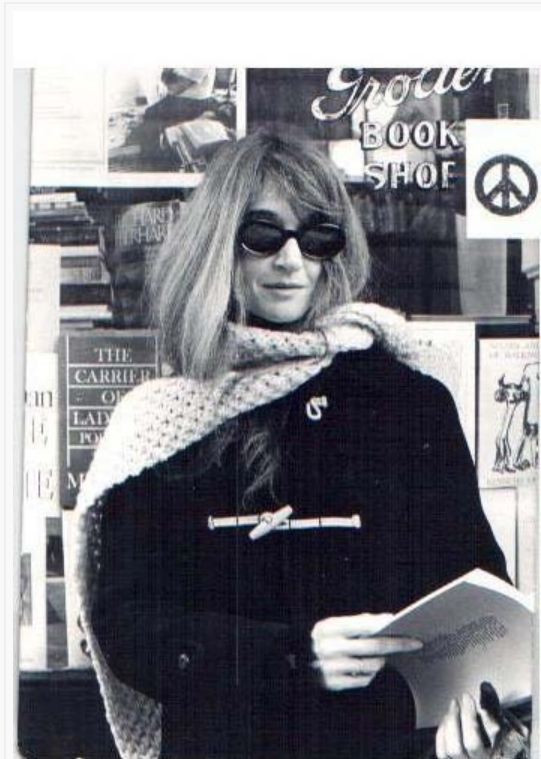
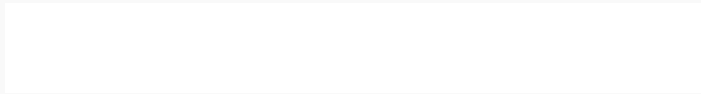


# The Damned Interviews

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## Poet Lyn Lifshin



Lyn Lifshin is one of America's most published poets. Her works has appeared in nearly every literary journal gaining her the titles "The Queen of Lit Mags" and "The Queen of Modern Love Poetry". She has published over 130 books and chapbooks. Lyn has won countless awards for her writing by the likes of Robert Frost, Ken Kesey and Richard Eberhart, and Ed Sanders. <http://www.lynlifshin.com/>

Can you tell us a little about your background? What were you like as a child? Were you drawn to creative things at an early age?

I was born in Barre, Vt, a small granite mining town (that seems caught in the past even now) and often on weekends my parents would pack up the car and drive 2 or 3 hours on back roads south. I was told that before I was three, I said "it looks like the trees are dancing." My mother, who named me Rosalyn Diane, a name she thought suited for an actress, something she would have loved being, thought, well if not an actress, maybe a poet.

In elementary school and into high school, I painted and usually won some award. I also won science contests, one on the national level with my face plastered across many news papers. But actually that exhibit was mainly an art project too.

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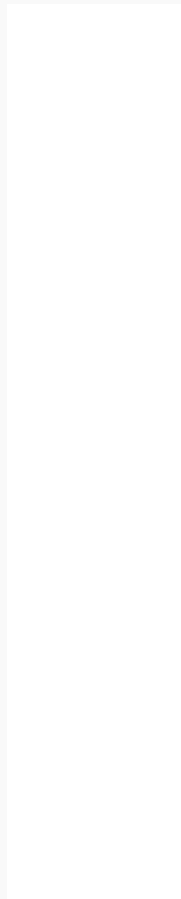


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I took piano and don't think I was very good at it. Then I took violin— was much better. They asked me to be in the high school orchestra but I would have had to wear a dress every day and (odd since I adore clothes now) I just wasn't into that.

What was your life like before you became a writer?

Because I learned to read early, I skipped from first grade to second and then quickly on to third grade. I never learned long division somehow and never was good at math. But I had a wonderful teacher who had us reading Milton and Blake and Wordsworth. Every day we wrote poems. She would bring in a bough of apple blossoms and have us look at them, touch them, smell them and then write our own poems. I still have one of those pale blue lined thin notebooks of poems. And when I teach, I ask students to rely on their senses in our exercises and in their writing outside the class.

