

## **EPISODE 4: RONI NATOV - CONVERSATIONS WITH OLD(ER) WOMEN**

This is Rose Levinson of Emerging Voices. I'm speaking with Roni Natov, a professor at Brooklyn College in Brooklyn, New York. A few years ago, I published my last book, *The Courage to Imagine*. And it's about how for children who have been supported and loved and encouraged it's not hard for them to imagine. But for those who have been hurt, traumatized, it is. It brings up a lot of difficult things. So the book is really about how to encourage and how to find books that do that. And when you talk about children who don't have the resources to imagine, are you thinking about a particular subset or just deprived children in general? In general. I'm talking about books that address that kind of deprivation. Right now I'm teaching Victorian mystery and fairy tales.

Do you think you have another book in you? If I do, there are two I'm thinking about, but I don't want to do anything right now. One is about Dickens. I've thought about it for a long, long time. Dickens, as a poet of childhood, able to construct metaphors for the state of childhood in different ways. For example, *Little Dorrit* is about being imprisoned. Father's in prison, but she's also in prison. It's a breathtaking book.

This series that I'm trying to do is to focus on us being elders, being older, and how we work with that. So in terms of your teaching and your writing, Roni, and are you willing to say how old you are? How old are you? Yes, I'm going to be 80 in April. How do you think about the fact that you will be 80? First of all, it's shocking. It's like what? 80, 80. The thing that I don't like about it is that your time on Earth is shorter. It's unbelievable to me. What I like about it is I just do what I want pretty much. This term is a little too pressured for me. I think what I want, what I'm going to do next term, is teach one class and my interns, my internship program, and that's it. And also, I forget things. I say to this boy, Tim. He says, Nicholas. The next day, Tim. He says, Nicholas. I say, I don't know why I think you're Tim. He says, it happens. That was it. Also, I have to prepare what I'm talking about the morning before I teach. I could do it the week before, but I have to look over that. That's hard. I come home really tired. What I still like is the connection.

I love talking about the literature and the connection with students. Like I'll say, I don't remember, you know, or I'll say, the good thing about being old is you don't care, particularly around women's issues. My aunt used to tell me: when I was young, I walked into a bar, all the

heads would turn. Now, no head turns. And I feel like I don't have to worry about walking down the street and hearing those horrible cat calls. It's a relief. Whereas my students, you know, they always have to deal with that, that kind of attention.

When I started the series, I called it "Conversations with Old Women," and I got a lot of feedback saying, "Don't use that word." So I modified it to say older. If I were to describe you, would you prefer old or older or elder or any preferences on that? Not so much. I'm okay with it. I mean, the truth of it is hard. I just want to stay healthy. I've had several surgeries, knee replacements, hip replacements, hernia, et cetera. Nothing life-threatening. And then the losses you have at our age. That's well said. No replacing anybody. And I think from what you've told me over time, one relationship loss was your sister. My sister, I think of her every morning, several times a day. You know, I look in the mirror and I see her. I think, oh my God, I look like Melanie. That's exciting.

In the country where I have a house and she had a house up the road. Her partner, Leslie, still has that house. But I miss her. There's no replacing anybody. Is there any other loss that you feel has been particularly terrible? The first two losses for me were horrendous. My two best friends, one died, she was 36. The other died, she was 45. That was horrible. That's still there. The one who's 45, who was 45, her husband died a few years ago. That was horrible. My ex-husband, Irwin, died. Oh, devastating. And Jonathan, you know, my son, it's his father. And I really loved Irwin. I just couldn't live with him. But he was great and he died. And my parents died, but that didn't feel like this.

People your own age or your friends. When you think about your own death, how is that for you? I don't know. I still have that 'don't bother me with that'. So you push it aside. I do. It's not dark yet, but it's getting there. But you don't let it in. I mean, that's-- No.

How would you describe who you are now and what's the most surprising thing about being 80 in terms of how you thought you'd be at 80? When I was young, it was hard for me to be alone. It is not hard for me now. Of course, I have Steve. Your husband. I mean, I don't know how people deal with not having their partner. I feel more at peace with myself. I don't know, less judgmental of others. Although I still have some of that. More open. What I'm not open to is the fascism that's going on in this world and in this country. Steve and I, after we eat, go into the

room, we watch the news. And when it starts on Trump and the malicious people, I have to leave the room.

