



“What would Grace make of this world we’re in?”

The daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, the acclaimed writer Grace Paley grew up in the Bronx in New York in the 1920s. On the centenary of her birth, her friend and one-time student **Joan Silber** reflects on the influences that shaped her fiction and committed political activism

Grace Paley was my writing teacher in my last year of college – she was also a friend to me and I’ve been proud to cite her my whole writing life. On this centenary of her birth, I find I have, nestled in my bookshelf, a booklet from the War Resisters League honouring her 65th birthday. It carries photos of Grace in action – carrying a sign that says, ‘I Counsel Draft Refusal’, planting a tree at the Greenwich Village Peace Center, visiting North Vietnam, protesting death squads in El Salvador and being arrested in an anti-apartheid demonstration. “I happen to love being in the streets,” Grace wrote.

In his excellent introduction to *A Grace Paley Reader*, published in 2017, George Saunders cites her as “one of the great writers of voice of the last century” and speaks of her innovative use of language, recognising her as a “thrilling postmodernist”. These are, of course, the two sides of Grace, activist and author. She was always told she would get more writing done if she was less politically active, and she always said she was happy with her choices.

Grace was a loved personality during her lifetime, a public personality – she liked that – and much praise came to her in the years I knew her. My 1960 paperback of her first book, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, has an almost comic blurb from Philip Roth: “At last a woman writer who isn’t bitchy or precious or honey-and-roses or all recollections of a gay fetching girlhood.” At last, indeed. Herbert Gold wrote: “She has a girl’s charm and a woman’s strength.” It reminds us, in this time of all times, of the world Grace was writing from. “What is man,” a narrator asks, in ‘Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life’, “that woman lies down to adore him?”

Nineteen years after studying with Grace, I went back to teach fiction writing at Sarah Lawrence College, outside New York City, so I was also her colleague. When one of our grad students told us she was having an abortion the next day, Grace talked with her about her own illegal abortion, decades before, which she later chronicled in her essay, ‘The Illegal Days’. Grace also underwent an experience that is current again, the dangerously delayed treatment of a miscarriage due to a doctor’s fear of prosecution. How outraged and horrified Grace would be today, how eloquently pissed off.

Being appalled marshalled her; in the parlance of labour songs, she expected to keep fighting. She had been raised by

From left: Grace Paley, Vermont, 2000 (Getty); Paley and Gloria Steinem at a protest supporting Iranian women, New York, March 1979 (Copyright © Diana Mara Henry/www.dianamarahenry.com)



socialist parents in an atmosphere of uplifting argument; no one wanted any such clunky thing in fiction by the time Grace took to it, but Grace went about things her own way (careful, complicated, linguistically charged). One thing I love about her stories is the way ideas fill them; people are going on, sometimes showing off, about what they think and believe. They are mouthy about what matters to them. She could do this through character – through voice – as few writers can.

Grace’s parents were Russian-speaking, rather than Yiddish-speaking, like most of the others in their Bronx neighbourhood. They were not especially observant – she writes of taking rides on the Sabbath when no one else did – but she has also said that, in her first book of stories at least half of the “themes” were Jewish. When I was her student, I was glad to see these people (first-generation Ashkenazi Jews) in her stories. I knew these people! It wasn’t that fiction hadn’t featured them before – Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Roth were widely read – but she had her own wild experiments in form, that called out to my ambitions. You could put those people in fiction that did that?

After the success of her first book of stories, someone was always trying to get Grace to write a novel. I think there was a spell when she thought about using her early character, Faith, as the centre of something that could be called a novel, but she decided not to.

In fact, she began to like working in short-short forms. I especially love ‘Wants’ and ‘Samuel’ from *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, and her most anthologised story, the great ‘A Conversation with My Father’, is a mere seven pages. Her concentrated language became ever more adept at concision, at distilling high drama and long times. In ‘Samuel’, a young boy, horsing around with his friends, is killed between subway cars. His mother, given the news, screams for a day and a night, to know she’ll never find another boy like him. But, being young, she becomes pregnant, and “for a few months

she was hopeful. The child born to her was a boy. They brought him to be seen and nursed. She smiled. But immediately she saw that this baby wasn’t Samuel. She and her husband have had other children, but never again will a boy exactly like Samuel be known.”

Much has been said about the fact that Grace only wrote three books of fiction. She always told us that a story could take years to write. It was a writer’s job to let it do that. For a while I was secretly mad at her for not having pushed me to be more productive. Other people had gone to writing programmes where they were scolded about writing routines and daily word counts – why had no one told me?

Of course, I think differently about all this now. What Grace worked very hard to convey to us – her acolytes – was what lasts. In her casual way, she taught honour. I’ve had a long, zigzagging career, with varying stages in which to see ever more clearly the luck in having had Grace as an example.

And now I see the way the later stories are darker. I keep re-reading ‘Friends,’ from the last collection, *Later the Same Day*, in which three women take a train to visit a beloved friend with cancer, whose daughter, not too long before, has been found dead in a rooming house

in another city. “To put us at our ease, to quiet our hearts as she lay dying, our dear friend Selena said, ‘Life, after all, has not been an unrelieved horror – you know I did have many wonderful years with her.’” All the women have children they fear for, in an era of drugs and disorder and danger, and Faith, the narrator, has an 18-year-old son (we met him in the first book), who “believes that the human race, its brains and good looks, will end in his time.”

What would Grace make of this world we’re in? Misogyny, war, fascism, racist violence, yet again. People never stopped suggesting she was too caught up in politics for a writer. She tended to say she’d been ‘political’ all her life and it was a serious way to be. She also got flak for including too much of that stuff in her fiction, as if the habit of protest was an ungraceful element. In our wretched moment, views on this question have changed again – how could we have forgotten how important the murderous use of power is or how it enters the daily textures around us. The world has come round to seeing once again what she was making such a fuss about. (“What world?” Grace liked to say.) ■

Joan Silber is the author of nine books of fiction. The most recent, *Secrets of Happiness and Improvement*, are available in the UK, along with the newly reissued *Fools and Ideas of Heaven*.