

# Flying Lessons

Thanks to an unlikely mentor, Erica Jong survived the turbulence

By Dana Micucci

**E**rica Jong leans closer as she speaks, as if eager to reveal a secret. Her enthusiasm lingers in her blue eyes and wide smile before bursting now and then into warm-hearted laughter. As refreshingly candid in person as she is on the page, she exudes the serene authority of someone who has weathered the varied turbulences of fame, love and the writing life and has come in for a smooth landing.

She is inspiring in, a generous, nurturing way, a quality that she says she found in her mentor and friend, Henry Miller, the legendary "bad boy" author of the audaciously erotic novel "Tropic of Cancer," which was published in Paris in 1934 and banned in the United States for almost three decades. Their lives intersected in 1974, when Miller, then 83, wrote the 32-year-old Jong an effusive letter praising her first novel, "Fear of Flying," and its sexually liberated heroine, Isadora Wing. He called it the female counterpart to "Tropic of Cancer."

That was the beginning of a friendship, carried out in lengthy correspondences and conversations on everything from literature and mysticism to love and feminism, that lasted until Miller's death in 1980. Miller, to whom Jong says she is forever indebted, encouraged in her a gutsy sense of freedom and courage at the threshold of her career.

"'Fear of Flying' was very controversial," says Jong, who wasn't prepared for the cataclysm of early fame. "I wrote it at a time when sexual rebellion wasn't acceptable. Suddenly, I had gone from being a young poet to a household name. I was be-



Photo for the Tribune by Chrystyna Czajkowsky / AP

"The courage to be a writer is, in a sense, the courage to be an individual, no matter what the consequences," says Jong

ing treated as the queen of smut, the whore of Babylon, and Henry guided me through that. He had been through the same thing and understood that you had to climb your own mountain. Henry was the person who always helped me to center, and his understanding kept me going."

Jong, 51, who describes Miller's first letter as a "life raft to a young author who had been hurled into a political maelstrom," has more than a few things in common with her mentor. Both have been alternately admired and criticized as sexually liberating writers and high-brow pornographers. They wrote lusty vernacular prose that fused

autobiography with fiction and offended people on moral and feminist grounds. And they had the courage to stay true to themselves regardless of reactions from the rest of the world.

"Henry's story and my story have one thing above all in common: the search for the courage to be a writer. The courage to be an individual, no matter what the consequences," Jong writes in her recent book, "The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller" (Turtle Bay Books, \$23). Her first full-length work of non-fiction, the book, which includes letters and an imaginary dia-

logue between the two writers, is a tribute to Miller and their friendship as well as a critical study of sexual politics.

Buoyed by Miller's support early in her career, Jong says she had promised him that she would one day write a book about him. But she had trouble reconciling his writing with her feminism. While she acknowledges there is blatant sexism in Miller's work, she believes he was a victim of sexual politics, that his exuberance was resented by detractors who saw only fornication rather than freedom in his books. She wrote about him because he demanded "that we understand the connection between Eros and life. And

we have still not understood.”

“Although I’m a passionate feminist, I don’t think we should burn the books we don’t agree with,” says Jong, the author of six novels and seven books of poetry. “Freedom of expression will get us further than censorship, which is always used politically anyway. Henry once said that his only subject was self-liberation, and that’s the subject of my books too. He spoke to some deep knowledge in me. He was an anarchist and a lover of mystical ideals. Henry was very critical of the social order and reinforced a tendency in me to question authority. He lived and wrote with such freedom. All the artists of my generation are so bourgeois by comparison.”

Jong grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in what she calls “a very intellectual Jewish family.” Her grandfather was a painter. Her mother is a painter and designer; and her father was a songwriter, before starting his own gift business.

The middle daughter of three, Jong began writing at age 10. She graduated in 1963 from Barnard, College in New York, where she majored in English literature and writing. Two years later she received a master’s in 18th Century English literature from Columbia University, also in New York. Planning a career in academia, she began working toward her Ph.D. there, having already published two books of poetry before “Fear of Flying” became a popular success in 1973. That book was a dare to herself “to write from the female point of view with as much verve as Philip Roth and John Updike had written from the male,” according to Jong. “

“I eventually decided that I was too free a spirit to put up with all the crap of academia,” Jong says. “I needed to write,



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but I wasn’t interested in writing scholarly papers.”

Jong describes writing as a personal transformation. “It’s a very profound self-analysis. It’s like a meditation,” she says. “I try to tell a certain truth about the interior of my life and other women’s lives. If you’re writing the kinds of books I write, you come out a changed person.”

Jong, whose more recent novels include “Serenissima: A Novel of Venice” (1987) and “Any Woman’s Blues” (1990), a steamy story of a woman’s struggle to overcome sexual addiction, says her writing mirrors her own spiritual journey.

“I’m a recovering addict,” she admits. “I’m a love addict, a sex addict, a work addict. I’m very passionate and intense. I’ve had to find the center of myself again and again at different stages of my life. And I’ve always found it through writing and 12-step recovery programs, which are for anyone who’s an addict. Those programs have started a great spiritual movement in our country.

“Women of my generation were raised to look for satisfaction outside themselves, particularly in men. But we discovered

that we can’t find it there. Learning to take care of yourself is a particular problem for women.”

Jong has had to rely on a significant reserve of tenacity and resilience on her path toward personal and artistic freedom. When she’s told that something can’t be done, she says she’ll do it anyway.

“It’s easy to get discouraged when you encounter a lot of vicious criticism for writing about sex,” she says. “It’s hard enough to be a writer in a society that doesn’t respect writers and only cares about making money. Rebellious and sexual writers have an even tougher time, especially if you’re a woman. That’s why it’s important to have mentors and role models. Writers look to other writers to give them courage to continue. And I found that in Colette and Henry Miller.”

She says her need to write and the feeling that she could be of use to people through her work have also kept her going. “When women tell me how my books have changed their lives, I feel that I’m being the teacher I was meant to be,” she says. “I get a lot back from that.”

Jong, who is now in her fourth marriage, says she figured out who she was in her late 30s and 40s when she was a single mother, running her own life. She has one daughter, Molly, 14, with her third husband, writer Jonathan Fast. For the past four years, she has been married to New York lawyer Ken Burrows.

“When I was in my 20s, I thought I was nothing without a man,” she says. “But after raising a child alone and supporting myself most of my life, I realized that I was enormously strong and that there was nothing I couldn’t do on my own. The sexist assumption is that women should be self-sacrificing

and look for strength in a man. But the truth is that we’re stronger. I learned that a husband is not going to solve my problems. And I won’t tolerate a relationship that puts down my work or individuality. I figured out a while ago that men are icing on the cake.”

Jong hopes her books will help women to realize that it’s OK to be alone. “It’s a fate worse than death to feel that you’re nothing without another person,” she says. “A woman who is not horribly needy and enjoys her own life and work will always have men flocking around her if that’s what she wants,” she says.

She relishes motherhood and says she was fortunate to have had the financial resources for childcare, which allowed her to continue writing. “I would have had three children if I could have dealt with it, but you can’t do everything,” says Jong, who admits to an enormous capacity for work.

Part of the inequality problem is that some women are sexist themselves, and there isn’t an easy scapegoat, according to Jong. “The men in our lives aren’t responsible for the patriarchal system,” she says. “We can’t rebel against anyone specifically, so we must continue to fight on the political and legal fronts.”

Jong has spent a lifetime waging revolutions for herself and other women, speaking out against censorship and defending freedom of expression. Although she’s still fighting, she has found a renewed spiritual calm at the eye of the storm. “I’m more and more able to come back to my center and take care of myself,” she says. ■