Inventing Memory Short Guide

Inventing Memory by Erica Jong

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Contents

Characters

Across the four generations represented by Sarah, Salome, Sally, and Sara, the theme of mother-daughter relations remains consistently strong; each woman becomes the mother of a daughter as talented and self-willed as herself, and each must cope with the powerful alteration of her emotions that occur with the birth of her daughter. Over time, however, there is a deterioration in the degree of maternal devotion each subsequent mother displays as she embraces greater personal freedoms, although the lessons that Sara learns hint towards a reversal of that decline. Sarah makes sacrifices, works harder than ever, and virtually effaces herself from her art, painting anonymously for less talented men, in order to earn a living for herself and her daughter.

She accepts a sexless marriage for the stability it will offer her child, giving up personal satisfaction in order to achieve domestic security. Salome makes only limited concessions to motherhood, even though she feels the maternal bond as powerfully as her mother did, and seeks to maximize her personal happiness in life through her writing and her affairs.

Sally is the least successful mother, eventually allowing her daughter to disappear from her life under the care of her ex-husband, but she is also the character most passionately devoted to personal fulfillment, no matter how destructive it becomes. She virtually turns her back on motherhood in order to pursue her career as a rock-and-roll icon, with all of the loose living implied by that lifestyle; she subsequently finds new sources of solace in alcohol, eventually replacing her addiction to booze with an addiction to her twelve-step cure. In Sara, the maternal bond between her and her daughter Dove is renewed, but art has been eliminated from her life in favor of a scholarly career, and men have only limited power to draw her from the course she has delineated for her life. In the three-way struggle between maternal duty, fulfillment through the work of building a career, and sexual passion, each woman must make trade-offs and give up the fantasy of having it all.

By comparison, the men in the novel are less fully rounded as characters, even though they represent a force so powerful as to draw a talented woman away from her career or a loving mother away from her child. They are the beneficiaries, to greater or lesser degrees, of a culture that bestows disproportionate privileges on men, but in Jong's treatment they assume secondary status to the women of the novel. The reader gains access to them only indirectly through the descriptions and references provided by Sarah, Salome, Sally, and Sara, and so the male characters seem to be extensions or even constructs of the female characters. Even Aaron, the survivor of the Holocaust, becomes known to the larger world only when Salome records the horrifying story he has told her and presents it to the world in published form. Since the reader sees these men at one remove, it is difficult to say with confidence whether they are also struggling to accommodate irreconcilable goals, although they clearly suffer from injustices, especially those connected with anti-Semitism.

Social Concerns

Erica Jong's first novel, Fear of Flying, exploded onto the literary scene in 1973 compelling attention by the force of its shocking language and explicit images.

Women had not written serious fiction in such a manner before the publication of that novel. Fear of Flying gave an articulate voice to female desire and placed it in an intelligent character with whom female readers could identify. In many ways, that book prepared the way for Inventing Memory (also published as Of Blessed Memory), the story of four generations of Jewish mothers and daughters who struggle to assert themselves artistically and sexually amid the radically changing social and historical contexts of the twentieth century. Each of the four key characters strives for happiness against the terms dictated by her individual circumstances.

At the turn of the century, young Sarah (Sophia) Solomon must flee the anti-Semitism in her native Russia that led to the death of her illegitimate son, her brother, and her father. In the new world of America, she is exploited in New York's sweatshops as she labors to bring over the remaining members of her family; eventually the discovery of her talents in drawing and painting leads her into a different kind of exploitation in her relationships with Lev Levitsky, another immigrant Jew, and Sim Coppley, an old-money WASP. Both men love her, each for his own selfish reasons, and the three of them enter into a complex relationship intertwining ethnicity, politics, economics, art, and a passionate affair between Sarah and Sim. But although she loves Sim best, she winds up married to Lev in a long, stable, and prosperous union. Sarah gets her portrait commissions and her politics from Lev, who in turn is under the influence of his anarchist cronies; in Sim she finds sexual fulfillment and the legitimating approval that newcomers yearn for. An outburst of politically-motivated street violence temporarily destroys their happiness and removes Sim from Sarah's life, so that Lev becomes her husband and a father to her daughter Salome. They remain committed to art and politics, opening a successful avant-garde modernist gallery where they show the most innovative paintings, even though Sarah continues to work prolifically in the conservative genre of portraiture. Ultimately, art is their last refuge, since they are driven away from political activism many years later when the Communist-hunting, red-baiting investigation of Joe McCarthy crushes their support of leftist ideals.

