Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LESLÉA NEWMAN

Interviewed by

ERIN MOLLOY

November 14, 2008
Northampton, Massachusetts

Narrator

Lesléa Newman (b. 1955) is a Jewish lesbian Northampton-based poet, author and lecturer. She lived in Brooklyn and Long Island as a child with her parents and grandmother, before attending college at the University of Vermont, and the Naropa Institute where she earned a Certificate of Poetics and served as Allen Ginsberg's apprentice. She currently teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Maine, and offers workshops on writing poems and novels. Additionally, Lesléa offers lectures to colleges and community groups on homophobia and family values, butch/femme identities, and the intersection of lesbian and Jewish identities. Much of Lesléa's body of work deals with identity: lesbian, Jewish, butch, femme. She has written over 50 books for adults, young adults, and children, including novels, short stories, poetry, and picture books. She is perhaps best known for *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), a children's picture book about a young girl with two mothers. The book caused an outrage in some areas of the US, and was denounced, banned and burned. Some of her other well-known titles include poetry collections *My Lover is a Woman* and *Still Life With Buddy*, novels *Jailbait* and *Hachiko Waits*, and short story collections *A Letter to Harvey Milk* and *Girls Will Be Girls*. Lesléa is serving as the Northampton Poet Laureate until 2010.

Interviewer

Erin Molloy (b. 1979) will receive her A.B. in History and the Study of Women and Gender from Smith College in 2009.

Abstract

In this oral history Lesléa Newman describes her childhood in a Jewish, middle-class community in Brooklyn in the 1950s and 1960s, her college years at the University of Vermont and the Naropa Institute 1970s, and her adult life as a writer, a lesbian and a Northampton resident. Newman's sense of identity is explored in depth in the interview, examining her roles as Jewish lesbian and daughter, and what it means to be a childless woman. This interview explores the ways in which Newman's writing operates within a political framework, the impact she's had on women and children, and the personal and professional lessons she's learned.

Restrictions

Format

Interview recorded on MiniDisc using Sony Digital Audio MiniDisc Recorder. One 70-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Erin Molloy.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Audio Recording

Bibliography: Newman, Lesléa. Interview by Erin Molloy. Audio recording, November 2008. Sophia Smith Collection.

Transcript

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LESLÉA NEWMAN
Northampton, Mass.
by: ERIN ELIZABETH MOLLOY

[Background chat]

MOLLOY: Well, first, will you describe your childhood in New York in the 1950s and 1960s?

NEWMAN: Let's see, well, I spent the first part of my childhood in Brooklyn in Brighton Beach in a two bedroom apartment with my parents and my two brothers, and I shared a bedroom with my older brother and my younger brother was in my parents' bedroom. And then there was a living room and a kitchen. And we lived right across the street from my grandmother's apartment, right on the beach basically, I mean if I looked out my bedroom window I could see the ocean, so that was really nice. Um, and we had a bird named Chirpy, who my mother hated. [laughs] With a passion. Um. I went to PS 253. I don't have a lot of memories of it, except that we ate our lunch in the auditorium and it was really noisy and smelly. I remember that very vividly. [laughs] Um, do you have more specific questions about it?

MOLLOY: Ah, no, just whatever…whatever main memories come to mind, anything that you've brought with you.

NEWMAN: Uh huh, it's funny, I remember my grandmother's apartment more than my apartment, I spent a lot of time there, and she had a kitchen so tiny that you could sit at the table and click on the stove and wash the dishes at the same – like, without moving – [laughs] and then she had a living room and a bedroom. And I remember she had a red couch with leopard print pillows which I have [laughs]. And she was like a third parent, spent a lot of time with her. And then when I was eight we moved to Long Island and then I had my own room, we lived in a one- two- three- four- bedroom house so we kids had our own bedroom and my parents had their bedroom and then downstairs there was a kitchen, dining room we never used, we always ate in the kitchen, and like a den, and then like halfway up the stairs there's a living room and then you turn the stairs and you go up to the second floor and a backyard. And the best part of that was we got to have a dog.

