

Green Mountains Review



Women, Community and Narrative Voice

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Dedicated in loving memory to

Sybil Claiborne

(1923-1992)

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Introduction:

Women, Community and Narrative Voice

This issue of GMR has been a long time in the making. It evolved both in concept and in content out of my women's fiction writing group, which began in 1980 in New York City and continues still with a slowly changing membership. The group includes a range of women, from 23 to 70 years old, from Arkansas Baptist to Austrian Jewish, from wholly unpublished to critically acclaimed. "Group," as we refer to it, provides us with a time and place to discuss our stories, both written and told, the interaction between our lives and our writing, and the relationships between our voices as writers, as politically involved individuals, and simply as women from diverse backgrounds.

Although most of the authors gathered in this issue of GMR never belonged to this particular women's writing group, in some larger sense they might have. For one thing, many of the authors featured here (true also of the women in my group) are friends, colleagues or students of Grace Paley's, the author interviewed for this special issue. They also share her interest in how life, art and politics are interwoven. In particular, three threads — women, community and narrative voice — can be traced throughout Paley's writings and the works chosen for this volume.

Women's "topics," as Paley refers to them, and as they emerge from the works collected here, include longing after elusive lovers and the critique of actual mates, the trials of friendship and the angst of isolation, the contemplation of motherhood and the evaluation of one's own rearing, the comfort taken in domestic detail and the fascination with exposure, ongoing attempts at deciphering the world and unusual efforts to define one's own place within it, everyday suffocations within an unjust society and idiosyncratic stabs at turning it all inside out. Of course, these topics are not reserved to women only, but when explored by female authors, such subjects continue to attract readers, whether male or female, offering a powerful entree for identification and understanding.

The communities of these stories include not only those of cultural background — from Oregonian farmers to Staten Island Italians, from educated West Virginians to African American laborers, from Polish Jews to white-collar Canadians — but also those within which we live our quotidian lives, ever in the process of being constructed and transformed: the family, the workplace, and the neighborhood; whorehouses, burlesque theatre groups, and political organizations; friendships across ethnic lines, households made up of gay and straight couples, and the phantasmagoric relationships created by the alienated and estranged.

Through a variety of narrative strategies, these stories bring the reader into close contact with an individual's train of thought and feeling and response to experience. Most of the authors have elected the intimacy of first person narrators, while those who employ third have mostly opted for the immediacy of present tense. Thus, each narrator has a "voice", sometimes laden with distinctive markers of ethnicity or altered consciousness, sometimes deceptively standard, seemingly transparent, yet subtly telling and intimate. One narrator consults the reader directly concerning the truth of the story being told; another sits us down to evaluate the pattern in her life of lovers; one we overhear in reverie posing questions her lover, now dead, will never answer; another invites us to peek as she enlists the services of a funeral director in epistolary form; one uses traditional storytelling cues to discuss with us the day she learned she was a witch; another employs the journalistic mode, which records life unfolding and makes us into helpless observers as cancer comes or love dissolves.

These narrative voices speak of their experiences as women; they speak as members of communities and as spokespeople for the formation of new communities; but mostly they speak because people seem to need to hear and tell stories about who we are, where we came from, the situations we are presently enmeshed in, and what we intend to make of it all. I offer this issue in the hope of widening the community of voices talking and listening from within and across all boundaries.

—K.R.

Kate Riley

Talking with Grace: An Interview with Grace Paley

I have come to know Grace in a number of ways over the past twenty years: first as a distant luminary writer of short stories I read with great pleasure, then as an inspirational teacher in my Masters program at City College, and finally as a friend and fellow activist in a number of different settings. I have been struck by her capacity in all of these roles to integrate art and politics. Her stories have embodied voices from a number of life-ways we rarely hear. Her teaching has encouraged many young writers to find their creative voices. In politics, she has joined her voice with others seeking peace and justice everywhere. In this interview, conducted in her kitchen in Thetford, Vermont, I wanted to explore the mysterious relationship between the communities of her life, both personal and political, and her narrative voice.

Kate: First, can you say a little about how and why you began to write and for whom?

Grace: Well, I wrote little things when I was a kid, but I guess in my middle teens, I began to write poems constantly. And I remember sometimes as a young teenager in the country writing a few pages of very emotional stuff, dragging all these girls up and making them hear me read it. But after that period of aggressive telling, I really worked almost alone for the next twenty years.

