

A conversation with Barbara Graham, editor of *Eye of My Heart*, conducted by Mark Matousek, author of *When You're Falling*, *Dive*, and *Sex, Death, Enlightenment*, and a former editor at *Interview* magazine.

**Q: What made you decide to write about being a grandmother?**

A: From the moment my son and daughter-in-law announced that a baby was on the way, I began to get an inkling of just how complicated grandmotherhood could be—especially since they were living overseas at the time and my husband and I lived in Washington.

**Q: Is that when you decided on grandmotherhood as a subject?**

A: No. But I started keeping a very detailed journal of my experience right after Isabelle Eva was born. There was such a riptide of emotion and, being a writer, I simply had to record it in order to make sense of it. By then my son and daughter-in-law had moved to DC to be near us—an incredible gift—and they found a house a mile away. I held Isabelle when she was just minutes old.

**Q: When did you suspect that your experience might turn into a book?**

A: Soon after she was born, my daughter-in-law and I were walking her around the neighborhood and it just hit me how radically different grandmotherhood is from motherhood. Interestingly, the same primal protective—even possessive—feelings get triggered, but when you become a grandmother you realize very quickly that you have absolutely no control, no say in anything. That afternoon I understood for the first time that Isabelle is mine—but not mine. I thought it would be interesting to explore the range of emotions and experiences that were getting stirred up.

**Q: Why did you decide to invite other writers to join you in exploring the subject instead of writing your own book?**

A: Originally I planned to write my own book, but when Isabelle was four weeks old my son and his wife concluded that moving to Washington had been a mistake—even though they enjoyed being near us—and one month later they were on a plane headed back to Europe. After that I only saw her in brief, intense spurts, a week here, two weeks there.

**Q: That must have been really difficult.**

A: There are no words to describe my grief when they left. It felt like a death. But it wasn't a death, just a dramatic change in circumstances beyond my control. At a certain point, I realized that I simply had to get past my feelings of loss. I had to reconfigure my relationship to my son and his family, as well as my own longing to be involved in Isabelle's life in an ongoing way, when every visit doesn't have to be planned months in advance.

**Q: What was the genesis of the idea for a collection of essays on the subject?**

A: After my son and his family left I was more interested than ever in grandmotherhood as a subject. I started talking to friends and friends of friends who are grandmothers—and everyone had a story. Some were dramatic, like that of the grandmother who is raising her mentally disturbed daughter's son and was not thrilled, at least in the beginning, to be a mother again. Some stories were far more subtle or comical, but each was complex in its own way. I looked around to see what had been published on the subject and I could find nothing smart or literary that told the real stories about being a grandmother—the challenges as well as the joys. I decided I needed to do something about that.

**Q: Do you think the stories are different now than they were in your grandmother's time or even when your own mother became a grandmother?**

A: Absolutely. Our lives are so different. Most grandmothers I know—certainly those of my boomer generation—work and continue to pursue their own passions in life, which almost always include but aren't limited to their grandchildren. Many of us have been divorced and our extended families include stepgrandparents, as well as the usual other set of grandparents. Many grandmothers, like me, live far away from the grandkids. My own grandmother lived a few blocks from our house and was available to take care of me at a moment's notice.

**Q: So is *Eye of My Heart* meant to update our perceptions about grandmotherhood?**

A: Yes! Update, enlighten, and act as a corrective to the cliches and stereotypes about grandmothers that no longer apply yet still persist. This is the anti-Hallmark take by an exceptional group of writers who are reinventing grandmotherhood, just as they rewrote the book on motherhood and career. Half the writers in the book are boomers and many, such as Letty Cottin Pogrebin (who co-founded Ms. magazine), helped break down barriers and make it possible for women to live much more rich and satisfying lives than ever before in history. Now these women are becoming grandmothers and the stories they tell—unflinchingly honest, hilarious, heartbreaking—could not have been told by any previous generation.

**Q: How did you go about finding the contributors?**

A: Every which way. I started with two writer friends—Kate Lehrer and Susan Shreve—who are grandmothers. They immediately signed on and suggested other writers. Other friends knew someone who knew someone. I also combed the internet trying to figure which authors whose work I love are grandmothers—not information easily come by. Maybe because it connotes being a woman of a certain age, many writers who are devoted grandmothers don't mention that fact in their bios. I also called several contributors out of the blue.

**Q: Obviously, you got a good response.**

A: This was a book waiting to happen. One author said, "This will give me a chance to explore issues I've been avoiding since my grandchildren were born."

**Q: I'm impressed by the broad range of stories in the book—from Lynn's Lauber's exceptional essay about finding the daughter she gave up for adoption and her daughter, to**

**Jill Nelson's moving account of the old issues between herself and her daughter that have been triggered by the birth of her grandson. Some of the essays are hilarious too. Judy Viorst's tales of competition among grandparents had me laughing aloud.**

A: I was looking for good stories as well as good writers. I was very careful about assigning each essay. There are so many aspects of grandmotherhood that I wanted the book to touch on.

**Q: Such as?**

A: Anne Roiphe writes brilliantly about all the things grandmothers would like to say, but can't. There are also adult daughters who anoint their own mothers Number One Nana, leaving their mother-in-laws out in the cold. In our very first conversation, psychologist Mary Pipher, who wrote the introduction, said that grandparenthood stirs the dust in our psyches that we thought had settled long ago. Even in happy families where everybody gets along, relations between the generations is an ongoing, sometimes subtle, but almost always tricky dance.

**Q: I was really struck by just how revealing the stories are. Weren't the writers worried about offending their adult children?**

A: Yes, so much so that two of the contributors wrote under pseudonyms. I encouraged each writer to be as honest as possible without endangering her invitation to future Thanksgiving dinners.