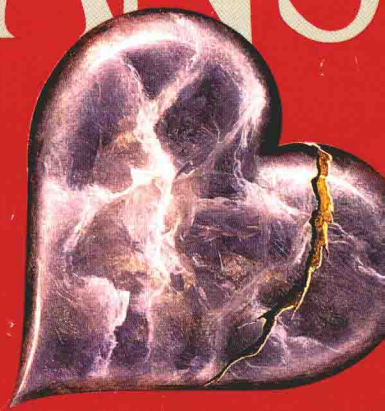
ERICA JONG

author of FEAR OF FLYING

ANY WOMAN'S BLUES

A Novel of Obsession



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ANY WOMAN'S BLUES

By Erica Jong

Fruits & Vegetables
poetry, 1971

Half-Lives
poetry, 1973

Fear of Flying
fiction, 1973

Loveroot
poetry, 1975

Here Comes & Other Poems
poetry, 1975

How to Save Your Own Life
fiction, 1977

At the Edge of the Body
poetry, 1979

Fanny: Being the True History of
the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones
fiction, 1980

Witches
nonfiction, poetry, 1981

Ordinary Miracles
poetry, 1983

Megan's Book of Divorce:
A Kid's Book for Adults
fiction, 1984

Parachutes & Kisses
fiction, 1984

Serenissima: A Novel of Venice
fiction, 1987

Any Woman's Blues
fiction, 1990

For the impossible he
who lives inside me

And for M.N.B., with love

Special thanks to Ed Victor, Gladys Justin Carr, William Shinker, Margaret Kiley, Ken and Barbara Follett, Shirley Knight, Gerri Karetsky, and Georges Belmont for affectionate support above the call of duty or friendship. And a big hug to Molly Jong-Fast, the greatest daughter in the world, and to Ken Burrows, my darling husband, who appeared just at the moment I had stopped believing in darling husbands.

Throw your heart out in front of you
and run ahead to catch it.

—ARAB PROVERB

I intend to stake out my own
claim, a tiny one, but my own.
Lacking a name for it, I'll call
it—pro tem—*The Land of Fuck.*

—HENRY MILLER

Love has no words to spell
or lines to start and stop.

—ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
(The Big Book)

The blues ain't nothing
but the facts of life.

—Willie Dixon

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FOREWORD

How I came to edit this curious manuscript—and how indeed Isadora Wing came to write it—are two of the many bizarre stories the ensuing pages have to tell. I hesitate to label the book either "fiction" or "autobiography"—for it was Isadora Wing's unique genius to blur the boundaries between the two. But in editing Any Woman's Blues, *which was necessarily a partial and unpolished manuscript, there was another problem to contend with: namely that the author herself left, along with her unfinished book, her arguments with herself and her heroine in the margins of the working draft. These I have taken the liberty of inserting into the text—in italics—where I presume Isadora Wing wished them to go. Thus we have a unique record of an author arguing with, and indeed heckling, her creature—a creative dialogue that must go on in the heads of all novelists, but that, in most cases, we are not privileged to see.*

When did Isadora Wing write Any Woman's Blues?

Internal references in the manuscript make it probable that the novel was composed in the late eighties, at the tail end of the decade of greed and excess known as the Reagan years. This would in turn jibe with the known facts of Isadora Wing's life—that she nearly always wrote her "novels" in response to disastrous events in her personal life and that in the latter years of the eighties she was attempting to break an obsession with a much younger man, one Berkeley Sproul III, a handsome young WASP heir, who had an unfortunate dependence on drugs and alcohol.

The first chapter of the "novel" seems to me one of the most extraordinary

pieces of writing I have ever read. It is raw and vulnerable to a degree that seems to push literary counterphobia to the limit. Were Isadora Wing alive today, I wonder how she could tolerate the publication of this work—so exposed does it seem. She seems indeed to have known this, for a note to her research assistant and amanuensis, scrawled in the margins of the last page of Chapter One, reads:

> *Pls. do a computer search and see how many times the word "cock" is used in this chapter. I feel like I'm drowning in pubic hair—if he prongs her once more I'll scream!*

Perhaps a further word to the wise is necessary here before plunging willy-nilly, as it were, into the endometrial landscape of Any Woman's Blues.

