

ANNE BERNAYS

The Curious Urge to Write

BY DEBORAH MILSTEIN

IN HER ESSAY “Fifty Years in the Bonds of Matrimony,” Anne Bernays says the urge to write “was as mysterious and subterranean as the urge to produce a child had been. Maybe they had something to do with each other, the creative floodgates having been released in a torrent.” New motherhood, and a chance encounter, moved Bernays into a new realm of words. She confesses to a “shameful” impetus: “I met a woman who had been my best friend in middle school and I hadn’t seen her in years. I said, ‘Oh, Eleanor, what are you doing?’ She said, ‘I’m taking a writing class at Columbia.’ I went home and wondered, ‘How come she’s doing that and I’m not?’ I realized *I wanted to do this*. If I hadn’t bumped into her I probably would have done it anyway—yet it started me off.”



(LEFT) GRANDMOTHER ANNA FREUD BERNAYS, c. 1945; (RIGHT) FATHER EDWARD L. BERNAYS, c. 1980

Bernays wrote ten stories that first year, “the words pouring almost, it seemed, unbidden.” She sold one of them, “A Better Place,” which she tells me is “horrible” and “self-conscious”; a pregnant woman, worried about giving birth, wonders how small her cervix is. She holds up two fingers close together. “A whole baby has to come through that, and it freaked me out.”

“Was this before or after you gave birth?” I ask, during the first of several interviews with Bernays, sitting at the kitchen table of her Cambridge house.

“After. I met one of my old boyfriends on the street in New York—he’d always been a terrific do-gooder—and he looked at me and said, ‘What are you doing to make the world a better place?’ I should’ve said, ‘Feed you some poison.’ Oh God, how could I ever have gone out with him?”

She published the story under her married name, “delighted to be Anne Kaplan. But then I thought, ‘Anne Kaplan didn’t write this story, Anne Bernays did.’”

Unexpectedly discovering that one’s name is “the core” of one’s identity, “no matter how much you dote on your husband,” Bernays followed her mother’s example and decided to keep her own name. As a child, she recalls she was embarrassed to introduce her friends to her mother as “Miss Fleischman.” “Isn’t your mother married to your father?” they’d ask when they visited her home.

In 1959 the Kaplan-Bernays family moved from New York to Cambridge, settling into “a large house on a groovy street not far from Harvard’s famous yard,” where first-born Susanna was joined by sisters Hester and Polly. “I had three children in six years, but I was also writing books, I just couldn’t stop,” Bernays says. And she hasn’t stopped; Bernays published a dozen books over the span of forty-three years.

Her first novel, *Short Pleasures*, was published in 1962, soon followed by *The New York Ride* (1965) and *Prudence, Indeed* (1966). Then came *The First to Know* and *Growing Up Rich* (both published in 1975), followed by *The School Book* (1980), *The Address Book* (1983), and *Professor Romeo* (1989), a *New York Times* notable book of the year. Bernays’s collaborative non-fiction book *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* (now in its third edition), written with Pamela Painter, was published in 1989, followed by two more collaborative nonfiction works written with Justin Kaplan: *The Language of Names* (1997), another *New York Times* notable book of the year, and *Back Then: Two Literary Lives in 1950s New York* (2002). Bernays’s latest novel, *Trophy House*, was published in 2005. *Trophy House*, set

in Boston and on the Cape, explores shifting relationships and changing neighborhoods. Recently, Bernays completed the manuscript of another novel, *The Man on the Third Floor*, which is currently on offer.

She was in her early thirties when her first novel appeared. Her father, Edward Bernays, the self-proclaimed father of public relations, issued a press release, which made her cringe. “I once had a shrink tell me that my father couldn’t see his children as anything but extensions of himself, so my success would be his success,” she explains. “He was used to sending out news releases about everything—the cat fell in the bathtub, send out a news release! This seemed so not me.”

Edward Bernays wrote *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, published in 1923, the first book to discuss how general sentiment may be shaped. His clients included major automobile and tobacco companies; President Calvin Coolidge gave him a warm endorsement. When her parents were approaching retirement, they asked Bernays to continue the business, and she declined. Her mother was very hurt, but Anne was simply not as absorbed with the spin of public relations as she was with the fabrication of fiction.

Although she was not as well recognized in the Bernays empire, Doris Fleischman worked alongside her husband and helped found their PR firm, actually starting off as his secretary. Doris was a member of the Lucy Stone League, which promoted married women’s use of maiden names. In 1928, when the couple went to get

a birth certificate for their first child, also named Doris, the registrar saw their different last names and deemed the baby illegitimate. A year and a half later, Anne—named for her grandmother Anna Freud—was born. (Edward was a nephew of Sigmund Freud—a fact that he eagerly publicized, so much so that he was mocked as a “professional nephew.”)

“There’s a wonderful term, ‘optics,’ how something looks, which seemed all-important to my father,” Bernays recalls. “I sang in a women’s chorus for thirty years and I complained to him that nobody had ever reviewed us, and he said, ‘If nobody reviews you, the concert didn’t happen.’ I just was horrified—was there no point of doing it for the sake of doing it, for itself, for having completed something, for having created something that somebody else might enjoy? Even if only the families of the singers came, I thought it meant something. But as far as my father was concerned, it didn’t happen. I never could square my own feelings about work with his. That’s why I didn’t take over the business. I would’ve been very rich.”

