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Erica Jong : 04-04-1974

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Jong: Becoming a Nun.

On cold days it is easy to be reasonable, to button the mouth against kisses.

Dust the breasts with talcum powder, and forget the red pulp meat of the heart.

On those days it beats like a digital clock.

Not a beat at all but a steady whirring, chilly as green neon.

Luminous as numerals in the dark.

Cool as electricity.

And I think I can live without it all.

Love with its blood pump, sex with its messy hungers.

Men with their peacocks strutting.

Their silly sexual baggage, their wet tongues in my ear.

And their words like little sugar suckers with sour centers.

On such days I am zipped in my bodysuit.

I am wearing seven league red suede boots.

I am marching over the cobblestones as if they were the heads of men.

And I am happy as a seven-year-old virgin, holding daddy's hand.

Don't touch.

Don't try to tempt me with your ripe persimmons.

Don't threaten me with your volcano.

The sky is clearer when I'm not in heat.

And the palms are colder.

[Music]

Host: Brockport Writer's Forum in a continuing series of discussions with leading literary figures presents the Poetry of Erica Jong, author of several books of poems including *Half Lies* for which she's received an award by the Poetry Society of America. Erica Jong, who has recently published a novel, has taught at Manhattan Community College and City College of New York. Discussing Miss Jong's works are Leroy Searle, an essayist, a published poet and critic, and currently Assistant Professor of American Literature and Literary Criticism at the University of Rochester. And the host for today's Writer's Forum, Stan Rubin, a poet, co-editor of the anthology *Working from Silence*, and a member of the English Department at the State University College at Brockport.

Host: Did you ever think about becoming a nun?

Jong: Never. I never thought of it at all. I mean, that's just the ironic term that I use for the, the feeling that you want to give up sex. And that feeling that you want to give up sex always [inaudible]. It lasts about two days -.

[Laughter]

No, I mean the feeling of, that you're a nun lasts two days. And then you fall into some sort of terrifically erotic trip.

Host: Do you think it lasts any longer than that for nuns?

Jong: I cannot speak for nuns.

Host: You have another poem that you wanted to read.

Jong: You know, it's funny. You, you write a poem like this where you seem to be putting down men and their silly sexual baggage and stuff like that. And it is a persona poem in the sense that it involves the passionate feeling of a moment. But it's a moment frozen in time. At an, and at another moment also frozen in time, you may write a poem like this. Which embodies a totally different feeling about men. Dearest Man in the Moon, ever since our lunch of cheese and moon juice on the far side

of the sun, I have walked the craters of New York.
A trail of slime ribboning between my legs.
A phosphorescent banner that is tied to you.
A beam of moonlight focused on your navel.
A silver chain from which my body dangles and my whole torso chiming
like sleigh bells in a Russian novel.
Dearest Man in the Moon, I used to fear moonlight, thinking her my
mother.
I used to dread nights when the moon was full.
I used to scream, "Pull down the shade!"
Because the moon face leered at me.
Because I felt her mocking.
Because my fear lived in me like rats in a wheel of cheese.
You have eaten out my fear.
You have licked the creamy inside of my moon.
You have kissed the final crescent of my heart.
And made it full.

Host: Both those voices. And both poems I encountered in your novel, Fear of Flying. Very powerfully, and maybe later we can talk a bit about writing poetry and writing novels. But I was really devastated by your novel. Frankly, I started to read it you know. It's a woman's novel. This is the way it's been talked about: it's a feminist novel. And I began somewhat cynically. And I'm reading it and discovering a tremendous amount of intelligent courage, introspection, and honesty. And I was just knocked over by it. I identified with large chunks of it, and I think many men would in a very, very primal way. Not simply making a leap. What do you intend when you, when you write something that personal? And how does it feel to see what happens to it?

Jong: I don't really intend anything. I mean, I really write for myself or for my mental double, whoever that happens to be. And then it discovers itself. I certainly don't write to be a feminist poet or and I certainly don't write for reviewers. I mean, I write for the kind of reaction that you're speaking of. And I hope it will find its audience. And one of the things that's sort of terribly unfortunate about the last few years and the feminist publishing boom is that sexism towards women has sort of taken a new form in literature now. I mean it used to be that we were lumped in the category of women poets or women novelists. And that was assumed, it was assumed that we dealt with a lesser category of truth. That is only things that women would be interested in. Well, now we've had this wonderful revolution which has resulted in our being lumped as feminist writers. And absolutely nothing has happened. And we get reviewed as, you know, those cunts over there. It, not in so many words. I mean, the words are more liberal. And the implication is that we're all gray in the dark and that we're all interchangeable. And that I am the same as Alex Cates Schulman or Lois Gould or you name it. But it's really the same old junk by the, you know, by a new name. And what happens is that men get turned off. I don't find it, I don't find it at all surprising that you should identify with Isadora Wing, the heroine of Fear of Flying. Because all my life I identified with James Boswell in the London Journal and Henderson the Rain King and Herzog in Bellow's novel and Pip in Great Expectations. All these people had things to say to me. These characters were important members of my life in a way. Why shouldn't I be able to write about a woman character who would move men?

Host: There's something that intrigues me with both your work and the response that reviewers have had to it is that a sense of risk that's very apparent in the poems especially. Where you come directly to the subject about which people hedge and dodge and try not to talk. And in the first poem you read, *On Becoming a Nun*, that image of don't threaten me with your volcano, you know, I find this very interesting. Where perhaps a lot of this takes place, don't you think, when the material appears to come from that intimate and almost impersonal center. And suddenly right there it is. And people have to have some quick and desperate way to react to it.

