

TrustMovies

Review by James Van Maanen

SFJFF world premiere

GRACE PALEY: COLLECTED SHORTS by Lilly Rivlin

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Here's a new documentary that ought to chalk up an immediate fan base: readers around the world passionate about the work of the late writer/mother/activist Grace Paley. There are a lot of Paley fans out there -- TrustMovies is one of them -- which ought to ensure a release of this film by Lilly Rivlin (shown below). Even better, so good is this new work -- so immediate, enthralling, moving and funny -- that it will probably create a bunch of new Paley fans, as well. (My companion, who knew little to nothing about this writer, happened to pass through the living room while I was viewing the DVD screener. He stood in back of the sofa for a time, growing interested and occasionally commenting. Then, clearly enthralled, he sat down next to me and continued watching.)



Rivlin's film, titled GRACE PALEY: COLLECTED SHORTS uses no narrator; instead it is often Grace's voice that guides us through her life. This makes the documentary extremely intimate and warm. Listening to this funny, direct, smart and practical woman is such a pleasure that even the usual talking heads that abound in films such as this (that's writer Alan Gurganus, below), well-spoken as they are, play second fiddle to Grace herself.

We learn about her early life, her parents, and the men who mattered most (what she has to say about attraction, love and marriage is simply wonderful -- as is her anti-love poem that we also hear her read). We meet, glancingly, her children and grandchildren, her friends, students and other writers. I would call Paley a proto-feminist, but that is not the opinion of writer Vivian Gornick (shown below), also interviewed here. To that

opinion, "She may have too narrow an idea of feminism," notes another interviewee, with whom I'd agree.

There are gobs of good information on display -- about everything from The Great Depression to the old Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village (Paley tells one whopping good story about this place!), her family in Poland and Russia, and of course the ever-present demonstrations. This lady was often out there on the front lines and occasionally even arrested (see below).

If the movie is a paean to Paley well -- goddamn -- the woman deserves it. Just hearing of her mother's history when down south (refusing to move from the back of the bus into the white section) is inspiring, as is the writer's standing up to Norman Mailer during one even-more-male-centric-than-usual meeting of the Pen crowd.

These two SFJFF screenings comprise the documentary's first festival outing, but surely we'll be seeing it again. Every moment in the film is alive and rich -- just like Grace. Could the movie be better? Of course. What film couldn't? Does this matter? As the words on Paley's chapeau (shown at top) so clearly state: Hell no.

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The National
Center for
Jewish Film

The National Center for Jewish Film
Lown 102, MS 053, Brandeis University
Waltham, MA 02454
jewishfilm@brandeis.edu
(781) 736-8600
WWW.JEWISHFILM.ORG