Choosing a writing career, indeed, did cost her. Soon after her first book was published, Bernays was sued for a million dollars by a man with the same uncommon surname as an unsavory fictional character. An expensive lesson to learn: “Never, *never*, name a character something odd. Name it either something impossible—like Zock—or name it Wilson or Jones, because then you’re not so likely to be sued.” There were only, however, five people in the Manhattan phone book with the last name she used. The judge instructed her to settle out of court, since, he said, if it went to a jury, “Juries always find against the writer. They think writers are immoral.”

Nevertheless, Bernays kept writing at a steady pace. Her fourth book, *The First to Know* (1975), is a novel about a novelist. I wondered how much of this character’s experience was her own. Both Bernays and this fictional novelist started writing after age twenty-five: “He’d waited until he was past twenty-five to start writing seriously and the stuff came out as if someone had shaken a bottle of champagne and then pulled the cork.” I read this line to Bernays, who reacts as if she’s never heard it before. “How nice!” she laughs. “It’s vivid.” She agrees that the metaphor is true to her experience as well.

Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator says, “Nowadays, I’m told, a first novel rarely makes more of a splash than peeing into a tidal wave would.” Thirty-five years later, Bernays considers if the difference is decided by marketing and promotion. On occasion a publishing house may be convinced a first novel is going to be a best seller, and they put everything behind it. But nine out of ten first novels don’t get that treatment. Bernays says that “it’s probably just as well because most people who get that

treatment have a terribly hard time writing the second one.” It was Bernays’s fifth novel, *Growing Up Rich*, which garnered the most press.

Growing Up Rich was awarded the Edward Lewis Wallant Award, which is presented annually to an American writer “whose published creative work of fiction is considered to have significance for the American Jew.” Bernays didn’t submit the book for the Wallant award and was completely surprised to find out she’d won. In fact, she’d never even heard of the prize, but was pleased to find that “some good people have won it,” like Cynthia Ozick for *The Pagan Rabbi* and Chaim Potok for his classic, *The Chosen*.

Still, she didn’t consider *Growing Up Rich* a Jewish book; she says she hadn’t come to terms with her Jewishness, even then. “I didn’t grow up in a Jewish household; I grew up in an aggressively nonreligious, absolutely sectarian, antireligious household. I asked my father, ‘What am I?’ because people would call me ‘Jew’ at school. And he said, ‘You’re nothing, and you can choose when you grow up,’ which I think is terrible. It’s unspeakable, but he really meant it.”

Reading Bernays’s books with an eye for it, I began to find a lot of Judaism in her work, as in this delightful passage from *The New York Ride*:

“There’s something about Jerry you have to admire. Nerve.”

“Chutzpah,” I said. “Jewish nerve.”

“Jerry’s not Jewish,” she said.

“I know,” I said, “but his nerve is.”

Judaism pops up unexpectedly in other novels, too. After Dannie, the heroine of *Trophy House*, first has sex with David, he tells her, out of the blue, that he’s Jewish. It’s by no means a central moment of the book, but it strikes me as important. “You didn’t grow up like this,” Bernays tells me, “but I still expect people to talk behind my back or to exclude me because I’m Jewish. That’s just the way we grew up. I mean, when we were little, there were hotels that didn’t allow Jews. Tell that to anybody nowadays and they say, Really?”

She and Kaplan didn’t raise their children with much religion. “We had a Christmas tree when they grew up”—as Bernays’s childhood family did—“but little by little, I thought, this is silly.” Eventually she began celebrating the Jewish holidays, because she felt she was “ignoring something that drags on me. ‘Drags’ is a bad word because that’s negative. It’s like pulling my coat”—she tugs at her shirt—“to remind me that I’m Jewish. I don’t believe in God and I’m very secular, but we light candles on Friday night and the Hanukkah candles. I feel the weight of it, not in a bad way but in a good way. I owed them something. A lot of my relatives were killed in the camps, an awful lot. Most of the Freud relatives were. And if very influential people had not worked on his behalf, Sigmund Freud would have been killed also. Several of his sisters went to the camps.”

I know she must get this question a lot but I can’t resist asking: did she grow up as rich as the heroine of *Growing Up Rich*? “Yes,” she says, matter-of-fact. “That wasn’t my family in the novel, but, yes, we were enormously rich. I lived in the Hotel Sherry-Netherland for two or three years. When I got up in the morning, I simply left my pajamas on the floor; by the time I got home, my room would have been made, my pajamas picked up. I actually had somebody come into my room in the morning to close the window, because my mother believed in night air. ‘Good morning, Miss Anne, it’s time to get up.’ By the time I got married I’d never bought the ingredients for one meal. The ironic thing about having a lot of help is that you’re essentially helpless.”

“I was driven to school in a chauffeur-driven Cadillac, and I made the chauffeur let me off a block away so the children wouldn’t see me. I was always ashamed of it. In a funny way, I was just as ashamed as if I’d come to school without shoes. But other people love being rich. It’s nice to have enough money to get what you want, but it shouldn’t be used in the way it’s often used.”