Jong: You know, that's quite true. And I think, and maybe the, the hostility is in some way an index of reaching people. Because I remember that some of the books that, my initial reaction to certain books that later became very important to me was one of shrinking back and hostility. My first reaction to *Ariel*, for example, by Sylvia Plath, was that I didn't understand the poems at all. I mean, my very first reaction. The language seemed almost opaque to me. And I remember my first reaction to some of Mary McCarthy's novels. Which later I came to love. So maybe it's an index of reaching people that you're really digging down into the unconscious. And threatening them with stuff?

Host: And yet it does seem that, that, that women who are writing now are making a particular kind of use of literature, just as you might say. You know, Jewish writers or black writers make different kinds of uses of literature in recent years.

Host: In terms of this kind of self-exploration that your book is dealing with. And Isadora, Isadora herself. One more point. Isadora herself does have a case to make in a sense against the masculine literature that you mentioned. The question in the book repeatedly for me was, about that was what has, knowing what that literature had done for her in terms of knowing herself? What has knowing all the, all the male literature done for her?

Jong: Well certainly I mean, I learned from it. I mean, I read Portnoy's *Complaint* over and over again, trying to figure out. Well, I read it for a strange reason. I mean, I read it as a novelist reads books or a novelist to be - I wanted to see why he leapt back and forth in time the way he did. I was intrigued with the way he got back and forth in time. That was my fascination with Portnoy's *Complaint*. And I thought it was a book in which that problem was solved extremely well. You didn't have to stick to a chronological time scheme. And of course I learned a lot of things, but there was something left out in literature by men.

Women have not really been permitted to have their own voice. They haven't been able to speak about their sexual fantasies. Virginia Woolf for example said that, "The enemy is every woman writer is the angel in the house," as she called it. And the angel in the house is this little, this little guardian who sits on your shoulder. And she is the embodiment of all authority. She is your mother and your grandmother. And perhaps even your grandfather and father. And she says, "Be nice. Don't say anything that will embarrass the relatives. Don't say anything that a lady shouldn't say." And most women writers, or many of them, have capitulated to that demand. Even Anais Nin who was a great fore-mother, so to speak. Said that when she came to publish her journals, she purposely eliminated and edited out the sexual parts of her journal. And I said, I asked her, "Don't you think this was a crazy capitulation to male standards?" And she said, "Well, my dear, if I had written about

sex in addition to all the other things I wrote about, I would have been killed by the critics. Look at what happened to Violette Leduc." And this is true. We do run a much greater risk writing about sexuality, writing about men and women. Writing about the unconscious. To this day it seems to me that D.H. Lawrence never received fair criticism as a novelist. The criticism always centers around, "Did he really throw plates at Frieda? Did, did Frieda really sleep with Middleton Murry?" I mean, the criticism is never - why? Because Lawrence is dealing with disturbing unconscious material. And perhaps you know it will go on for years. Perhaps he'll never get a fair hearing.

Host: But he'll always be there because of the power of what he put down. It does seem too that for instance, in your book, we're seeing people dealing with, women dealing with mother images. Where men dealt with father images. And we're learning things about the human consciousness that we didn't learn before thanks to the fact that there's more openness now about women writing.

Jong: That's true. It really takes an incredible kind of courage, I think, to try to put down those things when you don't see models for them. I don't say that there were no models at all. I mean, I had some, certainly. But there were times when I was writing *Fear of Flying* when I really was quaking in my boots. Truly, I was frightened. And I really had that little angel on my shoulder. And I had to constantly juice myself up and say, "Look, if you're not going to be honest, there's no use writing at all." Which I really believe. But this is the end process of years of stuff for me. I mean, I started out in college writing sonnets and sestinas in the age of Richard Wilbur. And William Empson. I mean, not that I was a contemporary of theirs. But the people that I studied with at Barnard in the early '60s when I went to college were followers of that school of poetry. So I started out being a very formal academic poet. And writing poems about the fountains of Rome and the unicorn tapestries. And they all rhymed and they were all in iams. When I was in college, I wrote a mock epic.

Host: What makes a young writer discover their work instead of other people's work?

Jong: Well, it was just the teachers I happened to have at Barnard who you know, who pushed me in that direction. I did my MA in 18th century English Lit. I read Pope. I read, I read Dryden. I was fascinated with satire. But what I was dealing with was a very surface, superficial, brittle world of intellectual stuff.

Host: I mean, what, what makes you discover your own work?

Jong: Well, the process from there was to go to graduate school and to immerse myself in 18th century. And then I had the good fortune, and here the novel does follow my own experience. I had the good fortune to follow my husband to Germany where I was in isolation and couldn't go to graduate school. And I was alone in Heidelberg, Germany, in the rain for three years. And those were my years in the desert. And I read nothing but modern poetry and modern fiction. And I discovered Neruda and Vallejo and [inaudible]. And I read French symbolist poetry. And I discovered all the things that had been left out of my education. Also I was in psychoanalysis. And those two things, that kind of delving into myself and that self-education. And just writing. I knew no poets, but writing and revising and revising and revising. That was, that was the time that I studied to be a, to be a writer in a way.

Host: This brings up the question of, of risk again. Because for someone who's writing both poems and, and fiction, that the intimacy of those things like the angel in the house. You know, that somewhat murky and disturbing world always requires that, that exercise of craft. And brings it out and makes the language that you use when you talk to yourself or the language of your dreams into something that's public speech. And this, I find, is a very interesting problem. And, and a question about craft. I mean, how do you approach the, the craft of a writer? And how, how do you define it as a way of, of bringing those, all of those unexplored areas of experience into something that's public and, and said right?

