

## *Fear of Dying by Erica Jong*

By MERRI ROSENBERG

I was in high school when Steven Sondheim's musical "Follies" opened. When I asked my parents if I could go with them, to my surprise they said no. However smart or theater savvy I was, they explained, the themes of "Follies" wouldn't mean anything to me. Years later, when I was middle-aged, "Follies" broke my heart—and realized how right my parents were not to have taken me when I was 14.

Erica Jong's latest novel, "Fear of Dying," occupies much the same space. Jong has a distinct talent for tapping into the zeitgeist. Her sharply observed, fearless "Fear of Flying," which appeared in 1973, reflected the less sober side of feminism in its uncompromising portrayal of bold female sexuality and sensuality.

In "Fear of Dying," Jong confronts the issues that baby boomers can't escape: aging and dying parents, diminished spouses and partners, the death of our beloved dogs, accepting the mistakes we've made as parents and the urgency to do a better job with our children's children, if we're fortunate enough to reach that stage, and what it means to remain vibrant within the confines of our own aging bodies.

As she writes in one of her many poignant, wise passages, "...I think about how impossible it is to explain to the young what happens when you know you're not immune from death...All you long for is to go back and do it all over, correct the mistakes, make everything right."

On many levels, "Fear of Dying" reflects Jong's effort to share her insights and wisdom, acknowledge her mistakes, professional and personal, and make amends. I can't imagine my daughter, a millennial, responding to this novel—but it's one that resonates for my peers.

Her heroine, Vanessa Wonderman, is a former actress who—despite her happy marriage to Asher, who's 20 years older than she—longs to rekindle a sexual combustibility that has languished on the back burner. Her best friend is Isadora Wing, the heroine of "Fear of Flying"—and "a writer who got famous way too young and then had to save herself from the



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brink of destruction." Wonderman's adventures (well, more like misadventures) with Internet dating offer humorous interludes, but there's no mistaking that her essential theme is dying, and how to live with that knowledge.

Jong captures perfectly the scents, sounds and emotional claustrophobia of a dying parent's sick room, and the torture of desperately wanting to hold onto one's parent even as one desperately wants their—and your—suffering to end. She knows exactly what siblings fight about when it's time to settle the estate, and how numbing the post-death process actually is.

Yet it's not a grim read. Vanessa Wonderman and her husband, Asher, attain clarity about their lives and relationship during a magical trip to India. She embraces the thrill of becoming a grandparent, with ferocity and love. As Jong writes in her heroine's powerful voice, "And now, when I am surrounded by death—yet still, somehow, dancing—I know that I was born to give life as well as art and that both are equally important."# *Published by St. Martin's Press, New York. September 2015: 273 pp.*