

In Interview: Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker

Jennifer Bartlett: Rachel, you noted that Graham said that many of her influences were men. I was recently reading the letters between Levertov and Williams. What struck me as interesting is that, although the poets had a mutually supportive relationship, there were undertones of sexism. This, of course, was partially due to the time period. What differences/difficulties do you suspect arise when mentor relationships develop across the sexes?

Rachel Zucker: I'm going to answer this by telling you about a specific relationship in my life. Wayne Koestenbaum, a poet/writer/teacher, has been tremendously supportive of me, and inspiring to me. I was enamored of his brilliance when I took his classes at Yale, and was thrilled that over the years we became friends. He's written me recommendations and given me teaching suggestions. He's read my manuscripts and counseled me through various professional and artistic crises. He recommends books for me to read and inspires me with the fabulous books he writes. I think the fact that he is an impeccably fit, well-dressed gay man without children and I am or often feel like the old woman in the shoe has been great for our relationship. My affection and admiration for Wayne is profound; the differences between us are protective and sustaining as well. For example, I am astounded by how prolific Wayne is, but I don't have the same feeling of wanting to kill myself because I'm not as prolific as he is. It's possible that Wayne would be just as prolific if he had three children (look at Michael Chabon, father of four!), but the fact that he doesn't have children makes the relationship safer for me. I am less apt to feel competitive. In Wayne's gaze I feel exotic, almost heroic.

I've never felt anything other than respect and support from Wayne, but that has not characterized my relationship with other male teachers. Bob Perelman, for example, opened our first student-teacher conference by saying, "So, you're going to be a professor's wife?" Perhaps it was a joke, but it didn't sound like one and Bob, though he and his work have inspired me, was never my mentor. Even Marvin Bell, a teacher from whom I learned so much, was not a mentor—in his presence I felt young and female in ways that felt frivolous and insubstantial. I felt, when he looked at me, that wasn't sure I would keep writing (or should keep writing?).

I've never looked to my male teachers or male artists for ways to live my life (except perhaps Spalding Gray) and sometimes this was good for the mentor/mentee relationship and other times it was limiting. As wonderful as my relationship with Wayne is, I would have been in a lonely and confused place without my relationships to my women professors and mentors and without the writing done by women. I adore Wayne's book *Model Homes* and in many ways it has been a signpost of which way to go in my newer work, but I'm able to fully appreciate the work and Wayne because I also have the work of Alice Notley and

the guidance of my women teachers and friends. That's really what the anthology Arielle and I have edited is about: we're not saying that mentorship by men isn't important; we're saying that mentorship by women *is* important and that being surrounded by a generation of successful women poets is a new experience.

Arielle Greenberg: Yes, as Rachel says, what women poets can provide as mentors is a real-life example, that being a woman poet is a possibility in our time and culture. This existential issue simply isn't as pressing for men, and no man, no matter how supportive or understanding or feminist, can tell a young woman poet what it is to be a woman poet, to succeed as such.

Beyond that, in my own role as professor-mentor, I can see how being a woman poet makes me seem or feel different to my students: I'm sure there are men out there who talk about their personal lives in class, but the fact that my students know about my children because I talk about them, because they can visibly follow my pregnancies, because I offer stories about misogyny in the writing community—well, this makes me a different kind of teacher than others they have. Also, like it or not, I'm a stereotypically nurturing sort of woman teacher, and I do a lot of therapy-style conferences with my students about their personal lives and how those affect their writing.

That said, in graduate school the professor I was closest to by far was male, the poet Michael Burkard. Michael was instrumental for me, like Wayne was to Rachel, and beyond his amazing ability to read my work and recommend books to me, we became good friends, went on drives and jogs together, and I also worked as his assistant on a couple projects. We got a lot closer than I did with any of my female professors. But it was very clear to me, as it was to Rachel, that this childless man was not a model for the life I was planning to lead. One irony is that I think one of the reasons I was able to get so close to Michael is that he was childless and male, whereas my female poetry professors both had children: one, Mary Karr, was a single mom raising a teenager, and the other, Malena Morling, was supporting her family and had two young kids and a third on the way. These were women necessarily preoccupied by their outside lives, in a way that Michael was not.

