



PARMALEE PAULA COVER

# An Interview with Parmalee Paula Cover

THE BACON REVIEW

Parmalee Paula Cover has just put her grandson to bed. She lives with her daughter in a sunny house with a “Happy Birthday” hanging sign for her seventy sixth birthday. Her daughter is a speech pathologist, who, when out, leaves her son with Parmalee.

The child’s name is Olin, and Parm says he would answer questions as honestly, or maybe more honestly than she. A little Danish baby. Her daughter’s father is Danish, but Parmalee is not.

A copy of *The Writing of Fiction* by Edith Wharton is behind her, as is Olin’s first drawing of a person. They are sitting on a shelf in front of a map with circles indicating places in Europe and Asia where PPC has travelled to do research for her book.

Conversation turned from Noam Chomsky to Charles Bukowski, because of a wonderful miscommunication. PPC knew Bukowski.

“I used to live in LA. I lived all over but back in the 80’s it was quite a poetry scene. A punk poetry scene. I lived in a loft downtown. It had about 30 square blocks of insane people. When Reagan was governor, a long time ago –he’s dead now of course– he let everyone out of the insane asylums. So then they moved to LA and.. thirty square blocks of them. Artists live there too, you know, because artists will live anywhere.”

**TBR:** How long were you there?

“I did poetry at the time but I’d just optioned a book through Bantam Double Day Dell and I was there to do script writing, but they’d just gone on strike. So what they were doing was using back scripts, so the strikers didn’t have any leverage.

So I got no work.

I got some work when people were on vacation, but it was also union. Anyway, since I didn’t have any work, I became a 976 phone sex operator.”

We are surprised.

The dog needed to go out. Dog-o, a rescued greyhound who didn’t like narrow places. PPC takes us with her to let him out. She has to throw a treat out the door so that it would wander outside. It is a former race dog

that got let go early for not winning any races. It had to be taught how to go upstairs.

**TBR:** Any stories about the phone days?

“There were hundreds of people working there. It was like a big factory. Back then you had the regular phones, no cell phones.

Someone would call in and there would be the whole “Welcome to...,” I forgot the name of it “.... in a moment we will connect you with a centerfold model.” “

PPC laughs, a giant smile.

“And we’re all sitting around looking like shit, you know. You could smoke inside then, and people had put donuts in the ash trays so people were putting out their cigarettes in the donuts. All disgusting in there, there were ants and cockroaches in this big room....”

She put up a fake phone to her ear.

“So you take the phone over here and in a sultry voice: ‘Hello? Oh yes’”

She holds up a second phone to her other ear. “And you’re talking to them at the same time,” and PPC begins adding phones to every possible point near her mouth where she could speak.

“Pretty soon you have two here, two here, and one

here and you’re saying the same thing to everybody. The trick is to say the same thing, but make it seem like it’s just for them.

It was a big scam. A lot of math students called up from the University of California. They didn’t know I was a way-old person.” She thinks for a moment: “Let’s see, seventy-six now, I believe I was fifty.”

**TBR:** How do you land a job like that in the first place? Does someone just approach you about how sexy your voice is?

She laughs, “No, I lived around the corner. The street people had dismantled my car bit by bit. Every time I came out, I saw something else was missing. Steering wheel was the last thing. So I had to walk wherever I went, and it was within walking distance. There was an ad in the paper.” PPC puts on an advertiser’s voice: “‘Are you sociable? Do you like to talk? ..’ and I said, ‘Oh yeah, that’s me.’ ”

She laughs as she mentioned the ‘down-and-outers’ who also worked there, the Christian people who would bring their kids in while they worked.

“And we had a Santa Claus line.”

TBR: Santa Claus line?

“People would call in to talk to Santa, and he was right across from the S & M line. So if a child was paying attention, he might hear some...”

TBR: Some snapping of leather.

“It was a lot of shouting.”

TBR: The grime and grim of LA.

“It made a good book.”

We all sat quietly for a second, and then she asked us what we wanted to ask her.

TBR: We thought we did ask you some things.

This sparked conversation about Vilho, and The Birth of Pale Ochids.

TBR: Was there a Vilho?

“No, he just came to mind. I had decided before I

went out that I wanted to write something that is not about me, that my relatives won't be embarrassed by; no personal revelations about me. But, what was the most significant thing that happened in the last century, which I grew up in? Of course to me, that was WWII. I was in this country during WWII; I was a little girl hiding in doorways. And I drew pictures on the wall of bombers with bombs coming down and I didn't get the fire quite right but my parents were driven nuts by this because here's this little girl drawing bombs all over the wall and they couldn't stop me. No matter what they'd do I did that. Because I knew that it would stop the war.

