

Obituary: Grace Paley and political culture

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Grace Paley, the American short-story writer and political activist, died on August 22, aged 84. She described the lives of ordinary New Yorkers in the postwar period more ably than almost any other writer of her generation. She wrote in an ironic tone that implied, at its best, that there were historical processes latent within the travails of daily life.

Born Grace Goodside in the East Bronx, Paley was raised at a time when hundreds of thousands of working-class and middle-class people in New York City, particularly Jews, identified themselves with international socialist culture. Growing up, “Everyone on my block was a Socialist or a Communist,” she remarked in a 1994 interview.

Her family, which she describes in the her collection of essays, *Just as I Thought* (1998), “was a rather typical Socialist Jewish family. My father refused to go anywhere near a synagogue, although he allowed me to take my grandmother on holidays.”

Grace’s parents, along with an uncle, Rusya, who was killed for carrying a banner in a workers’ demonstration, participated in the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Her father was imprisoned by the Czarist regime and, after he was freed in an amnesty, emigrated to the United States with his wife.

This was a period of the mass flight of Jews from oppression and poverty in Eastern Europe—approximately 150,000 came to the US in 1906-1907 alone. Like many who settled in New York, Paley’s family spoke English, Yiddish and Russian at home, and like thousands of others, her parents carried a political awareness with them to the United States, where socialist ideas were becoming increasingly popular.

Although her parents at first lived in poverty on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, by the time Paley was born her father had become a doctor and the family was materially comfortable, though not wealthy. The family had moved to the East Bronx, one of the first refuges from the ghetto for immigrant Jews or their children.

The family still retained its socialist ideals. In 1927, her mother refused to move from the back of a segregated bus near Washington, D.C. Paley describes her mother as “principled, adamant, and at the same time so shy.”

At the age of nine, in 1931, during the trauma of the

Depression, Paley joined the Falcons, the social-democratic movement for preteens. She later wrote, “Every day there were whole apartments out on the street.... We understood that this was because of capitalism, which didn’t care that the working people had no work and no money for rent.”

Paley attended Hunter College in 1938 and then New York University, although she never graduated from either institution. Soon after, she studied with W.H. Auden at the New School for Social Research. She left the Bronx in 1942, and married her first husband, Jess Paley, with whom she had two children.

Paley wrote poetry for several years, but she only emerged as a writer of short fiction in the mid-1950s. She was a young mother in a postwar atmosphere that had changed drastically from the left-wing political world of her childhood and youth.

The Holocaust and the way in which it was understood in the reactionary climate of the Cold War, the establishment of the Zionist state in Israel, and the McCarthyite witchhunt, all made artistically critical views of life difficult during the postwar years.

As an artist, Paley resisted many of these pressures. Her first collection of stories, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), remains her best. A number of the stories reflect the past of New York: “Goodbye and Good Luck” is about a relationship with a leading man in the Yiddish theatre, told many years later by his mistress.

The context is both rugged and sophisticated: a culture in which working people see classics of the stage by Chekhov, use terms like “bourgeois” and get fired from jobs in the garment industry for fighting for elementary rights. The story is told as a reminiscence by the woman to her niece, one suspects in the late 1950s, in a world that had changed from the one the former knew when she was young.

Paley captures the loneliness of women that sometimes lead to what today we would call a crossing of boundaries (“A Woman, Young and Old”). She depicts an emotional hunger in the men, which can also bring transgressions (“An Irrevocable Diameter”).

Paley is forgiving of the way her characters accommodate themselves to their mistakes and misfortunes. She takes in

stride the smallness of the preoccupations that people are forced into, but she often implies that her characters could hope for much more.

A semi-autobiographical character with the ambiguous name of Faith Darwin appears in some of the stories in *The Little Disturbances of Man*. She is a single mother who has “raised these kids with one hand typing behind my back to earn a living.” Faith begs her children for peace, for an hour to herself. Life is confined, but in the end it is only her children who offer her solace.

By the time her first book appeared, Paley herself had become a pacifist and a feminist, working with the Quakers. She participated in the nuclear disarmament movement, and later, in the War Resisters League.

It can’t be said that this outlook offered much to writers. This kind of politics was not so much a perspective as it was a sentiment, a desire to register one’s discontent with the state of things, often expressed with a resigned sigh.

Changes in American life came powerfully and without warning, and they brought on changes in the thoughts and feelings of human beings that many writers wrestled with in the 1960s and 1970s, with more or less success. Something more than a sentiment was (and is) required to grasp the essence of these developments.

At the Stalinist-sponsored World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1974, Paley denounced the USSR for silencing political dissidents. The congress disassociated itself from her statement. She described the cynicism of the Soviet officials, the easy sycophancy of the writers still under the sway of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the pitiful, but unavoidable political ignorance of dissidents like Andrei Sakharov, with whom she met [1]. In reading her account, one senses that no one there really understood the issues involved.

Paley began teaching writing at Sarah Lawrence College in 1966, where she remained until 1989. She married again in 1972. Personal stability in the heyday of protest does not seem to have benefited her work, though.

The stories in her second book, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), were written from the early sixties to the early seventies. She examined a wider range of ordinary New Yorkers, and tried to accomplish more thematically and technically, but with less success. These stories don’t gain much from their formal experimentation.

There are exceptions, though. “Distance” gives a feeling of a working-class family enjoying the postwar boom, but not life. Faith Darwin reappears in a number of stories, the most successful of which is “Faith in a Tree,” where, in the middle of a playground full of parents and children, Faith takes a political step in opposing the Vietnam War. The story feels organic and tied to the sensibility of times.

Later the final collection, (1985)

weakest. There is a “postmodernist” tendency to fragment plot lines, and a good deal of prose is interrupted, unsatisfactorily, with poetry.

Many stories never really get going. Faith Darwin reappears. She is smart, honest, and wry, but she has long ago fitted herself into official society. One of her sons has become a rude Maoist. He criticizes his mother’s pacifism, but doesn’t offer much. Faith meets Chinese women through UN-sponsored groups. In the end, she can only feel that she didn’t raise her son well.

Other stories show insight into history as it is experienced personally. “Ruthy and Edie” passes from girlhood in the Bronx to a fiftieth birthday party in Manhattan. Something has happened to this generation. It has gotten richer, and it is liberal, but there is an overhead for essentially accommodating to the way things are. This mirrors a frantic, ugly incident in childhood.

Paley also wrote poetry, collected in *Begin Again* (2000). Little of it is striking, although some do complement and deepen a knowledge of her stories. In later years, she lived in Vermont, where she was appointed Poet Laureate.

Obituaries of Paley, for the most part have not been insightful about her writing or her politics, much less about any relation between the two. Some writers, such as the *Nation*’s patronizing Katha Pollitt, have essentially cast her as a fool for believing that politics was essential to life or art: “I used to see her at small demonstrations around town in the 1980s, and wish someone would chain her to her desk—lots of people can march, I would think to myself (not that lots of people were doing so) but only Grace can write like Grace.” She goes on to say, rightly, that Paley would have condemned her as an elitist. [2].

Snobbery, arrogance, and status-seeking, were, by all accounts, completely alien to Grace Paley as a person. An empathy for humanity and an attempt to write a “history of every day life,” as she put it, remain the strengths of her writing.

Notes:

[1] “Conversations in Moscow” in *Just as I Thought*, New York, Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1998, p. 87.

[2] The *Nation* “Grace Paley, 1922-2007” (posted 8/26/07); retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/anotherthing?bid=25&pid=226859>



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