Jong: Well my process now as of April 1974, may be different by the time somebody sees, you know, sees this. Or listens to it is that I no longer count syllables on my fingers as I used to in college. Or beat out iambs on the desk which is really the way I used to write early, early, 18, 19, 20. But what I do now is that my first draft is written very freely. A first line comes to me from the muse, who I don't know. And the first draft is written very freely. And with a really conscious attempt to concentrate and to allow the images to percolate up from your unconscious and to surprise me on the page. The next draft is written extremely critically, crossing out the junk. I don't believe in automatic writing in the sense that you don't revise. I believe in using the automatic process to get, to get the gold. But then you, you cross out the dross. So there's a second refining process. Then you perfect for rhythm. You read the thing over and over and over again to yourself. You change words so that they read well. I feel that I write in rhythmic free verse which is my own rhythmic free verse. And I have a very strong sense of changing, changing words. I may have a two-syllable word where I need a three-syllable word. And I keep refining from there. So there are many revision processes. They've come into it. And then if I really get stuck, I might read the thing into a portable Sony cassette player and hear where the meter falters or where the rhythm falters. Sometimes at a reading I'll discover that there's something wrong with a poem. In terms of rhythm and then change it.

Host: Oh, that's very interesting you know. When those questions that appear to have to do with technique you know. And notice in both of your books of poems, think of the images of onions, you know. You know? Think of the world from the point of view of an onion. The peeling away, you know? And then finding in such things as two or three syllables in one particular line that you're making a discovery that's a great deal more important. And craft in that sense I think is, is one of the things that you know I look for reading poetry. And you know, I find even with the very powerful material that you're dealing with, that the most interesting thing that it's trying to break out of notions of craft [inaudible] counting syllables on your fingers. You know? And it's an interesting thing, you know that maybe you say something about what it's like going from the poems to the novel. I mean how the, the difference of discipline works as you, you know, start spending your time on that long, sustained narrative.

Jong: Well I think poetry is essentially condensation. That one thing that all poetry has in common is condensation. You have to pack a lot of meaning into a very small space. Stanley [inaudible] once said that a poem is like a container of energy which is released when the reader, when the eye of the reader hits the poem. Or the voice of the poet hits

the poem. And so I find that whatever else I may do in poetry, I'm always aiming for that incredible condensation. What I like about the novel is that it gives you room to tell stories, to digress. To make wisecracks if you want, something that I dearly love. [Inaudible] Yeah, there's, there are poems in the novel. It's my wish to someday write a novel like Pale Fire which has poetry and prose together. Or Dr. Zhivago. I hope that I'll be able to use both in a long form. And then the other thing is that I think one of the interesting things about the age we're living in is that poetry and prose, the distinction between poetry and prose is kind of an artificial one now. There are passages in Ulysses which are certainly poetry. There are passages in Joyce's great story, The Dead, particularly the last segment which were really prose poems. Some of the best modern poets now writing are attempting prose poems. It just doesn't seem to me that there's all that much difference between the two, two forms. I mean, there is and there isn't, let's say.

Host: Do you find yourself writing poems working other things while you were doing the novel? Or did it take your energy?

Jong: Well, I was writing Half-lives during the first few months that I was working on Fear of Flying. I was writing some of the poems in Half-lives simultaneously with Fear of Flying. Not all of them, but some of them. I was completing that book during that year. But the thing that happens when you get three-quarters of the way or half-way into a novel is that the novel sort of takes over your life. And you enter that world. And then you really can't work on other things. But in the beginning, I was doing both books simultaneously. Switching from one to the other. I'm doing the same thing now.

Host: Does writing the novel then interfere with your, your daily life? In that way that you're dealing with other people?

Jong: To some extent. I mean, it does. It gets very obsessive, but particularly toward the end. When you get toward the end of a novel it, it really takes over. And you're not interested in anything else outside. And it's very, it's an effort to pull yourself away to go to a dinner party or to do a chore, do the laundry or something like - I mean, you really don't want to do anything else.

Host: You know, they say that all, all novels are written directed to a reader. [Inaudible] said that anyhow. Were you - who were you thinking of as a reader while you were writing? Or weren't you? Who were you directing it to?

Jong: I was directing it to that, to that reader who can tell the difference between a sentence by Nabokov and a sentence by Jacqueline Susann. I mean, there were a lot of people I was directing it to. But I had some ideal of prose and the importance of prose. One, one of the things that so distressed me about the reviews is that they've concentrated so on subject matter and so little on prose. I mean, I think one book is distinguished by another not only by subject matter, but by the rhythms of the language. And the metaphors that are in the language. And one of the things that people have lost sight of is since it's a book about a woman, it must fit into a certain category of books about women. The reason that a book lives is because the sentences are these little containers of energy. And they go on. If you go back now and read Great Expectations. You just pick up that book, and every sentence sits there on the page. Every sentence has kind of a heft and a weight to it. And that's why the book is there. Not because of the subject matter.

Host: There's a lot of, of wordplay. There's a lot of, the way you set up the time sequences where something in her consciousness in the present will then be picked up in a flashback in a later section which is crafted, I think, to stand by itself. It almost looks as if, is the novel now the way you wrote it substantially in terms of sequence? Or did you find yourself writing a section by itself which is now, you know, perhaps a later chapter?

Jong: Like everything I've ever written, it's sort of a collage. It, it really is a kind of collage. And I think in a way that the collage is the basic art form of the 20th century. Even in the visual art.

Host: Why? Why is that?

Jong: Because our reality is so incredibly fragmented that the only way we can deal with reality is through the collage. The [inaudible] is a collage. The best modern visual art is done in collage technique. Movies are collages.