**Do you worry about it in terms of your son and your grandchildren? Tell me how does that play out for you?** I worry about it. I try not to think about it all the time, but it's there. I read the *Times* headlines, I say, "My God." I mean, the good thing is I see people of colour all over the television, all over. That's great. In fact, if I see a whole ad with all white people, I notice it. The fact that people can marry, whoever thought that would happen. And let's hope it continues to happen. The abortion thing, unbelievable.

**How does it feel to be in America's major city, in Brooklyn, Manhattan?** I'm not in the midst of it, personally, because I'm, you know, first of all, I'm very out there in my classes. I say, I'm not going to pretend I'm okay, you're okay, no. You don't have to agree with me, but I'll tell you. I have power in that way. I can say things, and as a respected teacher, if they hear it from a whole bunch of people, you know, they start to think differently. Mostly my classes, from what I gather from my students, they tend to be progressive. I don't know. I don't know whether that's just English majors. I am completely horrified.

**What do you think that we elders ought to do? What is our responsibility?** Well, I just wrote a whole bunch of those postcards. Okay, that was good. I could do that. I cannot march. I'm not there for demonstrations.

**Okay, talk a bit about Steve, your husband, your partner. Do you worry about him predeceasing you? Do you want to go into that just a little? How is that for you?** I do a little bit. I mean, he's five and a half years younger. And I say, oh God, that's good. But he's not young and he could get sick. That would be devastating. **Do you worry more about something happening to him than to yourself?** No. Equal. Equal.

**Who do you think will remember you and how much does being remembered matter to you, Roni?** I think a lot of people will remember me. Thousands and thousands of students. I've been teaching for more than 50 years. But I don't care if they remember me. I really don't. It's like, okay, for Jonathan and for Steve. **Your son, Jonathan's your son.** When I die, do what you want. Do what's easiest and most comforting.

**Grandchildren, what would you like them to remember?** How I love them. You know, I say things to them like, "You're so smart. You're so wonderful." And you can't know that at your age, but you will know it. 'Cause they're like the 13-year-old. How do I know if I'm cool? The 16-year-old doesn't want to hear anything except about her friends. So I say, how are the girls? And they have things on their minds. But I haven't talked about them so much. With me, I just want to be there with them. The 16-year-old told her mother two years ago: when I grow up, I want to be just like Nana. So unbothered. That's her feeling about me. And I think, good. I know how much that family loves me. I think great.

And then I have two goddaughters, and I have friends and cousins. I'm very lucky. I feel loved. I am loved. Jonathan, my son, said to me once, "Ma, I have everything I want." Because I was thinking, "Oh, I should have done this as a mother, I didn't do that as a mother." He says, "The past is really past. I have everything I want." And I feel grateful that I didn't destroy him, you know? Youth and stupidity. I wish I had been more consciously there for him. I mean, I always loved him. I was never critical of him. But, you know, with all the stuff I was going through, he could easily get lost in all that. PhD, the boys, men, whatever.

**Anything that you were disappointed by or regret?** Lots of little things. I have been so stupid. You know, there are a lot of those. And then I try to just say, well, you were young, you were stupid. And you're not stupid now.

**What do you most admire about yourself?** Let's see. I had the first Tau Award in my school, which was for teaching and scholarship. Then I got an award by the Alumni Association-- because I was a student there-- for my inspiration or whatever. You know, I don't remember the details. Then I got an award, an international award, for my second book, *The Poetics of Childhood*. And that was an award by the International Research Society of Children's Literature. I was so shocked and so happy.

**There was a time when you were involved with an alternative university. Are you still involved with them?** No. They stopped being so alternative. It was just too much. But I learned a lot from doing that alternative work. I was able to take a lot of what I learned there and put it into my work at Brooklyn. For example, we have a very strong creative writing program, and students

can do their thesis with a manuscript and then an analytical piece. I ask students more and more, where are you in this essay? Stand behind your words. Who are you? And you can balance that with what you're saying because what you're saying is you saying it. And that helps to not pretend this is 'one says.' You say, I say: use the word I. It's okay. It's important even. Things like that.

**Talk a bit more about your sister and why that was such an important relationship.** Well, my sister was really brilliant. She was such a brilliant writer. She was so hilarious. She was so out there. And she was always ahead of her time. She was intellectually and emotionally ahead of her time. And as a writer, unbelievable. She is still one of my favorite writers. Also very, very kind.

When we were young, I was the older sister. I completely abused the privilege. You know, I'd have her do things for me and I'd ignore her. But when we turned into teenagers, we were there together. And that lasted, although we had some big fights along the way. I remember we had one big fight in the country. We're having dinner together and we have this fight.