Raymie, a character in *Trophy House*, laments how Provincetown has changed: “Where have all the artists gone? Where are the playwrights and poets?” Raymie doesn’t represent what Bernays thinks; “She isn’t me.” But Bernays has seen Provincetown change. A few years ago “a lot of very rich people came in, gay and straight as well, and along with them came stores on Commercial Street that you never saw before, stores that sold beautiful antique furniture and elegant Oriental stuff and high-end boutique kinds of things.”

A New Yorker at heart, Bernays has for many years summered with Kaplan on Cape Cod. “The wild part, Wellfleet and Truro,” she writes, “where the trees and brush are thick and thorny and laced with poison ivy and the seascape is as variable as the weather.” They discovered the Cape in 1957, the year their first daughter was born. “My sister had rented with her husband a little converted something from an Army barrack—it barely had running water—on the edge of a pond in the Wellfleet Woods. We spent two weeks and that was the start of it. We’ve spent every summer on the Cape, except three, since then.” She and Kaplan bought land in 1968, built a house in 1973—“I don’t know what took us so long”—and, after a storm blew the roof off in 2005, built a new house in 2007.

Bernays has long been involved in the Provincetown arts community. She’s taught at and served as chairman of the board of the Fine Arts Work Center. “The students were *very* good,” she recalls. “I was there in the summer, the writing Fellows were there in the winter—so I didn’t meet too many of them. But I was also on the panel to choose the writers from time to time. I didn’t always do well. We turned down Jeffrey Eugenides.” (He later won the Pulitzer Prize for *Middlesex*.) “I’m sorry about it now!” Following her tenure at the Work Center, Bernays joined the board of the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, eventually becoming copresident. “I’ve been teaching there for twenty-five years; I *love* the classes. I’ve had wonderful students at both places.”

I was one of her MFA students, so I was amused to come across this line in her memoir about working at the literary magazine *discovery*: “The stories were fresh and smart, not one of them giving off even a whiff of pretension. Few of our writers had gone through MFA programs like Iowa or Virginia, and occasionally you could hear the gears grinding, but you never had the sense that the writer was composing according to a set of rules learned from a master in the classroom.” When Bernays was on a panel choosing Fellows for the Work Center, she became perplexed by evidence of education at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, because the stories were so beautifully crafted, and because they all had a similar self-consciousness about writing a story. “When I worked on *discovery*, we got wild stories about people doing bizarre things, such as T. C. Boyle, who was completely his own self. We wanted



ANNE BERNAYS TEACHING AT THE COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL, c. 1980



ANATOLE BROYARD AND ANNE BERNAYS, 1951 PHOTO BY VOSBURGH LYONS

original stories, not cookies from a cutter. On the other hand if you look at some of the really successful writers, they came out of Iowa, including Jane Smiley, John Irving, and Michael Cunningham.”

What has changed Bernays’s opinions of MFA programs? Programs differ, she says. She thinks highly of the Lesley program, where she teaches; each term, students work with teachers who are very different in their approaches and styles, so there is no cookie-cutter concoction. But in the seventies and eighties, that cookie-cutter imprint of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop was very pronounced. “You just *knew*.”

“What a writer needs is life and not other writers,” she explains. “You don’t learn writing from other writers, that is, from living with other writers, you learn what it’s all about by trying things that you’ve never tried before and going places and meeting people and getting lost and taking risks and fucking the wrong man and all that stuff. You don’t get it from living in a dorm with other writers. If anyone ever asks me if they should go to an MFA program, I say no, but if you must, go to a low-residency program where you’ll be in the world most of the year. It’s a hothouse,” she says, but agrees that it can grow excellent tomatoes.

“I think the more experience you have the better writer you are. Of course that wasn’t true of Jane Austen, but who knows what she would have written—she never went more than twenty miles outside her hometown.”

I think Bernays would agree that, along with experience, the more reading you do, the better writer you are. When she dated Anatole Broyard in the early fifties, he gave Bernays a recommended reading list including “D. H. Lawrence and the work of several kinky French writers.” Bernays’s own recommended reading list is too long to fit here. I asked for five books and got ten: Jane Austen’s *Emma* (“*Emma* is fantastic”); Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*; Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori*; *The Emperor’s Last Island* by Julia Blackburn (“a masterpiece”); the short stories of Flannery O’Connor and Salinger; Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*; *True Grit*, “a sort of fake Western,” by Charles Portis; a novella by Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, “about the flu epidemic of 1918. Not too many contemporaries.”

I ask Bernays what book she last read. “I’m in the middle of *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. It’s my second time through.” She recently read *Game Change* because she “loves political gossip.”

ON A FRIGID JANUARY MORNING, Anne Bernays wears hot pink socks. We’re in the reading room of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism

at Harvard, where Bernays teaches, right across from her Cambridge house on Francis Avenue. I wanted to see Bernays in action and she welcomed me to her fiction class. “But you can’t just observe,” she tells me. “You’re going to have to work.” She works, too. “We’ll do a little stretching. Let’s begin a story. Any humor injected would be much appreciated.” We start the class discussing the way to begin a story. One student suggests the word *waiting*, as a prompt to spring from.