MOLLOY: What was your dog's name?

NEWMAN: Angus.

MOLLOY: Ah.

NEWMAN: And he was a Cairn terrier.

MOLLOY: Yeah, I cried on Wednesday with that poem.

NEWMAN: Oh, yeah.

MOLLOY: Yes.

NEWMAN: "Best Boy."

MOLLOY: Yeah.

NEWMAN: Yeah. It's funny, I hadn't– he died when I was 27 I think, and I never wrote a poem about him, or I never wrote about him at all really until very recently I think that poem was maybe 5 years old.

MOLLOY: Yeah? Well, it was obviously very [laughs] extraordinary–

NEWMAN: Yeah, I know, a lot of people cry when I read that poem.

MOLLOY: Um, what was your relationship with your parents like?

NEWMAN: Um…complicated. [laughs] You know I'm the only girl, middle child, sort of a daddy's girl and then sort of not because I was very rebellious as a teenager. My mother and I really batted heads about a lot of things and I think that she saw the choices that I made in my life as a direct rejection of her because they're pretty opposite, I mean everything from becoming a vegetarian to becoming a lesbian to not having children to wanting a career instead of being a stay-at-home housewife I guess for lack of a better word. So, you know, I guess I was very rebellious as a teen, I didn't want to go to college but I went because it was a good way to get out of the house, out of my parents house. Yeah, I wanted to go to some alternative school like Bennington or Goddard or, I don't think Hampshire was around then, but a school such as that, and my parents wouldn't send me to a school like that. So I found ways to rebel within the college that I went to.

MOLLOY: UVM?

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: Um, I'm going to pop ahead because I did want to ask you about that. So Burlington is noted for its progressive views towards homosexuality. What were your experiences–

NEWMAN: I wasn't out back then.

MOLLOY: OK.

NEWMAN: Um, and I wasn't out then. So I wasn't aware of it. But I definitely started becoming a feminist when I was in college- and I was talking about rebellion

before, one thing I did was, there was a program then, it still might be in existence, it's called University Year for Action, it's a branch of Vista and the Peace Corps. So you could– instead of taking classes for one year, you can do some kind of volunteer work and get 30 credits.

MOLLOY: Wow.

NEWMAN: Yeah it was great. And then you had to like write a paper at the end of it. So I did that, and I worked at Planned Parenthood. And that was a huge education. And I learned a lot about women and reproductive rights and freedoms and birth control and we went to– I worked in Burlington but we had sort of a traveling clinic and we went to some of the poor, rural communities and taught some of the women about birth control, and it was very interesting.

MOLLOY: So you were in education outreach?

NEWMAN: I was a little bit of everything, I did some education, I worked in the clinic, you know I wasn't a nurse or anything, so, but I could do things like intake interviews, and I often was the patient advocate in the room when she was having her exam, for a lot of these women it was their first pelvic exam and it was very frightening. And then I would talk to them about the different kinds of birth control and their options and things like that.

MOLLOY: So what sparked your feminism?

NEWMAN: What sparked my feminism? God, it was so long ago, you know? Um, that experience I would say was definitely a big part of it because you know I saw things that made me really angry– I remember very clearly one woman who was pregnant saying something like, "but my boyfriend told me *he* was on the pill." You know, things like that. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: So I began to see how that kind of oppression really had an effect on women's lives. You know I, as a kid and teenager I wasn't really interested in boys– I was a budding lesbian but of course I didn't know about it, it took me a long time to realize that I had a best friend who I spent every minute with, she and I were sure we were going to grow up and live next door to each other and be friends forever– I– my mind couldn't take the next step which would have been to marry her instead of we would each marry and live next door to each other with husbands, who were going to be completely irrelevant to our lives but, you know, I had no role models. So I had no idea that that was even an option for me. And I guess my feminism maybe came later when I started reading a lot of poetry and fiction by women, on purpose. Grace Paley was a big influence on me, actually I remember Rita Mae Brown came to speak at UVM-

MOLLOY: Wow.