Host: That explains, that I guess some of the success of Isadora as a character because she sees herself as a collage. Does she put herself together by the end, the end of the book when she goes back to her husband, but not to her husband, in a way? She finds herself.

Jong: Well, I always have the feeling that in a sense she put herself together by writing Fear of Flying.

[Laughter]

Host: Do you feel more together than you did when you started writing Fear of Flying?

Jong: I absolutely do. I mean, I don't want to make a literal equivalence between myself and the character in the book because the book was finished almost two years ago. And even if I was that character when I wrote it, which I wasn't really, I wouldn't be now. So it's, it's kind of - it would be dangerous to assume. I mean, in a way I'm every character in that book. And Isadora is based on me in some ways and in other ways, wildly departs.

Host: That's a, that's an interesting and I think frightening thing to contemplate especially with a book like that. How you, I mean, what does a writer have to write with except their own feelings and responses and observations? So you put yourself into a book in some way. And then there it is, it seems to be a definition of you, and you've got to go beyond it. Did you really doubt yourself at any point in the writing of the book?

Jong: As a writer?

Host: Did you [inaudible] to try to publish this?

Jong: Oh, boy, did I doubt it. Are you kidding?

Host: No.

Jong: That is the question. I mean, I had a publisher at the point that I was working on this book. I mean, on the novel because I'd published two books of poetry. I had one published and one in the works. And my editor kept saying, "So you're working on a novel. Let's see it." And I couldn't even bring it downtown to show him chapters of it because. I mean, he's, he said, "We'll give you some money. We'll give you a contract if it's any good." And I kept writing, and I wrote 300-odd pages before I would show it to anyone. Because it didn't know what it was I was doing. I mean, I didn't know what to call it. I felt that I was inventing something. I, I used to call it in my head a mock memoir. Because it appeared to be literal confession, and yet I knew that I was wildly inventing certain sections. I wanted the feel of autobiography.

Without really committing myself to literal autobiography. And then finally, we were going away for the summer. And I had 312 pages or something like that. And I thought, "It's now or never." And I took the manuscript and went racing downtown and dumped it on the desk of my editor, just sort of squeaked into his office. I mean, he didn't even expect me. Dumped it, and he said, "What's that?" And I said, "It's my novel." And he looked at it and it was 300 - I mean, it was almost done. You know, and I think by then that he suspected that I wasn't - you know that I had never written one or anything like that. And, and it was by then almost finished. Then I had 50 pages to, to write to conclude it.

Host: I love this scene, by the way. There's a lot of humor in that book. I love the scene early on when you're hiding in the closet, and your sister's screaming at you, you know, Isadora, you. And she's saying, Isadora's saying to herself, "I published poetry! People write to me and say I've liberated them. Why am I hiding in the closet?"

Jong: That scene is totally invented. I want you to know. [Inaudible] But that scene, it's very interesting because when I speak about a collage of things that really happened to me and things that never did. That scene materialized under my pen one night. I mean, I've never hidden in the closet in my family, literally speaking. Although certainly in my head I'm in the closet all the time. But it's fascinating. One of the wonderful things about writing a novel is the way even on a dull day when you don't feel like writing, you sit down at your desk, and you begin. And the scene starts growing. And that was one of the scenes that happened that way. The closet scene. Another scene that just sort of materialized on a dull day when I didn't feel like writing was that [inaudible] swapping scene. Which again was not anything that literally happened to me but which was a conglomerate of all kinds of different ideas and things people had told me and so on. And that I loved because the dialogue just sort of came. That's a delight when you get when you write prose.

Host: Of course you could make the case that there's no such thing as literal autobiography. That, that the very act of writing involves invention. You know, and you start to invent - you can name the character yourself and you'd have a persona. You know, that's a very interesting episode because it's a, Vonnegut has his science fiction novelist Kilgore Trout say, "God never wrote a good play in his life," you know? That, it's, it's very interesting where even the most apparently private material, as soon as it's on the page, you know, then it becomes that, you know that invention. That act of putting it out there. Again, an instance of craft you know where the forces at work, when they come out into the poems and into the, the prose makes something quite interesting. You know.

Host: This is true of our, of our identity, though, isn't it? We're always reinventing ourselves.

Jong: Well the thing, the thing about the power of the printed word that really distresses me and also the thing about video tape that distresses me is that, it gives an authority which is really undeserved to a certain moment in time, you know? Our writing is just that fragment, that portion of ourselves which we manage to salvage from the chaos of every, everyday life. Everyday life is totally anarchic. And we manage to salvage a few ordered fragments from it. But it really doesn't represent all of life. It's just, it's just a portion. Just as this videotape will be just a portion of the things that happen to us in the course of the day. But it

really won't be all of us or what was going on in our heads while we were taping it. And I guess it, it really distresses me that these are the only things people will know us by.

Host: Do you feel as though there's a kind of violation? I mean -

Jong: Always a violation. Always.

Host: How do you feel about what they've done to Sylvia Plath since her death?

Jong: Well, it's very sad. I mean, it, it really, it's very sad because her poetry's been kind of lost in the process. The, the interesting thing about Plath's poetry is that she's an innovator in [inaudible]. And she does things with syllabic verse that were never done before. And boy, nobody's going to discover that until 100 years have gone by.

Host: You really think the [inaudible] form is really the essential craft commitment?

Jong: I don't think it's the essential, but I think that Sylvia Plath is, is - oh, she's fascinating for her subject matter and her courage in dealing with the unconscious, yes. That I agree with. But also the reason that she's so much better than all her imitators is because her craft is so extraordinary. And you'd think that the only reason she was interesting was because she stuck her head in the oven. And she was married to this warlock.

