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INTERVIEW WITH ROSELLEN BROWN AND MARV HOFFMAN

Rosellen Brown is a celebrated poet, fiction writer, and essayist. Her strict attention to rhythm, syntax, and word choice not only demonstrates her love of language, but also gives all her work a poetic vibrancy which entrances her readers. She’s published ten books, including Some Deaths in the Delta and Civil Wars. She currently lives in Illinois with her husband Marv Hoffman, and teaches at the Art Institute of Chicago.

INSCAPE: As I think about you and your husband, I also think about the writing students here at BYU who are trying to balance their lives. They have to synthesize school and writing, as well as their careers and lives as parents.

ROSELLEN BROWN: It’s never easy. There were times when I had to go away to readings and things like that, and I did that a lot. Fortunately, at that point Marv was teaching kids and had a slightly more flexible schedule than a lot of people, so sometimes if I had to go off and go do a gig like this, he could cover for me when my kids weren’t in school.

MARV HOFFMAN: Just an interesting parallel: I once did a series of interviews with scientists about how they do their work. Several of them started their careers in Germany and Hungary and were fleeing
from the Nazis, and they all said to me that they did some of their most significant work during those years. There’s something useful about that kind of pressure.

RB: It’s imposing the discipline on yourself to do it when you can do it. I never used to work when my kids were home. I would work when they were in school. And one day my oldest daughter came home from school while I was finishing working on the typewriter, and I said, “Honey I’m sorry, I’ll be with you in a second.” And I go on, and she’s standing there. And I say, “Honey look, there’s milk and cookies in the kitchen, you know, please, I’m sorry.” I was very apologetic. And she said, “But I want to see what it looks like when you’re working.” When she was home, I was trying to pay attention to her and not to my work. She is a writer now, though she doesn’t have children. I’m much less disciplined now than I was then, because now I have all the time in the world—in theory.

INSCAPE: It strikes me that people think writing books when you’re married is a challenging process, but there are some partnerships—literary partnerships—like Virginia and Leonard Woolf, George Eliot and George Lewes. Creating a space for your work without sacrificing the needs of the children had to be a partnership deal.

RB: Absolutely. I was very young when I started writing, and I knew that I wanted to write. I have a number of friends who discovered way later, when there was something they were dying to say, that they wanted to become writers. I remember one friend who’s a writer who
started late, Hilma Wolitzer, mother of the currently popular Meg Wolitzer, saying, “We had to renegotiate the marriage contract.” My husband had to discover that maybe dinner wasn’t going to be on the table exactly when he wanted it, or whatever. I was not there to serve him, and of course every relationship should be that way, but an artist certainly needs it.

MH: And there are some men who say at that point, “This is not what I signed on for.” But you already had an identity when we married.

RB: I had an identity as a writer in graduate school, and I started publishing very early. I think that was one of the things that attracted Marv to me, and of course he didn’t know what he was getting himself into, but he did know that I had an identity and that my identity was not going to be pushed to the side, and I think that was very important. I have seen people whose marriages have crashed when the husband discovered that his wife was not at his service in the way that he might have expected her to be. So with Marv and me, some of it was the wisdom of knowing what we wanted and maybe needed or didn’t need, but most of what happened after that, I think has a lot to do with luck.

INSCAPE: You're a very good husband, Marv.

RB: Fifty-four years and counting.

MH: I got a lot in return.
INSCAPE: What do you think about the relationship between character—not character as in a novel, but personal, individual character—and the simulation of voice and authenticity? Is there something in the rigors of style and the capacity to think that apply also to the rigors of character and the capacity to act?

RB: I’d like to think it, but of course the horrible reality is that a lot of writers are terrible people! (Laughs). It’s one of those things you discover when you read the biographies of great writers. Dickens two-timed his wife, which, of course, is hardly unique, and had many other shortfalls of moral character. So it’s hard to say, “Well, if you can do a complex sentence, you have a complex character.” I’m not sure that they really translate. I have a distinct memory: I had an instructor in college with whom I, like so many other young women in black who thought of themselves as budding artists, fell in love. It’s almost a given that that will happen—but then I discovered that he was not the person whose wisdom showed up on the page. He was a wonderful poet, but his moral character was another thing altogether! It was a very sad awakening.