NEWMAN: And I really don't remember much about my college years, it was not a good time for me, I was very actively having an eating disorder, or I was depressed and not a happy camper. But for some reason, and I don't remember how I heard of her, but I heard she was coming and I went and I sat in the front row and she was like up there behind this podium and she just looked like a goddess, I mean she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life and I don't remember anything she said except I felt like she was talking directly to me. Whatever she said, I'm sure she talked about being a writer. It just seemed like that was– I just took that to heart.

MOLLOY: Do you remember when that was?

NEWMAN: Well it would have to be between 1973 and 1977 because that's when I was at UVM.

MOLLOY: OK.

NEWMAN: So I don't know if you could look that up and see if she was there, I mean when she was there and what she said, but definitely, it would have to be during that period.

MOLLOY: Um, so I wonder if that was when she was in The Furies–

NEWMAN: Oh!

MOLLOY: And if she's talking about lesbian separatism.

NEWMAN: I don't know. I don't know. Um, I think, maybe she even read from *Rubyfruit Jungle*.

MOLLOY: Yeah?

NEWMAN: I don't remember what year that was published.

MOLLOY: I think '73?

NEWMAN: Yeah, but that might have been what happened, she might have come to read from that book, but I'm not a hundred percent sure.

MOLLOY: Well, that sounds like an awesome experience.

NEWMAN: It was great, yeah.

MOLLOY: How was it to be Jewish at UVM?

NEWMAN: Um, it was challenging. And again, I was at the point in my life where I was rejecting and rebelling against everything that was remotely concerned with my family [laughs] and Judaism was a big part of that. And when I lived in New

York, being Jewish was no big deal, even if you weren't Jewish you were almost Jewish by osmosis, you knew enough to say "Happy New Year" during Rosh Hoshana, or – but in Vermont I was like this enigma being Jewish, I remember someone actually telling me I was the first Jew she had ever met which was weird. I wrote actually a short story called, oh god, what was it called? It's the first short story in *A Letter to Harvey Milk*, and…ah, I'm just blanking on it. Maybe it will come to me. It's told in short sections and it follows this character, from her childhood in Brooklyn through her time in college in New England, you know, very autobiographical obviously, and there are some anecdotes or scenes that talk about being Jewish at UVM and what that was like. And I remember during – you know I couldn't find anything like Chanakuh candles there – there probably was a Hillel but for some reason I wasn't aware of it, but I never went to it. But I went to a tiny little store once, and there were these two little old people [laughs] and they were eating latkes and it turned out they were Jewish and it was Passover and it was so amazing to me to find somebody who was eating the kinds of foods that I grew up with in this foreign country of Vermont. And that really stayed with me. And somehow we got to talking and they gave me a little piece of a latke and it was just this experience that I remember because it took me a long time to come full circle and come back home to Judaism and you know that's one thing that sticks in my mind.

MOLLOY: Can we go back to your childhood? You've mentioned your grandmother–

NEWMAN: Mmm-hmm.

MOLLOY: And I know that not only did your parents raise you–

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: But she was pretty instrumental in your development. Um, can you describe what impact she had on you.

NEWMAN: Well, she's my mother's mother. She's definitely the matriarch of the family. Very strong person, very stubborn, determined, passionate, very outspoken and it seemed like those qualities really skipped a generation. And she was born in the old country in Odessa, Russia, and came here when she was 10. And she would never admit this but I would call her a feminist. [laughs] She told me this story once about – she worked in a lace factory from the time she was probably 12 until the time she was married at 27. And she got very mad one day that the men were getting paid more than she was getting paid, and she had some words with her boss, and I don't remember what happened but, parts of that story always stuck with me, you know, she really wanted to stick up for her rights from a from an early age um …well I forgot what I was saying about her. Do you remember what I was saying?

MOLLOY: [unintell]

NEWMAN: Before that.

MOLLOY: That she wouldn't describe herself as a feminist .

