Music ]