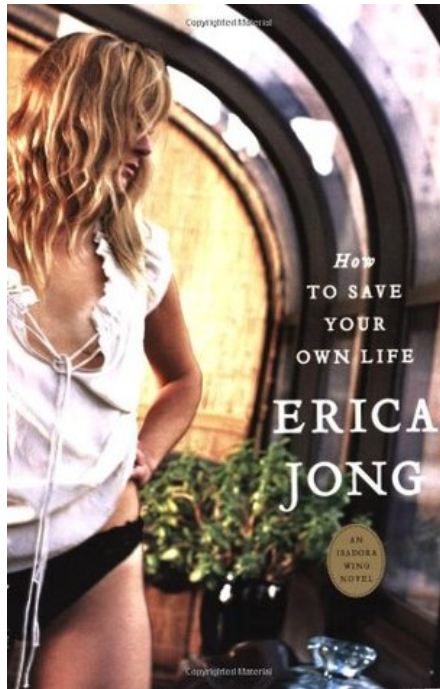




How to Save Your Own Life: An Isadora Wing Novel

Erica Jong , Anthony Burgess (Afterword)

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Vicki ~ no time to read says

During: I don't really know what to think about this book [as I'm reading it]. It's vivid, and kind of morbid. The woman is trying to 'save her own life' starting with leaving her husband, which she thoroughly retells, event for event. Some parts are depressing, others are funny. Definitely adult content all around.

After: Okay, this book was like one half porno, one half self help book... Sometimes it just felt really demoralizing, other times it was really interesting. When the main character started to get her life together, I was actually really excited for her, even though the rest of the time I was thinking that she was just really ~~f*cking~~ stupid.

Anyway, I'm not sure, but I think the epilogue just kind of ruined the entire book... whatever. The whole thing was kind of a drag.

The poems at the the end were nice, it just sucks that I can't really read them to anyone, considering they're somewhat pornographic.

Jana says

In French, when you want to address an elder you will use 'vous', which grammatically is the same as when you are addressing second-person plural. In English, YOU, is plural and singular, and in Croatian is the same as in French. We use 'vi' as a respect and as second person plural, and 'ti' for second person singular.

What am I trying to say? I am addressing Erica Jong with 'vous' because I don't want to be disrespectful. We don't really have common topics but there is a certain understanding between us – part of it being age gap and me being accustomed to zipless fuck. We were eyeing each other, we were aware of each other but we kept our distance and showed only our greatest politeness and manners. And that is perfectly fine and enough.

April says

I put this book aside to read some book club reads, and I really had to force myself to finish. Once I got out of the swing I had trouble getting back into Isadore's head. I planned to read "Fear of Flying" which is apparently a pre-cursor to this book, but I don't think I'll waste my time. "How to Save Your Own Life" is supposed to be about a woman who finds herself, realizing she has self-worth without a man and comes through divorce a better person. This book has lots of needless swearing, crude sex talk, and a few too many chapters of the main character blaming her boring, controlling husband for "forcing" her into repeatedly cheating on him. I realize I'm too young to have experienced the bra-burning-let's-shatter-the-glass-ceiling-sisterhood-feminism revolution, but in what world is it someone else's fault that you can't "keep it in your pants" so to speak? Then, upon confirmation (she already knew, but was in denial) that her husband cheated on her, Isadore is PISSED and wants us to pity her self-imposed victim status. Sorry, babe. Not in this girl's lifetime.

Lyddie says

If the words “cunt,” “clit,” or “cock” make you uncomfortable, you will be utterly desensitized by the end of Erica Jong’s *How to Save Your Own Life*. I considered counting the number of times “cunt” appeared (perhaps a dozen times per chapter) but I eventually gave up.