Kate: You didn't go to school for writing? You didn't go looking for teachers?

Grace: One of the reasons I couldn't stand Hunter was that there was a teacher there who, whenever I wrote something, would say: "You didn't write this..." But finally I just stopped going to school. Not because anybody was so bad; it was just that I was so distracted. I was young, maybe 16. So a few years later I thought I would take a writing class. I'd been writing poems; I thought I should write stories; so I took a writing class with a teacher — they didn't have writers then [teaching], they had someone in the English Department — so this guy really didn't know much, but I didn't know he didn't know much. He didn't like anything I did. "You can't do this," and "You can't do that." So I just thought he was right.

I thought, "Well, I guess that's it...I guess I can't do this." So I didn't even try to write stories for a long time after that. I just continued to write poems for the next fifteen years.

Kate: Then what inspired you to write the stories?

Grace: Well, actually my former husband had probably a lot to do with it. Partly he didn't like poems especially, but also he said: "You're not using any character, you're not using any humor, you're not using anything you have." He was right: I didn't know how to put it into poems. I wrote very literary poems. Also I was very afraid by that time: I'd been a typist — that's how I made my share of the money — but I could see that I was going to be forced into some career or something. The kids were now five years old or so. I could see it coming from him, from my own family, you know, that I was going to have to go back to school to do something with myself, which I naturally dreaded above all things: doing something with myself. So I thought to myself, it's true what he said, I really would like to write some stories. Let me see if I can do this. And, you know, I always read a lot so I had enough stuff jammed in my head, enough technique and observation and language, so it wasn't that I came to it bare. So I sat down and wrote the first two stories that are in the first book ["The Contest" and "Good-bye and Good Luck"], and that was it. But I attribute a great deal of it to having read and written a lot of poetry. I wouldn't put it that I went to school for poetry. Poetry was the school I went to. Taught me what you could and couldn't do....And then the story was something else again...

Kate: Now, looking back, what's your feeling about not having written a novel...about having stuck to the story?

Grace: Well, I haven't really stuck to the story...it sort of stuck to me. I mean I love the short story. I wouldn't mind writing a novel if I could, but I don't have that kind of long range thing that people have. I mean Bob [Robert Nichols, her present husband] has written novels and short stories. And when he's written novels, I've known that he's had a really long view of what he was doing. I venture to say that I think I have a deep view but I don't have a long view.

Kate: You go into the moment...

Grace: I go in as far as I can. I sometimes wish I could write a novel. After my first book came out I really tried because I was told to. But I don't like the forms that exist for that purpose, that come to me. Form is like that: it's a kind of grace in a way — you either get it or

you don't. It's like humor, the form. You have the story, you have the conversation, you have the talking, you have the life, you have the... I don't have the picture because I'm not so visual... but you have all of this happening. Then form either descends on it or it doesn't and you can have the whole narrative and know much of what is said and done but until you receive that grace you really haven't got it. So I keep waiting. Maybe it'll fall on me someday. So far it ain't.

Kate: But the story form usually falls....

Grace: Yeah, it falls. But it sometimes takes a long time. It's sometimes taken me fifteen years between the time that I think I know what I want to do and the time when I learn how to do it.

Kate: Your stories don't have that "Let me tell you a story from beginning to end" kind of form to them.

Grace: Yet, that's really the first way [storytelling begins]. I mean, how do we learn about stories? Just exactly like that: *I want to tell you something*. And in every story there has to be that. That's a tension thing. No matter what the form, no matter what it tells or does — whether it's surreal or modern or whatever — if you don't feel that "I want to tell you something," you notice it. It's a good thing to talk early to students about, that if they don't have any pressure to tell, they shouldn't bother....Go do something else.

Kate: Does this need to tell have to be an oral thing?

Grace: Oh no. It never enters some people's minds to tell it by mouth anyway. But if there's no pressure to tell the story either by writing it or telling, the hell with it.

Kate: Were you a talker before you were a writer? I mean were you a storyteller?

Grace: I talked...I think I talked as much as any average big talker, and I often would tell stories, but I was never really a storyteller. Because as much as I say I wanted to do it aloud, I also wanted to do that complex thing on paper.

Kate: Do you go back and revise a lot?

Grace: Yeah, because I don't write *good* when I begin. I mean my first drafts are really terrible. I don't know if I ever did this with your class, but at Sarah Lawrence where the kids were younger and seemed to need it more, I would often show them early drafts just to enable them.