NEWMAN: Oh yeah, so my parents, well my mother in particular, she was born here and I think really wanted to be an American and maybe was a little embarrassed that she had this immigrant parent who spoke funny and dressed funny, and you know was just different. So I think my mother and that generation really held themselves in, in a way, and wanted everything to appear like everything's fine, everything's good, and you know, making it as American as the whole American success story. My father went to CCNY, City College of New York, which was free at the time, and then he went on the law school, and then they became very successful in that way but I think they paid this price of shutting down their emotions. And there really wasn't room for anything out of the ordinary like a lesbian daughter, a fat daughter, a daughter who didn't want to get married and have kids, you know, that was just not ok.

MOLLOY: Um, what lessons did you take from your grandmother as a child? What lessons did you get later on in life that you had wished you had learned as a child?

NEWMAN: You know my childhood is very vague in my mind but I could tell you – some things that I learned from her that I treasure is one thing is to not take no for an answer. To stand up for what you believe in, to give to charity. I actually wrote a book called *Remember That*, It's a children's book about a little girl and her grandmother and all the lessons that the grandmother is imparting onto her. To be proud of yourself, to be healthy – she lived to be 99. To be independent, she was fiercely independent, she didn't want to be a burden on anybody.

MOLLOY: Yeah, she does sound like a feminist.

NEWMAN: Yeah, absolutely. And she became a widow when she was 66, so she lived the last third of her life by herself.

MOLLOY: Going back to New York, how did the political climate in New York in the sixties and seventies shape your experiences? Were you involved in any of those movements, or did you witness any?

NEWMAN: Oh, I'm going to give you such a disappointing answer

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: [laughs] So I was born in 1955-

MOLLOY: Mmm-hmm-

NEWMAN: So in the 60s, you know, by the time 1970 came around I was only 15. I was completely unaware of anything going on around me except my own self-involvement. Which you know is kind of typical of teenagers, you know, I'm

not really proud of it but that's really what was going on for me. And then in the seventies I went to college up in Vermont, so I was very unaware of anything that was going on. Although I do remember another writer – that Allen Ginsberg came to UVM, and it was during a protest for the war in Vietnam. And I remember that, so what years was the war? I'm so bad at history.

MOLLOY: Um…64-72?

NEWMAN: So it must have been right at the tail end, because I went to college from 73-77 but I remember, maybe we were protesting something else, who knows, but I remember there was this big protest and then all of a sudden he was there right next to me, and I was amazed that he came out in the crowd and he was chanting whatever we were chanting, and you know, I didn't know that years later I would meet him and he would become my mentor but I remember that very, very vividly.

MOLLOY: Wow. What years were you at Naropa?

NEWMAN: I was at Naropa from 1979-1981.

MOLLOY: OK. I had a friend who was there from the mid-90s, from 94-97.

NEWMAN: Uh-huh.

MOLLOY: And she's described some of her experiences to me.

NEWMAN: Uh-huh.

MOLLOY: And I had wondered if there was any interlap there.

NEWMAN: Yeah, no, I was gone by 1981.

MOLLOY: Um…When – I know you didn't describe yourself as an activist, but when did you develop your political consciousness?

NEWMAN: Probably shortly after I came out. In hindsight, the thing that shaped me more than anything in my whole life was being fat. And I wasn't aware of anything political about that for a very, very long time, I just thought there was something wrong with me because I couldn't control my eating, because I couldn't have the type of body I was supposed to have, but now when I look back on it I see how much pressure I was under to be a certain size and how that is a very political issue.

But I certainly didn't see that at the time. And then when I came out as a lesbian I was living here in Northampton, I was 27 and I was working, I had some odd jobs. I was working at a day care center, and I never really wanted to go into education in terms of teaching kids, but I thought about it, I thought, you know, I needed to figure out how to make a living. And I didn't do it on purpose because I was a lesbian and I just thought, well people are not gonna want to trust their

children to me, so that was the first time I think I was aware that my identity was going to have huge ramifications on my life. That was at Sunnyside at Smith, by the way.

