

The Writing Life and Aging:  
A Conversation with  
E.M. Broner and Mary Gordon

On September 11, 2008, Marcia Freedman, *Persimmon Tree* contributing editor, sat down with writers E.M. Broner and Mary Gordon in Mary's New York apartment. Over tea, these old friends talked about many important issues.

*PT:* I'd like to start this conversation by asking you to think about your writing and your lives as writers. As you grow older, what changes do you see?

*EMB:* We always talk about how life gets in the way of our writing.

*MG:* We both have complicated families and are passionate about them. The reality is that this has pressed on our lives as writers in a way that it wouldn't for men. And these pressures change as our mates and our children are in different places.

Another thought is that we both had our most optimistic time as writers as a result of the women's movement. There suddenly was an audience for what we were writing in a way that there never would have been. And now there isn't again.

*PT:* You're talking about the '70s and the '80s?

*MG:* Yes. I am not so sure that this decrease in audience is a function of growing older as it is our historical moment—but it hits us at a particular point in our lives.

*PT:* But haven't you noticed that some of the men from the '70s and '80s, like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, continue to receive critical acclaim?

*EMB:* It seems their images have been enhanced by age. At least that's my impression.

*MG:* For us women, we had this little window of opportunity. If you look at what was being published in the '50s and '60s in America, there were no women novelists. Tillie Olsen and Grace Paley were there in a marginal way. Eudora Welty was almost silent. Flannery O'Connor was just writing short stories, so she wasn't really

making it. And then Toni Morrison came along in the '70s and broke through.

*PT:* Would you say that women are having trouble getting published today, and would that be worse for older women than it is for younger women?

*MG:* I think pretty, sexy young women can still get a first novel published. Everybody of middle age or older who is literary is having a hard time.

*PT:* And why is that?

*MG:* There just aren't enough people interested. Not enough to be financially profitable to a major publisher.

*PT:* So we are a disappearing audience?

*MG:* Yes. In this culture all literary writers are having trouble because people aren't reading the way they used to. Everybody says, "Well, look at the big Barnes and Nobles stores." But have you noticed the books that take up most of the space there? Even I don't read as much as I once did.

*EMB:* You're more pessimistic than I am. I keep thinking of people on the subways, everybody with a different book.

*MG:* They're crap books. But what a pleasure to see them reading.

*EMB:* Sometimes on a weekend morning, I'll get up early and walk to the park and sit on a bench, reading the book review. All these people walk by and want to know what books I like. We've been told for a long time that the novel is dead, and we've been told that technology is changing and nobody's going to be reading books in print anymore. But it hasn't happened. I don't have such a long lifetime left, but I think people will keep reading while I'm alive. I remember my dad reading a book a day until his eyes were buried deep in his head under thick glasses, and we'd go to the library every week.

*MG:* That's beautiful.

*EMB:* Well, I want to go back to the Remington. What happy days those were. The typewriter was beautiful, and black, and noisy. And the piles of paper, I didn't mind that.

- MB:* The carbon paper. The white-out. But I feel, as I age, that one of my most important spiritual tasks is not to become nostalgic and not to say, “Oh, it was better when we were younger.” Because that just makes you bitter and crabby, and all the old people we loved were not bitter and crabby.
- EMB:* That’s true.
- MG:* Those older women or men embraced our different way of doing it, and they blessed us. I have the temptation to say, “It was so much better in the past. It’s all going down the toilet.” I feel I have to fight that in myself every single day.
- EMB:* When you’re teaching young people, it’s easier to resist that. You go towards the future.
- PT:* Would either one of you say that your writing has been enriched by the fact of being older?
- MG:* Yes, I would. It’s analogous to feeling attractive. You can look as gorgeous as you want, and it doesn’t matter—there’s still going to be some 20-year-old who’s going to look more gorgeous than you. So you let it go because you realize you’re not in that game. And when you do that, it’s sad at first and then it’s a terrific relief. As I get older, I realize I’m always going to be a little bit marginal. I’m never going to be really at the center of the web. So what the hell, I’ll just write whatever I want. In a funny way, it’s freeing.
- EMB:* Mary, sorry to cut you off, but I disagree with your idea of yourself. You’re an enormous influence, a major writer.
- MG:* I’m not diminishing myself, but I know that younger people don’t particularly read me. I look at my audiences, all older. My graduate students in writing programs have never read me. They want to read Dave Eggers or someone like that. What I do is very peripheral to what is important to them.
- EMB:* To the young people, yes.
- MG:* Even my concern with the shape of a sentence, the kind of sentence I love. Mine don’t make my students’ blood race in the way a sentence of Tillie’s or Grace’s did for me. I would go home and copy it, asking, “How can I do that? How can I learn from that?”
- EMB:* When my dad was in his eighties, he used to say that the good

thing about getting older is the winds of ambition don't blow so fiercely.

*MG:* I think that's so.

*PT:* But still, you want people to read your work. The publishers are looking for writing by young writers, but maybe they're overlooking the interest of older readers. We've had great success in attracting older readers to *Persimmon Tree*. Perhaps the publishers are convincing you and your students to look for a public that isn't really the public you can rely on and that will read you.