For five minutes, seated in upholstered chairs, arranged in a circle, we write quietly. Stories of waiting emerge: waiting for the bus, waiting for a wife to get out of the bathroom, waiting in a doctor’s waiting room. Bernays laughs as she riffs off details the scenarios suggest: the joker in the writer’s mind, police officers, facial stubble, those horrible johnnies you wear in the doctor’s office.

One student is having a hard time with fiction. “He thinks he can’t make up stories,” Bernays says. “But I think everybody’s got it. Little kids have it. And you have it somewhere, and I wonder what the combination to the lock is.” She explains that a side of your brain sees things as

story. Tapping in can take some practice, because it’s not thought and analysis, but a kind of free association seeking connections.

“Your subconscious is supplying the details. Do you know about alpha states and beta states?” A little, we say; it’s the flow, the zone. She elaborates, “It’s right under your conscious, not quite unconscious, resting and relaxed. These story-making things are accessible to you. Perhaps they are primitive. It would be interesting to see what part of the brain they come from. Children make up stories—does your little boy make up stories?” she asks a young mother in the group, who nods. “And you know parents often say, ‘Don’t tell stories,’ squeezing that ability out of you.”

“Come on,” she says, “make it up!”

Bernays walks fast, often wearing red shoes; she loves driving her tiny hybrid Honda Insight. She’s five feet, three-and-a-half inches tall. Towering over her in the front hallway of her Cambridge home is a ten-foot-tall Tiffany grandfather clock, which was, she says, a gift for her maternal grandfather, Samuel Fleischman, when he retired from his law firm. The enormous clock looms, a metaphor for her larger-than-life background.

Bernays was educated at the Brearley School in Manhattan, and then spent two years at Wellesley College, which, she says, was “a breeze” after Brearley. “Anything to stop normal human behavior, that’s Wellesley,” she says with a laugh. “Sorry,” she apologizes, knowing I’m an alum. “I went there in the Middle Ages, it was completely different then.” After two years Bernays transferred to Barnard College, where her mother had gone. She took exactly one creative writing class in college and worked as the Barnard campus correspondent for the *New York Times*.

After graduating, Bernays wrote some obituaries and press releases for her parents’ PR firm, and soon took a job as the assistant to a beauty editor at *Town & Country* magazine, where she wrote copy and nearly burned down the office after accidentally leaving some smoldering cigarette butts in a wastebasket. From *Town & Country*, Bernays moved on to *discovery*, a sophisticated literary magazine edited by Vance Bourjaily. She became managing editor, and then moved on to Pocket Books, working in publicity, writing news releases, newsletters, and jacket-copy blurbs. She lasted three un-stimulating months at Columbia’s graduate school in English. At her next position, reading manuscripts at Houghton Mifflin, Bernays “felt like a Dickens character, forced to sit on a stool rubbing blacking into gentlemen’s boots from morn till night.”

In 1954 Anne Bernays married Justin Kaplan, whom she calls Joe—his legal name is Joseph, but he also goes by Justin. In 1957 they had their first

child, and Bernays began to write fiction. “A friend asked what started me writing,” Bernays says, “and I gave them all kinds of fancy reasons, and then I realized after the conversation that I hadn’t told the truth.” The truth was simple: Bernays liked to tell stories. She believes storytelling is automatic. If you see somebody, you wonder who they are and why they are there. You ask whom they live with, where they went to high school, and whether they have “done anything terrible in the last two days.”

After working with words and writers for so long, how did Bernays herself leap into writing nine novels? “I hung out with writers. I liked being around them. I never thought I could do it myself.” Her mother wrote boilerplate speeches and pithy news releases for her father’s business and later in life published a book of poetry. “But she didn’t write at home and wasn’t a model. There was no model,” Bernays says.

In her youth, she dated Anatole Broyard, who, if not a writing model, “certainly helped form patterns in my brain and focused my taste along his lines. He was a Svengali, an iconoclast, absolutely brilliant. I don’t know whether he took me seriously or not, but he certainly felt there was some clay up here”—she touches her head—“to be molded.”

Bernays took a single creative writing class at Barnard with a teacher who worked as the fiction editor of one of the top glossy magazines, “an incredibly good editor,” Bernays says. After writing a story, “you’d have a conference with her, and she would sit down with the story and say, ‘Now I don’t want you to answer these questions. I’m only going to *ask* you questions,’ and each question she asked opened up a gaping hole in the story.” Bernays considers her “the best kind of editor, not saying, ‘I don’t understand why you did this,’ but asking ‘Why do you think this person did this?’ And you’d say, oh my God, because you know up here, but the reader doesn’t.”

As a teacher, Bernays follows this model. In class, she prods us with questions to deepen our stories: What’s this character’s motivation? Would he really say this? What’s the symptom that brings her to the doctor’s office?

Bernays asks the class, “Have you ever played a musical instrument?” We’re struggling with an exercise from *What If?* The idea is to write a story or description using only one adjective and one adverb. “Verbs are your best friends; nouns are your second-best friends. Adjectives and adverbs are your older sister telling you you’re stupid.” We all crack up and gossip about our older sisters.

