

Ambiguity and Paradox

A Conversation

with Helen Weinzweig

Helen Weinzweig is the author of two novels, *Passing Ceremony* (Anansi 1973), *Basic Black with Pearls* (Anansi 1980), and a collection of short stories, *A View from the Roof* (Goose Lane 1989). At the age of nine, she emigrated from Poland to Canada, where her formal education began. An only child, Weinzweig was raised by her divorced mother. She did not know her father until she was an adult. Weinzweig's career as a writer began when she was 45. The wife of composer, John Weinzweig, Helen immersed herself in her husband's work and learned about structure and technique from his development of twelve-tone music. Her narratives are dark, spare, and her characters are set adrift by the circumstances of their lives. Weinzweig's fragmented, discontinuous texts propel her readers toward a heightened awareness of the chaos of contemporary life. Currently, she is working on a third novel, which she describes as "statement, without adjectives and adverbs." In May 1998, I met with Helen Weinzweig—who is 83—at her Toronto home where we spoke for three hours.

RP: Helen, how did you come to write at the age of 45?

HW: I had 20 different jobs from the time I went to work at 17. I was trying to improve myself by going from job to job, working part-time and full-time. Well, I was 45, my two sons were on their own, my husband got a job at the University of Toronto, and suddenly I didn't need to work anymore. I fell apart because the struggle for economic survival was over.

I went to a woman psychiatrist because I didn't know what to do with my life. In the 30s and 40s women were expected to play out their roles as wives

and mothers. But on my first visit—out of arrogance, despair, and fear—I said, “. . . and I don’t want to adjust!” She responded, “Yours is a simple problem of integration.” I was a little miffed because I didn’t think there was anything simple about my existence. Fortunately, she wasn’t interested in prolonged analysis. One of my problems was that, despite a passion for books, I could no longer read: the printed word did not impinge. She suggested I find my own words. But I couldn’t write. Then, on an empty white sheet in the typewriter, I started to free associate and the first line I wrote was, “Your body cares not a whit for your mind.” I almost started to cry.

I then spent two years writing a short story which I sent out and it got published. Two years later I sent out another story and it got published. I panicked. Did publication mean I could write? Could I be a writer? I continued with another story. . . .

RP: What did you read as a young woman?

HW: I was the only one I knew who hadn’t read *Little Women*. I read the *Boys’ Own Annual*. I did not like women’s fiction. I didn’t like the women I knew. That wasn’t their fault, but I didn’t want their lives. I did not see myself as a woman until I started writing.

There is a picture of me aboard ship to Europe in 1932. For the Captain’s Ball, a costumed event, I borrowed a pair of trousers from a young chap I knew. As half man-half woman, I dressed in one trouser leg and half a skirt. I drew a moustache above half my lips and applied lipstick to the other half. It kills me to look at this picture of me at 17. What is that? My husband claims that I confuse people. He says people don’t know what to expect from me. What does he mean? But a funny thing happened on my way to becoming a writer. I “integrated” to such an extent that I developed hips and breasts. I’m not kidding; in places, I am twice the size I used to be.

RP: Who directed your reading?

HW: I arrived here when I was nine and I had never been to school. I didn’t know how to read and write. In Poland, when I was six, I went to school for one day, a policeman brought me home, and then I wouldn’t go back. When I was in my thirties, my mother explained that she had to obtain shoes and clothes for me to go to school; that she sent me to school when it had been underway for weeks. In class, the kids sat down and immediately opened their books. But I didn’t have a book, so I took one from someone’s desk. When I

was leaving school with the book, someone called the police to say I had stolen a book. I never returned because I felt so ashamed to have been arrested.

When we came to Canada, we lived with my aunt and uncle who ran a restaurant at Spadina and Dundas [in Toronto]. My two cousins made fun of me because I couldn't speak English. At 10, I had to learn how to read, write, and speak English quickly. At 15, I was first in my class in high school.