INSCAPE: Do you think there’s a responsibility and opportunity as writers, or as teachers of writers, to help people to learn to think, and to introduce new thoughts, and create—

RB: Aspirational! (Laughs). I wish! I don’t know. I’d like to think that’s the case, but we can’t claim too much power as writers; let’s face it. When I think about some of the wonderful writers who are horrible people and who abuse their families or other people, clearly all that
reading has not made them into better people. So it's an aspiration, but I don't know that you necessarily improve people. Wouldn't it be nice if it worked that way!

INSCAPE: So I was also thinking about how many of your novels deal with domestic tragedy. It sounds like you have such a wonderful family and marriage, but you also deal with these difficult problems in your books. Where does that come from?

RB: I think it comes from the idea that if I do it on paper none of it will happen to me in real life (laughs).

INSCAPE: That is a great idea!

RB: Well, I'll tell you in part where it comes from, and this is probably going to surprise you: I'm not a good storyteller. I have to kick start my so-called "plot" with something big happening. I'm really not the sort of person who thinks of one thing happening after the other, and my books for the most part are strung together episodes. There's only one book that actually has what I think of as a plot, something where if you took one thing away the whole thing would fall apart because you wouldn't know what comes next. The rest of them deal with complications and aftermaths of the tragedy. And I'm not very interested in actually describing the tragedy itself. What I'm interested in are the ramifications of the thing: how people respond to it, the psychological complexity of it. I'm just not good at telling really interesting stories. So in some ways the tragic events in my stories are a result of a weakness. The impetus for most of my novels
is something I've heard or read, situations that seem to promise complex responses, no easy solutions. I have to re-frame them totally but the initial questions are still there.

INSCAPE: But you've made it a strength! You're really good at delving into the psychology of your books' family members.

RB: Well, that's what I'm interested in. Marv was trained as a psychologist, though he's ended up teaching, but it's of real significance to me.

INSCAPE: Did you pull from that in your research? I've noticed that, in a lot of your novels, you really delve into a lot of legal ramifications.

RB: Well, I've had to get help with that. When I wrote my book “Tender Mercies,” I had to learn about being a quadriplegic. For Before and After, I needed advice about some things that would happen in court, so I found a lawyer and said, “Well, I’m sorry, but I’d love to take a little of your time if you wouldn’t mind,” and she said, “I’m so interested in meeting you because I’ve read your stories and they’ve informed my family court practice.” She let me come to her courtroom, and she gave me terrific advice. I thank her in the beginning of the book. So, yeah, you have to hope that the research doesn’t overwhelm what you’re doing, but you need to learn some stuff.

INSCAPE: That’s amazing. So I was wondering; you have two novels, Civil Wars and Half a Heart, that deal with the civil rights movement. What do you think about our current political climate?
RB: You really want to hear? I'm not allowed to curse here, as far as I've been told. (Laughs).

INSCAPE: Well, if we shut the door. (Laughs).

RB: Well, without being specific, I can't imagine a more appalling state of the country than the one we're in right now. I don't think anybody can listen to each other or be honest about their experiences. I just think we are in a very terrible period.

MH: There's a wonderful African-American writer, Julius Lester, who said that when people interview political candidates they often ask the question, "What books are you reading?" Well, you can't even ask that of Trump because you know that he's not reading anything, but in the past people would talk about various biographies or Six Crises by Richard Nixon, or you know, The Winds Of War, and Lester said that's the wrong question. You have to ask, "What novels have you read?" Because if someone reads novels, they have the capacity to empathize with characters. When Rosellen met Barack Obama, long before he was famous, he told her that he had read Civil Wars.

RB: Immediately I said, "Whatever he stands for, I'm going to vote for him!" (Laughs).

MH: My point is that you can see in his autobiography that this is a man who knows how to empathize.

RB: And how to write, as a matter of fact. Talk about what's happened
to the English language with our current legislators! I mean, we’re very much the worse for it.

INSCAPE: Things I thought we were past, like intense racial tension, we’re not actually past.

RB: Well, when we went to Mississippi—we moved there in ’65 and lived there for three years—like most Americans, we thought that the horrible racism was endemic to the South. We went there from Boston, which, as it happens, is an incredibly racially divided city. Racism is not just in the South, and in many ways it’s more frightening farther north.

