

SUNDAY ROUTINE
ERICA JONG



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUTHARAT PINYODOONYACHET FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Writing, Family and ‘Coffee After Coffee’

Erica Jong used to spend Sundays in her Connecticut home with her husband, Ken Burrows, a lawyer, but in recent years, the weekend commute became more of an ordeal for the couple. (She is 80, he is 81.) These days, they are living full time in their apartment on the Upper East Side, with their two black standard poodles, Simone and Colette. Ms. Jong is most famous for her rollicking debut novel, “Fear of Flying,” which has sold more than 37 million copies worldwide and will have its 50th anniversary next year. She is currently at work on her autobiography, which is, she said, the hardest thing she’s ever done. “My main thing is, when I get up in the morning, I want to put things on paper before I do anything else,” said Ms. Jong, who said she writes every day when she’s working on a book. Having published 25 books that span five decades, the author shrugs at her fame, though she is still occasionally approached in public. “Sometimes people will come over to me in a restaurant and say, ‘You wrote in one of your books something that *really* enlightened me, and I think it kind of changed my life,’” Ms. Jong said. “And that is something that just absolutely fills you with gratitude.” *JULIA BOZZONE*

CAPPUCCINO O’CLOCK The first thing I do is make a cappuccino for myself and Ken. We basically wake up at the same time, around 8. And sometimes he makes cappuccino for me, sometimes I make it for both of us, and we generally have some food in the house that’s been bought by the housekeeper. And we may eat it, or we may wait. Sometimes it’s just coffee. And you know, that’s it until maybe lunch time. Coffee after coffee after coffee.

BEFORE THE DAY TAKES ME When I’m working on a book, Sunday is like every other day. I go immediately to my desk. Weekends and weekdays don’t matter to a writer. I’ve discovered through my life, if you take the day off, it takes you two days to get back to where you were. You need to keep it going in your head. Before the day takes me, I try to continue what I was working on. When you’re writing a book, it’s all part of a piece. And you want to go and put down whatever you think of. Because you’re freshest after you awake. You remember stuff. Or you had dreams that reminded you. I write long-hand on yellow legal pads. I always have because I feel that the hand and the heart are connected.

THE NOTEBOOK I have a notebook that is on my desk. Sometimes I carry it, sometimes I don’t. It’s ideas that I don’t want to forget, that I want to elaborate on, that have come to me at odd moments. That, I think, is very important for a writer. You know, as we’re walking through our lives, stuff comes to us. And sometimes it comes to us in a very unformed way. But you don’t want to forget the images, the thoughts, the ideas. So you make a note.

Sometimes, in your relationship with family, you have a flash. And you’re not ready to put it down. Or you’re anxious that if you do put it down, you’ll offend them totally. So instead of writing paragraphs about it, you leave a note to yourself for later. And that’s very important because there are forbidden things that happen with family. You have thoughts that you shouldn’t have had, like, “I’m going to kill her if she says that again.” Well, you don’t really mean that. We all have these random thoughts that are angry but they’re not finally what we think. I think it’s very important to translate passing feelings into words if you’re a writer. It’s important to know what’s going on in your own head.

ART IS LIFE We’ll eat lunch, maybe an omelet. I’ll call up my daughter and my grandchildren and see if they want me to drop in. We don’t really have an organized activity on Sunday, usually. If there’s an exhibition we want to see, Ken and I might go to it together. My favorite places are the Metropolitan



‘I want to put things on paper before I do anything else.’

Museum of Art and the Frick Collection. And I have always tended to go to the things that reflect on what I’m writing. I grew up at 44 West 77th Street, opposite the Museum of Natural History, so all my life, we walked out of the house and into the Museum of Natural History. The dinosaur bones, the fish with the bare teeth that are hanging on the ceiling, oh my God!

EVENING PLANS We call up my daughter and say, “You wanna have dinner?” And she might say, “I’m busy,” which she often is, but that’s OK. I don’t want to force her to be my only friend. And then we try to see which friends of ours are in the city. Many of them go to the Hamptons, and they’re not going to come in. So we have to see who’s around. Is there anybody who wants to have dinner or wants to come over?

DIVORCE THERAPY If Ken has clients who need him, they reach him by telephone or he goes to see them. He has a lot of divorce clients. So they call all hours of the day and night. The most important thing that a divorce lawyer can do is to help the person decide what they actually need rather than what they think they need. Some people think that changing spouses will change their lives. You have to work slowly and listen a lot to what the client really needs and what the client is capable of doing. And I admire that so much. You know, we are all accustomed to taking action too soon. And that’s not a great thing to do. You have to puzzle through a problem before you get to the answer. He’s very psychologically savvy. He’s not a shrink, but he might as well be.

DINNER OUT, EARS OPEN We always go out somewhere in the neighborhood. Pre-Covid, we frequented Caffè Dei Fiori and we often visit Sette Mezzo. I love pasta. I love grilled fish. My sister Claudia will call me

and say: “We just found this restaurant. It’s a little off the beaten path. Do you want to go?” Claudia’s a great finder of restaurants. And then Ken and I might go with Claudia and Yitzchak, her husband, for a 7 o’clock dinner. We love Primola. We always have some wine, white wine to start and red wine with the meal. The best thing in restaurants is not the food but the people-watching. If you want to be a writer, you’ve got to have your ears open. We used to have a lot of restaurants in the city where you could sit down with strangers. We don’t have as many anymore. Maybe because the rents are so high.

LOVE IS LISTENING Or we might go over to my daughter’s house and see the grandchildren. They’re quite near. We usually order in — Chinese, Italian or whatever they want on a given day. I try to listen to my grandchildren, who are teenagers. We love watching movies together. They’ll turn on the TV, and they’ll find something they want to watch. Watching with them is the best thing in the world because you hear what they’re interested in and how they react to things, which is different from how you react to things. Honestly, I think love is listening. And this is true with your husband, with your grandchildren, with your children. You know what you think. You want to know: What does this person that I love think? And to actually lift away your obsessions and hear what the people you love think, it’s the hardest thing in the world and the most important.

ALWAYS A WRITER After dinner, we usually watch television. We are addicted to MSNBC. But alas, news can be very repetitive. Sometimes we keep it on because we’ve found something that is fascinating. And sometimes we turn it off and go to sleep. I get sleepy around midnight. As I go to bed, I’ll always think about what I’m going to write the next day, if I’m in the middle of a book. Always. And then I will say to myself, “Oh my God, you didn’t get any writing done today.” And I’ll lash myself: “Better do better tomorrow.”