And she leaves. I'm in the restaurant by myself. And I was so enraged. And she's walking home in the dark, three miles. I mean, I was so angry and so upset. The waiter came over and said, "Are you all right?" And I said, "Yes, we're sisters." I get in the car. I say to Steve, we have to go get Melanie. She's somewhere on the road. So we go, we find her, I say, "Get in the car." She's like, "Oh, the good one." I say, "That's right." So we drive her home.

She doesn't say goodbye to me. I don't say goodbye to her. The next weekend, she shows up at my house. I open the screen door, and there she is. I go, "Mel." We hug." I say, "Sit on the swing. I'll get us some wine." She says, "We can't do this, Roni. We're really connected." That was the end. **When you say you think about her every day, I mean, is it comforting? How is that?** It's comforting, but I long for her.

And I'm happy as a clam talking about her. **Does Jonathan know his aunt, your son, does he?** Yeah, he knew her well. **So you can share with him as well.** Yes, yes, he remembers. And Steve remembers. **So yeah, and there's a way of holding her. She's still here.**

**What else, Roni? So talk about whatever you want; just free associate around being an elder.**

**What would you like to have?** You know, just appreciating. Like I'm looking at the beautiful trees outside my window here. It's so gorgeous. And I just took a three-mile walk in the park with Nancy, one of my housemates who lives downstairs. And it was so gorgeous, even though I had to find a bathroom. Nancy, I have to find a bathroom, which is a drag, but it was beautiful.

And I came home and I don't feel that tired right now. I feel peaceful.

**What do you look forward to?** I'm very sad about the pandemic and COVID. I don't want to travel. I really don't. I mean, Steve said to me, what do you want to do for your 80th birthday? I don't want to party. I don't know what I want. And then I thought, I wouldn't mind going to London, visiting a few friends. Taking my friend Kareem and going to Barcelona where her younger son is now living who I'm close to. I'm close to her and her family. That would be fun. I've never been to Barcelona. That's fun. But I don't know with this, I don't know.

I mean, my stepson just wrote on his Facebook page, how he just got COVID. Then Brian got it, my stepson. And they seem okay, but my sister-in-law, Carol, has long COVID. Oh my God, she is really sick. And I have other friends who got hospitalized. And I'm just EEK!

My students are masked. We yell and it's not as much fun. **And they'll comply with it.** Yeah, they have to. Occasionally one shows up. I say, where's your mask? Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. I don't have a mask. Yeah, I give them one.

**What's your read of the younger generation? I mean, besides the fact that the world they're in is pretty precarious, how would you describe them?** They're worried about making a living. They're worried about getting a job or going to graduate school. They're poor, they're working class. They have families they have to support. They're very different from us. They don't have those luxuries. **Or that sense of maybe openness that we had.** Do what you can do to feel hopeful.

**How much does the work contribute to the sense of well-being for you?** I think a lot. I really do. It's like I have a place to go-- to school. The days I don't teach, I'm like, thank God, I don't have to go to school today. But when I get there, and I'm with the students and they're so sweet, and

it's good.

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I'm speaking with Roni Natov 15 months after the first part of this conversation. I asked Roni, how was it when she turned 80 last year. I couldn't believe it. It was important. I felt like I had changed or that I had to change to think about what it means to be old. And I remember announcing, you know, wherever I'd go, I go, well, I'm 80 if the subject came up. Of course, hoping that everybody would go, oh my God, you don't look 80, you don't seem 80, which some did and some didn't.

It was like, yeah, this is what 80 looks like and is like, just one person of 80. And I let my hair grow gray. That was a big thing. And I told my son, my daughter-in-law, and my two wonderful grandchildren to come up here, as you can see, I'm in the country, our country home. They made so many presents for me and presented them.

And I just took it all in and felt it. And then Steve made a party for me, for the family, the larger family. And that was so great. I had a great time. And Max, my grandson, sang and played the guitar. Oh, so beautiful, so beautiful. And my goddaughter, Sophie, plays the violin, the fiddle. She's in a serious orchestra. I mean, the whole thing was so great.

People sang and I was in heaven. For my birthday in the summer, we went to Barcelona where we have friends. And at first I didn't want to go anywhere. And I thought, well, if I'm going to go anywhere. I thought, Barcelona, I've never been there. It sounds so great. And then I'm still teaching, loving it, love my students, and we have a lot of fun. It's good.

Now I'm 81, but I'm very conscious of it. So 81 feels, all right. I'm used to being 80, but it doesn't stop. It was like, I remember when I was 70, I could not believe I was 70. And then the next year I was 71 and then 72. And it's going fast. And I'm very conscious of how we don't have forever, mortality.