Sarah is a strong and passionate woman who tries to find satisfaction in a repressive world that limits her opportunities because of her gender, so she makes many compromises—in art, in love, and in politics—and effaces herself in the process, not even signing her own name to her portraits. Consequently, her daughter Salome sees her as a failure and flees to pursue her own dreams in Paris in the 1920s. Salome cannot paint as her mother does; instead, she finds her creative outlet in the written word. Living the flapper's life in Paris, she writes a shocking novel and starts a literary magazine. She flings herself into affairs attempting to fill her own life with the passion she never saw in her mother's life. She experiments with freedoms she thinks her mother never knew existed, and she struggles to establish her unique individual identity at all costs. Only the Nazi threat in Europe drives her back towards her home. Her

journey, however, takes an unexpected direction when she sees a portrait painted by her mother in the Paris home of Edith Wharton. The picture is of Sim Coppley, and he looks as if he could be Salome's next of kin. She searches for Sim and finds him in New England, a shadow of his former self and nearly ruined financially by the stock market crash of 1929. Salome's discoveries about her own identity force her to alter her perception of her mother and of Lev as well. She stays on in the quiet tranquility of a small New England town, far from the tumult of World War II.

Salome eventually meets a survivor of the worst part of that war in the person of Aaron Wallinsky, who witnessed the horrors of the death camps and lived to tell of it. He relates his experiences to Salome, but the inhumanity he has witnessed is more than he can bear. The two of them make a contrasting study in Jewish identity at mid-century: the sheltered American capable of skepticism since she has been spared the pogroms her own mother witnessed, and the brutalized European who has miraculously survived the Holocaust. They marry and conceive a daughter, Sally, but even that joy cannot retrieve Aaron from his suffering: millions died, but he lived. He does not understand why he should have been spared. His guilt prevents him from recording his story and drives him to insanity. Salome writes the book he cannot bear to compose, leaving Sally with her mother and Lev. Aaron finally succeeds in completing the task begun by the Nazis when he commits suicide, departing from a world that is still unwilling to believe that the Holocaust could really have happened.

Salome copes with her abandonment by seeking love. Like her mother, she enters into a double relationship that fills up her heart but leaves little time for her daughter. Sally grows up on the fringe of her mother's life, taking the personal liberation Salome exemplifies for granted.

She cannot write books as her mother does, and she cannot paint as her grandmother does; instead, she finds her creative outlet in music. She takes up the guitar and begins to hang out in the folk clubs in Greenwich Village while she is still virtually a child, singing and composing under the name Sally Sky. Soon she has released a phenomenally successful record, and in her teenage years she becomes a legend and an icon for her generation. Life on the road takes its toll, however—especially during the 1960s, when self-expression and self-destruction were two sides of the same coin. Sally is successful on the concert stage where she becomes an emotional personification of the audience, endlessly fulfilling the desire of her fans to hear their feelings articulated in her songs. Her personal life, however, is chaotic as she sinks into alcoholism. She marries a poet, Ham Wyndham, and they conceive a daughter, Sara. Sally is deprived of whatever stability motherhood might have provided her when Ham takes their daughter and disappears into remote Montana with his new love, Sandrine. Sally is left with her alcoholism and her devotion to Alcoholics Anonymous to occupy her time instead of a family.

Sara eventually discovers who her real mother is and buys a bus ticket to New York to find Sally. In the Levitsky art gallery, grandmother Salome and mother Sally are joyously reunited with Sara, who has arrived only slightly too late to meet her namesake Sarah and great-grandfather Lev. Nearly a hundred years after Sarah arrived in New York, a

bumpkin from the old country, Sara arrives herself, just as much a bumpkin as her great-grandmother had been. But having seen the destruction of her mother's life in the pursuit of music, Sara chooses the life of the scholar and becomes a historian. The stories in Inventing Memory are there because her research has exhumed them from letters, diaries, oral histories, reviews, novel fragments, and the other ephemeral forms in which women's stories can be found. The novel opens and closes with Sara's story as she ponders how to raise her own daughter, Dove, and how to find personal satisfaction in a world that offers little security and no promises of happiness. Sara has a significant advantage, however, that her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother lacked: having reconstructed their stories, she has the wisdom that can be derived from their varied experiences as they undertook the same tasks that she herself now faces.

Techniques

Inventing Memory is something of a postmodern collage or pastiche of various writing techniques. The story is revealed through multiple points of view, including a representation of a tape-recorded first-person narration created by Sarah Levitsky for her absent great-granddaughter Sara, personal letters (some of which were never mailed), especially between Sarah and Salome, journals kept by Salome in Paris and later in New England, an unpublished magazine interview with Sally, poems, an erotic fantasy sent by Salome to a lover, newspaper clippings and reviews of Salome's books, an excerpt from the rough draft of Salome's lost novel, and an old-fashioned thirdperson omniscient narrator to deliver the story of Sara at the opening and closing of the novel.