This so-called novel is not for the prudish or the faint of heart. It is throbbing and raw to a degree that will shock the most hardened libertine. Nevertheless, I think there is merit in publishing it—if only to demonstrate what a dead end the so-called sexual revolution had become, and how desperate so-called free women were in the last few years of our decadent epoch.

Any Woman's Blues *is a fable for our times: a story of a woman lost in excess and extremism—a sexoholic, an alcoholic, and a food addict. It is the "novel" Isadora Wing was in the midst of writing when her rented plane—a de Havilland Beaver (whose name she must have chuckled over)—was reported missing over the South Pacific in the vicinity of the Trobriand Islands. (Her last desperate stab at serenity—conquering her fear of flying and going to the South Pacific in search of utopia—seems like a mad attempt to play Gauguin when playing Emma Goldman had failed.) At the date of this prefatory study, the wreckage has not been found.*

For several years, Ms. Wing had been taking flying lessons. She qualified as a pilot in 1987 and delighted in flying her own plane, a Bellanca, in the skies above her home state of Connecticut.

Her plane—a complex single-engine that "takes off fast and lands short," according to Ms. Wing—was called Amazon I, *a name that I believe she used ironically. Like all poets, she had a penchant for giving names to inanimate objects, and at one time in her life drove a Mercedes whose license plate read QUIM.* *

During Ms. Wing's final, tragic flight, she was accompanied by her fourth,

* Quim (queme, quimsby, quimbox, quin, quem, quente, or quivive) refers to the female pudendum, also called the divine monosyllable, the cunt, cock alley, the jampot, the Fanny, and a host of other fanciful names. Chaucer favored "quem" or

and last, husband, the noted conductor and composer Sebastian Wanderlust, a friend of fifteen years whom she had just married. It is not known whether she or Sebastian was flying the plane, but internal evidence from her voluminous diaries suggests that it was she. She is survived by an eleven-year-old daughter, Amanda Ace, two stepsons, three sisters, her aged (but youthful though grief-stricken) parents, and eight nieces and nephews.

Ms. Wing's daughter being a minor, the executors of her estate quite properly sought a reputable feminist scholar to edit and prepare for the press Ms. Wing's last literary works, her "literary remains," so to speak. This sad but exhilarating task fell to me.

I had been very much taken with Ms. Wing's first book of poems, Vaginal Flowers, *which I instantly recognized as something new in women's poetry, an antidote to the doom-ridden, deathward poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, a woman poet embracing and celebrating her own womanliness with verve and joie de vivre. Ms. Wing's first novel,* Candida Confesses, *the succès de scandale that made her a household name, had not yet been published, and Ms. Wing herself was then a part-time professor of English at CCNY in New York. We met as colleagues, as feminists, as contemporaries, both committed to the struggle for women's equality, both, if I may presume, Shakespeare's sisters. I remember a warm and engaging blonde in her late twenties, with a savagely self-mocking wit, a sort of gallows humor of the underdog, and a tendency to pepper her speech with Yiddishisms, four-letter words, and literary references. I was drawn to her immediately. But I also remember a great sadness in her eyes and a vulnerability that troubled and surprised me.*

I never had met anyone that vulnerable except for the poet Anne Sexton (another reader in our series and, in fact, our stellar attraction that year), and I could not quite make sense of the bravado of Ms. Wing's writing and the vulnerability of her persona. It was as if the two halves of herself had not yet come together; and indeed it is still hard for me to associate the fragile young writer I met in 1973 with the woman of the world who piloted her own plane, had numerous lovers, and lived as hard as she wrote, taking the Hemingwayesque ideal of the novelist and appropriating it for the whole female sex.

Through the years, Ms. Wing and I met infrequently, but we continued to correspond sporadically. After Ms. Wing's tragic disappearance, I was invited by her stepson Charles Wanderlust, himself an eminent scholar of English literature (pre-Romantic poetry), and her sister Chloe, a psychotherapist in New York City, to make sense of the mass of papers on Ms. Wing's desk in Connecticut.

"quente." Shakespeare had a menagerie of metaphors, including "dearest bodily part" and "eye that weeps most when best pleased."