I swim two to three times a week, pretty much three quarters of a mile, always more than half a mile. That's a lot. You do what you can do.

Do you think about death more, Roni? Yeah. Yeah. When you think about it, what comes up? Next Fall, I'm teaching a course in contemporary Japanese fiction. And the concept of wabi-sabi, which permeates Japanese aesthetics. And it involves letting go, the impermanence of things, the beauty in that, which yeah, I can feel it, although I don't like it. The connection we have to everything and to each other, that feels important and real. But it's all transitory. We're going to change. We're going to die. So I'm trying to concentrate on the not having to be in the moment, because I never am. Just accept that I'm not in the moment. I'm wherever I am. I'm doing whatever I can do. I'm being whatever I can be. And it's all transient anyway. That's less pressure. Oh, this moment, you know you're going to die, so you have to. But I can't. And the letting go feels important.

Sustenance from where? Where does nourishment come from? The swimming is one. What else nourishes you? My family. Oh my God. Steve, my son, and my students and my friends. Lexi, my granddaughter, graduated from high school. She's going to Clark, which is a small liberal arts school. She's very talented. I decided for her graduation gift. I took all my jewelry, everything that wasn't a present, laid it out on my bed, earrings, necklaces, bracelets. I said, Lex, take what you want. So she's trying on all, oh, Nana, this is cool. This is cool. And then she says, do you have any rings? So adorable. And Sam, my daughter-in-law, said, Lexi has been wearing everything and showing everything. After the graduation ceremony, we were outside and there were people mingling and I see this one girl I've seen in Lexi's pictures.

And I thought, I bet that's Melanie, her best friend. And I said, 'Melanie.' She goes, are you Roni? I've heard so much about you. That was it.

Now the Trump thing is on my mind, the forefront. I cannot believe it. I cannot believe it. And I'm not watching those debates. I'm so horrified and so scared.

In fact, I can't even believe it. I can't. And letting go. I feel like I can tolerate an hour of the news, MSNBC, and then I have to leave the room. I can't. You're done. And people are manipulated. No, they don't deserve that. They deserve not to have these lies. See, I feel as a teacher, I have a lot of power.

And I don't even pretend. I say, "We're in danger." And I feel like, you know, if Hitler were

around, would I say, "Oh, I shouldn't touch it." And I feel like there's nothing anybody's gonna do to me. What could they do to me? **How do your students respond?** I don't know, but I'm sure they're not going to say it in my class.

This is interesting. There was a kind of battle between this Orthodox student who's not so orthodox. After the first day of October 7th, he wrote this long piece in horror. And then at the end, he wrote, "Here's a song I was raised on every night. My mother sang it to me." And it's like no more war, no more war, no more. war

So we posted it on Eblog. We have many weekly posts, many columns. And somebody answered him and wrote, "That was a couple of days later, and look at Israel," and blah, blah, blah, blah. Blah And he didn't want that on his blog piece.

He said, "This is my testament and it's grief." And then another intern wrote, "Yeah, but this is a free space and I don't think you should do that." So I said to them, the interns, go meet by yourselves, which they do once a week, and see what you can do with this. I was not getting in there. And then they came back and I said, "How'd it go?" "Good." I said, "Well, you all feel okay?"

Yeah, we agreed. Yitzhak doesn't have to have that on his blog. If he doesn't want it, we take it off." And other people can say what they want. Perfect. That was it. **There is a way forward, Roni, if people will look for it.**

**What are you reading? Are you finding any sources of stimulation or comfort in any of your reading?** Well, I just finished teaching a class on Native American literature, fiction. And oh God, I loved it. They loved it. We read *Solar Storms* by Linda Hogan, Louise Erdrich, *The Roundhouse*. We read Joy Harjo, a lot of her. I mean, and there's, of course, darkness, grief. How could there not be? And beauty. Nature. I felt close to nature and they did. We explored a lot. After that, it was a little hard for me to find comfort in reading. So I read some Japanese literature because I'm going to be teaching it. You know, I feel like what I've lost as an elder is words, nouns, no nouns.

But what I've gained is really a kind of wisdom. I'm deep. I don't give a shit about all those fussy

things; and they're still there. Am I good enough? Am I kind enough? And did I upset someone?  
It's still there, but it doesn't throw me.

You know, guilt and shame, they're still there, but not the way they used to be. And I feel like I  
really basically like myself and enjoy myself being myself.

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