



And Now for Her Third Act: Jane Fonda Looks Over the First Two

By TODD S. PURDUM
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A steel and concrete loft overlooking the capital of the New South is the last place you expect to find her, yet somehow Jane Fonda seems right at home. She chose this space three and a half years ago to begin living what she calls her third act, and it is a structural symbol of where she finds herself at 67, on the eve of the publication of her new memoir and the release of her first movie in 15 years.

"I did the floor plan while I was rehearsing 'The Vagina Monologues,'" Ms. Fonda said, poised in pale purple sweater and slacks, and tinted, rimless glasses that can't quite hide those Barbarella-blue eyes. "Lofts are always so angular. I wanted something curved. I wanted to come through the double doors -- read labia -- into a warm, pink womb, and then pass through a narrow birth passage."

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She delivers this as a casual conversational aside, but it turns out to be no accident: she makes a point of making the same point in other interviews at the start of a two-month nationwide comeback tour befitting her status as cultural icon and political lightning rod. And why not? Birth is an irresistible metaphor for a woman who may have been reborn more often than any famous person of her generation.

She has been an award-winning actress, activist, feminist, filmmaker, fitness fanatic, philanthropist and, for the better part of the last decade, a committed if continually questioning Christian. And in "My Life So Far," which is to be released on Tuesday, Ms. Fonda makes it clear that she has lived enough lives for six or seven ordinary people.

Two vivid chapters -- on the 1972 visit to North Vietnam that she cannot forget and so many others cannot forgive -- are written in the present tense, as if in testament to the incident's lingering presence in her life, and ours. But in most of the roughly 600 pages, banged out on her own laptop, often while barefoot in pajamas and down parka, she explains how the little girl born Lady Jayne Seymour Fonda (for Henry VIII's third wife, a distant forebear) became the glamorous, intelligent, articulate yet palpably fragile grownup she is.

"I made the commitment to myself when I started that I was going to be honest," she said during a two-hour talk in which she swung from quiet tears to throaty laughter and back again. "That I didn't need to say everything, but I needed to say what I needed to say in order to make the journey to where I am now resonate. If you didn't know where I came from -- emotionally, psychically and all kinds of ways -- then where I've ended up doesn't really make that much difference."

She recounts her desperate efforts to please the men in her life, starting with her famous and famously withholding father, and continuing through her three spectacularly disparate ex-husbands. Henry Fonda's perfectionism (he told her she was fat); Roger Vadim's hedonism (he invited other women to share their bed, and she acceded to please him); Tom Hayden's alcoholism (on her 51st birthday, he told her he was in love with

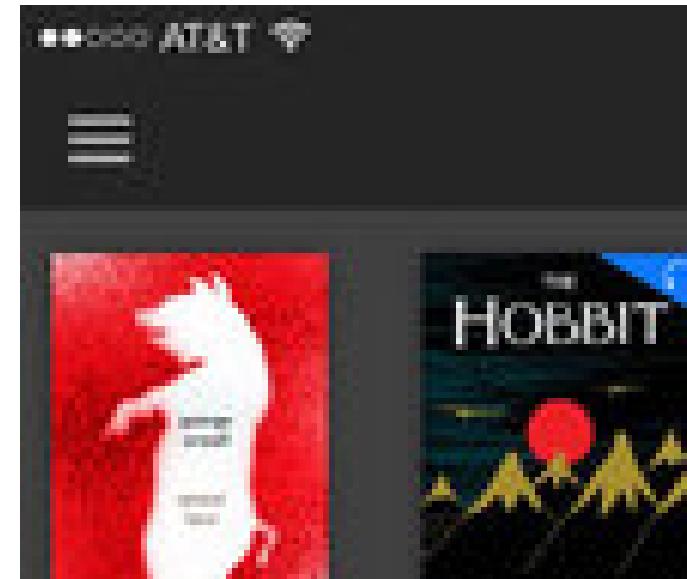
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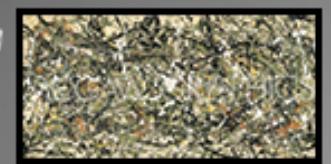
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someone else); and Ted Turner's narcissism (she caught him having a "nooner" with another woman a month after they were married): all take their toll.

But the most haunting figure is her beautiful but damned mother, the socialite Frances Seymour, who slashed her throat when Jane was 12 and to whom she dedicates her book. She was told at the time that her mother had had a heart attack, and after Jane learned the truth while reading a movie magazine a short time later, she all but shut her mother out of her memory.

After she began writing the memoir, Ms. Fonda gained access to her mother's psychiatric records from the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Mass., and learned that Frances had been sexually abused as a child, acquiring scars that Ms. Fonda sensed even as a girl. That trauma would have debilitating effects on her daughter's own body image and helped lead to more than 25 years of severe (and secret) bulimia and her decision, in her late 40's, with two Oscars and best-selling workout books and tapes to her credit, to get breast implants (which she later had removed).

"Suddenly, I understood why she was the way she was," Ms. Fonda said, her arms wrapped tightly around her torso as she begins to shake. "And also my own discomfort, within my skin, within my body, where that came from -- at least one of the places it came from. Even when I talk about it now, I get cold."

As she has before, Ms. Fonda apologizes for being photographed laughing and clapping while sitting on an antiaircraft gun in Hanoi. (She writes that she absent-mindedly sat down in a moment of euphoria with her North Vietnamese hosts, and adds, "That two-minute lapse of sanity will haunt me until the day I die.")

But in the book, and in the interview, she is unapologetic, even defiant, about her opposition to a war she saw as wrong and un-American, and expresses pain and puzzlement about why an acquaintance from those days, John Kerry, could not seem to defend his own antiwar activities in his presidential campaign last year.