About seven years ago, I read Jong’s first novel, *Fear of Flying*, featuring the feminist and lustful Isadora Wing. It’s a wonderful novel about the sexual lives of women in the sixties, hard-hitting commentary on the politics of marriage and relationships. *How to Save Your Own Life* is the second installment in the story and, holy crap, what a disappointment. Written in the seventies, with a distinct nostalgia for the sexual freedoms of “bisexual chic” and orgies, we join Isadora once again as she grapples with the ending of her marriage.

Isadora has become truly nauseating, a bourgeois writer with nothing better to do than complain about her husband, have countless affairs, and go on incessantly about the guilt. Most of the characters in the entire book are incredibly difficult to like. And yet, I kept turning the pages. I wanted to see if she could actually “save her own life.” Honestly, I was more curious to know what Erica Jong’s interpretation of the phrase would be.

I’m sad to say that Jong’s idea of saving one’s life means jumping from one dysfunctional relationship to another. For nearly three hundred pages, Isadora laments about her cold and unresponsive husband, Bennett. He doesn’t understand her, or her “art,” her “writing,” or her sexual appetite. Sure, he’s a jackass. I can’t argue there. Indeed, he’s dismissive, patronizing, and surprisingly unfaithful. But – so is she! Isadora doesn’t see any fault in her own character, which is amazing considering the amount of guilt she experiences. Perhaps it’s a strange grand of virgin guilt, and it’s somehow unattached to destructive behavior. Instead she wallows extensively in her anger, but doesn’t do anything about it. And by the time she actually finds love, her idea of the concept is so fu*ked up, it’s impossible to see Josh (husband number two) as the savior. He’s just another Bennett, in a different form.

Isadora appears to be doomed, sexually and romantically. While the social climate of gender politics certainly comes into play here, she’s convinced herself that Josh is the soul mate she’s been searching for. Unfortunately, in the Epilogue, we get a glimpse of their married life and – sweaty, Herculean sex aside - we come to realize there is something wrong with the picture Jong paints in the final pages. Horribly wrong. They play an odd game together, a power struggle of the most masochistic kind.

Perhaps this is simply the environment of marriage, and no matter how many times you escape one demented relationship, your fate is to fall into another. In David Finch’s interpretation of *Gone Girl*, all relationships are apparently doomed to become a power struggle, reduced to nothing but mind games between people who used to love each other. Maybe we are hardwired to play these games. That could be the case here, but I don’t think so.

The divide between Isadora/Bennett and Isadora/Josh is not nearly as wide as she might think. But, by jumping from one man to the other, she never has to make a decision one way or another. She doesn’t have to worry about being alone, nor does she have to sacrifice her sexuality, which seems to have been so intertwined with her identity that losing it would likely result in losing her mind.

To Jong’s credit, this book made me think. It made me angry, and frustrated and outright annoyed. It seems insane to become one-hundred percent dependent on the experience of our bodies to keep us happy. Regardless, the prose is painfully honest. Isadora speaks for the women of a generation who felt trapped by the social expectations of their culture, and shamed by any desire deemed “unladylike.”

However, a book like *How to Save Your Own Life* doesn't work very well in 2014. It feels like Jong was trying too hard to connect the dots for us. We didn't need to be hit over the head with a steel pipe to understand her argument. Throwing around the word "cunt" hundreds of times doesn't make your reader see the issue more clearly. Even if the word had been "rainbow," overuse doesn't do anyone any favours. Maybe Jong was trying to re-appropriate the term from something traditionally offensive to powerful, feminist sexual vocabulary; a noble effort, but ultimately troublesome and completely lost on me.

Amanda says

Was this the whole of the 70s? I know, I know, not everyone had the financial wherewithal to flounce about the city avoiding their cold husbands and drinking champagne. Still a strangely disturbing portrait of an era when "women's lib" was still a newish concept and a 32 year old woman with a career entirely her own could imagine herself trapped in a bitter-yet-tumultuous marriage.

I get the impression that the whole thing was a big, well executed dig at her second husband, by portraying him as cold, calculating, hypocritical and basically miserable.