*MG:* I completely agree, but when you say my work will have an influence, that's a different question.

*EMB:* I think of my students reading your work and reacting, and it's freeing them to write in another way. For myself, I no longer think I'll be rich and famous; it was a nice dream. But I've had an effect. I've freed thinking in a way.

*MG:* You know, Flannery O'Connor says you learn everything important by the time you're seven. I think that for a variety of reasons, I have felt stylistically freer as I've aged. When I was starting to write in the early '70s, there was a kind of feminist writing that I really did not want to be associated with.

*PT:* Why?

*MG:* Because I thought it was sloppy stylistically. It lacked polish and elegance. I thought it was careless. The people whom I honored had a great concision and beauty of language. I was reading Tillie, and I was reading Grace, and I was reading people like Elizabeth Bowen and Katherine Ann Porter, and I had a sort of ideal of something well-wrought that was very, very important to me. A lot of feminist literature at the time seemed ill-wrought to me. I worried about distinguishing myself from that because my subject was similar to theirs. I kept a very tight leash on myself formally, and it took me many years to be able to loosen that leash.

*PT:* Both of you have rich religious lives—Esther, you as a Jew and Mary, you as a Catholic. Can you say something about how that has affected your work.

*EMB:* Maybe it's the Psalms. In them is a sense of ecstasy. I extol; I honor. I love those women heroes. I look for them everywhere—in

literature, in the Bible. That has stayed fairly constant with me.

*MG:* Me, too. Those liturgical rhythms are in your skin. The notion that this is the work that language can do, and you want to do it. To not do it somehow seems inadequate. And for me, a sense of resonance with beautiful words of the past is tremendously important; that's something that liturgical language does. You are saying the same thing that people said 4,000 and 5,000 years ago.

*PT:* Do you think that writers who don't have that kind of a religious life would say what you're both saying?

*EMB:* I know of certain orthodox women who have cleverness to their work. There's not always heart, nor is there adventure. Oh, adventure is so wonderful, and it shouldn't be just when you're young. Mary and I talk about the Psalms being honey on the tongue. I feel like I can drip it around.

*MG:* You want it to be delicious and physical.

*EMB:* And sensory, like the Song of Songs.

*MG:* I find it interesting that your new book, *The Red Squad*, is less Jewish than anything you've written in a long time.

*EMB:* That's true.

*MG:* It's more saleable, isn't it?

*EMB:* I didn't think of that. I had gotten a little tired of the characters I'd had before, so I chose a Greek woman hero. It was great fun to have her shaped differently from me and have a different history. I had a lot of Catholic characters in there. I could go into other traditions with comfort because I was comfortable with my own, but my old audience is going to wonder what happened to me.

*MG:* I'm writing a novel now that's set in Rome, and a friend of mine said to me, "Oh, good, you do the Catholic stuff so well." But I'd rather talk about the food. I'd rather talk about the stones. I'd rather talk about the sky and the orange trees. I just don't want to do the same thing again.

*PT:* You're both making changes.

*MG:* I do think there's a sort of freedom that comes with age. My subjects are not my business. What's given to me is what I'll go

with. What people make of it, or not, is really not my business.

I say to my students that the muse is a horse, and it runs around, and you never know when it's going to run around your house. You can't call it, but you'd better be home and jump on its back if it happens to be there. I have given up more control as I've gotten older.

*EMB:* But you say that form and structure are enormously important? That's not giving up control in that sphere.

*MG:* No. One can never do that. But I'm trying to relax: I'll write about this, I'll write about that, and when it gets done, it will get done. I think that's better.

*EMB:* I used to tell my students that there are so many stories to tell. The American Jewish male story has been told and re-told, and there's not a whole lot more to say. But the Jewish story is still quite rich. The female story is coming along; the homesteader in a wild country is a wonderful story; and the story of the African-American is very important and very good—but there are things that haven't been said there. We haven't been told all kinds of other stories. We don't even know what they are and how to listen for them.

But the question is: How do we tell the same story over in different ways?

*MG:* I think it has to do with language. Sometimes I feel like I'm reading the same story about Indians or Cubans or Chinese. There are no surprises. I think great literature makes things more complex rather than flattening them out. I'm always against oversimplification wherever I see it.

I had a friend who was asked to write a TV show about a Black woman and a white woman. They don't like each other, but as they work together, they realize they have a lot in common, and they end up loving each other. My friend said, "What I want to do is have the Black woman and white woman think they like each other at first, but after they work together, they realize they have nothing in common. They truly end up hating each other." I'm sure the TV studio didn't buy it.

I think there's a kind of re-cycle, like with the stories of mothers and daughters sitting around the table. We invented them, and now they've become such a cliché.

*EMB:* Yet in our own lives that relationship is so complicated, with our daughters inching toward our throne, elbowing just a little bit, to say it cruelly. Mother doesn't know best anymore, and some of that is true, but it's very hard to be dethroned.

*MG:* It's one of our tasks to get off the throne.

*EMB:* Yes, but hopefully not to be pushed.