You know, the magical thinking. And that was all for us.

But when I went to high school, there were all these displaced people from Europe. This was in Long Island. It was years later

I wanted to learn, 'What was this?' So I investigated these displaced people. And then I'm finding out, 'Oh my god, there are like fourteen million people wandering around Europe with no place to live and they've been wandering around Europe for years before that because of all this stuff that's happened.'

So I do all this reading and I read maybe 250 books from cover to cover. Good memory. And I incorporate

that into my mind so I don't have to go look up anything. And I'm writing out of that, this book, about *Child of War*. All wars seems like are fought by the children: WWII - it was all a kid's war. The only people who got food to the Warsaw ghetto were kids sneaking out. Five-year old kids sneaking out to get meat to bring back under their dresses. And I was thinking of all the wars and families. So I had this idea, there would be, in Montana, there is this young woman who's sort of modeled after the way I was: rebellious teenager. Named Lola.

And she, her parents are communist. I thought I'd put in the desperate elements and try to shoot down the clichés about them. Because I was very much in the peace movement in the sixties. And I found a lot of stuff out about how rigged some of that was. Both sides are full of it.

But I was thinking, "There's someone in the ghetto, how am i going to relate this to Lola in 17 Montana?" And ok, what if he goes there? How does he get out of the ghetto? Well, maybe he goes north into Finland which is democratic. They don't have any prejudice against the Jews, not then. Only gypsies."

She laughs.

"A lot of the Jews who went up there fought with the Germans—believe it or not—against the Russians.

Because the Finns and the Germans, in 1941, were fighting against the Russians.

So this character escapes. Ok: 'What is he doing?' He's a cartographer of course. And there are these fake maps that the Finns did come up with to misguide the Germans.

So, the map was for the Battle of Murmansk†, which is an awful awful Stalinist piece of shit place. So Vilho goes there.

Okay: 'How does he get to America?'

Did you know that you can float on ice? You can actually get on an iceberg, get on a piece of ice," she traces on the map behind her Vilho's journey 'around the east', around the Artic.

"You'd have to be very lucky to do it, but it could be done. And along the way, there would be a lot of Gulag's, loaded with intellectuals. But they're unfed.

And they're out there doing stuff. So the name Vilho, William; he has three names. I don't know why I called him William except my children's father's name is Bill and I wanted to irritate him.

Vilho and his two friends, they actually make it around there. But Vilho's unconscious, so I don't really need to write too much detail about that but I have done a lot of research. So the part that you read is the first part

to my book

That's Vilho, and I ended up liking the guy. He's a little tiny hero. A little guy. He slipped out of the wall to help his parents."

**TBR:** We both had the same gut reaction. "Wow this is really unusual. I've never read anything like this before." Not only is there a really encyclopedic knowledge of history, but there's a melding of genre that we've never seen before. Where do your influences come from? Not the academic ones so much.

"I'm a dadaist. I'm a born-and-dyed-in-the-wool dadaist. I was in San Francisco during the abstract expressionist scene. And they have a rule that if it looks like something, you paint over it. And so in writing, if it starts to have that oh i'm familiar with this, I question it. I might leave it, as a kind of homage to what people want to hear, but use it. And so I'm doing it as art. I'm basically born-educated-artist.

The musical form of it, too. There's a lot of editing out to make it musical. To get rid of the 'supposed to's'. I feel myself coming up with a slightly different form. It might be a kind-of Don DeLillo, somewhat Pynchian, Foster Wallace, a little meta-fiction, a little prose poetry.

I don't know what genre it is, but I'm so grateful you took mine on, because it is strange and it is weird and you can't put it anywhere and that's purposeful on my part.

I could write the other ways, but they bore me, you know?

**TBR:** So as a follow-up question, are you doing any of this dada work on your own interpersonal life? Any covering up or painting in your non-writer world?

"I'm trying not to. I'm a recovering dadaist in my private world. I'm trying to be a normal grandmother and all that, but it's a little hard.

This art is like a rebellion and I've always espoused with people like that, always the questioning of things. Right now, I live a very ordinary life on a quiet street named Sumner Street in Portland, Oregon, doing little grandma things. So I really need writing dada.

As far as art is concerned, I did a series of cartoons. I switch media. If I draw for pleasure, I write seriously and if I draw seriously, I write for pleasure. A back and forth."

**TBR:** In drawing seriously, is that more a taking-your-drawing-seriously, or are you trying to get

that work out there?