My mother worked and she didn't get along with anybody. My mother and my aunt quarrelled, my uncle was busy womanizing and running a restaurant, so I had nowhere to go after school. Then I discovered Boys and Girls House [now Lillian H. Smith branch, Toronto Public Library] where I was adopted by a librarian, Miss Bush. She gave me hot chocolate and read to me. She was the first and only person who cared about me and we communicated through books.

The first book I ever read was *Peter Pan*. I lived at Spadina and Dundas and I used to look for the statue of Peter Pan on Kensington Avenue. I thought I was in England.

RP: Do you think your work reflects your experience as a woman?

HW: I have a lot of trouble with that. Everything I had read had been written by men and from the male point of view. I was terrified when I tried to put words on paper. "What can I say that is mine? Who needs another book? What is mine that is different from the things I have read? Nothing, nothing is mine. Everything I know has come from books or necessity. What have I got to say?" It took about 10 years for me to learn to use first person. I wrote everything in third person. Third person was easy because "I" didn't exist. The first person had to be found: who was the first person, who was the "I"?

I have modified a lot of my vocabulary. For example, a phrase I no longer use is "playing a role." It's in the language, it's acceptable, yet I resent it. I have never played a role in my life, but I was using "my role as mother," "my role as teacher," etc. Suddenly I realized that the phrase is acceptable for women *only* because it adds to their sense of fragmentation. So I've begun to watch my vocabulary and to question the idea that I am a different woman as a mother and as a writer. I decided that what may be considered "normal" was not normal for me.

RP: I am struck by your faceless female characters. Do you see them as faceless?

HW: Someone once said that all my women are victims. My response was, "Yes, but they prevail." Because of my own limited background, I cannot

seem to enter into the life of the well-adjusted and apparently successful woman who has an ability to handle her crises directly. This may be because I wish to talk about events in my personal life. In fiction I seem to regress to a period in my own life when I had no sense of identity.

RP: Your work has been described as unsettling, Helen.

HW: I'm always surprised by that because in the process of writing this unsettling material, I settled something in myself. I guess what was a catharsis for me becomes a difficulty for the reader.

Everything I have written has been a discovery for me. Unwittingly, I found a source in myself that I wanted to tap. It was the not-knowing that propelled my writing, not knowing what was going on, not having any judgement. For me, fiction is the truth of the unconscious, if it's done properly.

RP: Do you see a connection between your fiction and your husband's music?

HW: Two scholars at Lakehead University [S. R. MacGillivray and Noreen Ivancic] say that my husband's twelve-tone technique has shaped my writing.

RP: What do you think? You have said yourself that you lived John's career.

HW: Yes, I did. Vicariously I lived out the trials and agonies of John's career. My energy, creativity, and thought went into John. There wasn't a thought in the world that I could do anything on my own, not a thought. I flattered John into marrying me. I was his muse; I provided titles for his work; I stayed up with him until all hours to talk about his music. But when I got pregnant with Paul the emphasis shifted away from John and I don't think he ever got over it.

I went to night school when Paul was a baby to get my senior matriculation and thought maybe I'd go to school again. The history teacher met me at the door one evening and said, "Please, Mrs. Weinzweig, not tonight." I said, "I'm sorry." I would disrupt the class by asking questions on history, ". . . but, but sir." And so I realized I couldn't go back. I could no longer just sit there and "repeat after me." So, I didn't go back to school, I didn't get my senior matriculation, and I didn't go to university.

When my sons were babies, I trained in nursery school work. I organized the first co-operative nursery school on our street, which began in the basement of my house. And I started to think, well, I can learn child psychology and do nursery school work. But I couldn't continue because it was very hard for my sons to have other children come into their house and claim their mother's attention.

RP: So, Helen, are you saying that there is a connection between your own and John's work?

HW: Yes. For 12 years we lived in a small house and the piano was alongside the kitchen wall. I was in the kitchen a good deal of the time when I wasn't doing nursery school work or whatever. My place was preparing meals, cleaning up, and all the rest of it. John was at the piano most of the time because he always worked at home.