"Dear Allen, the whole time we were married, I was sleeping with everyone we knew. Love, Erica. PS. I finally thought of a way to get a rise out of you, which is all I ever really wanted."

A look at Wikipedia suggests that the epilogue isn't much more than a bonus dig at her third husband. ("You were controlling, too, okay?")

I thought it was supposed to be some kind of feminist manifesto but if the only way out of an unhappy marriage is to dive straight into the arms of another man, I'm not buying it. I think that what was groundbreaking was simply that sleeping around didn't ruin her life. Fair enough. It hardly enriched it, though.

For all of that, I couldn't bring myself to hate it. It is a window onto another world and another set of options and opportunities. Caftans and dashikis and a gynecologist with a "clap and birth control pills practice on the Upper West Side." Loft living as a novelty and ... just all kinds of amazing anachronisms.

PS. This is what I get for deciding what to read next by picking novels out of free piles on the basis of name recognition alone.

Joe says

What a sad and demoralizing sequel. *Fear of Flying* took the stance that women can desire, experience, enjoy, and pursue sex in the same manner as men. It was a groundbreaking stance that spoke to a generation of women who were taught to believe that only women of loose morals could enjoy sex, not a lady. Isadora Wing's guilty yet liberating sex fueled romp across Europe was endearing, relatable, and the voice of an entire generation of women.

So what happened with *How to Save Your Own Life*? Isadora has become insufferable---a spoiled, self-centered, neurotic, hypocrite angry at her husband after discovering he had a longterm affair. The "novel" is one long winded rumination after another about how horrible her relationship is with her husband who is

indifferent to her whining, selfishness, and neediness. There a lot of potty language and raunchy sex thrown in for shock value and then culminates with several pages of cringe inducing poetry

Isadora spends her days either whining to her extremely patient friends or screwing one lover, then skipping across town to screw another lover, then slinking back home to angrily screw her husband. Not to mention she also dabbles in some sapphic delights with her lesbian friend (who finally has an orgasm by cramming a champagne bottle up her hoohoo) and participates in a drug and booze fueled orgy. Yet hypocritically she remains angry at her "boring" husband for having an affair. Then Isadora finally finds the guts to leave her husband not through some incredible sense of inner strength but through the arms of another younger man.

So much for feminism. So much for being strong, independent, self-sufficient women who don't need a man to complete them. Isadora is only happy if she has a man, preferably with a large cock.

I really enjoyed *Fear of Flying* and it's a good thing women have come a long way since the 70s because *How to Save Your Own Life* sets feminism back at least five steps.

It's no wonder Jong is one of the most revered and reviled feminists of the 20th century.

Laura says

Before I met with Book Club the other week, I'd have given this one star. But talking it over and realizing that Jong and this novel are, without question, a product of their political context made me realize that it has merit as a piece of history if not as a successful piece of fiction (or of writing in general).

Why did I find it unsuccessful, you ask? Because the narrator is a whining, pretentious, and wholly unlikable specimen of a human being and of a woman. I am, even after talking to the BC, irritated that she is even in part representative of an era of women's literature. I've never read the word "cunt" so much and after the first fifty times it kind of loses its shock factor. And then it just sounds dumb. And like Jong is trying way, way, way, way too hard.

Why else didn't I like it? Oh, because the plot is non-existent and although the protagonist seems to feel that there is a lot at stake, to me there didn't seem to be anything. She doesn't change or evolve as a character and I found the entire trial pretty dull.

But the BC girls say to read *Fear of Flying* first to lay the groundwork for the marital relationship at the heart of this book. So do that, and then read this one at your own risk.

Rachel says

This book charts the daily life of Erica Jong's alter ego, Isadora Wing, as she navigates her way through a maze of work, fans, friends, lovers, and an emotional vacuum of a husband. This is NYC in the 70's, and apparently everyone has a shrink, an avocado plant, and an affair. Isadora is no exception. Jong's writing is witty, candid and fast-paced. She lets you peek into her (I assume it's hers) world of hedonism, confusion and boredom. It's alternately hilarious (I actually laughed out loud 3 times), shocking (blatant adultery, drug abuse, orgies), and sad (divorce, disappointment, shattered dreams).

