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ERICA JONG REVISITED (OR) NO WONDER WE MEN HAD TROUBLE UNDERSTANDING FEMINISM

by Francis Baumli

It was 1974—ten years ago—and I knew I was not happy with my masculinity. Also, I knew there were not men around me with whom I could discuss what was happening inside of me. And all the feminists were telling me to get with it. They told me to read all the feminist literature I could get my hands on, attend all the feminist meetings—except, of course, the ones where men were not allowed, and acknowledge my role as an oppressor so I could help the world become a better place for women.

I set to work with an enthusiasm and ardor that would have impressed Susan B. Anthony herself. I read everything I could get my hands on. First I hurried through *The Second Sex*, and then went on to other classics. They all seemed rather dull, very rhetorical, partly right, but somehow they did not seem to say very much to me. So when a male friend said, “You should read Erica Jong; she’s fun, and she’s a feminist,” my first question was, “When did she write?”

He replied, “She’s just been published. Get her novel, *Fear of Flying*.”

This is great, I thought. A modern writer. And a novel, no less. Maybe now I can get into it.

And before I could buy the book, half a dozen women too, all of them feminists, were telling me to hurry and read her, telling me that this woman would help me learn all about feminism.

So I bought her book and read it. Something felt strange about it, but I didn’t mention this to anyone. Yes; the book was funny, sort of interesting, but still...something was missing. So when *How to Save Your Own Life* came out four years later, I hurried to buy it, already being told by several feminists, “If you think the first one helped, wait ‘til you read this one!”

Well; it did not help. And still, I could not articulate why not. Or perhaps I lacked the courage to be a very lonely voice crying in the feminist wilderness.

But now, ten years later, with the advantage of hindsight, a few years of reflection, and with the support of men around the nation who are pursuing the path of gender liberation while not buying everything the feminists say, I can perhaps offer a belated, but somewhat instructive, explanation for my confusion.

Yes; many a frustrated, repressed housewife, as well as many ardent feminists, have considered Erica Jong to be a major spokesperson for their own chaffing and for the feminist movement. And without doubt Erica Jong herself believes she is such a spokesperson. “*Someone*,” she says, “had to break the curse, *someone* had to wake Sleeping Beauty without ultimately sending her to destruction, *someone* had to shout once and for all: fly and live to tell the tale!”¹ This someone. Erica Jong not so modestly lets us know, is none other than herself.

Ms. Jong does have some worthy insights about feminist issues. She recognizes that the early efforts of women activists bore bitter fruit, and women artists were often, “Timid in their lives and brave only in their art.”² She is sensitive to the economic plight of the working woman.³ She defends women’s right to throw off the “curse” stigma and give importance to their menstrual cycle, their sexuality, and their orgasms.⁴ She claims that sex is at its best when instead of being genitally fixated it attains diffuse bodily and emotional sensuality.⁵ And though her attitudes toward men leave something to be desired, she allows that male erectile dysfunction

tion is not something to be scorned, and she values male tenderness and emotional sensitivity.⁶ Although one might ask Erica Jong to spend less time parading her ego when she airs these issues, we must concede that she sometimes articulates them very well.

If Jong's story about her own life can motivate men and women to begin the task of self liberation, she deserves our praise. But I must here opine that Erica Jong herself had a long way to go before she deserved the acclaim she immediately received as a spokesperson for human liberation.

A look at Ms. Jong's approach to writing itself shows that she often is less than humane in how she presents the issues. Her novels are thinly disguised autobiography in which she heaps resentment, scorn, and ridicule on others. For example, excepting Josh, her current liaison, she brays about how she loses all sexual passion for any man once she gets to know him. She might love him still, but even then he is no more than "an insect on a pin,"⁷ to be analyzed, trivialized, and then written about. Her own immediate family comes under the glare of such scrutiny,⁸ and even her lover, who otherwise is an amazingly decent person compared to the other people Jong writes about, is scarcely presented as more than a quasi-cerebral stud with a huge, hot penis, whose only nonmacho characteristics are his winsome boyishness and occasional ability to shed sentimental tears.

