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An Interview with Fanny Howe

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An Interview with Fanny Howe

Fanny Howe, author of the The Needle's Eye: Passing through Youth, visited the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University on January 22, 2017. Fanny Howe was a finalist for the National Book Award for her book of poetry Second Childhood and her fiction has been considered as a finalist for the Man Booker International Prize. We were fortunate enough to spend a sunny afternoon in our dining room with Fanny and hear her discuss her thoughts on literature, religion, life, and politics.

The Needle's Eye is available online from Graywolf Press.

The Needle's Eye centers on the trauma of the Boston Marathon bombings, how did you come to this topic?

It was weirdly traumatic. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev lived right down the street from me, four blocks away, and there are boys like him all over, flying by on skateboards, stoned, lying by the Charles River, doing drugs, driving down to New York and back in stolen cars. He was just one of the boys who I had gotten used to and who went to a neighborhood school. I went driving around and around to everywhere they went, trying to pick up the mental state of the boys from out of the geography. They had stopped at this garage at four-in-the-morning to get gas, so I would drive over to see what it felt like.

The book is really about mercy for me, that would be the overriding term. I was trying to find out why you should have mercy on Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and on everyone. He was the sort of mistro of mercy, the one who needed it most, but got none.

It is maternal for me, because he came from my neighborhood where my children grew up apart of the same generation. And so I could so easily see what his troubles with the world were.

And you connect the story of the bombings with Saint Francis?

It seems to me that Francis and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev both had a similar sort of breakdown and both could have gone in opposite directions; it wasn't predetermined that Francis would become a saint or that the poor killer would end up in prison. It really isn't clear if you go deeply into Dzhokhar's past. It was just a horrible thing that happened. They all talk about the teenage brain and brain development, but at the same time they don't show mercy upon those people that are out of control.

And then coincidences start to come up as you start writing anything like this. It's this idea of errancy. You're going along with a story but then something happens out on the street or someone calls you that interrupts the way you thought you were going and that puts you on a slightly different path. I really believe in holy coincidence, that things drop in your path and you have to be aware of them. It's mad, but it works!

There are certain elements which seem to reoccur in *The Needle's Eye*?

Fairy tales and stories for children have been very important for me and something that I would like to do more of -- trying to go back to the beginning of literature and the beginning of thought. Starting to start finding it all over again. I sort of feel that way about politics too, in general, that we should go back now, that we've completed a great cycle of invention and learning and science. There isn't much more that we have to

do other than going back and fixing the errors we've made and trying to use early models again. So I think that we have gotten too complicated and self conscious now.

Errancy, again, is another foundational element. It appears most often in old literature and medieval texts. In Persian texts too, you find errancy appearing as way to go about the world. Don't stop, just keep walking. Don't expect, just accept. it is a philosophy but it requires you to move. Saint Francis, for instance, was a knight errant.

Often the errant quest is like life, where you have an idea of where you want to get or what you want to find -- the promised land or something -- but you follow random clues, so you can't say that you took a wrong turn. Whatever random thing that falls in your path and changes its course is your fate and not an error. It's sort of a whole different way to interpret what is happening to you.

Since I've been young and bad at everything, I had to find a new subversive way of being.

You have to trust that something is going to come out of it. I suppose that is how artists live. They never just have an ordinary day; they're finding clues or secrets or new colors.

Religion also comes up fairly often. I'm Catholic and I go to mass. But I go and I am always in a fury. It's a hard religion and writing it hasn't made me any more comfortable with it. I think it offers a grounding for all your interior rantings as you go through your day. For me the grounding of the mass and the Eucharist infuses the rest of the days. It's physical and intentional, to go to the same place every week, sit down, and listen. It is poetry that you are listening to. And it's free!

I sit in the back in a fury though, judging everything, the homily, the music. It's probably part of being a Catholic. It is hard. If they would only just do the three readings and the Eucharist, I don't think anything else would be necessary. Even the Eucharistic prayer is a bore! I never get moved by one word of the Eucharistic prayer. It's good to be protesting each week, It probably is good to be pissed off, I mean, Protestants give you what you want. To be a Catholic really hones your mental skills!