The oral history Sarah creates is flavored with the Yiddish that was her native tongue, and the reader gets a vivid picture of the immigrants' world through Sarah's eyes. Since she is a painter, her report about her life is colorful and filled with telling details; additionally, remoteness in time takes the edge off of the suffering and the injustices she has witnessed. This is an old woman's fond recollection of her salad days, and Sarah tells it with a storyteller's relish in yet another retelling of the tale. The illusion of reading a transcript of an oral history is heightened by the conversational asides, misplaced story elements, and ellipses that characterize speech rather than writing. Of the four key characters, Sarah is the most fully rounded and the most detailed, since she gets to tell her own story exactly the way she sees it.

In contrast, Salome's diaries, letters, poems, clippings, and other writings provide only a partial view of her personality. Much of her writing is devoted to describing the world around her, the people she encounters, and the goals she has for the future; consequently, the reader is continually prying into bits and pieces of her private life rather than hearing the story she might have wished to tell about herself. These writings are more intimate than the story Sarah relates to the tape recorder, but ironically they are less revealing. This distancing effect is even more pronounced for Sally, who is glimpsed almost entirely through others' eyes. The reader sees what Salome or Sara sees, learns a verse or two from a song by her, or sits in on an interview. In all these cases, Sally remains frustratingly remote, as immaterial as her voice in the air. She is a flat character—a stereotype of a 1960s phenomenon—primarily because so little of her story can be known.

These varying points of view are initiated through the traditional medium of a third-person narrator who introduces the reader to a character by revealing the character's appearance, behavior, and thoughts. After a short sequence from the earliest part of Sarah's oral history, the opening of Inventing Memory is patterned on this old-fashioned storytelling method as an unknown narrator begins to relate the details of Sara's crucial job interview at the Council on Jewish History. Eventually the story comes back to Sara, and the narrator returns to explain what is happening in her life. The result is that Sara's story seems artificial, while the other women's stories seem direct and immediate, even though they are sometimes incomplete. As a novel, Inventing Memory would have been a much more challenging reading experience without the omniscient narration of Sara's

story, since much of the reader's task of understanding whose point of view is driving the story is undertaken by the narrator, and many details that might have presented a tantalizing puzzle are instead peremptorily explained by the narrator.

Themes

Jong's writing has always addressed feminist issues, and Inventing Memory is no exception. The novel is dominated by women who are seeking personal fulfillment through activities other than marriage, but who find themselves in a world where marriage is the only socially accepted option. Each woman strives to express her artistic talents, to fulfill her sexual desires, to support her political ideals, and to assist her daughter in becoming a happy woman.

The importance of motherhood to each character cannot be overstated: In positive and negative ways, motherhood defines, delimits, burdens, and enriches the lives of every woman in the story.

Each woman discovers overwhelming emotional bonds upon becoming a mother; and each fails her daughter in at least one way. Mother-daughter relationships are made even more complicated by the changing social circumstances that perennially leave the older generation out of step with contemporary mores: What was a risky adventure for one generation is the birthright of the next and the downfall of still a later generation. Sarah's freedom is exceptional in her day, but her own daughter Salome revels in freedom, and Salome's daughter Sally is undone by it. Each individual is so absorbed in daily life that the changing background cannot be captured for a lesson to a daughter. In addition to these historical changes which form an important part of Inventing Memory, the relationships themselves change as mothers and daughters grow, mature, and undertake the taxing responsibility of getting older. The task of understanding the self is difficult when that inner person does not retain a fixed identity, and this ongoing change strains the abilities even of a mother or daughter to keep on understanding her closest relation every day.

In comparison to mother-daughter relationships, the bonds between women and men seem pale as they are presented in InventingMemory. Interpersonal relationships between the genders are not nearly as problematic as family relationships are in this novel. Perhaps since we can choose and reject (and be rejected by) lovers, while parent-child bonds are bred in the bone, romantic attachments are doomed to secondary status. As depicted by Jong, romantic love is transitory and insubstantial, though intensely fulfilling in the short term. The great love story of the book, between Sarah and Sim, is shadowed by class and religious differences and then destroyed by chance violence. The traditional marriage modeled by Sarah and Lev is sexless, and no other two characters maintain a permanent pair-bond throughout life. In fact, by the end of the novel, Sara seems to be ready to reject any attempt at romantic love in her determination to understand herself and rear her daughter in a nurturing environment.

