

Erica Jong and Her ‘Fear of Dying’ Deserve Respect



The 'Fear of Flying' author is back, once again striking a societal nerve

By [Suzanne Gerber](#)
September 16, 2015

Erica Jong, best known for her 1973 breakout novel, *Fear of Flying* (which gave the world the iconic concept of “ziplessness”), and her follow-up memoir *Fear of Fifty*, is back with a new book — and, not surprisingly, a new fear.



This novel, called *Fear of Dying*, was 10 years in the making as Jong struggled with the heavy issues at its core: a midlife sexual crisis, a partner’s life-threatening illness, the slow decline of both parents, coming to terms with one’s own aging and, inevitably, the specter of death. Though *Fear of Dying* reads like a memoir, it is a novel, if one whose real-life models are thinly veiled.

As Jong recently [told The New York Times](#), “I’ve always wanted to write the books for women that didn’t yet exist, so I thought, I have to write about an older woman who is sexual, attractive and wants to reach out for life. That’s not celebrated, sadly, and I would hope that a lot of older women who read this book realize that sex doesn’t disappear, it just changes forms.”

This time, however, it’s not *Fear of Flying* heroine Isadora Wing who’s having the sexual exploits; it’s a new character, 60-something Vanessa Wonderman, who happens to be BFFs with Jong’s more famous alter ego.

Jong-as-Wonderman ricochets from discourses on the superficial (poodles, art, plastic surgery) to the gut wrenching (her husband’s [erectile dysfunction](#), her daughter’s rehab, her [parents’ deterioration](#)). Propelling the narrative along are hefty infusions of wit, literary allusions, name dropping and various sexual encounters. (Warning: Jong is jauntily casual about dropping a blitzkrieg of “c-bombs.”)

I would hope that a lot of older women who read this book realize that sex doesn't disappear, it just changes forms.

— Erica Jong

But this is no cheap, cheesy, titillating airport novel. (Although it probably will fill many airport display cases and titillate a good number of probably older female readers.) Jong, as the New York Times has dubbed her, is a “feminist heroine of sorts and avatar of female sexual liberation,” and in this, her 18th book, she takes direct aim at outmoded cultural taboos, chief among them women of a certain age speaking — and acting — with candor about their sexuality.

If You've Got It...

As Wonderman says to a crowd, “But why do we as women always need permission to be ourselves? Who took away our self-given permission, and why?”

Neither Jong, Wing nor Wonderman has ever made apologies for her sexuality. In fact, all three proudly displayed their lusty appetites as a sort of calling card.

But it's 2015, and things are different now. That's clear from page one, where Wonderman says, “I used to love the power I had over men ... how strange that I only completely knew this power when it was gone.” Then, she admits wistfully, she misses that power.

This time around, Jong's alter ego is an over-the-hill actress whose most memorable role was an ersatz Erica Kane character (*All My Children's* infamous rhymes-with-rich) in a long-running nighttime soap opera. She's aware that while she's lost her superpowers, her lust is decidedly still intact. And with a much-older husband who's unable to satisfy her, Wonderman goes looking for love in all the wrong places, including a dating site called Zipless.com — whose name was a nod to, and a steal from, her wing woman, Isadora.

Wonderman's (mis)adventures with potential partners, however amusing, are just a small part of the book's arc. (And truth be told, there are only a handful of graphic encounters.) Mostly these interludes serve as spicy dangling carrots to keep the reader engaged in what's at the book's core: a philosophical treatise on aging, and the difference between lust/sex and love/intimacy.

The Other “F” Word

Historically, women’s sexuality has been enshrouded in taboo. But women (and a few iconoclastic men) have been chipping away at the barriers for some time. If Jong is the original “chick lit” author, early 20th-century writer Colette may be responsible for the first “cougar” novel (*Chéri*, in 1920), and *Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir laid the foundation for modern feminism.



While valuable for its perspective, *Fear of Dying* is not going to win any major literary awards. For one thing, its meandering and self-referential storyline makes it feel like it was written over 10 days, not 10 years.

There are a number of sloppy errors, as well. Though assiduously sober for 272½ pages, the protagonist orders a glass of wine early on; JP Morgan/Chase CEO Jamie Dimon’s surname is spelled like the precious gem; and the Hindu god Shiva is confused with Krishna in a passage that begs familiarity.

Plus the book is riddled with the kind of clichés and tired phrases that simply can’t sound fresh in 2015: “I was number one on his hit parade;” “dogs are our Zen masters;” “reciting chapter

and verse” and engaging in “retail therapy.”

Yet *Fear of Dying* is important if only because of its provenance. Jong is part of the feminist pantheon that includes Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem and Naomi Wolf, and when she speaks up about the ghettoization of female sexuality, however flawed her narrative, we owe her a serious listen.

A Celebrity Voice

True, scads of middle-aged women have the same complaints and heartbreaks, but when Jong’s discussing them, she’s likely to capture a larger audience’s ears (and hearts). It’s like the way anonymous humanitarians can toil in their field for decades and not earn a fraction of the support that George Clooney can garner in a five-minute speech about Rwanda.

Regardless of how you feel about that, it's undeniable that this is the positive power of celebrity. So I say kudos to Jong for unabashedly adding her voice to the crescendo'ing chant that women should not go gentle into that good night of sexual second-class citizenship.

While no one will confuse *Fear of Dying* with a self-help book (it clearly is a book by Jong, about Jong, for Jong), it still has much to offer women of all ages, namely, an affirmation that the desire to love and be loved doesn't fade away, but that a deeper love often rushes in to fill the void left by retreating youthful passion.

Jong's themes should resonate with many-to-most *femmes d'un certain âge* — or anyone dealing with a shifting sexual landscape, a fear of aging or (especially) the singular heartbreak of watching their parents decline and die. When you get socked with all those challenges all the same time, it can be overwhelming.

But this book demonstrates that with humor, grace and the wisdom that comes only from living many decades, as Jong has, not only can it be handled, but that it can bring a special kind of transcendence.