Kate: So when you sit down to write, do you imagine an audience that you're speaking to, telling the story to?

Grace: No, I don't, even though I read aloud to people a lot. If I do that, I really get stuck. If I imagine sort of telling it to Bob, how he's going to take something, then I'm really bad because I'll be thinking: "Oh, he'll like this or he won't..." So I try not to.

Kate: So how do the stories come to you? What comes to you first?

Grace: What comes first? Usually there are voices that come first. I just hear people. When I go through a period of time where I really don't hear an opening sentence, I'm in trouble. Because you hear many first lines, many beginnings of the story, but they don't all go anywhere. They're sort of like meeting somebody and you never see them again. So you hear this voice and you never hear it again. But it's true that almost any story I've written, there was some sentence that I began with that was resonant for some reason and I went on from there.

Kate: Do you ever start with just the idea of some one person — your mother, your aunt — whose story you want to tell?

Grace: Oh yeah, very often. Some of the stories are just purely made up out of whole cloth. But some of the stories come from really having been thinking about someone a long time. Like my story "Friends." I'd been thinking about my friend for so long. I wanted to memorialize her. I wanted so much I guess to talk about her, and I wanted to talk about her in public. So I began with one of the last things she said to me which was that her life had not been a complete horror for her.

Kate: Do you every worry about showing people the stories you write about them?

Grace: No, I never worry about it because I don't usually write to expose people for being shits or something like that. Those people [shits] interest me, but only insofar as the person who's telling the story is interested in them.

Kate: Here's a more technical question, but one I worry about a lot as a writer. Do you purposely choose at some point to use the first or third person to tell the story, or does it just come out that way?

Grace: Well, I'm trying to think of stories where I went back and forth, but I don't have a lot....I have stories where I have decided to change the storyteller, but not so many where I've started in first [then changed to third]. I mean sometimes the first person is the wrong

person—it's really the story of one of the other people in the story, and I've been fooling myself. But in general I seem to know.

Kate: There are some of your stories that don't really get into any one consciousness in particular, but sort of hover over the characters. Are these different kinds of stories for you?

Grace: Well, like what? Maybe "The History of a Joke" or something like that? Some stories aren't specifically characterful. Some of the ones that seem to be characterful aren't really about specific characters. After language, they become kind of idea-driven in some way...people talk.

Kate: Do you visualize the people speaking?

Grace: I don't visualize. I'm very unvisual. I don't really care what they look like half the time. Every now and then the person speaking goes and visualizes; somebody says how somebody looks. They say what a person looks like to them because they care. But I myself don't care that much.

Kate: So usually there are people talking to each other in the story. Even if it's the somebody telling the story to somebody else in the story as in "Good-bye and Good Luck."

Grace: Oh, yeah, she [the narrator] is telling the story to Lillie. I'm dying to write Lillie's story. I'm thinking about it lately, 30 years later.

Kate: Was Lillie you?

Grace: No. I mean the aunt [the narrator] wasn't my...anybody. The language began with an aunt of Jess's, my former husband, talking, but I didn't know her especially well. But we were knowing theatre people, you know, so I had a feeling about that generation which wasn't my generation; it preceded mine. I had a feeling about all my aunts, my unmarried aunts or my late-married aunts. But this aunt's really an invented person.

Kate: Did your aunts have that sort of free lifestyle?

Grace: No, not really. But people around the theatre did and they were not far from it in some funny ways. And partly I wanted them to have it. I think sometimes you sort of...some people you give worse lives to and other people you give better lives.

Kate: I'm curious about your early life. Were your parents political?

Grace: My parents had been when they were young. They were socialists. My father had been jailed a couple of times and sent to Siberia. Then the Czar had a son that let out everybody under 21. So my father and my mother came here immediately — they were all of 20. They remained somewhat socialist all their lives, but they didn't do anything that I knew of. According to my mother's sister who came from Israel—she was very radical—they became just bourgeoisie. The women all worked very hard in the shops and sent my father to school and he became a doctor. So it paid off as I always say: it was the right thing to do.

Kate: So you didn't get this sense of a party line in the home?