JB: All of the relationships in the book are between women. Could you talk more about your decision to focus on female poets' relationships?

RZ: I hope we've already answered this.

AG: I think we have, but I want to emphasize that we don't see this as a project of exclusion: as feminists, we feel that projects that focus on women and the untold stories of women's lives need to be written into the culture and history. This book is an attempt—a minor one, really—to level that playing field. Male poets are still historically the center; women poets are still on the margins. The only

existing theory on influence between poets is Harold Bloom's, which is not only male-focused in terms of the poets discussed, but masculinist in every way: the analogies he uses are those of soldiers at war, fathers vs. sons, etc. There is no room for a female model or female self in that vision. We are trying to open the field with our book, which presents any number of models of mentorship as yet undocumented. We see it as opening a door, not closing one.

JB: When you say women are still in the margins, what do you consider a good measuring tools: awards, books, academic jobs? Where would you place Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff in terms of poetic theory, as well as books of essays by Lauterbach, Howe, Boland, Levertov, and so on? Wouldn't you agree that there has been a shift, particularly beginning with the Language (and post-Language) movement that brought in so many female poets? I think your own books are proof that things are changing. Women can write about their lives and be published and read in a way that was never possible.

AG: It's true, thank goodness: individual women poets have made great strides and are taken seriously in many important venues, and there is a whole generation of young women poets publishing and making names for themselves. Our book hopes to document this shift, and hopes to demonstrate how much we owe all this change to the political struggles of the feminist movements of the past several decades. But it's still a recent phenomenon, and overall, the canon is still stocked with men, the majority of well-known scholars and college-level literature professors are still men, there are still only a handful of women who have ever won, say, the Yale Younger Award, and let's face it, it's still a patriarchal culture. Women are still discriminated against in the academy for being women: there's Rachel's story about Bob Perelman, and at one campus job interview I was asked, as the first question, by a male professor, "so when are you getting married?" Every woman I know has a story like this. Individual successes or even groups of books are great and important, but it takes a long time to change institutionalized ideologies.

RZ: As Arielle said, our book documents the progress of feminist movements and the richness of the current state of poetry by women. The book is a celebration of the shift you are talking about. Academia (and prizes and awards) is always, by its nature, behind the times—engaged in looking back with a critical eye. I think that in terms of the books being published today, at least the books that I am interested in, there isn't a dearth of women. On the contrary, it feels a bit like a joyful explosion of poetry written and published by women poets. This bounty is due, in part, to the powerful work of the women in the generation before us and the way those women supported and inspired younger women.

JB: The idea of mentorship has been replicated in academia. I went to a school (Vermont College) based on the mentorship system. Students were required to

set up individual study with four poets during the course of the two-year program. While this relationship was more appropriate for me than the workshop model, I think it has its limitations. I am only in touch with one of these teachers now (Bill Olsen). My other two mentors (Nathaniel Tarn and Lee Bartlett) came to me outside of academia. Bartlett is my father, and Tarn, to my luck, offered his counsel. I wonder how the sort of forced mentorship system within academia limits both younger and older poets. It also creates a sort of competition within the poetry world where young poets struggle to get into MFA programs to study with a favorite poet. What would you say is the positive and negative side to mixing academics and mentorship? Do you believe that people still apply to certain schools to find a particular teacher – or are they more concerned with the status of the institution? Do you think the MFA program is an appropriate replacement for the mentor relationship – or means to be?