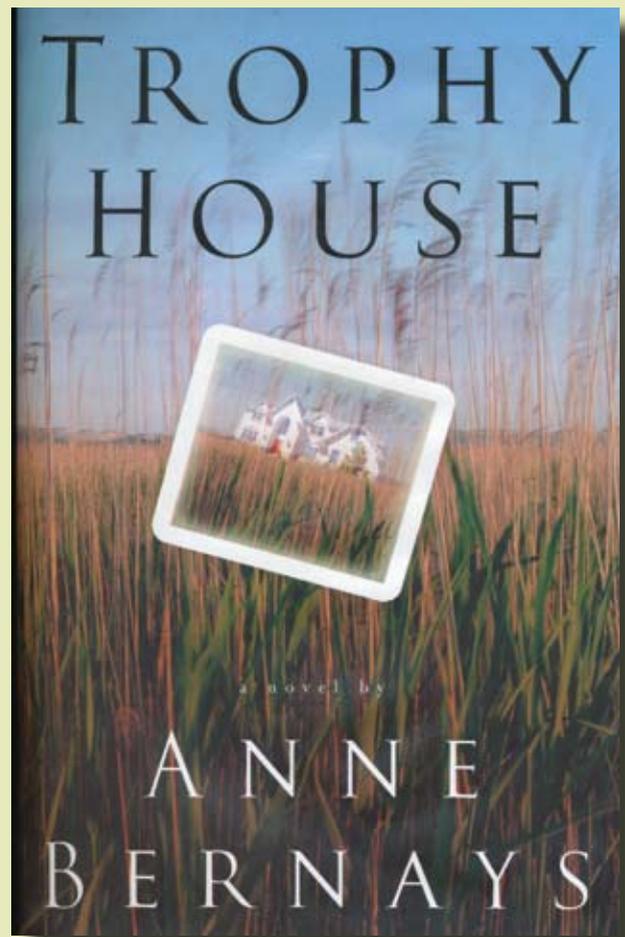
It’s not surprising to learn that Bernays sings; musical references often pop up: “It’s an ear thing, like when you’re singing and know you’ve hit the right note.” Of course, it’s hard, she assures us. “The more you practice, the more easily your fingers do what they’re supposed to do, so when you get a violinist playing something very fast, it’s almost automatic. Doing this kind of thing takes a lot of practice but it gets stuck in your head, like any other muscular exercise. Your muscles learn there’s more than one way to go.”

This sense of muscularity, of practice, comes up in Bernays’s essay “Pupils Glimpse an Idea, Teacher Gets a Gold Star,” in the anthology *Writers on Writing*.

There’s sureness to good writing even when what’s being written about doesn’t make all that much sense. Words have muscle and grace, familiarity and surprise. If forced to choose one writer of the twentieth century who has these qualities most abundantly, I would name Vladimir Nabokov, who makes me want to take back everything I said about adjectives, except that each of his is chosen as carefully as an engagement ring. You can’t teach that kind of sureness; it comes only after writing every day, sometimes for years.

Bernays learns writing from her reading; it’s an ongoing process. In class, she reads to us from a tattered paperback. “This is one of my all-time favorite writers, Graham Greene. I just want to read you the opening of a story, which he does so beautifully. *The End of the Party*—have you ever read this?—is terrifying, and gives me goose pimples.”

She reads a few paragraphs of Greene’s story. “I don’t know how he does it,” she says. “The language is *so clean*. You want to know what happens. I think he, along with Nabokov, were the two great writers of the twentieth century. Nabokov gets away with oversalting the stew but it still tastes good. And he can do it, but it’s an incredibly hard thing to do, to use a lot of adjectives and adverbs, and just throw them around like seasoning.”



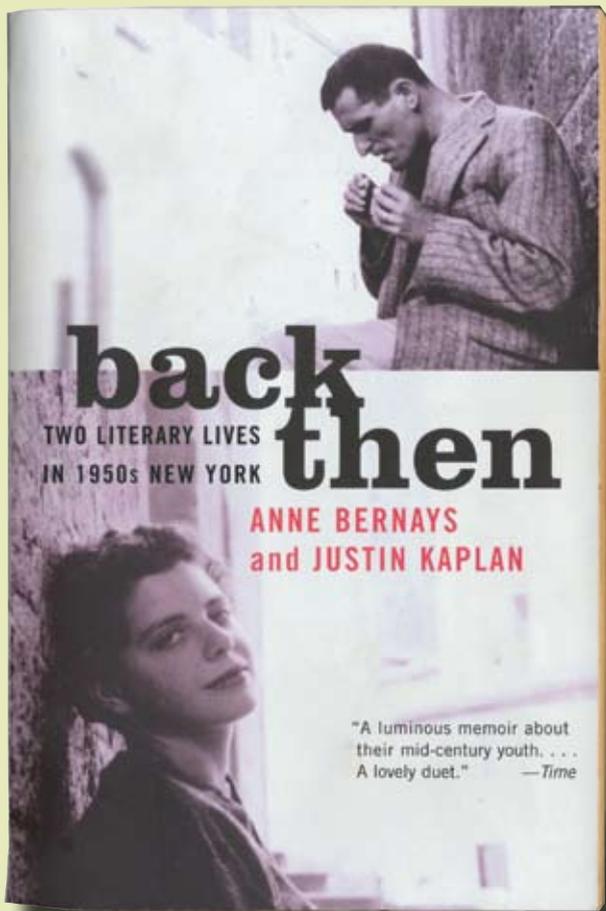
One student in the Nieman fiction class, a writing teacher himself, discusses the novel he’s working on, about the navy. “Somebody said the novel is a domestic form,” Bernays says, “and I think that’s especially true for women—because he’s writing a book about the navy but we don’t have that experience, most of us, traditionally. We tend to write about the things that we know.” Her fictional settings are familiar terrain; many of her novels are set in New York and in the Boston area. Her most recent novel, *Trophy House*, takes place mainly on Cape Cod; “Raymie and I,” says the narrator, “are as unlike as Manhattan and Truro.”