Grace: Oh, no, they were very anti-communist. They really hated whenever I was involved with any of the United Front people or this or that or the other thing. They really were full of contempt. On the other hand, when I was really young they sent me to this camp for Falcons—I just wrote a little story about it. The Falcons were the Socialist version of the Young Pioneers of the Communist League. I went to that with their friends' children. Also, by the time I got bigger they were well enough set—they'd been here twenty years already—so my father could tell me stories of his brave youth. I don't think he did that with the older children because all he wanted then was that everybody should learn English. But he didn't want to ever forget Russian either. There was never any of that stuff that you read about: either people want to forget the language or they're made to forget it. I grew up listening and hearing a lot of Russian talked at home.

Kate: And Yiddish too?

Grace: Some Yiddish, but much more Russian. My grandmother talked Yiddish and Russian. So in a sense I was getting the idea that one should be political, and that one should be interested in the news and what was happening here, there and everywhere, and the rise of fascism was a very dangerous thing. On the other hand, there was no political outlet, because they were socialists, but not Trotskyites. I mean from their point of view it was all the same: Lenin and Trotsky were just different sides of the same coin. My parents were Norman Thomasites. They loved Eugene Victor Debs. They also, that generation, tended to name their children, in my parents' case, Eugenia and Victor.

Kate: So in a way you feel like the political thing for you was a thing of the place and time you were growing up?

Grace: Yeah, in high school I used to go to all the demonstrations. There was the Spanish Civil War. I did tenant organizing starting at the end of the war. And then I had the children, but I always did stuff. It was natural to me, but at the same time it was not. I never was really at home in it until I got to know people in the non-violence movements. I always felt very uncomfortable around certain rhetorics. I never felt right about what was happening in Russia. It was all a line and I knew that. Still it was a place to do certain things. The communists and their satellite groups were truthfully involved in organizing people. I believed in the things they were organizing people for, but the lines they were pushing out all the time were very nerve-wracking. You gotta remember those party lines were changing all the time. It really made people into fools. On the other hand, I was very close to all those people. I thought they were the only people doing things for a long time. So I did go to a lot of these demonstrations and I was pretty good about it. I mean I could be counted on. But until the 60's I never would step forward in any kind of leadership way. It felt important for me to do something but it didn't feel like I could honorably act. The best thing that happened to me politically was getting into very local politics—through the children and the park and then the schools. That was important to me because it was the first time I saw where action and thinking had some relation to each other. As soon as I found a place where I could always tell the truth I felt good.

Kate: Can you talk a little about that community in the park with the children and how the local politics began for you?

Grace: Apart from the luck of moving to a place I didn't want to move to [15th St.] and having it become my children's happiest memories and me liking it too because it reminded me of my own childhood city life in the Bronx, a kind of street life which seems to have ended in a lot of neighborhoods, middle class neighborhoods especially. So apart from that kind of neighborhood, I'd say I also had the great good luck when my kids were little to have to take them to the park. Unlike women in the suburbs or isolated in the country, they have to drive their kids everywhere, to see friends, to play soccer, to take music lessons...or if they have money they have daycare. But I had the luck to have to go to the park in the earliest 50's, and in Greenwich Village it meant that I met with a bunch of women who became the community of my life. Sybil [Sybil Claiborne] was one, and at least two or three other women remained my friends all those years. Even the ones who didn't, who moved away or married away, I knew pretty well too. We shared kids, had jobs. People came to my house a lot. I mean it

was a very social thing even though I did not make friends with all of them. That community of women and children was very important in my life.

When the kids were very little, we organized, like in the very beginning of the 50's, when Robert Moses wanted to put a road through Washington Square Park to LaGuardia Place which would then be Fifth Avenue all the way down and we fought that...it was a very strong fight. And then in the PTA, starting in '58 or '59 when the kids were in school, the whole nuclear business began to become very terrifying—the testing was going on. So there was that political action, and through the PTA I became involved with other different actions. Then in the very beginning of the 60's we formed a group called the Village Peace Center. I worked with that group for a while — a lot of Village people were involved in it. The Vietnam War hadn't started yet, so the concern really was local action and the arms race. That was a group that remained close to me, almost all of them still. Syb came into it a little later, and when she came in she really became a major factor, an important leader.

Kate: Did the women come from all over...in terms of ethnic background?

Grace: Well, they were almost all white. I mean every now and then there were a couple of Puerto Rican women. But my whole life in the Bronx was in a Jewish community — that was the one I knew the best — so this was really much more mixed. I'd say religiously mixed except that nobody had any religion. But a lot of the people were [raised] Catholics or Protestants, many fewer Jews. So that was also a factor, sort of new in that sense. Also a lot of the women were alone or single mothers—already then—showing you how advanced Greenwich Village was.