Host: So you have to, [inaudible] is not enough. You've got to work to achieve form. You've got to work to achieve. That's a I think good lead-in to a, to a section of your novel. Maybe not as good as it could have been a few minutes earlier, but it's a good lead in.

Jong: Okay.

Host: To a highly, I think a section that reveals some of your concern with form. The novel's very diverse in, in what it attempts formally I think. Why don't you give us a reading? Would you like to say something about this passage before you?

Jong: Well, we're at the point in the novel where Isadore Wing, who is a naïve and a [inaudible] heroine. A very intelligent woman who's, who is like all very intelligent women: extremely naïve about men.

She has been conned on a, on a so-called existential jaunt across Europe by her manipulative, controlling, and impotent lover, Adrian Goodlove. And he has then abandoned her in Paris with the, with the news, the surprise news that he's going to meet his girlfriend and kiddies, in where is it? Cherbourg, I think. Isn't that Cherbourg? I wrote this a long time ago. Anyways, and she's alone, and she has to face the night of being alone. And she doesn't know whether she can find her husband again or whether she really wants to, even. Or whether she's going to remain alone. And the one thing in life that has terrified her most is being alone. And she hates staying in hotel rooms. And so she's alone in a Paris hotel room. Having night terrors, and having one of those conversations that we always have at moments of great stress. In which we take all parts in the dialogue. She's having a me-me-me-me-me conversation.

You have to sleep, I told myself sternly. But already I could feel myself moving into a panic which recalled my worst childhood night terrors. I felt the center of myself slipping backward in time. Even as my adult rational self protested. "You are not a child," I said aloud. But the insane pounding of my heart continued. I was covered with cold sweat. I sat rooted to the bed. I knew I needed a bath but would not take one because of my fear of leaving the room. I had to pee desperately, but was

afraid to go out to the toilet. I did not even dare to take off my shoes for fear the man under the bed would grab me by the foot. I did not dare wash my face. Who knew what lurked behind the curtain? I thought I saw a figure moving on the terrace outside the window, phantom cars of light crossed the ceiling. A toilet flushed in the hall, and I jumped. There were footsteps down the hall. I began to remember scenes from murders in the room morgue. I remembered some nameless movie I had seen on television at about the age of five. It showed a vampire who could fade in and out of walls. No locks could keep him out. I visualized him pulsating in and out of the dirty splotched wallpaper. I appealed again to my adult self for help. I tried to be critical and rational. I knew what vampires stood for. I knew the man under, under the bed was partly my father. I thought of [inaudible] book of the It. The fear of the intruder is the wish for the intruder. I thought of all my sessions with Dr. Hoppa in which we had spoken of my night terrors. I remembered my adolescent fantasy of being stabbed or shot by a strange man. I would be sitting at my desk writing, and the man would always attack from behind. Who was he? Why was my life populated by phantom men? Is there no way out of the mind, Sylvia Plath asked in one of her desperate last [inaudible]? If I was trapped, I was trapped by my own fears, motivating everything was the terror of being alone. It sometimes seemed I would make any compromise, endure any ignominy, stay with any man just so as not to face being alone. But why? What was so terrible about being alone? Try to hink of the reasons, I told myself. Try.

Me. Why is being alone so terrible?

Me. Because if no man loves me, I have no identity.

Me. But obviously that isn't true. You write. People read your work and it matters to them. You teach, and your students need you and care about you. You have friends who love you. Even your parents and sisters love you in their own peculiar way.

Me. None of that makes a dent in my loneliness. I have no man. I have no child.

Me. But you know that children are no antidote to loneliness.

Me. I know.

Me. And you know that children only belong to their parents temporarily.

Me. I know.

Me. And you know that men and women can never wholly possess each other.

Me. I know.

Me. And you know that you'd hate to have a man who possessed you totally. And used up your breathing space.

Me. I know, but I yearn for it desperately.

Me. But if you had it, you'd feel trapped.

Me. I know.

Me. You want contradictory things.

Me. I know.

Me. You want freedom and you also want closeness.

Me. I know.

Me. Very few people ever find that.

Me. I know.

Me. Why do you expect to be happy when most people aren't?

Me. I don't know. I only know that if I stop hoping for love, stop searching for it, stop expecting it, my life will go as flat as a cancerous breast after radical surgery. I feed on this expectation.

I nurse on it. It keeps me alive.

Me. But what about liberation?
Me. What about it?
Me. You believe in independence.
Me. I do.
Me. Well, then?
Me. I suspect I'd give it all up. Sell my soul, my principles, my beliefs just for a man who'd really love me.
Me. Hypocrite!
Me. You're right.
Me. You're no better than Adrian!
Me. You're right.
Me. Doesn't it bother you to find such hypocrisy in yourself?
Me. It does.
Me. Then why don't you fight it?
Me. I do. I'm fighting it now but I don't know which side will win.
Me. Think of Simone [inaudible].
Me. I love her endurance, but her books are full of [inaudible], [inaudible], [inaudible].
Me. Think of Doris Lessing.
Me. Anna Woolf can't come unless she's in love.
What more is there to say?
Me. Think of Sylvia Plath.
Me. Dead. Who wants a life or death like hers even if you become a saint?
Me. Wouldn't you die for a cause?
Me. At 20 yes, but not at 30.
I don't believe in dying for causes.
I don't believe in dying for poetry.
Once I worshipped Keats for dying young.
Now I think it's braver to die old.
Me. Well think of Colette.
Me. A good example, but she's one of very few.
Me. Well, why not try to be like her?
Me. I'm trying.
Me. The first step is learning how to be alone.
Me. Yes, and when you learn that really well, you forget how to be open to love if it ever does come.
Me. Who said life was easy?
Me. No one.
Me. Then why are you so afraid of being alone?
Me. We're going round in circles.
Me. That's one of the troubles with being alone.