And as if Jong can not do enough injustice to other people, she does the same to herself by undertaking certain sexual experiences for no other purpose than gathering material for her future novels.⁹

But, aside from Jong's approach to writing, let us see how she fares on some of the common feminist issues. Take aggression for example. Many feminists have tried to claim that aggression and violence are traditional male attitudes which engender war and domestic discord. They have also claimed that confronting aggression with similar attitudes does little for human liberation. But listen to Ms. Jong's reaction to her husband's sexual infidelity: "I'm so mad at the bastard, I'd like to castrate him, not divorce him."¹⁰ And, "I swear I'm going to go into the kitchen, get a knife, and cut your balls off."¹¹ And because her unfaithful husband is Chinese, "I can't see an Oriental on the street without wanting to murder him."¹² But angry as she is, her sexual appetite is whetted by his inconsiderateness:

his sadism, his familiar cruelty. It excites her. He might as well be a rapist....He savagely stabs a finger in. It hurts, but somehow hurt feels right on this particular night....She...takes his hard cock in her mouth, wanting to bite it off and seeing nothing but a bleeding root, a fountain of blood....¹³

And she has similar feelings on other occasions when making love with a woman or man:

I come in three minutes flat. It I don't. I am angry, resentful, snarling, biting, mean. None of that "I don't mind" stuff for me: my feelings are right there up front.¹⁴

Turning to other issues: one of the main claims of men's liberationists is that while they do not want to treat women as sex objects, they themselves do not want to be treated as sex objects either. A man is treated as a sex object when he is expected to make all the moves toward initiating sex with a woman, incur real or token rejection without feeling hurt or stymied, and be capable of instantaneous sexual readiness whenever a woman is so inclined.

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Many men of course treat themselves as sex objects. But when a man asks for emotional and sexual freedom for himself, he has a right to expect cooperation from other men and women—especially from feminists, since they are the ones who claim to have voiced the need for such new male values in the first place.

But what can a liberated—or self-liberating—man expect from Erica Jong? One of her more articulate characters sums it all up with:

They're all pigs underneath, you know. Even my illustrious Alan—with his cute vasectomy scar and his men's c.r. group. You can take it as a rule of thumb. Pigs is pigs.¹⁵

Men, in other words, are not very high on the sexual evolutionary scale. No wonder then that Jong feels so little guilt when she goes on to dissect them sexually.

For example, she describes how when she was younger she and a female friend would go into hysterics describing the way men “screw.” But she justifies this behavior by claiming that women have no other way of asserting their freedom than by lying, role-playing, and gossiping. She contritely admits that such conduct reduces men to sex objects, but goes on to excuse herself since at the time she was at the naive age of twenty-three.¹⁶ Yet, ten years later, at the age of thirty-three, a famous and supposedly wise feminist, secure with her perfect lover, with several books behind her and another novel in progress, she and her friends are still at it:

We talk endlessly about men in bed and their dimensions and how they fuck. I think if men ever heard the things we say to one another, they'd wilt....[We talk about] ..the anatomies and techniques of various lovers: What shape was his penis? How long did it take him to come?¹⁷

Erica Jong, thus expert and volubly confident, goes out upon the world in search of “a gorgeous hunk of flesh,”¹⁸ and gloats hugely when she at last finds the perfect lover with a big, thick cock.¹⁹

Is it any wonder that our heroine believes that sex with one's lover must eventually become boring and dissatisfying?²⁰ But as it is, no lover of Erica Jong's can satisfy her who is not receptive to her every carnal wish: “Do you love my menstrual blood? Would you eat my shit?...I don't think anybody actually *wants* to. You just want to hear the person say, ‘Sure I would.’ Reassurance.”²¹ And perhaps it is not surprising that despite the loquacious praise for sensual, relaxed, non-genitally fixated sex that she registered in her 1975 *Playboy* interview,²² we do not find a single example of such sex in her two autobiographical novels. Instead there is a medley of whimpers, moans, grunts, hard muscular fucking, quick orgasms, and Erica coming so hard she screams and pees, while her sensuous, empyrean lover reassures her with, “I love your pee, your farts, your shit, your tight snatch.”²³ If this indeed constitutes the feminist ideal of love-making, then we should hope for Erica's sake that her vagina (or snatch, if that is the term she prefers) stays tight; and for Josh's sake, we should fervently hope she keeps her shit together. (Apologies to the nomenclature of the '70s.)