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I have always been alert to my environment, and unconsciously I was alert to the environment of competent musical composition. So when I heard John working out an idea, often I would go in and say, "Not yet, not yet. A little more, a little more." I can't read music but something in me began to feel the process. I could sense the structure of a composition, even when it wasn't in the traditional three parts. I could sense where it was going and feel the inevitability of a piece.

I will work on a paragraph for as long as a month or rewrite one page 20 times until it has that same inevitability. So that is where possibly I absorbed structure. I hate to admit it because part of me is still a little bit uneasy with 30 years of the vicarious life that women of my generation lived. The careers of men were often the work of their wives. I can't blame myself but there is a vestige of regret.

RP: How did you react to your first publication?

HW: I didn't know that the *Canadian Forum* had accepted my first story, "Surprise!" [in 1968]. Everybody sent their first story to the *Canadian Forum*. I was walking along the street, the *Forum* was displayed in a wire rack outside a bookstore, and my name leapt out at me from the cover. Seeing my name in print on the cover of the *Canadian Forum* was a thrilling moment.

I then went to New York to take a writing course. I took with me an unpublished short story and I discovered—I was 48 years old at the time—that the young students were indignant that there were old people in the course with them. They were graduate students in their early to mid-twenties and they didn't like the presence of oldies.

RP: What inspired your first novel, *Passing Ceremony*?

HW: My husband had a performance in Saskatoon, I think it was, where we visited our host's friend, Eli Bornstein, a painter. He had a painting on his wall. Within the frame were blocks of wood painted white, in various geometric

shapes and sizes. While the men were talking I was staring and it hit me that if I had material that was geometrical and enclosed it in a frame, I could do in a novel what he had done on canvas. The random shapes and their random placement were unified by the frame. And the other unity was geometry.

In *Passing Ceremony*, I found the frame in an experience I had at a friend's wedding and everything took place within that frame. But I couldn't maintain the unity entirely; I was not experienced enough. Everything should have occurred within the frame of the wedding but I had the characters driving around Toronto, going to High Park. I gave up. I couldn't find any more material within the frame. I can now, but I gave up then. I saw unity on Eli Bornstein's wall and I repeated it in *Passing Ceremony*. It took six years to write.

I knew I had done a modern thing. No continuity, explanations, or flashbacks, and some of the characters aren't named. There was only one publisher in Canada I knew about that might be interested and that was Anansi Press. I took it down by streetcar—at that time they were on George Street [Toronto]—and left the manuscript on the receptionist's desk. I got a call that they were interested if I would make some changes. Their editor was—memory, there we go again, senility—Jim Polk. At the time, I wondered why Anansi grabbed it. But I soon realized that everyone's marriage at the Press was breaking up and I bring in *Passing Ceremony* [loud laughter]. Later, when *Basic Black with Pearls* was published, the *New Yorker* commented that my timing was perfect.

Jim Polk said that I had to rewrite, that some things in the novel didn't fit. I picked up the manuscript and the whole thing fell out of my hands onto the floor. As the two of us were gathering the typewritten pages, I said, "This is my first book and I don't know about rewriting. I don't know about what fits and what doesn't fit." So he took a red pen and went through the pages.

When I got home, I read his comments about my inconsistent style and I finally understood. It's *style!* I had absorbed so many literary styles and I had put them all into the book. That's how I learned to edit my work and when I handed the novel back to Jim, he said "It's perfect, but you may be interested to know that Peggy [Atwood] read both versions and she thinks that I was too hard on you, that it's now too spare." There is no word in there that doesn't fit.

RP: Tell me about the writing of *Basic Black with Pearls*.

HW: *Basic Black* reflects my desire to belong to the bourgeois, nuclear family.

The inherent conflict was to want it and to despise it. I did not write the novel to satisfy readers' expectations.

For public readings, I often used the "cash register" scene in *Basic Black* because I liked it and thought I did well with it. In one of those readings, I froze. I looked out at the audience who were waiting for the next sentence and finally I said, "I can't read this." I had been reading it for about three years. I looked down at one of my friends sitting in the front row and asked her to finish reading for me. She came up to the podium and I took her place in the audience.