Host: Beautiful, [inaudible]. Marvelous. Is there such a difference between 20 and 30?

Jong: Yeah. I think so. I think there's a vast difference between 20 and 30.

Host: How? What, what is it? How would you say it?

Jong: Well, when you're 20, you think things like, "Dear God, just let me publish my first book of poems and I'll never ask you for anything ever again."

Host: I'll never be alone again.

Jong: Yeah. And things like that, and you don't say that at 30.

Host: That, that section that you read actually reads like, like a poem in its own way. It has this concern for that, that dual pull, that the

heroine of the book is feeling. If I can call her that. Throughout this need to be loved and a need to be alone. This seems to be a, this is the heart I think of humanity in the book. Cuts across any kind of category. It's something we, we feel today. Is it peculiar to now?

Host: It is reflective also in that you know in the title and as well as the poems in Half-lives. That sense of loneliness and being separated from that other half of ourselves.

Jong: Well the only thing, it seems to me that the only thing that's interesting about people and the reason that I want to write novels as well as poems. The fact that anything about people is that they feel two things simultaneously. You know? [Inaudible] said it: I love and I hate. And, and that's what's so interesting about people. And I guess the travesty of, of most reviews and things like that is that they insist on making a program out of something that wasn't intended to be a program. What one is trying to show is the split in the human heart. And there's nothing more fascinating than that. The fact that we can love and hate at the same time. The fact that we can want security and also want independence at the same time. That's where all human suffering and all poetry comes from, it seems to me. That we have conflicting desires.

Host: Is it possible that marriage can exist in this kind of reality? In this reality of the human heart?

Jong: I hope so.

Host: There's a point earlier on when she's thinking about marriage. Like really marvelous, you know? Maybe they did something that, that's particularly for some who's married to read rather than just any reader. And she finally says something to the effect that well, we're going to die anyway. We might as well love each other. And that is one kind of answer you come back to in this problem of loneliness. What's the point anyhow in allowing myself to be pulled apart? Ultimately, what does anything mean? You know? It's a -. How does somebody stand on top of these pulls? Or do you just find yourself following them?

Jong: Well my way of staying on top of them is writing obviously. I mean, my way -- .

Host: You can't write all the time, or do you?

Jong: No, but I mean my way of dealing with, with this kind of split in ambivalence is to transform it into, into my work. I mean, it's the energizing things behind my work. I don't know what I would do with it if I didn't, if I didn't have writing. And I'm very lucky that I have it, in a way. I can always turn to it.

Host: That, there's, there is an irony in that, too then, isn't there? Because the act of writing, you know, is the thing that keeps you alive. You know. And just writing to keep alive.

But then you end up in a very odd position.

I wonder how you'll react to this with finding yourself under pressure from your publisher to get the next novel out?

The next book of poems?

You know, as people writing asking for poems.

How does it, how does it feel when you're put in that kind of a position?

Jong: Well, you feel very pressured, I think. But I think one thing is you always have to remember the light of time and the light of history. I mean, you really do. You have to disconnect yourself from the whole publishing scene and the poetry biz scene and conferences like the one we're at. And you are writing, you are trying to make words on the page

that will last. That will have the energy that the words in Keats' letters have. That, that have their own center and that will endure. Whether the books themselves will endure, I'm very, I'm very dubious. I, I don't have a great deal of faith in mankind's not destroying our civilization. But we have to go on assuming that things are going to go on existing. And you want to make sentences that will last. And you have to stop thinking about Madison Avenue and their needs. And it's very hard to take that long view when you're surrounded by it. But there's also, also a lot of comfort in taking that view.

Host: Do you conceive of literature doing any particular good in the world? Your novel, your poems? Or?

Jong: Well, sure. Anything that makes people think about themselves and their own motivations have to, has to be good, sure. I mean, -- ?

Host: Using your work as. As a means to their own insight about themselves.

Jong: Yes, I assume that that's a good. I do.

Host: But it sounds like you're also talking rather, you know, heavily about well, I'm writing for the future. I'm writing for somebody who can appreciate art and what I've put into this. Maybe there won't be any future.

Jong: But you have to write as if there will be. Alright? I mean, you really do. And it, and the great comfort to me always, again and again is, is the classics. I mean, I go back. I just re-read Keats' letters and wrote a letter to Keats. A poem to Keats. And the fact that, that words do contain that kind of energy. That they survive. I read Byron's Don Juan recently, re-read it. And there's a novel in verse. That's a nice idea too. Some, somebody ought to do someday, maybe me. And it's, it lasts. It's funny, it's clever. It's all the things it ever was. And it's there. Well, perhaps we'll blow up the planet. But we still have to write as if there are going to be readers there 200 years from now.

Host: This sounds like a good reason for teaching. Good justification for those of us who do that. How do you find your own teaching?

Jong: Well, I love it. I mean, I really, I find it, I find it very draining. And I've done a lot of it. And I started teaching when I was a graduate student at the age of 22. And I taught all kinds of courses including surveys of English lit and things like that. But at this point I really would like to write. And I find that the energy that teaching takes drains off the other energy. You can write poems and articles and teach. But it's hard to write novels and also teach. Because writing a novel demands that daily discipline, daily plotting. You have to sit down at the desk for four hours a day.