Bernays’s fictional characters work, as the author herself has, in the publishing industry, schools, and universities. Married for over fifty-five years, the mother of three and grandmother of six, Bernays knows family dynamics well—although her novels, inventive and imaginative, set up domestic situations she’s never experienced. Her greatest theme is relationship: husbands and wives, parents and children, writers and editors, friends, coworkers, neighbors. She brings her life experience to work—with a whole lot of twists. “Conflict, conflict, conflict,” she says in class, “that’s story.”

Her novels are, indeed, full of conflict and drama, murderers, suicides, philanderers, alcoholics. Bernays says she, luckily, has no real-life experience with this sort of thing, but neither is it entirely imagined. The husband in *Prudence, Indeed*, an emotional tyrant, was based on a brilliant friend of hers. “He drove his wife absolutely nuts, one-upped her in everything that she did. She was working on a children’s book, which didn’t come off, and he sat down and wrote a children’s book, which they published. She kept trying to commit suicide. He was driving his wife crazy and I just thought, what would happen in a marriage like that?”

“It was the height of the women’s movement, and a lot of people my age were getting divorced because the husbands couldn’t handle their authority being questioned. It was very hard for people who grew up in the thirties and forties to marry and have their marriages survive. Everyone was getting divorced. I had a friend who was a painter, and her husband wouldn’t let her put her paintings in the living room. Well, this is astonishing, so why didn’t she say, ‘Fuck you, I’m going to put the paintings up?’ But they got divorced.”

Bernays says she’s fascinated by this sort of thing. “My mother used



to tell me that she knew two women who had killed their husbands. One pushed him down the stairs. I don't know whether it's true or not, but it was her theory that a lot of that was going on and that it's billed as an accident. But it really isn't. I'm always sort of engaged by horrible stories," Bernays explains, saying she's drawn to them at the same time she's repelled. "But it makes good storytelling."

Bernays's curiosity informs—or perhaps forms—her fiction. In class, she gives assignments to focus our attention on the world around us: List ten things you've never seen before; it will hone your eye for detail. Listen for "overheards," bits of conversation you catch. "You hear the most amazing things when you're on the bus or the subway or you're waiting on a line at the checkout counter," she says. "People are all the time saying really weird things to each other. You'll find that people use wonderful shorthand in talking to each other. They don't use full sentences and they condense things beautifully." Read the newspaper, clip a few articles, write an outline for a story based on the clips. "I wrote my very first novel based on something in the paper."

An informed citizen of the world, Bernays is always up-to-date, reading news of every stripe. "The *Science Times* scares the shit out of you," she exclaims with a laugh. "Jane Brody is always having the most horrible things happen to her legs!" She's a frequent contributor to the *Times* and has had many letters to the editor published. When Sarah Palin's \$150,000 wardrobe scandal broke, Bernays wrote a letter about Patricia Nixon's "good Republican cloth coat." The Checkers speech, Bernays says, "got him saved. He was drowning and it was a lifeline. 'We got this little dog named Checkers, and my wife wears a good Republican cloth coat'—how brilliant! That sneaky bastard. Horrible man. He was smart, though. My mother knew him—he put her on some commission, something to do with the role of women. She was a big feminist."

Bernays certainly considers herself a feminist as well, "but I haven't been so, in my writing and my novels." Despite this assertion, *Prudence, Indeed*, which takes its title from the Declaration of Independence, has been called the first feminist novel. "But I don't like to hammer things home in fiction. I don't like to take a political stance and then just pound on it. I think that's stupid."

A huge theme in *Trophy House* is September 11. "After September 11,"

Bernays tells me, "a lot of writers said, 'I don't think I can write a novel now.' If they were going to write a post-September 11 novel, they'd have to mention it in some way. The same thing happened right after Kennedy was shot; a lot of novels came out in which it figured in some way. I know there were a lot of other books that did exactly the same thing, and much better, so I placed *Trophy House* exactly a year after. The unconscious brings anniversaries up for you, you don't even have to look at the calendar."

