

IT HAPPENS AS WE SPEAK: A Feminist Poetics by Pat Falk
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It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics is written in an interestingly hybrid form. It's a non-sequential memoir imbued with a literary journey in search of spiritual meaning. Narratives in the form of a journal that skips around in time of the author's life story are fit into an analytical approach to literature. Composed of personal memories of childhood and womanhood, Falk's feminist approach takes her through a coming of age story, laced with the experience of reading literature that defines her journey and augments it with metaphorical understanding.

Pat Falk begins her spiritual quest with an image that bespeaks nurturance from literary forebears. She carefully describes a sensual moment of eating chocolate "I slide the thin sliver of chocolate onto my tongue" a bit of sweet nurturance given her both literally and figuratively by her mentor, Adrienne Rich. It is clear that Falk has great admiration for Rich, one of the authors who has influenced her style of writing: interior monolog imbued with contemplative thought. This mode comprises the primary tone of her book.

In an earlier essay, "Writing as Spiritual Practice" —originally presented to a Sophia Center Symposium, Huntington, New York, and published in "Conversations," a publication of the center, 2002— Falk has said:

1962. Her name is Barbara Jane Lofrumento. Harvey, my doctor did an abortion on her and she died. He panicked and cut up her body; then he stuffed the parts down the garbage disposal. I am so sick and disgusted, I have sent my spirit into hiding to stay safe. I let her out only through poetry and music. She's very smart, and as strong as those stones I used to break open. She wants me to bear witness, to speak the truth, to bring to form that which has been lost, dis-membered and dis-integrated. I need to be able to imagine wholeness, to feel empowered, to live without threat. I want to speak for her, but I'm scared. It helps to use symbols and metaphors; they reveal and conceal at the same time.

This paragraph is a great clue to the form taken by *It Happens As We Speak*. Central to the book is the memory of that horrific night the author, as a young person, first heard of the crime committed by her lawyer father's client, the physician, Harvey Lothringer, who committed this frightening dismemberment of Barbara Jane Lofrumento, a woman with whom the author identifies deeply and traumatically.

The name “Jane,” as in Yeat’s “Crazy Jane,” but also, as in Charlotte Bronte’s strong heroine of survival and independence, Jane Eyre—a pivotal character in the history of women’s writing—is central to the author’s identity. Her middle name is also “Jane.” And Jane is the middle name of Harvey’s victim. *It Happens As We Speak* is Falk’s attempt to speak for the speechless woman inside herself, to “imagine wholeness, to feel empowered, to live without threat,” to survive illness and trauma.

Falk uses symbols and metaphors gleaned from literary art “to reveal and conceal” at the same time,” throughout her book. The spiritual quest that carries us through literature, history, socio-politics, carries us through the author’s life in a tapestry of time-dated events, threads of memory woven together with literary analysis. The form is in a measure experimental, but Falk owes much to her literary mentors. For one, Adrienne Rich, when she uses the idea of; “Notes Toward...” a construct used by Rich in *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, © 1993. The construct of “notebooks” allows the author to skip around in time and create order out of chaos with what feminists of the 70’s called circular, feminine logic, rather than masculine linear logic. Perhaps this form adds to the idea of a “Feminist Poetics,” Falk’s subtitle. Another author whose technique similarly influenced Falk is Susan Griffin who uses a similar non-chronological form in *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*, © 1992, a book woven of non-sequential, time-dated threads into a final tapestry imbued with literary commentary. Evan Boland’s *Object Lessons* affords another prototype.

Falk’s memoir is constructed in the form of notational entries into a diary or “notebook” in dated non-sequential order. As Alicia Ostriker has observed: “The personal, the poetic, the political, the historic, the mythic—they braid together in this saga of the growth of a woman’s mind.” The growth of the narrator’s mind concerns her coming of age toward an understanding of the past events and characters who have shaped her life. The literary art of others gives her metaphorical clues and symbolic truths along route to bring her to the age of wisdom, toward healing of the trauma, repression, and terrors of youth that have formed her poetic perceptions. In that sense Falks memoir is a passage with which all women, especially women writers, can identify.

In the same essay mentioned above “Writing as a Spiritual Practice” Falk states:

2002. Embodied in "the image," any image, are the seeds of its own volition. All I need to do is translate rhythms into images, then let the image go, trusting enough to be carried along the process, changing and being changed. Surrendering to a process of such intensity and uncertainty

is terrifying, and I often resist by refusing to write. But then my spirit, muffled and buried, demands release, and with faith that something good will come out of the process, I eventually let go.

It Happens As We Speak represents the “letting go,” that brings out “the muffled and buried” which “demands release.” It offers a road map for every woman’s spiritual expedition, and an prototypical vehicle for travel through interior space.