Ms. Wing's family seemed not to have tampered with her literary legacy, although one of her ex-husbands was threatening to sue if any part of the new book dealt with him. Fortunately that never became an issue, since his name hardly occurs even in her notebooks. When Isadora Wing moved on, she moved on, and if any ghosts from the past preoccupied her, they were the ghost of her grandfather, Samuel Stoloff, the painter, the ghost of Colette, with whom she felt a great kinship, and the ghost of Amelia Earhart, whose destiny she was soon to share.

Knowing this author's penchant for carrying all her manuscripts and notebooks with her on her endless travels, I feared to find nothing of value, feared in fact that the manuscripts and notebooks had gone down in the South Pacific with her. On the contrary, I found a rough and incomplete draft of her last "novel," Any Woman's Blues; *a dozen or more marbled notebooks from Venice, going back to the late seventies, when she was writing* Tintoretto's Daughter; *a spring binder of new, unpublished poems, tentatively entitled* Lullaby for a Dybbuk; *a pile of unpublished essays (many of which I had never seen); another binder, in which was a fragment of a manuscript entitled* The Amazon Handbook, *by Isadora Wing and Emily Quinn; various folders of literary correspondence to various authors around the world; love letters from a surprising variety of men and women; piles of art and anthropology books; clippings about women artists; and the like. Of particular interest is the following excerpt from one of her notebooks, dated October 1987, which makes it contemporaneous with parts of the rough draft of* Any Woman's Blues:

> *For some time now I have wanted to write a novel that includes within it the materials of the creative hegira and that illustrates within its very form or formlessness the* process *of writing the book—particularly the arguments with one's self or one's heroine in the margins of the manuscript. What I want to convey is the creative flux itself, the* feel *of life battling art and art battling life—the chaos and clutter of dredging a novel up out of the self.*
>
> *I have always been struck by Proust's motto (which Colette appropriated):* "Ce 'je' qui est moi et qui n'est peut-être pas moi" *("This 'I' which is myself and yet perhaps not myself"). Every novelist wrestles with this paradox, for we know that not only our protagonist but every character in every book is a part of that mysterious mosaic we call our "self."*

It is in response to this declaration and other internal evidence in the diaries and letters (including scrawled notes to herself on the rough incomplete draft,

indicating where she wished bits of marginal material to be inserted) that I have taken the liberty of reconstructing Ms. Wing's last manuscript as she doubtless wished it to appear.

Thus Any Woman's Blues, *a conventional roman à clef about an artist called Leila Sand (who, at the outset of the book, is at once battling alcoholism and a sadomasochistic obsession with a much younger man), is punctuated passim with the interruptions of Isadora Wing arguing with Leila Sand (the author arguing with her protagonist—with herself, in short), which suggest the life that flowed alongside the novel.*

Ms. Wing, like many contemporary women, apparently believed that the secret of happiness was not to be found in the illusion of "the perfect man" but rather in finding strength within one's self. That strength once found, one could be happy with or without a partner. This search for inner happiness constitutes the fable of Any Woman's Blues. *It has as its theme a woman's search for a way out of addictive love and toward real self-love, which is not to be confused with narcissism. It should not surprise us that this is so, for inevitably in a writer's life, "one tends to subsume in a book one is writing all the conflicts one is trying to resolve at that particular time" (Isadora Wing,* Interview, *1987).*

I trust that my foreword has made clear my deep interest in feminist literary history, my admiration for the late Ms. Wing, and my arduous preparation for the awesome task of editor, official biographer, and literary executor to so feminal—if I may use a Wingian locution—a writer of our time.

I have taken it upon myself to correct obvious solecisms, engage in minor copyediting, and change names and descriptions of characters to the satisfaction of both the publisher's lawyers and the lawyers for the Estate of Isadora Wing.

If, despite all my efforts to serve propriety without emasculating (effeminating?) literature, Ms. Wing's work still seems a bit too Rabelaisian for the faint of heart, I think we must understand that a total lustiness of body and mind was not only her chosen way of living but also her message to the world. She believed in the integration of body and mind, and it would probably be comforting to her to know that she lost both together. Fly on, Isadora Wing, wherever you are! Fly on!

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