It is only to be expected that Ms. Jong has a similar view of women. For example, she pretends to authority when she states that the majority of men do not like cunnilingus, and that the majority of women believe their genitals are ugly. But she thinks men should show love to a woman by giving cunnilingus, and believes women have a right to think their genitals are beautiful.²⁴ This seems to be an enlightened view; yet, in her one sexual encounter with a woman, Erica describes the woman's cunt as smelly and rancid, and worries about getting hairs stuck between her teeth.²⁵ And then as if this one experience has made her an expert, she audaciously

spouts. "Can any feminist dare tell the truth about cunt-eating in this day and age?"²⁶ And her artistic philanthropy goads her to enlighten us at once: "Gentle Reader, it did not taste good."²⁷ And we are thusly supposed to be impressed by the fact that Erica consented to sully her tongue, and despite her lover's difficulty with orgasm, despite her own weariness and frustration, and after trying every gimmick and stunt she could think of, Erica finally made that depersonalized cunt come with a wine bottle.²⁸

After all this, we begentled readers wonder what to do. At the very least we could ask that Erica get a little more experience before espousing dogma about lesbian sexuality. And, perhaps she could be more consistent, if not considerate, in asking the same sexual manners and consideration of herself that she so righteously demands from men.

But then, Erica did not seek out her woman lover because she was interested in her as a person, or even because she was highly attracted sexually. Instead it was,

out of curiosity the first time, horniness mingled with what I can only call "bisexual chic" the second, and obligation the subsequent occasions. It was stylish to have a lesbian affair that year, I thought I might want to write about it, and Bennett was making me miserable.²⁹

In other words, she did it to hurt her husband, to be stylish, and for research material. Sounds like something the feminists are always saying men do.

But now that she is rid of her husband, has already tried sex with women and did not like it, and will not need to write about it further since there is only so much you can say about frightened, reluctant, grimy cunts anyway, we can assume that women are safe from her future scrutiny. As for men, especially her lover, whose fecal orientation may by now have become a fixation—given Erica's irresistible body—we can perhaps expect more news.

Since Erica Jong is now a mother, I can not help but wonder if the child is just more material for a future autobiographical novel: "I thought I'd better do it before it's too late, being in my mid-thirties, you know; and besides, I thought I might want to write about it." After all, she has nearly exhausted the gamut of youth, romance, husbands, affairs, and the perfect lover. What is left? Motherhood; of course.

Can we now look forward to Erica's next autobiographical novel? If so I think we can safely speculate that this one will be a tirade about insensitive gynecologists, morning sickness, stretch marks, labor pains, dirty diapers, and the helpless, inconsiderate father. And lest we forget—the conflict between motherhood and artistry, and of course, Erica Jong's heroic and yet somehow unique triumph over that conflict.

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NOTES

- 1 Erica Jong, *How to Save Your Own Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 234. Hereafter this work cited as HSL. Also, cf. John Simon, "The Language: Authors Without Fear or Shame," *Esquire*, July 1977, pp. 24, 48.
- 2 Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: New American Library, 1973), p. 101. Hereafter this work cited as FF.
- 3 Erica Jong, "Playboy Interview: Erica Jong," *Playboy*, September 1975, pp. 66, 68. Hereafter this work cited as PI.
- 4 FF, 10, 81, 82; PI, 64, 69-70.
- 5 PI, 66.
- 6 FF, 122; HSL, 213-214, 255.
- 7 FF, 11.
- 8 FF, 145-157, 229-246, et. al.
- 9 HSL, 149.
- 10 HSL, 60.
- 11 HSL, 117.
- 12 HSL, 66.
- 13 HSL, 118.
- 14 HSL, 154.
- 15 HSL, 59; and cf. HSL, 85.
- 16 FF, 100.
- 17 PI, 66; and cf. PI, 67-68.
- 18 FF, 12.
- 19 HSL, 198, 204, 280.
- 20 FF, 8-9.
- 21 PI, 69.
- 22 PI, 66.
- 23 HSL, 285.
- 24 PI, 69; HSL, 80.
- 25 HSL, 150-153.
- 26 HSL, 152.
- 27 HSL, 152.
- 28 HSL, 149-156.
- 29 HSL, 149; and cf. HSL, 151.