After the sensual image of eating a piece of chocolate, symbolic of sweet nurturance, from her literary foremother and mentor, Adrienne Rich, in the “Prologue” to her book, Falk writes:

March 2, 1997

I am on sabbatical. The word sabbatical is related to sabbath: rest, reflection, meditation. Like keeping the sabbath day, like lighting a candle. I must take time from work, note change with ritual, let go.

An old dream: I’m on the shore, holding on to the rope of a boat which is being thrust and bumped against the bulkhead, then pulled out toward the sea on huge cresting waves. The thick rope cuts into my palms. I am bleeding and can’t hold on any longer. And if I let go? Maybe the boat will sail off to some great adventure; maybe it will be smashed. But my power is not nearly as great as some other force—wind, tide, current—a magnificent beast that presides on earth. I let go of the boat and it’s thrown on to the waves. I’m alone, standing on expansive, shifting sand.

Another image: I am the boat. I let the winds and tide take me out.

Writing requires a leap of faith: in myself, language, art, music, in the daily rhythms and currents of life. This is labor, different than work. In the morning, when my mind is most clear and focused, I leisurely putter, clean up the house, move from book to desk to a poem to a page of this manuscript; walk my dog, have breakfast; drive to the beach. Where sea meets land is the place of change: solid becomes soft, soft becomes liquid; liquid, firm; shape, form, solid, stone. Boats are stones, winged with sails.

* * *

I am reflecting on ideas, images and processes that I have valued, perhaps clung to, for much of my life; reflecting on change; and changing. I am trying to locate who I am as a woman and a writer in the world. It will happen as I speak.

And it does. Falk’s journey brings her ultimately to a place of peace and refreshment of the spirit. After a trip through trials and experiences, and texts by others, from William Butler Yeats to Charlotte Bronte, Walt Whitman, H.D., Anne Sexton, Denise Levertov, and William Stafford—to name just a few—the author comes upon a reaffirmation of writing as a means of fulfillment that reveals one’s own inner light. Falk ends where she began with a mention of her beloved mentor, the one who has been among her chief inspirations.

“Save yourself, others you cannot save.” Adrienne Rich. As usual, her words rise to the surface. How they have sustained me. Looking up at the sky, imagining the hidden constellations, I recall

a stanza from a William Stafford poem—was it the poem printed opposite my piece on Whitman?
I remember it at a difficult time in my life.

Time helps, the stars pulling apart,
Their constellations and forming new
Meanings, the shapes of leaves imitating
Feathers at first, then paws, then wind prayers.

We have traveled with the author through her poetic journey to come to a place where the sun burns through a blue sky, where experience is given shape and meaning by the use of words, both her own and the many other literary lights whose torches have shown the way through darkness, doubt, and fear to empowerment, self-realization, survival, and spiritual enlightenment.

What's particularly important about Falk's book is that it is an ode to the art of writing and the art of reading from which it is born. It affirms the value of literary art to one's inner life, of poetry as a means of spiritual enlightenment and escape from loneliness, a way of sharing experience on this "dark earth" lit by moon and sun, spinning in the currents of "wind prayers." Poetry offers hope in the face of despair that one is not alone, that other minds share understanding of pain and joy, pleasure and sorrow. It is a book that speaks to the spirit of all, augmenting what Emily Dickinson said when she wrote; "There is no Frigate like a Book/ To take us Lands away/ Nor any Coursers like a Page/ Of prancing Poetry—"

Pat Falk is essentially a poet who teaches writing, literature and women's studies at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. She was educated at the City University of New York and her research has focused on feminist poetics, interdisciplinary approaches to writing, the confluence of poetry and politics, and human rights. *It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics* is a culminating and climactic work in the course of her life as poet and teacher, and it is a valuable read for any person interested in the commingling of the two. Many of Falk's passages read like poetry and offer the reader musings that enlist uplifting realizations wrought from reading others with a depth of understanding and personal interpretation.

Daniela Gioseffi is an American Book Award winning author of fourteen books of poetry and prose from major and university presses, the latest: *WOMEN ON WAR; International Writings* from The Feminist Press, NY, 2003. She has won the Sidney Sulkin Prize for reviewing and been a member of the National Book Critics Circle for over thirty years. Her poetry has won two grant awards from The New York State Council for the Arts, and she has published poems, fiction and literary reviews in numerous venues from *The Paris Review* to *The Nation*, *Prairie Schooner* or *Ms. magazine*. Her 2006 book is a bilingual edition of her new and selected poems: *Blood Autumn [Autunno di sangue]* from VIA Folios, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. She launched her career with a feminist novel, *The Great American Belly*, Doubleday 1977, and a collection of feminist poetry, *Eggs in the Lake*, Boa Editions, Ltd. 1979.