

Embracing her demons: Erica Jong moves beyond fears, offer advice to writers

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Mothers, housewives and working women rushed to buy it decades ago, their teen daughters sneaking it from the bookshelf and devouring it page by page in secret. Grandmothers, hearing of it, flipped through the pages in shock or titillation, sometimes in relief. Husbands read it and learned a few things about their wives.

Critics lauded the book for its progressive message or panned it for its so-called shocking sexual passages, no longer so shocking today. Erica Jong's novel, "Fear of Flying" was published in 1973, just when the women's movement was coming into its own with Equal Rights marches and demands for economic freedom.

Isadora Wing, the book's heroine, was searching for "herself" as a woman and a sexual human being along with millions of others, millions of women who just didn't know they could talk about their own inner life.

The book opened more than doors for the era's women, it opened the eyes of the country to what women were thinking. Now, in her new memoir, "Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life" (released nationally from Tarcher/Penguin on March 16 with a special launch party at Jabberwocky Bookshop in Newburyport, Mass.), Jong leads us on another flight to the inner world of a writer who must own up to her past in order to keep writing just as honestly as she did more than 30 years ago.

Art reflects life

In 1973, Erica Jong was an established poet with a newly published novel in which the protagonist and plot had many similarities to her own life, so much so that many believed the book to be primarily autobiography. Like Isadora Wing, Jong had a mentally ill first husband and a psychiatrist second husband along with ideas about herself that most women kept quiet including fantasies about anonymous and adulterous sex, and independence.

With its frank sexuality and liberating style, "Fear of Flying" fueled the women's movement with its message that it's just fine to ask, to doubt, and to fantasize, to overcome the fear of "flying solo." When her first novel soared the best-seller charts, Jong's life was changed forever with reactions running from grateful thanks to opinions close to hatred. She had no idea the impact "Fear of Flying" would have, or that it would take millions on a positive journey.

"Many thought the book gave permission for women to f**k their brains out, but it wasn't about that. It was about a woman finding herself. For a lot of women it was an extremely reassuring book, to men it told them how women thought," says Jong.

At the time, Jong was in graduate school at Columbia University in New York City, leading the quieter life of a much more low-key literary profession as a poet and studying with notable poets like Mark Strand. "Fear of Flying," filled with frank sexuality and a look into the mind of a young woman during the '70s, changed her life dramatically.

"It was quite terrifying when it happened. I wasn't used to people asking me for my soiled underwear" says Jong. "It seemed like I was available to anyone, the Happy Hooker of the literary world. Some of the critics drag you to the lowest common denominator."

Read now in an era when shows like "Sex and the City" and frank discussions of sexuality on TV talk shows are the norm, the book might seem tame, but in the early '70s it was controversial.

"I was the woman who was leading the women of America into degradation and perversion. For others I was a princess."

The book eventually sold 8 million copies in the United States and about 18 million worldwide in 27 languages. Jong went on to write dozens of books including poetry, fiction, some with her heroine Wing, and non-fiction including a biography of Henry Miller - and along the way the stories that make up her writer's life in memoir. In 1994, she published "Fear of Fifty," and now her latest memoir written after four marriages, raising a daughter, Molly Jong-Fast, also a writer, and becoming a grandmother, shows how the mistakes and triumphs in one's life can make one face and conquer his or her demons and, it is hoped, become a better writer.

"This book started as a book for young writers," says Jong. "It takes a very long time in your career, in your life, to cop to your own lies before you can write an honest memoir. Memoirs tend to be either overblown or bashful or they are just saying, "Oh, I was abused more than anyone else was. You have to accept your own faults and laugh at them."

In "Seducing the Demon," Jong is frank about the mistakes she's made, but indicates that many of the events in her life, the choices good or bad, helped her become a better writer.

"I think it's very helpful to tell the truth about your life." Jong says.

In the memoir, Jong honors the women writers who went before her and who opened up the literary world for modern female writers, including Sylvia Plath.

"She really broke open poetry for women poets. She had a tremendous impact on people who didn't write like her. The door was opened into women's rage and sexuality."

Poets like Plath, Anne Sexton and Muriel Rukeyser opened up women's voices and are now beginning to get the recognition they deserve, she says.

"They broke open the rage."

While Jong writes about her literary influences, many readers will key in on the more sensational aspects of her life, including affairs with writers and publishers and a famous feud with Martha Stewart, but she tells these stories to illustrate that they are important to being a writer.

"I felt I'd made some major mistakes in my life and it was important to own up to them. I was never interested in famous writers and I vowed never to sleep with another writer because I knew if I got involved with a man like that he'd be the writer and I'd be the handmaiden. I needed to be with a man who would accept me as an artist. But I broke my own rule with disastrous results."

On her affair with Martha's then-husband Andy Stewart, Jong says, "The joke of it was that it was nothing, it was a "hook-up" as the kids would say today. But Martha told everyone and people would come to me and say 'What happened between you and Martha?' She brought it into prominence, including at a Barnard reunion. People who were writing about her would call and I'd say 'I have nothing to tell.' I didn't want to write about it, but then I thought if anyone was going to write about this absurd hook-up it was going to be me."

Jong covers the gamut in this memoir from her open marriage to Jonathan Fast, the father of her grown daughter to her bouts with alcoholism and her own daughter's addiction. She also includes a story about her DUI in 2004, an experience she had to take "dibs" on when her writer daughter Molly wanted to use it in her own memoir.

As for Jong's legacy to the feminist movement and women's lives, she says, "It was the second wave of feminism in the '70s that enabled me to get published. Many things that were radical then are mainstream now. My best activism was writing books about women that didn't yet exist."

Now happily married for 17 years, Jong uses her life stories to let other writers know at least one very important thing about the writer's life.

"Everyone has grist. Writers always write about what happens to them. You have to ask yourself, 'will you cop to your own garbage?' You can't write anything good unless you cop to your imperfections."