When I got home that night, I realized that what I thought I had invented had actually taken place. Unbeknownst to me, I was using unconscious material which did not surface until I had read it—I don't know how many times—as if it were an invention. That evening, in the middle of the reading, my conscious and unconscious merged. When my unconscious entered my memory the whole scene exploded for me. I just about broke down because that was one of my early traumas. Each noon, my aunt would give my two cousins money for candy. But she would slam the cash register shut in my face because I was not entitled to candy. Fortunately, many human traumas remain buried.

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I could not participate in life around me until I was an adult. But I absorbed a lot of what I saw, so many of my characters are voyeurs, like Shirley in *Basic Black*.

RP: How do you know whether material is appropriate for a short story or a novel?

HW: I didn't attempt a novel until I had some skill at putting words on paper. There are writers who reserve good material for a novel, but I let the punch line of a story determine its form.

RP: You've also written drama, Helen.

HW: The short story, "My Mother's Luck," was adapted for the stage. I also wrote a play about my father, "A Classical Education," which was produced when I was playwright-in-residence at Tarragon Theatre [Toronto].

In "My Mother's Luck," I struggled to write about my mother's experiences and to give her the voice of a Jewish immigrant. I was proud that the English in the monologue was a transliteration of Yiddish. I was not going to have her speak a "proper" English since she would have spoken in Yiddish if she were actually telling me the story.

I was pleased that I could create a dramatic effect without using dramatic language. The dramatic effect is that the daughter never speaks. The story succeeds entirely because of its *style* and the *two* characters, only one of whom speaks. When it was produced, I walked out of the theatre in tears—my identification with the silent girl was so complete—and my two sons were visibly shaken.

I then got a scholarship to take a playwright's course at Banff. I wanted to work on the play about my father, a companion piece to "My Mother's Luck." But I couldn't write about my father. At 17, I spent three months in an apartment in Italy with my father but now I can't remember his face. He refused to be written about and I put the play away. Some stories can't be written because they're true.

RP: *Would you describe the novel you are working on now?*

HW: The novel that I have been working on for more than 10 years presents a problem. I am trying to make simple "reality" fresh and interesting. Instead of starting with what I don't know and working toward discovery, I'm doing the opposite. Now discovery is in the ordinary, everyday world. The challenge is to write about the ordinary and move the reader at the same time.

The more experimental I am, the more control I need. The most important element in experiment is style and in this novel I control style as statement, without adjectives and adverbs. I eschew interior monologue which I use in my earlier work. I want to express thought so the reader responds emotionally, not the character.

Recently, I realized what I set out to do 10 years ago. I am really into chaos theory. Physics has shown that there is no order in nature, the universe, or life itself. But strangely, strangely there is a pattern if you can find it. About a year or so ago, I discovered a pattern in the novel's chaotic structure. In my chaotic way of writing, connections are made in the reader's head. In my view, linear thought and therefore linear writing are unnatural to humans.

Having been brought up under traumatic conditions in a *shtetl*, I write the way I heard speech used. No two sentences were consecutive: "Oy. What's happening? What should I do? Listen, did you know the woman who lives downstairs, her husband has left her? So, what's going to happen to the children? Oh, my son is learning the Talmud. What's your son

doing?” And so it went. I grew up perfectly comfortable with such melodrama, but I want to write melodrama in a postmodern way.

The protagonist in this novel can't remember his childhood and into the text I throw a story, “The Sea at Bar.” This story has a linear plot that has nothing to do with the novel but I include it as a likely reason for his amnesia.

I want to write in a manner that avoids what Gertrude Stein called “mere statement.” Since I appreciate ambiguity and paradox, I say things on paper that may startle the reader but do not startle me. Now I discard material that does not startle me. I am aiming for sincerity, without props, *shtick*, or nonsense.

For me, process is all. And I've been lucky; I've never had a rejection slip. But I've had to choose between being a writer and, as I say, a “liver.” Dostoevsky once said, “Everyday I have to choose whether to live or write.” It took me a long time to become a contented writer and I'm not giving that up.