One day for some reason I copied a poem of Blake's out of a book and told my mother it was my poem. Since Middlebury was a small town with one main street, it is not surprising my mother ran into that teacher and was so excited— she said she couldn't imagine I could have written such an amazing poem with words like "rill" and "descending" in it, was ecstatic and told Mrs. Flag she had been such a wonderful influence. So by that Monday, I had to write my own poem. And use those words in it.

Middlebury is not far from Ripton where Robert Frost had a summer home. My father worked in my uncle's store where they sold overalls and men's shirts and being somewhat like Frost, taciturn, cold, unfriendly— he and Frost got along well, Frost would only let my father wait on him. Over the years Frost sent my father cards and books. When my father took a poem I had written and showed it to Frost, never telling me— we rarely talked— Frost wrote "very good images sayeth Robert Frost. Please bring me more." Nothing my father could or had ever done mattered so much. I'm sure it helped get me scholarships. By the time I had more poems, Robert Frost was dead

After growing up in a small town, Middlebury, VT, where though I dated a little, a strong memory is of being at a sock dance with fluffy, floppy socks with bells and bows on them and waiting to be asked to dance. Waiting and waiting and then, like my best friend, going home without even one dance. We both were depressed and our mothers told us it was because we were too smart or that boys were afraid of us. I wasn't sad to leave to go to Syracuse University. I started majoring in theater and drama but when everyone I met had had Broadway or off Broadway, I backed away. And then in fine arts, when my first assignment, a collage— somehow I'd gotten into an advance art class and I wasn't even sure what a collage was— but when I turned in a still wet, partly oil paint, and a mix of purples in other materials, my teacher said her dog tracked it all over her white rug. She said I would never be a painter. That is when I transferred to British literature.

What first led you to try your hand at writing?

Except for the poems in third grade, I really didn't write that much until at home, one vacation, an argument with my sister somehow ended with me writing a poem. Not about that but a few poems. But not that many.

It really wasn't until after I got my MA at UVM and began my PHD at Brandeis, dropped out and got married and then began my PHD again at SUNY Albany where I spent week ends writing term papers that what developed, turned me into a serious writer. My experiences there became one of my most published poems, "You Understand the Requirements." And the subject of many poems in THE DOCTORS. And even "In Spite of his Dangling Pronoun."

I took a job at a TV station when I left Suny and had one week of rushed, frenetic activity but several weeks where things were slow. I had just discovered the *INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORY OF SMALL PRESS POETRY* edited by Len Fulton and began sending out requests for sample copies. I got a quick intro into the world of small press mags of the seventies: mimeo, off set, a few college presses but I was drawn to the most anti academic, the magazines with names like goodly company, apple, El Corno Emplumado, Folio and

Kauri— the first two magazines that accepted and printed my poems. In my upstate house those early magazines are still on shelves that fill a room. Very soon, the magazines overflowed every free space and had to be packed and saved for my archives.

It was such a different time. I still have the NYT book review that had an exhibit of a wild and wide range of small press mags on their front page.

Why do you think written word has such always had such an impact on society?

I may be cynical but I'm not sure it really has? and less so now with social media, a sense that people are always too busy?

Who are some of your favorite authors? Why?

(actually could find the book)I could never answer that question for fear of leaving someone out. Asked for an anthology to list writers or books I feel everyone should read I listed ten— SIR THOMAS WYATT, THE COLLECTED POEMS

GARCIA LORCA

JOHN DONNE, THE COLLECTED POEMS

EMILY DICKINSON, POEMS AND LETTERS

DYLAN THOMAS, THE COLLECTED POEMS

SYLVIA PLATH, ARIEL

WILLIAM CAROLDS WILLIAMS

THE BIBLE

WALT WHITE MAN, LEAVES OF GRASS

I went into more detail why I picked those writers in POETS BOOK SHELF contemporary poets on books that shaped their art edited by Peter Davis.