While politics pop up occasionally in her fiction—"She began to sing. The sound started far back in her throat and came out with all the sensational assurance of a President-elect emerging after the votes have been counted"—*Trophy House* is, of Bernays's novels, uniquely politically informed. "To me," the narrator says, "Bush 2 was like a doctor you're consulting whom you suddenly suspect never graduated from medical school."

Bernays herself is particularly invested in Bush's legacy of war in Afghanistan. "How do you feel," a student asks in class, "about your grandson being in the Marines?"

"Conflicted!" Bernays says. "I feel very proud of him because that's what *he* wants to do, and he's done extremely well. He came out eleventh in a class of two-hundred-eighty-something. He picked infantry, which is the most dangerous, and he's a platoon leader, and how can you not be proud of somebody and happy for him that he's doing well in what he wants to do? On the other hand, I'm a pacifist, deeply pacifist, so it's hard. Very scary." But everyday life is scary too: "I know three people, personally, who were killed in car accidents on Route 6 on Cape Cod. So the statistics for Route 6 are almost worse than the statistics for Marines."

When Bernays first started writing, as a new mother, she had a two-page-a-day requirement. How have her habits changed over the years, after publishing nine novels? "Well," she says, "the more time you have the more you waste. I had three children in the space of six years and wrote three novels in those same years, and it then slows down. But my routine has remained pretty much the same, which is to get up early and write in the morning. I've found that after two and a half or three hours I just didn't have any more juice left. Which is not very long. I know some people who can go for hours and hours and hours and hours, and I just can't do it. It's grueling. I can tell when I've had a good morning because I feel tired or washed out."

Bernays has cowritten three nonfiction books, one with Pamela Painter and two with her husband, Justin Kaplan. The collaborative process works because Bernays likes being edited. "If I admire the person I'm working with, that is if I think they're smart and know what they're talking about, I don't mind it. Once I handed Joe a chapter that I'd worked very hard on, that was extremely difficult. He looked at me and said, 'What's this?' But that was as bad as it got. The worst is, 'It's pretty bad,' as if it was just some vomit on the page."

Luckily, she says, she and Kaplan have the same work habits. "Except," she laughs, "he works longer and harder than I do." Their daily routines mesh: "We start working around nine, then break for lunch. He often goes back working after lunch but I stop working then. A lot of people's lives don't dovetail that way, and it's kind of too bad."

Although their schedules complement each other, their writing habits don't. Bernays shows Kaplan her work in progress, chapter by chapter. "I finish a chapter and then I show it to Joe. And then he suggests what it needs and I go back and revise, chapter by chapter. And then of course you have to revise from the beginning when it's all done. You have to do it all over again." Kaplan doesn't show Bernays his work in progress; in fact, "He worked on *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*," his first book, a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, for "seven years before ever showing me a word."

I'm curious if Bernays works on more than one project at once. "A few years back I was doing some book reviewing. I had quite a few in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *LA Times*—not the *Boston Globe*, they never asked me, isn't that funny? I would tend to do those while I was working on a longer fiction project, but I wouldn't dream of doing two novels at once. It'd drive you crazy."

"Any novel is a challenge, it's just so hard," she explains. "It gets harder as you learn more about complexity. Plot is fine but you need to fill it in with some kind of emotional density. I tend to write fast, and not in a good way, so that Joe is always saying, 'This is good but open it up, open it up, open it up, take more time.' If I have a scene I tend to zip through it. I lose an awful lot that way, so I'm trying to teach myself to slow down, and

The Man on the Third Floor

Excerpt from a new novel by Anne Bernays

A young man, I guessed to be twenty-seven or twenty-eight, entered briskly. I noticed his face first. He had the look of a swarthy angel, radiating beauty like that in a Renaissance portrait of an Italian noble. His mouth was full and slightly crooked. His eyes were dark, almost black, as if polished. My heart beat rapidly, my chest tightened. I knew I was looking at this man as if he were a woman.

"What can I do for you?" I said. He was wearing dark blue pants, thick-soled shoes, and a thin Eisenhower jacket. He carried a clipboard and pencil.

"I'm supposed to measure your room for

a new carpet."

"Really?" I said. "No one told me."

He consulted his clipboard. "You're Mr. Samson?"

"That's what they tell me."

"This won't take more than a few minutes," he said. "I'll try not to disturb you."

Disturb me? He had disturbed me profoundly. I nodded, meaning nothing, temporizing. I pretended to go back to the manuscript, trying desperately to shake off the effect created by the bent man's back and powerful legs.

"What's your name," I said. I hadn't meant

to say this out loud, but, apparently, I had, because he said 'Barry.'"

"Barry?"

"Barry Rogers." He took from his jacket pocket a large object that turned out to house a length of metal measuring tape on a reel.

I looked again at his black hair, beaky nose, and olive skin. No way was he Rogers, but this was America, land of altered names. If he was aware of my staring at him, Barry Rogers did not let on—he measured, wrote, measured again, wrote again, bending, straightening, doing a dance around the room, in fact, humming, very softly, to himself.

I do think that this book that's now on offer [*The Man on the Third Floor*] is considerably slowed down."