RZ: My experience at the Writer's Workshop did not involve much formal individual study. Which system—Vermont College or Iowa's—is better? I don't know. I do think that individual work with an older poet is valuable but doesn't always lead to a productive mentor/mentee relationship. So many factors—personality, time, energy, geography, circumstances, interest—affect whether students and teachers will keep in touch in meaningful ways. I'm not sure that you can “force” mentorship. I think I might call the system you describe at Vermont as apprenticeship, which can be very useful or a waste of time depending on those involved. I don't know how or why most people apply to MFA programs. My personal recommendation is that people should not go into debt in order to get a MFA. They should make decisions based on funding, location, size, and consideration of the faculty. Wanting to study with a particular teacher doesn't, in and of itself, seem like a bad idea. Why would it be? But of course to depend too much on one poet could be a mistake. Some great poets are lousy teachers. Some great teachers are lousy poets. And a great teacher is not necessarily going to be a mentor. Some poets are mentored by a teacher they had in an MFA program. Others are not. I think the value of the MFA program is the time and focus it affords a writer and the experience of being part of a community of writers.

Your question prompted me to look through the table of contents of our anthology. I think that seven of the twenty-four contributors choose to write about women who had been their professors and a few of these seven met their mentors as undergraduates, not in a MFA program. I think it is significant and valuable that most poets getting a MFA today will have at least one female professor, but that's not what our book is about. That is just one (and not a very common) kind of relationship that our contributors chose to describe.

AG: As Rachel says, mentorship and instruction are not the same thing. It's possible to go through an MFA program and have wonderful, helpful, supportive professors, none of whom become an actual mentor. In my MFA program, every

year some students choose me as their thesis advisor, but I don't think I *mentor* every student for whom I act as thesis advisor. This is partly because of me, in that I don't have as strong a feeling for every student or manuscript; partly because of the student, since not every student gives or wants the same thing in this process; and partly about the chemistry between us.

What I think MFA programs have done is allow poets, who have scant other resources for funding these days, to work in a profession where their poetry is emphasized and they can help others learn about poetry. In times and places when poets could live off grants or benefactors or when the cost of living was less, one could find and talk to a smart, established poet at their local pub or town square. This is less true today, so the place to find smart, established poets is often in the academy.

But as Rachel says, professors are one small part of the MFA experience: just as significant can be access to resources like libraries and readings, the community of peers and friends, the time and motivation to take one's writing seriously, etc. Some of these aren't as true for people who attend low-residency programs, to be frank. But low-residency programs offer other kinds of experiences. No MFA program, though, can or should guarantee mentorship, just as no workshop can or should guarantee great readers.

Not every poet has had a mentor, and that's ok, too. We are publishing an essay by Kirsten Kaschock on her own history of resisting/missing having a female mentor. Just as workshop and one-on-one teaching models don't work for everyone, mentorship doesn't either. I guess I believe that, in general, for women artists it's more important to have someone whose life you can hold up to your own as a template or example — just so you know you can BE a woman artist — than it is to find someone who will personally guide your work or vision. I mean, for example, that it's more important for me to know that Jean Valentine had two children and had a long hiatus in her career and has been in recovery and has been generous to so many other young poets, than it is for her to give me feedback on my individual poems. The life stuff seems far more tenuous, scary, and fraught to me—just so much more uncertain for women artists—than the art stuff.

JB: How would you define mentorship as different from one-on-one instruction? At Vermont the teaching involved many of the actions of a mentor: reading work, suggesting poetry to read, suggesting places to publish, correspondence, etc...

AG: Those actions just sound like good quality college-level instruction to me: I try to do those things for every single one of my serious poetry students, both undergrad and graduate. To me personally, mentorship implies an involvement with or example set by the mentor's *life* or life choices or larger career or aesthetic

choices, a relationship that surpasses in importance a regular teacher-student relationship. I've had many wonderful women teachers, happily, but it was the ones who consistently took me aside and gave me advice about the bigger picture (college, jobs, parenthood) that I think of as mentors. I've received plenty of good feedback on or ideas about my poetry from other poets—how to better structure a poem, methods for revision, etc.—but what stays with me are the things I've been told that are bigger than my poems: how to avoid petty jealousies and focus on my writing, how to balance work life and family life, even how to think about a close friend's suicide.