Host: You this is true as a character, and I pressure it's try of you in some other way, some related way. You've gone to school a lot of years of your life. You've been in those lecture halls. You've been in status university. What happened? Did you suddenly wake up one day and say, Aha!" Or "huh." What happened? How did you find out you didn't want to do that anymore?

Jong: I'm lucky. I just was lucky. I mean, oh I don't know. Maybe I would have, even if I had finished my PhD, maybe I would have become a poet anyway. I'm, I'm not sure I wouldn't have. But I went back there after my three years in Heidelberg. In which I wrote my first book of poems, which is not published, by the way. The first book of poems I wrote I have somewhere in manuscript. And I, I reregistered at the graduate program. That was in the fall of '69. And took another language

qualifying exam and passed it. Registered for classes. Went the first day. And the second day, came back and took a leave of absence. And I've never been back. [Laughter] that was the summer, by the way that, that, that man first landed on the moon. I don't know what that had to do with what. When I was studying for a qualifying exam, but I just couldn't beat the thought of going back there. For a PhD. I mean, I just didn't want to do a PhD at that point. And I think that the, the worst piece of writing I have ever done in my life is my master's thesis for Columbia for my MA at Columbia. It is just an atrociously written, footnoted, dull piece of tunnel scholarship.

Host: Sounds like your writer's instincts partly responsible for turning you against the scholarship.

Jong: It was really scary to give it up. I mean, I liked it at one point. And I love the -[inaudible]. No, but I love, I love literature. I love reading. I love books. What I can't bear is having to read stuff like McKerrow's Introduction to Bibliography. Or you know that kind of stuff. And what I couldn't bear about graduate school was the incredible concentration on criticism. Rather than on the work itself. It seemed so antithetical to everything poetry was about.

Host: I never used the Introduction to Bibliography, did you?

Host: Oh, no never.

Jong: I just use it. That's a symbol to me about everything I hate about graduate school. I shouldn't say that. Probably McKerrow is a very nice man who will someday see this tape and wince. [Laughter] [Inaudible]

Host: Or real life and then maybe you make a choice.

Host: The, the question of how literature relates you know to college is always a fascinating thing. I think it's a good idea for people to ask themselves what they're doing. You know, but you have what seems to me a unique kind of project and a unique setting for teaching. With your poetry workshop at the Y. You know, do you find that giving you something like, you know, the best kind of educational circumstance? With, with contact with students who are also writers? Or do you sometimes think that you might want to go back to universities for a while? Just to kind of be in that, that other circumstance again?

Jong: Well, there's always a chance that you'll be forced to go back by, you know, the need for money. [Laughter] [Inaudible]

Host: This is a reading festival.

Jong: Right, I mean poets can't go around debunking universities. I mean, we depend on universities for our daily bread. Give us this day our daily bread. I mean, but and I, and I think it's really silly for me to talk this way because I read all the things that I love in universities. And was introduced to them there. I mean, I would never debunk a literary education. [Coughs] It was just absolutely marvelous.

Host: Maybe the answer's you just can't expect to live your whole life in that same level of, of consciousness and security that you got when you're a student and you're discovering things.

Jong: I was very happy at college. You know I'm one of the few people that really loved Barnard college. I don't think, I've very rarely met other people. I loved it. I mean, all we had to do was read. It seemed to me, it was a delight. All we had to do was read the books that we wanted to read. This, this never seemed like work to me.

Host: Have you gone back there since to read your work?

Jong: Oh, I go back there all the time. I give them freebies all the time, free readings. And every year one of the interesting things about

publishing a novel is that you start getting these wonderful letters from the president of your college saying, "Hope you won't forget your college in your moment of success." [Laughter] Things like that. Solicitations for money come thick and fast in the mail.

Host: Right. They made you what you are.

Jong: No, but I loved Barnard. I really did. And I, I loved majoring in English there. And I won't, I certainly won't say that the graduate program was worthless. They were really great people that I studied with. And I, and I think that there isn't anything better for a young poet than to read poetry. Everything from Chaucer, you know, on. I mean --

Host: It does inhibit you in some way, doesn't it? It stops from you finding your own -- .

Jong: Do you feel that it inhibits you?

Host: I have students evidently seem to feel that one. People you deal with who are learning writing feel this. Maybe you should feel this in some sense if you're recognizing quality. Maybe you should feel a bit inhibited by quality. It's another aspect of it.

Jong: I think, I think you need the classics as a background. But I think you also need to read contemporary stuff.

Host: Which you don't often get in the, in the institutional setting.

Jong: Right, I mean, you really have to, you have to immerse yourself in the classics, and then you have to immerse yourself in contemporary stuff. I was in a funny situation during those years in Heidelberg. I'd never read anything past 19th century stuff. I mean, I had read modern poets up to Richard Wilbur and Howard [inaudible]. That was it, that was it. And I consciously forced myself to read all contemporary novels and poetry during that time. Because my education really was the reverse of what it should have been. Nowadays, the students I have, have the, have the opposite problem alas. All they've read is contemporary stuff. And they've never read Chaucer. And you say, "Read the Canterbury Tales," and they come back and they say, "Wow, this is really groovy. This stuff is really sexy stuff." You know? If they, if you can only get them to read it.

Host: Sounds like a rather glorious isolation she had in Heidelberg in a way.

Jong: I was miserable, but anyway.

Host: But you were - something was happening.

Jong: But it was good.

Host: Could, could I just say something about, ask you, marriage. That topic again. What - not that you're necessarily answering people's marriage problems. But what do you see as, I mean, this is something that the kids are always questioning. Students are questioning. They seem apologetic if someone gets married. A student came to me this week and sort of apologized because he has decided to marry the girl he'd been living with. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jong: [Inaudible] marriage?