MOLLOY: Oh really?

NEWMAN: Yeah. I worked there for a year.

MOLLOY: Oh wow. So let's talk about Northampton then. Um.

NEWMAN: Ok.

MOLLOY: Ok, so it's been called Lesbianville, USA.

NEWMAN: Mmm-hmm

MOLLOY: Has it not always been the case since the early 80s?

NEWMAN: Let's see, well, I moved here in December of 1982. And I came out in like May of 1983, so it didn't take me very long after moving here. So I don't think it had the name Lesbianville but it certainly was very obvious to me that there were – the place was crawling with lesbians. Which was kind of great. I had had two previous sexual experiences with women both of which freaked me out [laughs] and, um, I had had a very active heterosexual life before that but when I moved here I was kind of in limbo, I didn't really know who I was in terms of my own sexuality and, it's, yeah, I can tell you exactly what happened, it's kind of a funny story. I was at a bus stop in Amherst and this woman came up to me she said "This guy's bothering me, will you just pretend that we're together, you know, that we're whatever," and I said sure, you know, sure, fine, so we started talking. And she was Jewish, she was from New York, she was a poet, we had all this stuff in common, and then she wound up inviting me to a party and she said bring some of your poems, people are going to read some of their poetry, so I said ok. So I came to this party and I read a few poems, and the women just loved my poetry and I just thought, 'these are my people.' And so I really came to the lesbian community through my writing and I identified as a lesbian for about a year before I dated anybody. I was just kind of getting my feet wet. Like, you know, going to dances, going to the woman's bookstore at the time was, I think, Womynfire.

MOLLOY: Mmm-hmm.

NEWMAN: So that's really how I came out. And it was very easy here to do that. Like I joined a woman's chorus, which I didn't stay in very long but it was very clear that most of the women were lesbians so… Have you heard that expression, "When the student is ready the teacher appears"? It was kind of like that.

MOLLOY: Ok.

NEWMAN: When the lesbian is ready her community appears.

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: Maybe.

MOLLOY: So do you find the term annoying at all?

NEWMAN: What, Lesbianville?

MOLLOY: Lesbianville.

NEWMAN: No, I like it, I think it's great.

MOLLOY: What brought you to Northampton?

NEWMAN: Ah, that's another interesting story. I was living in Manhattan, first I was living in an apartment on east 11th between First and Second, it wasn't an apartment it was a room. In a rooming house full of old men and one hooker – and a junkie who was the super, it was not a pretty place. [laughs] And then I left there, there was a fire one night that scared me, so I decided I better get out of there. So I found an apartment around the corner on Second Avenue between Fifth and Sixth Street with this woman, who turned out to be a raging alcoholic, and had a former husband who would come and beat her up and I just thought, you know, uh, this just really isn't working. And I was so busy trying to make a living temping that I had no time to write, which is why I moved to New York in the first place. I got there by dropping out of graduate school at BU and before that Naropa. So I wrote to a couple of friends, one who still lived in Burlington where I'd gone to UVM, and one who was still out in Colorado where Naropa is, and one who I had met at Naropa and who was living here in Northampton. And I said to the three of them, look, I'm having a really rough time, I'm in Manhattan and it's not working, could I come stay with you for awhile till I get settled? And the only person who answered me was the person from Northampton. So that's how I came here.

MOLLOY: Wow. So did you intend for this to be a temporary–

NEWMAN: Yeah

MOLLOY: Getting your–

NEWMAN: Well yeah, I mean I didn't really think in long terms but I, never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd stay here for 25 years.

MOLLOY: Wow. So what made you stay?

NEWMAN: Well I just never left. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: Well, one of the first things I did was I got myself into therapy, because I knew I had a lot of issues, you know, I was dealing with my eating disorder, I was dealing with, you know, moving from place to place, I was dealing with many failed relationships with guys, and I wanted to be a writer, and I was very unhappy, I was extremely unhappy. And so I made a commitment to be in therapy for two years, which seemed like an enormous commitment, so I figured I'd stay here for maybe two to five years and then see, and then in these two to five years I started developing a life. And then there was no reason to leave.