What would you say to our readers who may be aspiring writers or artists?

I think it's very important to create, and to take that time alone. The weirdness of it is that you are looking for something that isn't there. You have to tame something that doesn't even exist. You practice a lot.

Creation is always a complete paradox, because, what is it that you are trying to get perfect? There's nothing in front of you. It is very strange. Especially when you are revising a piece of work that you wrote hastily. What are you looking for? Is it a sound? Is it an image? It's a very mysterious but grounding kind of thing to do. Starting out though I definitely wouldn't not show it to anyone for quite a while. No matter how much you admire it. When I do show my work to someone, what hope for is just silence.

Of course, it's important to have other artists who can read your work. My people are dead now, so silence is all I get anyway. I do still do sometimes just to ask aloud "well what will I do now". But for younger people especially there is a need to have a community of artists. You can't do it alone. It's just impossible in such a big world. It's terribly important to find some other

friends or poets and to put together magazines or online blogs -- to read each other's work.

I still do have that community, but now it's all over the country, out of the country and online. If I were your age, I would remember to go to a place where there are other poets or writers or artists. You have to begin with friends and a physical place. Even with the internet now, you don't want to lose community completely. That's one path to madness.

I used to tell my student to go write at McDonalds or at the local bus stop, not to seclude themselves. I wanted them to be somewhere where they could participate in human suffering and experience the difficulty of being alive. I wouldn't want them to go off into the mountains. Except when they can (laughs) But I do think we have to participate in the horrors of the world

Public intellectuals and writers are important. But it's now teachers that are the purveyors -- the most important citizens for change. It is so important that they are supported and given injections of energy to keep on going. Teaching you can convey ideas and change people's minds, more so than as a writer. You know, if you have a classroom then you've got people right in front of you. Teaching remains a noble profession.

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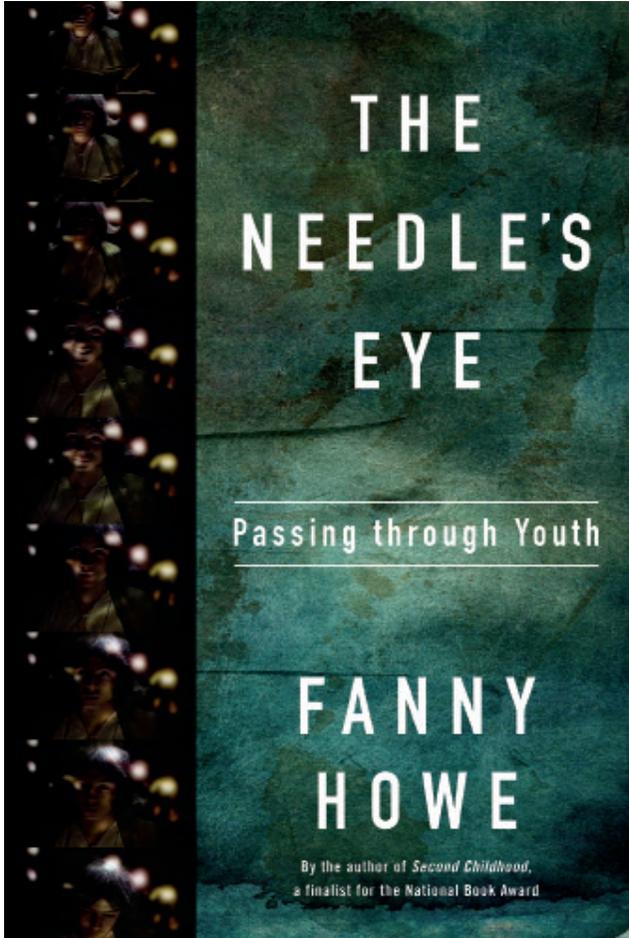


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