I highly recommend it to most of the women I know, some specific men, and ALL of my neurotic Jewish

girlfriends.

Kim says

This book pretty much picks up where Fear of Flying ended. A continuation of Isadora's story. I enjoyed it but definitely suggest you read FoF first if you haven't already. My edition of the book had a nice little afterword from Jong about her reactions to re-reading this story, some 30 years after writing it. It may be my favorite part of the book, actually.

some excerpts:

"The fact is - you can't really write about somebody you don't love. Even if the portrait is vitriolic, even if the pen is sharpened with old grudges, there has to have been love somewhere along the line, or the sheer, brute energy of pushing that pen across the page will not be there. And writing takes energy - more energy than you ever think you have. And energy comes from love."

"What a revolution it would be if all the people who led fragmented, lying, sneaking lives - justifying themselves with talk of realism, compromise, homage to the superego, civilization and its discontents - finally decided to throw off their self-imposed shackles and live according to their honest feelings! They would not immediately start fornicating in the streets and killing each other promiscuously. Not at all. But they would have to face the responsibility for their own happiness or unhappiness."

"Love is everything it's cracked up to be. That's why people are so cynical about it. ...It really is worth fighting for, being brave for, risking everything for. And the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even *more*."

also. she REALLY loves the word "cunt." haha

Torie says

I really wanted to like this book after being so disgusted by the stories of the passive women in Sara Davidson's "Loose Change." I mentioned in my review of that book how the most valuable idea I took from it was that the women of that generation learned lessons the hard way so those of mine wouldn't have to. I kind of feel the same way about Erica Jong's book, which is the story of the time she spent psyching herself up to leave her husband. While Isadora, the Jong character, isn't exactly passive, her desperation for male companionship and her paralyzing indecisiveness were way too tiresome to spend an entire novel reading about. Her critique of fame, which is ostensibly what the book wants to be, is overshadowed by annoying talk of psychoanalysis and other boring, self-indulgent trends of the 1970's. Erica Jong is a good writer, and at the very least she has a very feminist sensibility, but loveless bourgeois marriages and their attendant hypocrisy, deception, and guilt can only be played over and over for so long before it becomes embarrassing.

Hannah says

Hm. Got this at a library book sale and was intrigued by the dust jacket: "Erica Jong was rich and famous, brainy and beautiful, and soaring high with erotica and marijuana in 1977, the year this book was first published." It's sort of a female Bildungsroman that takes place at age 33, which is inspiring to me as someone who has not yet "come of age" at 29. (At one point, Isadora decides that it's better to be 25 at 33 than never to be 25 at all.) A story of sex, experimentation, pain, marriage, affairs, feminism, success. Also some extremely graphic sex so heads up!

One of my favorite parts:

"I never want to hear you use that word painful again," he said. "Do you know what they said about Whitman?... 'A pig rooting among garbage.' That was the review when *Leaves of Grass* came out. Do you read *Leaves of Grass*?"

"Yes. I love it."

"And have you ever heard of that review?"

"No," I confessed.

"So don't let me catch you saying 'painful.' Pain is not something you waste on newspaper hacks. In fact, I've never seen the point of pain at all. The trick is not how much pain you can feel - but how much joy you feel. Any idiot can feel pain. Life is full of excuses to feel pain, excuses not to live, excuses, excuses, excuses. When you wind up in bed at the age of eighty-seven like me, the only pain you'll feel is got all the useless pain you felt, all the times you let yourself not do something because of fear and cowardice, all the times you let the bastards and the kibbitzers and the life-shrinkers hold you back. Watch out for the death-people, do you see what I mean?... They need you - or they have nothing to write about - but you don't need them. Do you see what I mean? Do you see why I hate this word painful?"