MOLLOY: So you have given credit for the idea of *Heather Has Two Mommies* to a woman in Northampton.

NEWMAN: Yup.

MOLLOY: Um, in what other ways have people and events in Northampton shaped your art?

NEWMAN: Hmm. Well having such a nurturing community of writers has really helped me flourish. I mean, even before I was named the Poet Laureate I was in a writers' group. I know tons of writers and we're all extremely supportive, one writer who lives in Palmer gave my name to somebody at the Stonecoast M.F.A. program where I teach and got me a job, and you know, we're just always helping each other. Somebody else gave me the name of an editor [ed. the editor has the online magazine, not the writer] who was looking for a writer who has an online magazine that I write for regularly now. I mean that kind of support is priceless, because you know we're just sitting up in our rooms looking at a blank computer screen or a blank piece of paper for so many hours and to have that kind of community – there's so many people here I show my work to, or I look at their work. It's really, really important.

MOLLOY: So do you think that the Northampton community gives you more support in terms of sexual identity or artist creativity? Is it–

NEWMAN: I couldn't compare, I mean I would just say both–

MOLLOY: Yeah?

NEWMAN: I mean, you know, I think it's pretty obvious that it's very easy to live here as an out lesbian, and that also is priceless as far as – I mean especially once I became involved in a very committed relationship that I've been in for twenty years it became even more important to be able to – I mean I don't really care about walking down the street and holding hands, and to me I mean that in a way that's superficial and in a way it isn't, the right to do that, but, more important things like just being known as a couple and not having to hide anything, not having to censor anything that I say.

MOLLOY: Have you been involved in any women's movements in Northampton?

NEWMAN: Um…I'm not really sure what you mean by that, I mean–

MOLLOY: Any movement, um…it wouldn't have to be a lesbian, or…I guess what I mean is any movement that would be active in protecting women's rights.

NEWMAN: Well, you know really my activism is my writing. You know writing a book like *Heather Has Two Mommies* even though I don't really write out of a political agenda but it seems a lot of my work is political, so you know that book obviously is trying to help children who have two moms feel that they have a place. I've written books about eating disorders and fat oppression, I write editorials about gay marriage, so, you know, it's really more my writing as opposed to being involved in some kind of organized way.

MOLLOY: A lot of your writing deals with the theme of family. What does family mean to you?

NEWMAN: Well I've created a family, my spouse, and we have no kids, and that relationship is very precious to me. And then I have an extended family of friends, and I really consider that as much of my family as my family of origin, who I have had strained relationships with on and off for most of my life, though in the past couple of years things have resolved themselves. You know, we're all older, I think we're all a little more mellow and respectful of each other, but that hasn't always been the case, so I've really had to go elsewhere to find family, and I've gathered mothers around me, my whole life, because my mother for whatever reason couldn't be there in the most nurturing way for a lot of my life. So I was very close to my best friend's mother when I was growing up, I was very close to a friend in college's mother, I have some women here who I don't know if I would consider them my mother substitutes but they're about twenty years older than me and so they have filled that role in some kind of way.

MOLLOY: How do you define family?

NEWMAN: Well, I'll quote *Heather Has Two Mommies*: "The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other." [laughs]

MOLLOY: Definitely. So, you've talked about your family of choice. How did they come into being?

NEWMAN: Um, well, they just were drafted. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: Besides my spouse, I have one woman who I'm very, very close to, I've been friends with her for almost twenty five years, I knew her before her daughter was born, you know we've gone through a lot together. And then I have a friend that I would definitely consider family, Mary and I spend our holidays with her family, and I've only known her for about nine years. So it's not the length

really but sometimes you just meet someone and they just become your family. I don't know, it's like falling in love.

MOLLOY: Yeah.

NEWMAN: But in a different way.