“Depends on the situation. I won an award and had no idea why. For the committee against domestic violence. It was very violent. I think it said more about the people who gave the award than it did about my work. I doubt very much that that would happen now because the world has changed pretty rapidly in the last twenty years. There’s a lot of things you can’t say. There’re a lot of topics you can’t bring up. There’s zero tolerance for everything. I feel the world has become very constricted. A child can’t walk down the street by themselves, etc.

I’m not living dada now. I’m writing dada. It’s all, whatever. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

PPC had been drawing the whole time we’d been talking, when she wasn’t pointing to her map or tossing treats to the dog.

**TBR: What are you drawing right now?**

“The unconscious. See, I have your names. Jason. Eric. This is what you just said, Jason. I don’t know why. That’s a good thing about writing. Maybe you do that too. There’s words and phrases you get at random.

Oh, my biggest influence: Burroughs. Cut-ups. There’s so much in that. I don’t think I would like him that much as a person.

He’s not such a good shot with an apple. You know that story?”

**TBR: Nope. Tell us about it.**

“He was in Mexico with his wife; he actually had a wife. He decided he’d shoot an apple off her head.”

**TBR: William Tell.**

“And he shot an arrow at her and missed. Missed the apple. “

**TBR: Did he catch a forehead or an eyeball?**

“I think he killed her. I don’t know where it went. I don’t know whether it went into an eyeball or not. If it did, we’d probably know about that one but, anyway it was Mexico so he didn’t have to go to jail or anything. Just like today, you can do anything there. But his aesthetics, *Naked Lunch*, that whole thing of being banned in Boston.

And I knew Ginsberg and all those people; they were a big scene and all back in the beatnik days. I was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute.”

TBR: Did you ever meet Andrei Codrescu?

“No, was he there then? He’s not that old is he?”

TBR: What is he now, 60 or 65?

“So he’s just a young kid. I would love to meet him. “

TBR: Yeah, he was hanging out with Ginsberg on the Lower East Side at the time.

“He must’ve been really young.”

TBR: I think he moved at 19 or 20 from Armenia and went straight to New York.

“Ginsberg was kind of a nasty fellow. They were all kind of sexist you know. I did poetry, disrespectful poetry about Ginsberg when I was a slam poet for awhile. It went over with the ladies.”

She laughs.

TBR: Where was the slam poetry at?

“I was a guest slammer at the Nuyorican in New York. You’re not in New York are you?”

TBR: Nope, Colorado.

“What makes me think you’re in NY. The time? Colorado. Good for you. I didn’t go there, but, Los Angeles, Austin, Texas, Dallas, Texas,

Chicago. I was at the Green Mill there, slamming, and also Vancouver, Canada, as a guest.”

We struggled to remember the name of a movie starring Benjamin Bratt and made a lot of noises trying to recover the memory.

TBR: How was the Nuyorican?

“Kind of basementy. No windows. Factory-like, grey walls. It looks like an old part of the subway, its got tables and you can’t see anyone and there’s just one light on the stage and it’s not elegant, but it’s crowded as hell. It was really roasting out when I was there and everyone was sitting out on their fire escapes.”



TBR: Sounds like Rent.

“So I had the people from the Nuyorican, and then one at the slam venue in Salinas. And so I’d have those people out. We got to know each other, maybe too much.”

At thirty minutes or so, we had a lull in questioning, so we went for whatever we could find, which in this case was Olin’s first drawing of a person, behind PPC’s head.

“This is,” and she’s pointing to a drawing of an oval on two legs, with a little blue mowhawk and a green bandana over its eyes; it has no arms, “a first drawing of a human being.”

TBR: Does he have any distinguishable features? Looks like just legs there.

“That’s the early recognizable drawing. He’s three and a half. You probably did the same thing. First they draw a circle. Anywhere in the world, they all draw the same thing. So this is a classic early human. Because they look down at their body, and that’s how they see people, sort-of a tadpole thing. That’s why they have the legs

coming out of a head. Because they can’t see their body. I used to be an art teacher too.”

TBR: Of a particular age group?

“Everybody. I taught University, at Stanford. I taught children from China who’d just come over from Taiwan. The parents wanted them to learn how to do the SAT and the PSAT. And they gave me a lot of money and I had them do art.”

She laughs.

“See, that’s Dada right there. You’re supposed to teach them writing and you have them do art. I had workbooks that were based on people like Hans Arp\* who wanted to be a shoemaker and he became one of the Dada’ists. I had that in a workbook for fourth graders. They had to read it and pick out the nouns.”

PPC glances up.

“Do you want to meet my daughter?”

TBR: Of course.