RZ: One of the things I love about the essays in our book is how broadly our contributors chose to interpret the idea of mentorship and how diverse the mentors described in the book are. For Arielle, and for me, mentorship has almost always involved receiving advice or learning by example about life choices. This is not the case for everyone. Katy Lederer writes about how Lyn Hejinian refused to give her advice. Several of our contributors wrote about being mentored by women they never met. Aimee Nezhukumatathil finds a short prose poem by Naomi Shihab Nye in her common room in college and this one poem causes her to change her field of study and to become a poet. Jennifer Moxley reads *Pythagorean Silence* by Susan Howe at a pivotal and particularly lonely moment in her life and realizes what she must do in order to survive her isolation and become a serious poet. Moxley and Nezhukumatathil are guided by poems rather than a teacher's advice yet it was important to both of them that the poems that guided them were written by living women writers.

AG: Yes, my personal definition of mentorship is not the leading one, or even the accurate one! But I do think it's important to note that, when Rachel and I first began this project, the essays we most hoped to get were those that talked about women's lives intertwining, as well as their work. Though as Rachel says, we're glad for the way this book broadly defines "mentorship" through the diversity of situations described.

JB: You have a wonderful selection of poets in the book. How did you decide who to contact? Is there attention paid to poets of different aesthetics and age groups?

AG: Thank you, we made a concerted effort to span as wide an array of poetries as we could by asking poets from different aesthetics, geographical backgrounds, academic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, publishers, etc. The thing that they have in common is their age—they were all born during or after the Second Wave feminist movement, so they all grew up exposed to the rhetoric of women's rights, although obviously to varying degrees. Beth Ann Fennelly talks about a rather repressive Catholic girlhood in her essay, while Kristin Prevallet talks about her feminist mom fixing up her own home post-divorce. But they still all benefited from the access to a generation of successful women poets before them.

In deciding whom to contact, we chose to limit ourselves to “emerging” but established poets. So everyone had to have at least one full-length book published with a major press, but no more than two. (However, since we started the book years ago, some now do have three or more.) We also tried to ask poets we thought might have interesting or unusual stories of mentorship...and who would be willing and able to write good prose! It’s amazing how many poets don’t feel comfortable working in that other genre. And again, we aimed at diversity, so there were only so many poets we solicited who graduated from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, for example.

RZ: The selection process was one of the hardest and most rewarding parts of the project. There were so many younger poets we wanted to include and so many older poets we wanted someone to write about! It was painful having to make some of these decisions.

AG: Yes, we’re still sad about some of the older women poets about whom we both wish someone had chosen to write. But it was also part of the fun of this book, not being able to predict or control the mentor that our contributor would choose.

RZ: And the selection process was also incredibly rewarding. We had to force ourselves to read widely and beyond our circle of friends and acquaintances. It felt a bit like getting a second masters degree. For example, I had read very little formal contemporary poetry and needed to get educated. I’m ashamed to admit that I’d never heard of several of the older women poets our contributors wanted to write about; or perhaps I knew their names but had never read their poems. By the time we were done I felt like I had a really good sense of the first and second books written by young women in the years between 2000-2005 as well as a much better knowledge of the poetry of the twenty-two mentor poets.

AG: If we were starting this project now, of course, there’d be a whole new crop of young women poets with first books out to choose from, and I’d imagine they’d choose a whole new crop of older women poets to write about. That really is a testament to what an exciting moment we’re in for women’s poetry.

JB: Are there any poets with disabilities in the book? And, if not, being conscious of diversity, is it something you might consider in a later anthology?

RZ: I would love to read an essay about mentorship by a poet with a disability. As with all anthologies, our project is not and could not be inclusive. There are so many poets left out and so many perspectives left out. Our book is a slim chapter in the larger story about mentorship and the lives of women poets.

JB: When is the book coming out?

AG: The current publication date is May 2008.

JB: Thank you! We'll look forward to it.