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**Grace Paley, Writer and Activist, Dies**

Author Grace Paley in her home in Thetford, Vt., April 9, 2003.

By MARGALIT FOX

Published: August 23, 2007

Grace Paley, the celebrated writer and social activist whose short stories explored in precise, pungent and tragicomic style the struggles of ordinary women muddling through everyday lives, died on Wednesday at her home in Thetford Hill, Vt. She was 84 and also had an apartment in Manhattan.

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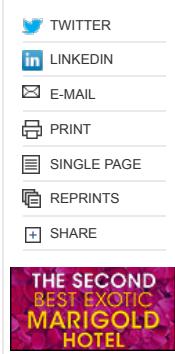
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Ms. Paley had been ill with breast cancer for some time, her literary agent, Elaine Markson, said yesterday.

Ms. Paley's output was modest, some four dozen stories in three volumes: "The Little Disturbances of Man" (Doubleday, 1959); "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974); and "Later the Same Day" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985). But she attracted a devoted following and was widely praised by critics for her pitch-perfect dialogue, which managed at once to be surgically spare and almost unimaginably rich.

Her "Collected Stories," published by Farrar, Straus in 1994, was a finalist for both the [Pulitzer Prize](#) and the National Book Award. (The collection was reissued by Farrar, Straus this year.) From 1986 to 1988, Ms. Paley was New York's first official state author; she was also a past poet laureate of Vermont.

Ms. Paley was among the earliest American writers to explore the lives of women — mostly Jewish, mostly New Yorkers — in all their dailiness. She focused especially on single mothers, whose days were an exquisite mix of sexual yearning and pulverizing


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fatigue. In a sense, her work was about what happened to the women that Roth and Bellow and Malamud's men had loved and left behind.

To read Ms. Paley's fiction is to be awash in the shouts and murmurs of secular Yiddishkeit, with its wild onrushing joy and twilight melancholy. For her, cadence and character went hand in hand: her stories are marked by their minute attention to language, with its tonal rise and fall, hairpin rhetorical reversals and capacity for delicious hyperbolic understatement. Her stories, many of which are written in the first person and seem to start in mid-conversation, beg to be read aloud.

Some critics found Ms. Paley's stories short on plot, and in fact much of what happens is that nothing much happens. Affairs begin, babies are born, affairs end. Mothers gather in the park. But that was the point. In Ms. Paley's best stories, the language is so immediate, the characters so authentic, that the text is propelled by an innate urgency — the kind that makes readers ask, "And *then* what happened?"

Open Ms. Paley's first collection, "The Little Disturbances of Man," to the first story, "Goodbye and Good Luck":

"I was popular in certain circles, says Aunt Rose. I wasn't no thinner then, only more stationary in the flesh. In time to come, Lillie, don't be surprised — change is a fact of God. From this no one is excused. Only a person like your mama stands on one foot, she don't notice how big her behind is getting and sings in the canary's ear for thirty years. Who's listening? Papa's in the shop. You and Seymour, thinking about yourself. So she waits in a spotless kitchen for a kind word and thinks — poor Rosie. ..."

"Poor Rosie! If there was more life in my little sister, she would know my heart is a regular college of feelings and there is such information between my corset and me that her whole married life is a kindergarten."

Hooked.

For Ms. Paley's immigrant Jews, the push and pull of assimilation is everywhere. Parents live in the East Bronx or Coney Island; their grown children flee to Greenwich Village. A family agonizes over its lively daughter's starring role in her school's Christmas pageant.

Later stories are even darker. A girl is raped; children die of drug overdoses. Threading through the books are familiar characters, in particular Faith Darwin, the subject of many of Ms. Paley's finest stories, grown older and world-wearier.

Though Ms. Paley's work also rings with Irish and Italian and black voices, it was for the language of her childhood, a heady blend of Yiddish, Russian and English, that she was best known. Reviewers sometimes called her prose postmodern, but all of it — even the death-defying, almost surreal turns of logic that were a stylistic hallmark — was already present in Yiddish oral tradition. Consider:

A man meets a friend on the street.

"Nu, how's by you?" the friend asks.

"Ach," the man replies. "My wife left me; the children don't call; business is bad. With life so terrible, it's better never to have been born."

"Yes," his friend says. "But how many are so lucky? Not one in ten thousand."

Grace Goodside was born in the Bronx on Dec. 11, 1922. (The family changed its name from Gutseit on coming to the United States.) Her parents, Isaac and the former Manya Ridnyik, were Ukrainian Jewish socialists who had been exiled by Czar Nicholas II — Isaac to Siberia, Manya to Germany. In 1906, they were able to leave for New York, where Isaac became a doctor. They had two children, and, approaching middle age, a third, Grace.

Equestrian

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