One final theme is so prevalent that exploring it would require extensive study: Inventing Memory is a book about four generations of mothers and daughters who are specifically Jewish. Just as women must understand themselves as women, and just as daughters must cope with the fact of their relationship with their mothers, all the characters in InventingMemory must understand themselves as Jews. At the heart of the book,

midway through the four generations, stands Aaron's story of the Holocaust, and at the opening of each chapter an epigraph comments on Jewish identity. The story begins in a Jewish girl's flight from ethnic persecution and ends four generations later in a young Jewish woman's museum exhibition on the subject of the identity of Jewish immigrants to America. Jong poses some challenging questions about Jewish identity in the course of telling her story of mothers and daughters, and she shapes her characters in the form of mostly optimistic replies to her questions.

Key Questions

The familial elements in Inventing Memory are universal in their appeal, since every woman is also a daughter, even though she may choose not to be a mother herself. An interesting comparison could be developed by discussing Inventing Memory in conjunction with another saga of mothers and daughters, Joan Chase's During the Reign of theQueen of Persia (1996). The questions in Jong's novel that address Jewish identity could be profitably examined in comparison to Bernard Malamud's The Fixer (1966; see separate entry), Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir Night (1982), or Etty Hillesum's diary An Interrupted Life (1996). Additionally, a less well-known novel, Rebecca Goldstein's The Mind-Body Problem (1993) features a family of Orthodox Jews as viewed through the eyes of a wayward scholarly daughter not unlike Sara. Be sure to give some thought also to the implications of the title: do we all merely invent the past for ourselves to suit our present needs? If so, where is truth?

1. Inventing Memory includes a glossary to define dozens of Yiddish terms and even entire sentences—a wonderful aid for monolingual goyishe readers. How does Jong's deployment of this old-world vocabulary define her characters? How does it change over the time span traced by the novel's plot developments?

2. Jong's narrative becomes more fragmented as the story's time-frame moves closer and closer to the present. Straightforward storytelling is replaced by journal entries, unpublished magazine interviews, letters, and other casual forms of writing.

What does this unraveling of the story's form suggest about twentieth-century history? How does it compare to the transformation in the art world from admiration for representational art such as portraits to the celebration of abstraction that occurred in New York after World War II?

3. What lessons can be learned from the varying degrees of sexual libertinism displayed by the four key characters, Sarah Solomon Levitsky, Salome Levitsky Wallinsky Robinowitz, Sally Sky, and Sara Wyndham? What benefits do they gain and what penalties do they pay for their sexual adventures and experiments?

4. Many real-life figures are mixed into the fictional plot either as working characters who interact with the story's protagonists (for example, Henry Miller) or as references to provide historical context and believable texture to the story (such as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg). Does this mixing of the real world and the fictional world work? Is the story made more believable by this technique, or are the historical references just so much baggage? What historical elements were particularly memorable, and how did they enrich or weaken the story?

5. Motherhood turns out to be the most important experience in the lives of the four women in the story. How is each woman transformed by becoming a mother, and does this transformation make them fit for motherhood? If motherhood is such a powerful

force, how is it that some women, in the story and in life, are unsuccessful mothers? How do the women in the story succeed and fail in particular ways as mothers?

6. During Salome's years in Paris, in addition to Henry Miller she meets Edith Wharton, and in a lengthy scene she visits Wharton for lunch one day. In what ways is Wharton, as a character in the book, presented as a model for the successful modern woman? How is she strikingly different from Salome? How are they alike? Why is Wharton such an ironic contrast to the rest of Salome's life in Paris? If you are familiar with novels by Edith Wharton and Henry Miller, how does your knowledge of their literary work influence your appreciation of these writers as fictional characters in Jong's literary work?

7. One of the most tragic characters in Inventing Memory is Aaron Wallinsky, a survivor of the Holocaust who cannot bear to live after seeing so many worthy people die in Nazi death camps. How does his experience typify the post-Holocaust crisis of faith experienced by persons of various religions when faced with the depths of human evil?

8. Sally Sky is the sole representative of the "Baby Boom" generation, and her life after her early phenomenal singing success is a sorry array of weakness, failures, and mistakes. In what ways is this characterization of the children born between 1946 and 1964 appropriate or inappropriate? Are there positive aspects of the "boomers" that Jong has overlooked or excluded, and if so, why might she have omitted them?

9. How would you characterize the Jewishness displayed by each of the four key characters? Do the changes over the generations represent a decline from the standards of an idealized past—a kind of fall from an Edenic practice of faith—or do they represent a growth towards a deeper understanding of faith?