MH: We were back in Mississippi a few months ago, and I think the disheartening thing about being there was that we initially felt we were part of something that was fundamentally changing the country, but we were confronted with the fact that that’s not the case. There are a lot of superficial things that have changed, which shouldn’t be discounted. The fear that people lived under was really intense, and that’s gone, but underneath the same structural inequities exist.

RB: Frankly, I’m pretty discouraged in a lot of ways, because the country is going backwards now, I believe, when it comes to equality. So much is now permissible now, to say that could not have been said earlier. But that was just sort of slightly hypocritical self-control that people were exercising. Now, unfortunately, our president has led the way in giving people the right to say anything they want to. It’s very sad. So, like everything else, it’s complex. What you do when
you write is you try to destabilize people’s sense of what is absolutely set and perfect, because life’s not like that very often. We need to listen. We need to talk. We need to figure out ways to move forward.

**Inscape:** We do have a problem in our culture of not listening to each other. You’ve said before that, essentially, the beginning of style is listening to others. How does one make that part of the culture of a classroom?

**RB:** It’s very difficult. At the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, I teach what we call Generative Seminars, in which people write afresh every week and then read it to each other. We have copies, of course, that people pass around so you have it in front of you, but people really have to listen very carefully, and it’s hard. It’s especially difficult with poetry to be able to critique on the spot, but it does sort of enhance the necessity of listening. But in general, what you’re talking about is a moral problem. It goes way beyond the realm of writing that we don’t listen to each other, that we speak over each other, that we tend to exclude ideas that other people have. So I think it’s something that goes way, way deeper. But just to listen to the words—I think that’s a conscious practice, actually.

**Inscape:** When you teach kids, you accept the fact that, beyond 10 minutes, they don’t listen. I’m pretty sure that something similar happens with adults. But you have to build your teaching around the recognition that listening is an intense activity, and you can’t expect it to go on for very long. So people need to move into some more active kind of posture, which is sharing their ideas with each
other, doing their own writing, whatever the activity is. But it’s true that listening is a challenge. I think that may not have been true in other cultures at other times when the whole mode of education was sitting quietly and listening.

RB: I think that’s true.

INSCAPE: A storyteller mentioned how critical it is to know your audience and speak to that audience. Among other things, that’s how history was passed down from generation to generation.

RB: I think that’s true! Maria Edgeworth, Dryden, and people like that wrote long, complicated paragraphs that are difficult for us to penetrate! The audience was used to that and that was the prevailing style at the time; the long, classical sentence structure was what people did and knew. And Shakespeare! Even those of us who have read a lot of Shakespeare and are pretty adept struggle. The first few minutes of a play, I have to adjust to the sound of that syntax because it is complicated. It is not a twenty-first century syntax, and it takes a while before you begin to think that it’s natural. The Globe Theatre, where Shakespeare’s plays were originally produced, was a pit of people—smelly people who could not take showers, untrained, uneducated people—who came to listen to those plays, and yet they, without educations, were able to follow what some of our students find almost impossible. Marv had a student who said, when he was doing Shakespeare with them, “This stuff is pretty good. I’d really like it if it was in English!” (Laughs). Because it isn’t automatic! But we’re sort of coddled by the terseness of television scripts and
newscasts that are coming at us in short bursts all the time—now we’re down to, what, 140 characters? Now there are novels and poetry being written on phones. There was a film a few years ago that was called Tangerine that was made entirely on an iPhone 5. I mean we’re in a very, very different culture.

INSCAPE: You said something earlier that I think is interesting about the sound bite. And people have talked about that before in terms of the “tweet,” but there are some things you just can’t do in 140 characters.

RB: If you think you can reduce things to 140 characters you are not getting the whole picture.

MH: When our kids were little, when they watched television—and this will tell you how ancient we are—Sesame Street started. They had been watching this show called Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, which was beautiful and quiet, calm and peaceful. And when Sesame Street came on, it felt like the beginning of the end. It was incredibly rapid fire. I don’t know what’s chicken and what’s egg in this situation, but it reinforced a certain kind of short attention span.

INSCAPE: Is there something we can do to counteract this as writers?

RB: Read Moby Dick. (Laughs).

INSCAPE: Write 440 page novels. (Laughs).
RB: I don't know if anyone has the patience for that ... you hope that your students can somehow enjoy enough of what you assign to them so that they'll go on doing it themselves. There's not a policeman out there saying, "You must read continuous prose!"