Kate: Do you think they were drawn to the Village because that was an area where they could feel comfortable being single mothers at that time?

Grace: They may not have been drawn for that reason. They may have been drawn as we were drawn, like Sybil, for instance, was drawn because that was the Village and she lived in some town in New Jersey. A lot of them became single after they'd been drawn, and some of them became extremely middle class later on. But in the earliest years there were a lot of young women alone with kids, really in a state of shock, struggling really hard.

Kate: Did they tend to be college-educated...interested in the arts?

Grace: Not especially. I mean they were pretty smart women. But I've noticed people are pretty smart almost everywhere. Then you meet someone and you say: "That person is dumb." I think that's really a terrific exception in the human race: stupidity. I think 90% of the human race is very smart.

Kate: So they didn't share your interest in writing?

Grace: They didn't know I was a writer especially. They finally found out: by the end of the 50's I had a book out. People were very surprised. I mean one or two good friends knew I had begun to write. But I'd always been writing. It was my normal life, to write.

Kate: But though they weren't reading your writing, still you were talking to them, learning to tell things, they were listening to you?

Grace: They weren't there to listen to me. I was there to listen to them. I was very interested in them. As far as writing is concerned that was sheer luck that I not only had to live that way but that I liked it. I mean, I didn't go around saying, "Oh goddammit, I have to go to the park with the kids again and talk to those people." I mean there has to be that also [in being a writer], that great interest in the other, which is your own really. I mean, why are you interested in them? Because there's something in them that you either recognize or else you think it could be you or else you think, "Thank God it isn't."

Kate: So in general, with all this political work you were doing, interacting with all these people politically, was there anybody else doing writing, I mean doing both art and politics?

Grace: No. I think a lot of people wanted to write. And Sybil had always written seriously though I didn't know till I was reading her journals this year how seriously, with what ambition, she was doing it. But for the longest time I never really liked to hang out with writers. Now it seems to me I know lots of writers, but that's a late development. Now I'm doing this committee of PEN so I know all the women writers. And of course my husband Bob whose novel, *From the Steam Room*, has just come out.

Kate: Is it that you didn't like writers before or you didn't come in contact with them?

Grace: In the 50's and 60's I never hung out with them. It wasn't part of the Village scene for me at all. I didn't go to bars. I moved into the Village after the Second World War with my husband in about '47. I had a kid two years later. I knew Bohemian types you might say,

but I didn't like them so much. I mean all the years of the 50's there were the Beats and all that. They were all boys and they couldn't've been less interested in me. I thought they were okay, but I wasn't especially fooled by who they were. I knew them well—I love Allen [Ginsberg] to this day—but they were very distant from women.

Kate: Were you ever in writing groups?

Grace: Every now and then when the kids were little, we would have people at the house since I couldn't really go out. Some of them would read something and that would encourage me because I figured: "I can do that too." When my book came out, Philip Roth's came out that same year. We were reviewed together, and I got very excited. I was living around 15th Street at the time. My editor picked me up and took me to his house and I met all these people. I met them then and I met them a couple times more and I didn't meet them again. I didn't want to especially. It was just another world. We were living just a lot poorer than they were. Not that they were rich or anything but they were living in a more bourgeois world. It wasn't what I was particularly interested in. I just felt by then that I knew my subject matter and that I didn't want to go too far from it. And I still don't.

Kate: Can you talk about the way your political voice intertwines with your artistic voice?

Grace: I don't know. I guess if it does, it does through the voices of the people I write about. Political voice and aesthetic voice, I think it's the same thing. It usually is for everybody. Almost any piece of work is political, either in its intentions or inattentions. Bob would disagree with that. He thinks nobody writes politics at all. But I think that, willy-nilly, people do. They may not want to but they do. Either they're ignoring society and that's a certain politics...

Kate: Or they're trying to describe the world...

Grace: You don't have to try to. People live in a world and you just talk about it somehow. I mean nature writers are political. You would never have said until the last ten years that nature writers were political. But their importance in the creation and sustaining of a society is clearly important. So I feel like just writing about women was important, was political, if I didn't say one word about anything else.

Kate: Do you think of yourself as a woman writer or as a woman's writer, writing for women?