Host: Yeah. He says it'll survive, that you hope it'll survive. What does it have to offer? Why should it survive?

Jong: It's, it's hard. I mean, I hate the idea of being a pundit on questions like that. You know. A la Joyce Brothers or something like that. I don't know. I think it's a rather good thing to have one person to go through life with. Who's your companion and friend and who will be there for you when you need him. I don't know whether you have to be married, and I don't know whether it has to be a him. Although for me it

has been most of the time in my life. But I think that this coupling instinct, this pair bonding as Conrad [inaudible] calls it. It's, it's something valuable, and I like it. I have a relative who's lived for years in a close relationship with another woman, and they have a kind of pair bonding relationship too which has much the same things as my marriage has. I think it's nice to have.

Host: So what your character's doing at the end of the novel is going back to marriage in a broad sense but with new rules, new definitions.

Jong: Well, you know, I certainly think that for many, many women throughout the ages, marriage has been incredibly oppressive. I mean, if we assume. But we forget what marriage was really like for women. They married at 14, they had children once a year, they frequently died in childbirth. They watched one after another of their children die of childhood diseases. They were really literally slaves to their husbands. They couldn't own property, couldn't vote. They went from being chattels of their husbands to being, from being chattels of their fathers to being chattels of their husbands. This is what marriage meant to women. For centuries and since it meant that, naturally a woman of independent spirit had to say no to marriage. But if marriage no longer means that and if we can sort of share childcare, housework, economic stuff. And that's a moot point still. I mean, it hasn't yet come to pass. But if marriage really can be a 50-50 partnership, then I don't see why it can't be viable. But it really has to change and become more elastic.

Host: That was a question in part of permissions. And we've managed to keep ourselves alive by all kinds of subterfuges. One of them just is the forbearance that's possible in those close relationships. In a way, wouldn't you say that you know what's happened with the women's movement is perhaps the best thing that ever happened for marriages? Do you think so?

Jong: Well I think so. I mean it's certainly the best thing that ever happened for my marriage. But, but and for all marriages. But the expectations that people have for each other seem to me to be more realistic. Yeah, I think the women's movement is the most important movement in history. But I think it's a long way from really having accomplished its aims. We still live in a patriarchy. We still live in a society in which all the laws are made by men. With very, very few exceptions. We still don't have women with political power. There is nothing like economic parity between the sexes. We're a long, long way off, and we're talking about it a lot. But there hasn't been an awful lot of action. The strange thing, and I think the thing that really disturbs me about American political movements is that we have this total media exposure of a given movement. Indians, blacks women. And everybody gets freaked out and says, "Wow, look at all these things that are happening." Really nothing has happened except cover stories in Time Magazine. Everything goes on the same. And then we get onto another bandwagon. You know, let's move on to the latest oppressed group. And there hasn't really been much substantive change. If you want to view the women's movement vis a vis the other movements of the times, the most interesting thing about the women's movement is that it has produced absolutely no violence and no mass demonstrations except for one demonstration in August 1970. And yet given the rhetoric of men, you would think that women were literally going around de-balling them. This is fascinating.

Even the student revolution of the, of the late '60s produced more violence than the women's movement. So there must be something very threatening happening.

Host: That says a lot about the difficulty men are going to have unlearning negative images that they've internalized. And -- .

Host: Which comes back to the, that image of the volcano. Don't, don't try to frighten me with your volcano. Perhaps it's something where there's no need to fear. It's just maybe a question of the loneliness of the long-distance writer. You know, seeing this in a very long view. The process takes a long time.

Jong: But it is lonely. I guess one of the things that comes up in that book again and again in *Fear of Flying* is what happens to a woman who desires men, who lusts for men, and yet who can't bear to go, go to bed with a man whose ideas she finds intolerable. Does that mean you have to be celibate? [Laughter] I mean, you know? I mean, I remember, it, it sort of goes back to an incident in my own life. I remember an incident at the age of 17 being in a car with a, with a boy. And we were about to neck. And or make out as what's said in those days. And then he revealed to me that he was for Richard Nixon. This is an incident out of my own past. It wasn't in the novel. And I moved away in the car seat. This was a boy I liked. I mean, he was very attractive to me. And I said, "I'm not going to kiss you." And he said, "For god's sakes, why not?" And I said, "I cannot kiss anyone who likes Richard Nixon." [Laughter] And it's something that comes back to me again and again. But really feminists who like men are in that position again and again and again. There you are in bed with this man who appeals to you, but whose ideas are just intolerable. You want to say, "Keep your mouth shut. Don't say -- ." And it's almost as if women are in a position that men were in for centuries. You know, she's so stupid but I dig her body. [Laughter] That kind of thing.

Host: You know, you don't mind that, you accept the reality of that position.

Jong: Accept it? I mean I think it's tragic. I mean, I think it's really horrid to be in that position.

Host: But there's no overnight.

Jong: Well, there's no overnight changes. I certainly don't think that all men are like that. I don't think that they're all pigs and oppressives. Although there's a little pig and oppressor in, in all men. I mean, they can't help that. It all goes back to having been dominated by their mommies. And things. In some way I believe that if men took more of a part in child-rearing, and that the mother was not such an overwhelming figure to the little boy. There would be less women-hating among grown men. Because in a way their women-hating seems to me to be a reaction to the omnipotence of their, of their mother when they're small. And maybe if that omnipotence were sort of dissipated by other figures participating in -- . [Inaudible]

Host: Erica Jong, our time is up. Your work reaffirms the fact that we need each other.

Thank you.

Jong: Thank you.

[Music]

