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# "Splitting the world open"

*In conversation with memoirist Judith Barrington*

by Simone Barley-Greenfield on Friday, March 23, 2012 - 7:19am

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Poet and memoirist Judith Barrington captivated an overflow crowd at her February reading at the Clayman Institute, as she wove her life experiences into an intricate tapestry. Her strong, clear voice gave her prose a wise, seasoned texture, and the audience relaxed into her tales of awkward dates in Catalonian wine country and driving in London to the music of John Lennon while contemplating her ideal world.

Through her stories, Barrington reveals a lifetime of searching for somewhere to settle, be it in a physical place, in a sexual identity, or in herself. Her honest portrayal of her struggles speaks not only to others of a similar background, but to anyone who has longed for a place to simply exist, as was evidenced by the large, diverse audience at her reading.

Barrington refuses to hide behind her stories; her writing opens her up to the world and to her readers. Her warm, frank way of expressing truth bridges the audience gap that often plagues writers who speak from a specific gender or sexual context. Her work unabashedly addresses feminism and homosexuality, using these concepts as a medium through which to explore truth, nature, and identity. Barrington asserts her gender perspective without trepidation, and her courage inspires others to do the same.

## Memoir - self reflection and liberation

Barrington's reading centered around her work as a memoirist. She read aloud from both her renowned personal story *Lifesaving: A Memoir* and her yet-to-be-published work *Mad Heart*. This new work recounts Barrington's journey from a divorced, closeted lesbian in 1970's England, to an active feminist set on revealing the truth of the feminine experience through literature and, to quote Muriel Rukeyser, one of Barrington's early inspirations, "splitting the world open." Barrington described the first time she walked into a women's liberation group in London, picked up a pamphlet on "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," and realized, much to the amusement of her audience, "not only could I think about orgasms, I could write about them."

This epiphany linked self-reflection and the writing process for Barrington. Through her textual conversations with other female authors, she felt empowered by the possibility of expressing her personal experience as woman through writing. She discovered "how much had been left out of women's experience in terms of literature," and set her mind on filling some of that void. She took the next step towards this goal by joining a writer's circle through the women's liberation office.

As Barrington's discussions within this group kindled her self-awareness, she found herself contemplating her own sexuality and gender perspective. She longed to share her "secret" with the group, but feared alienating the women she found so inspiring. Despite her trepidation, Barrington mustered the courage to be honest, and she found her "confession" met not only with acceptance but with eager curiosity. Telling the truth about her identity forged a bond between Barrington and her friends; by putting her experience into words, she also helped them learn something about themselves.

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### Challenging her audience's perceptions

As her writing career progressed, Barrington continued to grapple with difficult but important topics. She admits that she does not always have this unwavering commitment to challenging her audience's perceptions. She cites her poem "Horses and the Human Soul" as an example of holding back, when she had "a sort of instinct...to make people feel better after the story was told." This visceral, three-part poem about breaking a horse's leg originally had a fourth section illustrating the horse's last peaceful thoughts. Barrington realized that this section detracted from the poem; it was a cop out.

"It's hard when you write things that feel true to you that are difficult subjects, are violent, or in some way the under seam of life," she reflected. "It is hard to put that out and know it is hard for the reader, and yet my experience has been, over and over again...people always come up to me at the end of a reading and say, 'Thank you' because, in some way, it links to their own life or their own experience. The more times this happens, the more encouraged I am to have the courage to write that hard stuff and put it out in the world because I know that people need it."

Barrington understands how the circumstances of existence convince people that life ought to be viewed through a specific gender, sexual, socioeconomic, or political lens. However, she refuses to limit her work to one specific lens; she addresses the world as she sees it: a rich, multi-dimensional landscape that demands complex examination. Her words reflect this global perspective and ring true because they tell a universal story. As she writes in her educational work, *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, "We watch the memoirist make sense of her life and no matter how different our circumstances, we find some commonality with her and feel a little less alone in the world. This sense of shared humanity is a very important aspect of culture."

Barrington writes her own truth - as a lesbian, as a woman, as a feminist, even as a horse-lover or the daughter of parents who drowned at sea - but her voice as a human being unites these aspects of her identity and sparks the humanity in all her readers.

Whether giving a voice to her rage at being referred to as "unnatural and perverse" in anti-gay ballot measures in Oregon or confronting the shame she felt about her sexuality in her early years, Barrington uses writing to "get to the bottom of what [she] feels passionately about," and she hopes that her efforts illuminate not just her own life but the lives everyone who dares to ask those difficult questions about existence.



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Judith Barrington is a poet and memoirist who has published three collections of poetry, a prize-winning memoir, and a text on writing literary memoir which is used all across the United States and in Australia and Europe. Her talk was sponsored by the Clayman Institute for Gender Research, the Program in Feminist Studies, the Women's Community Center, the Stanford Humanities Center, the Dean's Office, and SICA as part of the winter quarter symposium Ms. at 40 and the Future of Feminsim. Many thanks to Valerie Miner for organizing Barrington's visit.

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### Responses to "Splitting the world open"



23 March, 2012  
Jesse (not verified)  
reply

This is a great summary of Barrington, it really captures her essence. While I couldn't be there for her talk, after reading this I felt as if I had just spent an hour speaking with her and sipping tea. Awesome!