Laurel-Rain says

In Erica Jong's follow-up to her iconic "Fear of Flying," we once again meet Isadora Wing, her "fictional doppelganger," who is representative of the times in which she lives. It is the 1970s, that time of quest: searching for lust set against a backdrop of hedonistic innocence. In some ways, Isadora is a metaphor of the times: she is on a sexual journey, but also trying to find her freedom from a stultifying marriage to Bennett, a cold, detached, dominating psychiatrist. Second-wave feminism is an influential factor, as she acknowledges that the controlling aspects of her husband are "holding her down;" but like any escape from tyranny, making the decision to break out of the chains is only the first step.

She starts "leaving" at the beginning of the book, and then she leaps into affairs as a way of propelling her forward. It takes the length of the book—and many months—for the leave-taking to happen, but it's a journey, a process, and there is guilt, pain, fear, and all kinds of negative emotions that accompany her along the way.

The final impetus is a younger man whom she meets in Hollywood, while on a trip to turn her bestselling novel into a movie. He is like her "second half," and they can almost read each other's thoughts. He seems to be her perfect mate. On her way home, with her plan to really leave motivating her, she thinks about the different lifestyles between New York (her home) and LA (her lover's home). I like this passage:

"The flight from Los Angeles to New York takes only five hours, but the real distance should be measured in light years. Los Angeles is more different from New York than New York is from London or Stockholm or Paris. Someday scientists will discover the invisible gas that fills the air in Southern California, making the most uptight, cynical Easterners relax, take off their clothes, lie in the sun, divorce their spouses, build swimming pools, take up Zen meditation, visit spiritualists, and in general behave as if they've found God

through sex, nudity, and sun-worship.

"To return to New York from Los Angeles is always to experience a profound psychic shock...."

So what will Isadora discover about herself in this journey? Will she learn that living with her love match can be the idealistic escape she had imagined? Will she remake marriage to include experimentation and openness? Or will she find that the same old problems come back in new versions, taking shape in different ways, but still just a repetition of old patterns?

I loved "How to Save Your Own Life," as it reminded me of some of my own journeys during those idyllic times. Looking back, I don't regret my journey, any more than Isadora (or her creator) does. We learned a lot about ourselves and the nature of love, and even when we were disappointed, as we often are in life, we are happy to have taken the leap of faith into new experiences that ultimately defined us.

Five stars.

Kelly says

This book is incredibly positive, and I really liked the direction in which Erica Jong took her character. The development seemed logical, and necessary. I usually have arguments with the "why" of passionate romances. I did in Fear of Flying. This one, I didn't. In some ways, Isadora seemed less mature than in the first novel, but I think that was a reflection of the love that was introduced here.

Just again, very positive and happy. You'll whip through it in less than three days. I took 24 hours.

Barbara Rice says

Her own life, she means. Jong still whining about men and then running to them.

John says

I recently bought this book in paperback with fancy color cover after a decade of borrowing from my writing mentor the hardback with a black and white dust jacket.

The book is a straight forward tale about a woman who finally decides to recognize that her marriage has failed, that her husband is a bad fuck and a lousy person, and that only she can decide what she wants to do, or as LouEllen aka Eddie, paraphrases and says to me, "Get off the razor blade and stop cutting your pretty cunt."

LouEllen loaned it to me to read when I was going through the first of a series of bad relationships with men who were okay in bed and that was the best thing going for them (just okay and only okay). It was a manual of sorts for me and certainly helped guide me to making swifter decisions that have always been dead on since. Never again will I sit on the razorblade cutting my pretty-

It's a more interesting read than Fear of Flying, which I find a little dull. Given the erection Fruits and

Vegetables gave me when I first read those poems, this was reassured me that sex, love, marriage like writing and anything else worth pursuing is trial and error and a whole lot of practice.