Her daughter Lucinda was surprised by how young we were. She also exposed the fact that PPC was drinking wine out of a Northpole Alaska mug. PPC intro-

duced us and it felt a bit like a speed-date. We got Olin's name wrong, who was still asleep.

Lucinda's cat was in a hospital. Pancreatitis. \$1800. An old cat that'd come all the way from New York. She headed off to check on it.

**TBR:** So what about Western Europe? Have you been there?

“Yeah, Lucinda, as I've said, is a speech pathologist, and she had an opportunity to work over in Bosnia. Over at Mostar\*\*. Because Bosnia wanted to be part of the EU, and in order to do that they had to do some special education for kids with disabilities that would help them qualify for membership. So Lucinda and a team of speech pathologists went over there.

We went to Turkey first, and they loved Olin, chucking his cheeks. And he hated that. While Lucinda was in Turkey, I went to Poland. First I went to Latvia, stopped off there, and got a taste of the Russian Mafia at the airport. It's really ugly. Have you seen any Stalinist architecture?”

**TBR:** We have.

“They have the really cheap version of Stalinist architecture. Then I flew off to Warsaw. I stayed in Old Town Warsaw, where no one could speak English except for a few people. I got lost there, but I did go see the ghetto there. And there are some buildings left, and I just wanted an orientation of what the city looks like because my characters come from there, and not that I learned much but i could see first-hand how big it was, how huge. The three types of architecture: the old, before WWII, then Stalin-stuff- ugly-ass stuff that's just huge. A simple lamppost is going to be six feet square at the bottom and go twenty feet up for no reason.

My guide was under the impression, as they are in Warsaw, that it was to intimidate the people. Now that they're not Communists, people are very happy, but they're the worst of capitalism.”

She laughs.

“Then I took a train to Krakow, but they didn't accept my ticket, they wanted me to buy another one. And then the train conductor keeps the money, right.. I went through Slovakia where you had to stop at the border to catch another bus. Actually, in Krakow, I knew a guy there who's got a PhD from Krakow University. He lived in Oświęcim\*\*\* which is right by Auschwitz, and he grew up there—he was one of the folks people, the

Germans that Hitler sent in there to populate the area. Lebensraum, when Hitler decided to expand Germany for the German people.

I went on the tour. Three hours walking. It was enormous. The enormity of it was in itself overwhelming. It put in context all the books I was reading about the Holocaust.

So I took a train, got off at Slovakia and we had to take a bus. Well, I had two bags. It was a big step down from the train to the platform. No one helped me; no one helped me all the way through. Everyone helps me here. So I throw the bags, and I'm kind of a gimp. Then, in Warsaw, in this Stalinist station where they had steps up the wazoo –stairway to Hell, right– I'm bumping my bag all the way up. One person comes down to help me, says, 'Oh I help you, I need. I need money for coffee,' and she's really strung out, right?

So I give her some money, she hardly helps me and we get to the top and I said 'Well, aren't you gonna go for coffee? There's coffee over there.'"

The woman apparently never went for coffee.

"That was the only person who helped me. It was plain to me that it was the Communists fault that they never help anyone because the Communists always said the State will take care of you. So when the toilet over-

flows, no one puts their hand down and changes the plunger like you do here. They file a report, call the State, the State doesn't come out. So these five-star restaurants –beautiful restaurants– have shit all over the bathroom floor seeping out the door into the fancy restaurant because no one fixes the toilet. The State's going to do it, right? So now there's no one who fixes the toilet. Now they're capitalist and they don't help anybody.

Then I meet with Cinda and Olin in Sarajevo. That's an interesting place. They're really trying to overcome the Muslim-Catholic thing. The war was absolutely horrible. They called it the Home War [1991-95], and I talked to people about that. It was awful. Every single life. All the way through Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia: roofs sixty years later, bombed out. Houses with no roofs. People are living in there, houses with no roofs. The devastation was just awful.

I stayed in Dubrovnik\*\*\*\* with Olin and the person who we rented the place from had fought in the Home War and he said he had wasted his life because they had no weapons, they'd given them to the Yugoslavs, who were the Serbians who were fighting Croatia, because Croatia wanted to be their own country, to not be Yugoslavia anymore. And they fought from his house. They used his house. They used to jog up the hill and had their

armies with no weapons. Finally WWII weapons from Germany arrived. History, my god.”

She waves her hands in a whirlwind around her face.

“They didn’t think they’d bomb Dubrovnik because it’s an international city, but they did, just to irritate people. So Dubrovnik is completely rebuilt but it was pretty devastated.”

**TBR: How many countries has Olin been to at the age of 3 1/2.**

“18 states. Canada, England, Bosnia, Croatia, Turkey, Slovakia. Only six.”