MOLLOY: You have a multi-media presentation called "Heather's Mommy Speaks Out" that deals with the controversy over gay marriage–

NEWMAN: Yup.

MOLLOY: What is your take on Proposition 8?

NEWMAN: Oh, well I just finished writing an editorial about it, this very day. It's called "Shouldering On" and it begins with a quote by Allen Ginsberg which says "America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel." I don't know if you know that poem of his, "America," he wrote it in 1956.

MOLLOY: It's in *Howl*, right?

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: Ok.

NEWMAN: And I just sent it to the *New York Times* with of course no hopes of them taking it, but I just figured, why not, start there. And then I'll send it elsewhere, it will probably wind up in the Gazette, but that's ok. Um, I'm so horrified, I mean I'm just so grateful that we didn't have to go through that here and as soon as I heard that it was going to go on the ballot I knew what was going to happen. I mean, even though I knew it would be very close it's just once that gets on the ballot it just gets ugly, and the radical right pulls out all the stops, and you know they have a lot of money and time on their hands, and they just know how to win a battle, they know how to fight a battle and they know how to win a battle. And I feel really bad for the people out there cause now – I mean, I think it will be overturned, I – I don't really don't know that much about the machine of politics but it seems to me that there are gonna be lawsuits, I think they've already started, and it will go back to the same Supreme Court that decided in the first place that gay marriage would be allowed, so they're not going to change their minds. So it seems to me that there's a huge waste of money and time. And that was part of what my editorial was about. Because you know I have this thing, I have this friend named Warren Blumenfeld who very strongly believes that homophobia affects us all, it doesn't just affect us homos, so part of my essay was talking about, think about how many hungry mouths $74 million dollars could feed. You know, you think this isn't affecting you? Look at our economy. Seventy. Four. Million. Dollars. didn't have to be spent. You know.

MOLLOY: Well, I do believe that when the backlash has started you know you're winning.

NEWMAN: That's true, that's true.

MOLLOY: Hopefully–

NEWMAN: Yeah, and I think New York will be next. You know, because New York is recognizing gay marriages from other states, so I think that the next logical step is that they just have them.

MOLLOY: Good. President-Elect Obama has been a supporter of gay rights, but he has said that he personally believes that a marriage is between a man and a woman.

NEWMAN: Mmm-hmm.

MOLLOY: What's your take on that? Do you think this is a contradiction?

NEWMAN: Well, I never believe anything that anyone who has that much power says. Because they have to say certain things in order to get elected. So who knows what he really believes, and who knows what would happen if one of his beautiful daughters grew up to be a lesbian. You know, I mean I think from what I can see he's a good dad, and I can't imagine that he would want his daughters to not enjoy the same rights and privileges as straight people. So I think he has to say that in order to have been elected, and who knows what he really feels and who knows what he'll do. You know, in a lot of ways, like every other president, he's a bit of a puppet, you know, he has a whole party that he has to represent and deal with, so I don't know.

MOLLOY: We'll have to wait and see on that one.

NEWMAN: Yeah, we will, we will. You know, I don't think he's going to do anything like write gay marriage into the Constitution, I wish he would, but I don't think he is.

MOLLOY: Um, what inspires you to write fiction about homosexual families and Jewish culture besides your own personal experiences – is there something beyond that?

NEWMAN: Um, no. [laughs] It's my passion, it's my experience, it's, you know, what I have to talk about. I just, I'll just throw in this quote by Maya Angelou which I really like, she said something like, "I write out of the black experience about the human experience." So I feel like I write about – "Out of the Jewish lesbian experience about the human experience," so you know what else do we all have to write about is the human experience, and those are the cultures and the communities that I know about.

MOLLOY: Outside of the controversy surrounding *Heather*, have you encountered any homophobia or anti-Semitism in your work, either your writing or speeches, your lecturing?