One of Bernays's fictional characters, Alicia Baer in *The Address Book*, shows up again in *Trophy House*, published more than twenty years later. "I liked her," Bernays says, so invited her back. "There's another trick in *The Address Book*, which is she's Alice, Alicia—every one of the characters is a character in *Alice in Wonderland*. It's not obvious. In fact you would have to know both of the books extremely well to pick it up, and it's only a little trick of mine. I just thought I'd have fun with it."

Bernays and Kaplan both write in *Back Then* about their respective experiences in psychoanalysis. It seems that everyone in 1950s New York was in analysis. Bernays writes amusingly of Dr. K, who "pounced on [a casual statement] as if waiting a long time for it, a pig smelling truffles in the forest." At one point, Dr. K tells her, "Do not write; it will interfere with your life as a woman."

I ask if she thinks women had different experiences as writers, and what she thinks now of this comment. "I think I should have gotten up and said, 'I'm outta here!' But I couldn't, I was too young to do that. But he should never have said that—I mean, that's outrageous. Classic Freudian, that's exactly what they thought. I didn't know any better, I was only twenty-two, twenty-three, a baby."

Bernays once reviewed a book by Adrienne Rich "in which she talks about being a woman and how it's impossible to be a really good writer and have a life—you know, a husband and children. I actually reviewed this book for *Harvard Magazine*, for which I was a contributing editor at that point, and I came down on her very hard, because she said in the very beginning of the book that she understood, she could relate to, women who had killed their children. And I thought, this is nuts, this is really crazy."

Bernays's life—and her writing—"wouldn't be the same without my children. For instance, *Growing Up Rich*, I wrote when Susanna was fourteen. I had forgotten what a fourteen-year-old was like, but I made my heroine fourteen and I had a fourteen-year-old right in the house."

In *Back Then*, Bernays writes of herself at parties in her midtwenties: "Shy to the point of paralysis, I mainly looked and listened. . . . I hadn't yet learned how to start a conversation." If you've met Bernays, you know she's chatty, warm, comfortable, and casual. She says she learned how to have a conversation by teaching. "Joe said to me the other day, 'You're a good teacher, you kept things going.' You have to, and as you get older you get braver. But I really was terribly shy. Literally, if I went into a room of people I didn't know, I couldn't talk. And I was very bad at small talk. I still don't like it. It still makes me uncomfortable, so I mostly ask sort of nosy questions. I do—can't help it."

In her writing, as in her conversation, Bernays's tone is matter-of-fact, honest and direct, blunt and funny, no bullshit. She uses vulgarity when necessary, and confesses casually and honestly: "The following is a sampling of the men I dated, considered, and eventually parted from . . . men about

as wholesome as deviled eggs left out beneath a midday sun." She uses understatement to very funny effect: "In Bologna we ate a gourmet lunch in a restaurant someone back home had recommended, telling us that if we failed to eat there we would miss the meal of a lifetime. I ordered half a chicken disguised as poulet Margaret-Rose. It was pretty good."

Always clear and fresh, Bernays tells it like it is, true and to the point, concise and precise. "He's up, she's down; she's harp, he's cymbals; she's silent, he screams." Some words, she writes in her memoir, "like *retarded*, *crippled*, *foreigner*, *spinster*, and *old lady* were never disguised but were allowed to emerge starkly, like naked children at a picnic." In her writing—and in her class—we hear such stark, straight language; "Don't fuck around with the exercise!" she instructs her students. She doesn't shy away from sex scenes, gore, or graphic physical description. Unflinching, Bernays dives right in. At the climax of *Growing Up Rich* is a graphic, stomach-churning scene when the heroine vomits up a rich lunch at Locke-Ober:

The fierce pain in my stomach fists itself and then opens up, disgorging, burning the back of my throat; the tears ooze from my eyes. I strain, pull, and heave, finally feeling the rush of glop upwards, then falling in a pink waterfall into the toilet. . . . I am an up-ended bucket. I feel the perspiration drip down from my armpits and stain my blouse.

Hallmarks and highlights of Bernays's fiction, and her conversation, are her wit, realistic dialogue, and imaginative metaphors—mountains of them, which she uses effortlessly, even in everyday conversation. When I run into her one afternoon in Cambridge, she apologizes for rushing off, wearing her hot pink coat, but has to get home. "The Computer Nerd is coming over—that's how he's listed in the phone book," she says. She's switching from a PC to a Mac, which, she says, is apparently "the Steinway of computers."

Her written metaphors are just as lively and funny: "Outwardly, Serena had everything a woman might envy; inside she was about as lovely as a cow with hoof-and-mouth disease." "She was like a packet of seeds that promises nasturtiums and sends up radishes instead." "Thinking she had married a noble lion, she was discovering that her mate was a one-eared alley cat with dust in his hair and a crimp in his tail."

Metaphor is her trademark, so what's a fitting metaphor for Anne Bernays, with her grey curls, hot pink accessories, and easy peal of laughter? At work in her office, walls painted a lush green, Bernays brings to mind not so much a tree—although, approaching eighty, she's established a sturdy career and deep roots—but a field of wildflowers shifting in the breeze, fresh and youthful, a flash of bright color, a lively surprise each season. A perennial "what if?" rising as she experiences, and teaches, the art of creation.

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