**TBR: Six at three.**

“Well, six at two.”

**TBR: You’ve led a very diverse life, a lot of unique jobs, lived in many different places, travelled through Western Europe; what sort of advice to you have about the political life; about writing, culture.. what kind of wisdom do you have to pass on to young people now? You’ve had a lot of worldly experiences, you’ve been touched by war. What kind of guiding posts do you have**

**for young people who want to get out there and write?**

“Just do it. Just write. Or art. Just do the thing. Don’t worry what anyone thinks. Of course you have to have a job, do the job, maybe get related. Get yourself some education but don’t take it seriously. Be a rebel. Question everything. Just do the thing, because you do get better and better and better.”

Read the experiments. Pay attention to the edges, to the rebels and the revolts because they become mainstream eventually and you may as well be first in the pile.

So many people are wanna-be’s. ‘Oh, I wanna be a musician.’ Well why don’t you do it now. Just play, just do it. Just sing. Sing now.

You don’t have to wait until you’re on stage. Just write, write now. Wherever you are, fucking write. I have hundreds of journals which are totally burnable. They’ll make a nice fire someday.

It’s the experience, the kinetic experience of writing, of writing cursive. Doing drawing, don’t pay any attention to what anyone says because they’re probably jealous that you’re doing something and they’re sitting around on their ass.

Oh, my sister and I have this rule. I have a baby sister who’s seventy.”

She laughs.

“I got this when I was a producer / director at PBS / CBS: *don't show anyone your raw footage.*

In the TV industry, you've got this uncut stuff, right? And you know what you're gonna do with it. You know the sound is bad here, you're not gonna leave this in. But you don't show it to anyone because you're going to hear from them little suggestions. Like, 'Oh, well you ought to...' And so, never show anyone your raw footage. When it's in a good place and you like it and you know it's good, then show it. But you're going to get some not-very-good comments. You have to be tough, and say, 'Fuck you, show me your writing. Show me yours, I may have some suggestions.'

I just got a rejection today, because I send stuff out, you know, just for fun to see what happens. And there was this science fiction piece called *On The Spectrum* with this sort-of idiot savant who kills his stepmother. It's surreal and has to do with physics and stuff.

He [the editor] wrote back and said, "You should leave the stuff about colors out and you know if somebody say's something you should have them say *he responded* or *she asked.*"

**TBR: A heavy editorial hand.**

She laughs.

“And I thought, *I think were operating out of different genres here.* If at the beginning I had heard that, I might have been unduly influenced. I don't think I am, but one can be.

Oh, and don't take too seriously the masters degree programs in Creative Writing. I went to U of Iowa. I go to see how the other half lives. The U of Iowa, that workshop, they've got a really good program but they have a certain way of writing.”

She takes the dog out again, throws the treat out the door.

“So I went there and did my thing, and I had a teacher, and he's now one of my editors. Those are the people, a lot of the people who are doing the judging of stuff. And they know the proper way to write. So if you don't write that way, you might not get your stuff out.

You know that, right? They're the screeners, right? And if it doesn't get past the screener who's just learned this crap and you're supposed to not do this or yes do that. They're thinking of a reason to throw it out anyway, because there're so many things that get sent in.

So good stuff gets thrown out.

The next thing that's going to happen is going to be

a revolt about these really tight times right now. These are really depressing time.

Worse than the fifties. Think about the fifties, all the great writers, Henry Miller, Anais Nin. Burroughs.”

TBR: We'll get 'em too.

“I think they're there. You're it.”

TBR: We'll try.

“There's going to be people saying I remember. I remember Jason and Eric.”

We laughed, blushing.

“I was there when they were doing their thing. Before they were famous.”

TBR: Well thank you for sending us your stuff and kicking it for awhile. We appreciate it.

“Yeah, 53 whole minutes.”

Boom.

“And thank you very much. If there's anything I can do for you, I'd be glad to do that.”

She showed us the end of her doodle, stacked boxes and a swirling fan of pencil marks.

#### NOTES

\* Hans Arp was an Alsatian sculptor, painter, poet, and abstract artist. He was a founding member of the Dada movement, Zurich 1916.

\*\* Mostar is a city and municipality in South Central Bosnia.

\*\*\* A small town in south-central Poland, 50 km west of Krakow

\*\*\*\* A city on the coast of Croatia, a popular tourist destination.

† The battle of Murmansk was fought in NE Russia between Communists and the para-military / personal Army of Nikolai Vokoshayef. It resulted in the surrender of the Red army. The Communists were led by Vladimir Lenin's son, Vasily, and they were aided by 2,000 German mercenaries.

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