As someone who has studied extensively at various universities and schools, and taught at a few as well, why do you think education is so important in improving one's life?

This is such a hard question to answer. I suppose the contact with some special, wonderful teachers, the atmosphere of others who are interested in the same thing and also people who are so different, from different countries, back grounds. I think travel, reading— also are so important. One of the teachers I most was impressed by told me to leave school, travel, write.

How have you changed most since your early days? What do you think is the most important thing you have learned so far in life?

In some ways, I think I've changed very little. As for the most important thing I've learned— I somehow can't answer that.

When you first began your career did you ever think it would have led you where it has?

I'm not sure where it has led to. I know I work hard, too hard and often do little else besides writing, ballet and ballroom. But I read less than I'd like to. Always have about 60 to 70 notebooks to type up. Used to go to the museums a lot and now rarely do....I vow after finishing a third horse book and trying to update my auto bio (I've started about 4 times and always got side tracked)— that I want to travel more — do more things.

How do you feel about being called, "a modern Emily Dickinson" by Ed Sanders? Would you agree with that statement?

Oh I don't think I am that reclusive! But I do work alone a lot and I do write often. I used to write in the morning and write at the kitchen table but now I always seem to have something that needs to get done. I always write on the metro— but now I take it two days a week instead of five... but I do get on themes and one poem leads to another.

What advice would you offer the women of tomorrow?

Things are changing so fast– I'm not sure what to say.



How do you think the role of women in our culture has changed most?

Probably the fact that the expectation you will marry and devote yourself to your children is one of the biggest. At my wedding I was told “better enjoy today. After this it will be your husband and your children.” That wasn't my plan and hasn't been my life.

Are there any little known facts about yourself that you'd not mind sharing?

That my real name is Rosalyn Diane? I could say more but some things, to quote part of one poem, “are better left unsaid!”

What advice would you give to other authors looking to be published in today's market?

I am just glad I am not starting now. I think for me, writing on the outside, always an outsider, connections, a degree in writing, a position in a university — these were not important. Or maybe I was naive But now, I don't know. There are so many places on line. I just read that Amazon is stopping writers who have their relatives write endless rave reviews– it seems more of a business than ever. And of course with so many people graduating from writing schools and comparatively few jobs– I don't know– it might be good to have a separate job and not have to depend on poetry. I just don't know. Today I read that many dancers, ballet dancers whose careers end so early are now taking courses in other fields, often going into science so it doesn't come as a rude shock when suddenly, because of an injury or age they can't still dance. Poets ought to have a back up too I suppose.

You have also been called, “Queen of the Small Press”. What are your feelings on that? Is nice to be labeled a Queen so often?

Gosh, I never thought of it!!

If you don't mind my asking what are some of your fondest memories?

Many are personal but I was very happy when Harper and Row accepted my collection of women diaries and journals, ARIADNE'S THREAD. And when Black Sparrow took my first book and second and third and talked about a book every other year, I was super thrilled. and I was happy to get my most recent Abyssinian kitten 10 and a half years ago.

Can you tell us a little about your book, ***Poets, (Mostly) Who Have Touched Me, Living and Dead. All True, Especially the Lies?***

I was asked to do a book on this subject by a press and I liked the idea. When I finished the ms they said NO we want living poets, gossip, dirt. Well I wasn't about to be on many peoples hated list so I felt more comfortable with writing mostly about the dead poets! Or living poets in poems that wouldn't get me sued.

Is it nice, do you think to be touched by people so to speak?

It is rare that I am aware of that. When I am it is wonderful.

What projects are you currently working on?

As I said, I am trying to finish my 3rd horse book and start to write an update for my Gale Research Autobiography series. I wrote in Turkey and some poems about Malala the young student who was shot because she wanted an education.

Do you have anything you'd like to say before you go?

It's been fun to do this- and Happy New Year.



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