Grace: No, I don't. I think of myself as a woman writer, but I really write for everybody. I mean I'd hope anybody would read me. But I've been supported—hardly any woman writer hasn't been supported—one, by women, and two, by the women's movement. Without a movement people might not read me. Some people may have liked my work and so forth, but I really believe that when writing isn't supported by a movement then it's either far ahead of its time or else its time is not yet. I mean even black writers are strongly supported by a movement. It doesn't mean they were to begin with, but then they become part of the movement. [For women,] by the late 50's or early 60's — Tillie Olsen's book came out around then — without knowing it we were just part of something that was just beginning. We were like drops that were going to form some kind of wave. But you can't count on it when you're writing. You really have to just go ahead and write your own truths. And you know, you may be lucky, you may not.

Kate: In your case you feel like you were giving voice to a movement that was growing around you?

Grace: No, I wasn't giving voice to a movement. I was part of the sounds of that movement. It's not up to me to give voice to a movement, but I was just one of the sounds that made it.

Kate: But you also think that a movement at the practical level can help get people published.

Grace: Oh, yeah, I mean the movement creates a readership, and the readership is very loyal. And there's something about the way women read women. It's not that I sell millions of books, but I do stay in print. I have a lot of men readers — I get always more letters from men, it's very funny — but at the same time, I really think that it's women that keep me in print.

Kate: Do you think that men and women are really different?

Grace: Oh, sure. Look at the men killing each other, and murdering and raping women. Really, when you look at Yugoslavia and you see these guys...or look at Africa. Everywhere it's men killing each other. In Los Angeles, New York.... Every now and then a woman does something like that and everybody jumps up and says, "See that!" But that's just.... There's something in them [men] that is really insane. I think it's curable myself. I don't think it's like

Kate: Not enough babies to birth... could say

Kate: Well, how about the voices? Do you think that men and women have very different voices either just talking or in writing?

Kate: Well, you've written stories from the male point of view, in the male voice. Is that particularly intriguing for you to try to do that?

Kate: Do you enjoy feeling sympathetic towards them?

Kate: For instance "The Contest"?

because they think he's okay, and I think he's full of shit. If I get an undergraduate class and give them an assignment, it is to really get into the voice of someone with whom they're having conflict and try to find out what is going on. But it's not an act of sympathy; it's an act of interest.

Grace: Very often it does. In that case I knew the story. Although the heroine was really imagined a great deal, this story was very close to what had happened to this guy. He had told me the story himself. It was an early story and I was very nervous about invention and imagination at that point. I've described it someplace that I sort of felt like I was along the wall, feeling my way. I didn't want to get away from the wall of fact.

Grace: Well, right, that also was very close...factual, including the part about the South Bronx. The man is Bob. That's exactly how it happened, just that way, the whole thing, the camera was stolen in exactly that way. It was funny because when we came back from China, suddenly I wanted to write about China. I always have difficulty writing reports: "What I did in China..." But then this occurred to me, and I began to write it. But I still couldn't see where the story was until I caught the story in the other story about the Bronx. I always feel that there has to be two stories for there to be any story. The writer tells not the story but the story of the stories.

Grace: And explained each other.

Kate: So that neither needed explanation on the surface. But other times it's like a little kernel inside?

Grace: Embedded. But that story was — a few changes here and there — very factual.

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Grace: The need there was really...one was to try to understand something about China, and the other was to really try to understand something about Bob, and then to see how they were, China and Bob, totally related.

Kate: Issues of authority and...

Grace: And respect for the other.

Kate: Not stealing their souls with the camera.

Grace: Also it was fun writing about China: the people and the guys with the cameras and the guns. I'll tell you a funny thing about that story. There's a guy in it who's very handsome, very blond. He was a lawyer, the one who was accused. Well, I read that story and a guy came up to me afterwards and said: "That's a very good story. You know my brother went to China." I said, "Yeah? When'd he go?" Then he told me his brother's name. And it was him. So there you are talking about recognizing. Here I couldn't have given a clearer.... It's one of the few descriptions I've ever done and it was absolutely perfect, from the hair to the shorts, sleeveless shirt, everything, and he was a lawyer. He said, "Yeah, my brother went to China around that time. So I must tell him about this story."

Kate: So after the 60's what were some of your communities?