10. Towards the end of the novel as Sara is working on an exhibit for the Council on Jewish History, she muses over whether the story of the Jews is pessimistic or optimistic and whether the Jewish conception of God is cruel or kind. The narrator asks, "If the Jews were to be seen [after the Holocaust] only as victims, then hadn't Hitler really won?"

Why might the narrator's observations be considered controversial or even heretical by some? What is lost or sacrificed in an optimistic view of Jewish history, and what is gained by a pessimistic view? How might these extremes be reconciled?

Literary Precedents

The multifaceted formal structure of Inventing Memory resembles a less orderly version of the literary techniques pioneered by John Dos Passes in his trilogy U.S.A., consisting of The Forty-Ninth Parallel (1930), Nineteen Nineteen (1932), and The Big Money (1936; see separate entry). Dos Passes was a member of the Paris society of American expatriates in the 1920s and would have been living and writing there during the time that Salome is publishing her literary magazine, Innuendo. He moved in the circle of poets, novelists, and painters that Salome mingles with, but she does not seem to have encountered him in spite of her wide acquaintance (she would certainly have mentioned him in her journal!). Dos Passos used innovative literary techniques which included the fragmenting of his narrative with bits of cultural flotsam and jetsam: newspaper headlines, snatches of popular songs, lyrical personal observations, and an eclectic parade of biographical sketches of real people all interrupt the flow of the story while also commenting on it and deepening the novel's social relevance. Some of the characters in U.S.A. also might have been anarchist comrades of Lev Levitsky, agitating for labor unions and striving to create a workers' paradise in the new world. Like Lev, however, Dos Passos himself became disenchanted with Communism and other leftist causes and abandoned them even though much of the literary world, or at least certain influential players in it, continued to espouse revolutionary ideals; similarly, just as Lev was despised by his former friends for abandoning the struggle, Dos Passos saw his novels savaged by influential leftist critics after he openly criticized the methods of the American Communist party. Heresy encounters equally harsh retribution in the fictional world and in the real world.

More recently, postmodern novels such as John Earth's Lost in the Funhouse (1968) have broken with the tradition of a unified deployment of first-person or third-person narration in order to incorporate nonnarrative experimental elements. In Inventing Memory, the reader eventually learns that the apparent first-person narrative of Sarah Solomon Levitsky is actually a transcription of a tape-recorded oral history she created for her great-granddaughter; in Lost in the Funhouse, the author announces directly in the introduction to one section that it is to be experienced solely as a live production of the author's voice (in spite of the fact that the text is printed on the page).

Other sections of Barth's book include messages in bottles or stories-within -stories that are eventually punctuated by long series of embedded quotation marks to denote a lengthy history of storytellers and their tales. Similarly, Jong invents a variety of indirect storytelling materials to reveal her characters as they would be in life and uses these to fragment her narrative; however, she also uses the frame work of a traditional narrator to set her story in motion and bring it to closure again.

Related Titles

Jong has remarked that her work on her personal memoir, Fear of Fifty (1994), led her to become interested in exploring her family's history. The research began with her grandfather's stories of his emigration from pre-revolutionary Russia, and it included her disappointing trip to Odessa, while it was still a Soviet city, to search for some traces of the family's roots. Jong's treatment of these materials, however, gradually changed, shifted, and matured into the novel Inventing Memory.

The remembered stories of her grandfather's early life underwent a complete transformation to become the fourgenerational saga of the struggles of Jewish mothers and daughters who seek fulfillment through love, art, work, and motherhood.

Another earlier literary interest of Jong's also plays a role in Inventing Memory: the novelist Henry Miller. When Fear of Flying was published in 1973, Miller hailed the book as a woman's version of his own ground-breaking novel, Tropic of Cancer, and praised Jong's development of an authentic erotic voice capable of articulating women's desires. Later, Jong met the aging Miller and produced a study of his literary achievement, The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller (1993). Miller appears as himself in the portion of Inventing Memory that chronicles the adventures of Salome Levitsky. This fictional character first encounters Miller in a cafe in Paris during the 1920s, "les annees folles," and becomes one of his sexual adventures. The experience is an awakening for her, especially when she learns that Miller has other lovers, including his wife and Anai's Nin. Years later, Salome visits Miller at his coastal cabin in Big Sur and renews their affair; in fact, Miller is one of three candidates who might have fathered her second child, the "nogoodnik" Lorenzo. Jong's personal experience with Miller allows her to create a sympathetic, detailed, and believable representation of one of the wilder literary legends of the twentieth century.

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