INSCAPE: Harry Potter changed things, in terms of publishers accepting longer works.

MH: One of the fascinating things about Harry Potter was to watch the kind of attention the kids were able to invest in those books. I mean, there were kids who sat down and read those books in one take.

RB: A lot of Marv's teaching is in inner city Chicago, and you have kids who are so far from the Harry Potter experience, and they would sit down and gobble this stuff up.

MH: Those Harry Potter books are usually way, way beyond the reading level of the kids who were fascinated by them, but it didn't stop them at all. So that's an interesting example. There's still a kernel of possibility for paying attention.

RB: Apparently there is.

INSCAPE: Obviously you've been a very successful writer. You've had numerous books published, both in poetry and prose, and you've done all of the genres you could do.

RB: Except children's literature.
INSCAPE: There’s still time! But I wondered if there was a moment in your career when you felt like you’d really “made it,” or felt like you’d reached some sort of literary success?

RB: I’ll tell you a small thing. I was one of Ms. Magazine’s “12 Women of the Year” in 1985, which was probably before your parents were even born. There were people in there you’ve probably never heard of, and we all had little things written about us. And a writer named Judith Thurman wrote an essay about me that in a million years I could not have dreamed of. I simply could not have imagined anyone saying these things about my writing, not about me personally, but about my writing. That is a moment that I hold incredibly dear. Last year there was a celebration for a so-called “lifetime achievement” for me, and a lot of it was about writing, teaching, and mentoring. My old students were there, and other writers, and they talked about me with big parts of my writing up on the wall, projections of prose and poetry. It was a great moment, but long before that this one essay by this one person that I respected that took the writing seriously was probably more significant to me than the fact that one of my books was made into a movie. It was a terrible movie, but I did get to meet Meryl Streep and get a hug from Liam Neeson. That was good. But seeing somebody who was the ideal reader, who got what I was doing and who could tie it all together, was much more important to me than any of the rest.

MH: This is more Rosellen’s style: She put up on her office door at the University of Houston a royalty check which she got for—
RB: For a story that was anthologized.

MH: Well, the royalty check was for twenty-four cents.

RB: I wanted my students to be forewarned about what they were getting themselves into! (Laughs). Not to mention running up debt paying for school.

INSCAPE: You mentioned that those late seventies were years when there was intense pressure on you as a writer. What have you noticed in terms of being relaxed or confident under pressure?

RB: Some people need less time than others. I have a friend who’s quite a prolific writer, and we went to a Cubs game with her, and between innings she would pull a manuscript out of her bag and revise it while we were sitting in the stands. I can’t do that. I’ve always needed a lot of time. Maybe not down time, but drifting and dreaming time, in order to write.

MH: And there are issues like when to take care of little things that have to be done around the house.

RB: Well, I’m always giving the advice, and still to some extent do this: When I’ve been asked all those questions about how to be a mother and a writer and all that, I say the first thing you learn is that you do not do your housework first. I make the bed, but basically no one cares about what your house looks like during the day. At the end
of the day you can fix it up, but you don’t have to do it during your prime possible work time.

MH: The new novel that’s coming out next year is happening a long, long time since the last novel. So this is another aspect of dealing with a career, because she’s been out of the spotlight for a long time. There are implications for your self-image, your identity, the feeling that you’re sort of off people’s radar.

RB: Yeah, I used to do gigs like this all the time, but I don’t do them much anymore because this generation doesn’t know my work. And my new book is a chancy book for me. I think a lot of people won’t like it. It’s a book different than what I’ve done before, and people don’t like that. They’re not ready to cut you the slack that you need, like, “Well, she thought this was going to be interesting to do as a different kind of book, and maybe it works and maybe it doesn’t work.” But it should be part of a career.

INSCAPE: What’s your new book called?

RB: The Lake On Fire. It’s set in late nineteenth-century Chicago.

So you’d like a piece of advice. Hmm...I think I’ve pretty much said it implicitly: take yourself seriously. Dare to consider that what you’re doing matters. That doesn’t mean that you mustn’t take into consideration the lives of the people around you, who often have to support and protect you and your time and concentration. But if you want to – need to – write, then don’t give that up because it’s difficult
or opens you to rejection or because you’re deferring to others’ career needs. Be your own champion and find a few people who believe in you to help you on your way. Then pray for luck because a lot of what will happen to you is out of your hands!