Grace: The 60's lasted well into the 70's. Throughout all this there was a very strong women's community. Kids growing up. Then they were in high school. Still those same concerns. Then the kids all becoming teen-agers—that whole life of the 60's which the children became part of [and made] deeper in a way. But the community of women was a very strong one and what really happened in the 70's was the development of the women's movement. Politically I became very much a part of that, without giving up the other stuff at home, without giving up Vietnam or any of those concerns. The Women and Life on Earth conference was I'd say probably the first eco-feminist gathering. There were three hundred women at U Mass. Then the Women's Pentagon Action came out of that. And Greenham in England and Seneca followed the Women's Pentagon Action and had a lot of the same people involved. It was very interesting the effect that action had on different parts of the world. At some big demonstration at the end of the 70's, we met five or six Japanese women, and they said, "We're looking for women from the Women's Pentagon Action." I did some writing about Seneca—a nice report.

Kate: So you are able to write reports sometimes. Do you publish them?

Grace: I am. I wrote a very long one after I went to Russia in '72. Even I happen to think it was really good and *The New Yorker* kept it for three, four months which made it almost useless elsewhere so it was published by the War Resisters League in a movement paper called *Win*. And the Seneca piece was published in *MS*.

Kate: And when did you start coming up here to Vermont?

Grace: I was coming up every summer from '68 or '69 on, but then I had a sabbatical, so I had a whole year here. Then I took a term off at some point and became very involved in this area. I actually developed a kind of rural understanding, which I owe to being here because I didn't have any of it before. Starting in 1977 we had an affinity group here — my daughter Nora helped organize it. I was on sabbatical. We met every other week and that group stayed together until about '86. It was organized in response to the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant. So that was another very important thing that happened towards the end of the 70's: becoming part of a group working in energy areas. And Bob meanwhile was working a lot on the Lower East Side with Puerto Rican kids. We used to bring them up here.

Kate: What's an affinity group?

Grace: An affinity group—that came from an old anarchist organizing idea in Spain. They're just like local cells or groups of people who meet and talk together. Ours started out of something called the Upper Valley Energy Coalition. Then we broke down into Central Vermont, Northeast, etc.

Kate: They try to mix thought with action?

Grace: They've done a lot of work. Not enough to do with agriculture —Bob is very despondent about that. But all this is related. I mean that's what I really learned: all is connected. I learned it by working in the peace movement, by working in the women's movement, by working in the rural energy movements. They were all related.

Kate: Did you ever feel that it was getting too large to know where to put your energies?

Grace: Yeah. Sometimes that happens. Like even when the Vietnam War began we had been doing so much in opposing nuclear testing and development that people were sort of mad at the Vietnam War. And then Central America and a lot of people abandoned what was happening in Vietnam. Also there's been continuing Middle

Eastern work as a Jew for peace with the Palestinians and recognition of their hard lives. One thing is not to look at these things as fads but as different struggles which add to each other, which accrete. The women's movement is probably the vastest. But when you don't include some of these other things then, just forget it. We may as well be just like the boys.

Kate: So have you started writing about Vermont, started trying to capture the voices of rural Vermonters the way you did with the Bronx? I was thinking of how you started with the park, and in a way this is like coming back to having a local action place.

Grace: Well, I've done a couple of things, one on jury duty in Chelsea. But it might be hard for me to write in the same way.

Kate: You feel it would be dishonest or...

Grace: I don't have it [the voice]...I mean if I live long enough.

Kate: You captured Jewish intonation, and Irish. There's the story of the black woman.

Grace: Well, I knew the woman well. I have a black man telling the story of the killing of a girl. But I wouldn't do a black voice now. Not because it's politically bad because I don't believe in those things. It depends on whether you're going to use them, exploit them, or whether you really are interested and you want to try to understand. I mean the art of writing is the art of trying to understand what the hell is going on. So you sometimes have to do that: stretch out to something, to some other sound, voice, story, experience. I think when you write you're doing two things (among five million other things): you're saying, "Oh, oh, listen to this, this person is just like me," or else you're saying, "Oh, listen to this, this person and I are totally unlike." So you're always after differences and identicalities.

Kate: But you're saying you wouldn't do that anymore with the black person.

Grace: Well I don't have it in my ear from living up in this place. I've just lost certain things. I might be able to have a character in a story but I couldn't let her or him take charge because I just don't have it in my ear, and that would be wrong to do. I was trying to understand those blacks. But up here—

Kate: You don't feel you've caught this accent yet?

Grace: I almost have. I always say: "Well, I'll meet you at the riva..." But basically I probably have my old Bronx Russian Jewish accent underneath all. That's who I've been: a New York urban Jewish woman writing.