*MG:* That thorny relationship, it seems to me, is well worth writing about. It's heart breaking. It's fascinating. It's funny. That, I think, is still a very rich relationship.

*EMB:* Then there are the stories of lovers. My last book has this passionate love affair over forty years. There's a lot of sexuality and longing.

*MG:* I can hardly remember that. Somebody once said to me something very intelligent: When you say you want sex, what is it you really want? I think this is the most dangerous, threatening thing that older women can write about.

*EMB:* Sex?

*MG:* Not wanting sex.

*EMB:* That is so interesting.

*MG:* All these old male authors write about being 75, wearing diapers, but still wanting sex all the time. I think these guys just don't want to die. One of the most threatening things that older women have asked is: Suppose that sex is not the driving force anymore? Then what do we have? And, boy, do people not want to hear that. But we're all living it and not talking about it.

When women say they want men, do they want sex, or do they just not want to be alone? Do they want financial security, do they want somebody to talk to at breakfast? I think we've used sex as an all-purpose metaphor for connection.

*EMB:* That's heterosexuals you're talking about.

*PT:* Well, it's the same question for gay women, I can tell you. Sex is the all-purpose metaphor for intimacy. I have a great deal of intimacy in my life, but I haven't had sex for about ten years. I

don't expect to, and I don't care.

*MG:* And this, I think, is the absolutely well-kept secret of older women. Everybody says, "Oh, you're not having sex. Your life has diminished. You're not as robust." That's not true. And the other question is: supposing it is true?

*EMB:* One misses a tender touch.

*MG:* I miss being completely insane. Thought he was going to call, and my heart would race. Then he would call and all of life was resolved. There was nothing else. I'm going to meet him, and what underwear will I wear? I'll wait in the bar, and I'll look around. How will I look so that he will see me? You're a crazy person. It's all you think about all the time. I miss that.

*EMB:* Oh, my dear. I don't miss that. That's too painful.

*PT:* Can we say that there's something about older love that's different because the sexual hotness is not the most prominent thing?

*EMB:* It's more tender than young love. There is the nice, rare moment of your head on his chest, his arm around your neck. It doesn't happen very often, but it is lovely.

*MB:* Young love is so urgent.

*EMB:* And older love is so courtly. How can I get you to the next place? How can we cross the street?

*MG:* How can I say that this day is a happy day?

*EMB:* What can I bring you on this day? I think about that a lot. What one thing can I do to make this day memorable?

*MG:* But the hard thing is that the loss of sexuality is linked with the loss of hope and a loss of optimism. Somehow it is a life force. It's the animal that's galloping toward life, and as I've lost that urgency, I've lost a kind of belief that life is good and that life itself is desirable.

*PT:* You're saying something a little different now than you were before.

*MG:* I think it would be a lie to say there's no loss to it. It's not that I miss the physical sensation, but I miss that sense of compulsion,

that sense of being a live animal.

*EMB:* There's so much heartache in that kind of compulsion, though. The heart breaks so noisily you can hear it crack on the ground.

*PT:* We're coming to the end of our time together, but there's one more thing I'd like to talk about. You've both been very heavily involved in caregiving for aging partners and parents. Can you talk a little bit about how this has affected your writing?

*EMB:* I don't think it's made its way into my writing yet. I suppose it will. I think of the schedule of care giving—the dispensing of pills, the calling for appointments, how much of a day is involved in setting things right and how little of the day is left to go to a wild place inside. You've been terribly tamed. How do you get untamed? It takes a huge effort, and it can also leave one angry.

I spoke to someone today who has an ailing husband, and she said she finally got angry with him. She told him, "I'm leaving now, and I'll see you at 6:00. You don't take care of yourself, and you don't do anything. I'm going away." And where did she go? To a long-ago therapist, and she said "You know me from the past. I don't want analysis. I just want practicality." And the therapist said to her, "All right. You take care of your husband, and I'll take care of you."

*MG:* How do you get to the place where you can step away from the person needing to be cared for? That's the hardest thing.

*EMB:* It's so hard.

*MG:* We did it when we had young children. Somehow it was easier.

*EMB:* The children were heartier. They were coughing, but we were pretty sure the cough would go away. But now you're not so sure.

*MG:* Back then we felt we were being cool if we said, "Okay, I'm doing my work, and the children will be all right." But there's nothing cool about thinking I'm going out to do my work, and my husband might fall in the bathtub with a cerebral hemorrhage.

*EMB:* No.

*MG:* When I had kids, I would wake up at 5:00 in the morning. I seemed to have a huge amount of energy, and I was a little writing machine for two-and-a-half hours. I'm not anymore. It takes much more

time to clear my decks. We actually need more space to write and are given less.

*PT:* Do you think older men writers are given this space?

*MG:* Absolutely.

*EMB:* The door to their writing room is closed. I want to be given permission to isolate myself and write beautifully.

*MG:* We women should help each other with this. We should give time, and we should give money.

*EMB:* The real thing is asking for help and being able to receive it.

*PT:* We're far away from that. But hopefully this conversation will bring us closer. I thank both of you for speaking so beautifully and honestly about your writing and your lives as writers.