

It Happens as We Speak: A Feminist Poetics

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By Pat Falk

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It Happens As We Speak is a book I will return to again and again. Its opening line reads, “Adrienne Rich offers me a piece of chocolate from the Hershey bar she has just unwrapped” and immediately, I feel transported to a chair at the kitchen table of the feminist literary tradition. Well, perhaps to just a stool in an unnoticed corner of that busy, busy kitchen where I sit spellbound, page after page.

I read on Pat Falk’s website (www.patfalk.net) that in April 2008 she gave a talk on the subject of, “the personal voice in academic writing” and it strikes me that this is what I have found so inviting, compelling about her book. It *is* a personal and friendly voice in a piece of academic writing. Or perhaps, it is an admission, a demonstration, the celebration that one’s academia and one’s self are plaited inseparably together. And not two separate selves that must be doffed or donned according to occasion.

Pat may have sat down in March 1997 on her sabbatical to write this book. Or maybe it began a couple of decades earlier when she first wrote her dissertation prospectus in 1978. Either way, she writes on page 10,

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 ... It will happen as I speak.

And so the book happens as the author speaks to her past, to her childhood, being parented, being a parent -- all in the context of poetry and the poetry of her foremothers. She explores feminism in terms of her life and in its portrayal in literature. She meshes her own histories and her dreams for her futures with her search for a feminist poetics and in this telling, demonstrates the symbiosis of life’s experience and literature. Simultaneously, she creates literary criticism.

I set out to learn from this book about the manifestation of poetry in feminism or perhaps, about the manifestation of feminism in poetry. And I encountered not a book of facts, answers, assertion, but a book of questionings, exploration and process. Through *It Happens As We Speak*, Pat shares her thinking and her ultimate understandings and presents these not as theoretical solutions for her readers, but as her resolutions to which the reader is privy.

Towards the end of the book, Pat explains poetry to her photographer daughter:

this is how you write poems. First rhythms, then images, and then you play with them, move the foreground, the background, clarify one thing, make another fuzzy.

She employs a similar method in her book to write an academic piece in a way that includes the reader and invites reading after reading to clarify or refocus yet another plane of meaning.