NEWMAN: Well, I did just get an invitation to come to do a weekend workshop and I looked at my calendar and it was on Rosh Hashanah. And so I said to the organizer, you know I'm sorry but I really can't come, this is Rosh Hashanah and you should probably know that you are probably not going to get very many Jewish participants, and she was like, oh, silly me… And I was like, you wouldn't do that on Christmas, right? I mean, this isn't a minor holiday, do your homework, look at the calendar, it's not that hard. So, you know, I think that's more ignorance than hostility, but, um, I've encountered that kind of thing a lot. Or it's not uncommon to be asked to do something on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur and often the excuse will be, well that's the day we could get the room, or something like that. So that's frustrating.

MOLLOY: Right.

NEWMAN: And in terms of the Jewish community it really depends where I go, you know, if the Reconstructionists ask me to do something that's not a problem. On the other side, the ultra Orthodox, they're never going to ask me to come and do something. So, is that homophobia? Probably, but it's so hidden because it never would even occur to them to have a lesbian come and give a talk. So again – a lot of times I'm just not aware. I remember there was one Jewish organization that invited me to come talk during the whole *Heather* thing, and I went and it was at a synagogue, and there was someone else on the panel who was just a raging homophobe. And I was so upset by it, so I have had those kinds of experiences.

MOLLOY: What happened on the panel? Did she directly confront you?

NEWMAN: It was more, he was like quoting Leviticus, and homosexuality is an abomination, you know, all that kind of crap. I actually felt worse for the congregants who were there and thinking – 'cause it was a member of the congregation – and I'm thinking, well, I can leave, I can just go home and this can just roll off my back, but I'm not living in this community, you know. And there were some lesbians who actually wrote to me after and said they were so sorry that that had happened to me, and that they saw how much work they had to do, and they were thinking about leaving the synagogue, but they decided not to, they decided to stay and try to change things from within.

MOLLOY: Wow. So, you've told me you see yourself as a writer and not an activist, um –

NEWMAN: I wouldn't say NOT an activist, but primarily a writer.

MOLLOY: Ok, um, many of your short stories and poems have been understood as political acts. Do you think that talking about and giving visibility to, say, homosexuality or AIDS is in itself political?

NEWMAN: Oh, absolutely. Just living one's life as an open lesbian is political. Even if it's not meant to be.

MOLLOY: Right, just being true to yourself.

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: And many of the issues that you write about are within a framework of women's health: eating disorders, sexual abuse, body image…Who is your audience? And how do you hope that your work will affect them?

NEWMAN: Well, of course every writer likes to think that her audience is everyone, but it's not true. [laughs] Um, my audience seems to be, from my experience, lesbians, feminists, Jewish women, gay men to some extent, women's studies majors… [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: Poets, you know people who are liberal, literary minded, hopefully people who like to read a good story. And then I have this whole other life as a mainstream children's book writer. So I have this whole other audience of little kids who have no idea what my life is like as an adult, and don't really care.

MOLLOY: Right. I wonder how much interplay, interlapping there is between the adults and their own children.

NEWMAN: Well, you know, it really seems like being a writer of children's books and a writer of books for adults is worlds apart and hardly ever the twain shall meet. Yeah. It's just a whole different world.

MOLLOY: That's interesting. I mean, I would imagine that if I was a mother and I enjoy your work as an adult, I would want to give my children the work of someone I respected.

NEWMAN: Ah, well, maybe that's true, it just seems like you know there's certain criteria there's just this kind of audience of people who know and like my fiction and poetry and they're usually, you know, left. [laughs] Left of center. And then there's the people who like my children's books. Well, I mean there's some overlap, like you know there's some feminists and lesbians who will seek out a book like *A Fire Engine for Ruthie*, and of course *Heather Has Two Mommies*. And a book like *Too Far Away to Touch*. But then I have these very cute little books like *Where is Bear?* And *Skunk's Great Surprise* and they're not political at all, and I don't think the readers of that book you know have any kind of clue that I have this whole other life.

MOLLOY: I mentioned to you on the phone that I really liked *Pigs, Pigs, Pigs*, and I'll have to read *Cats, Cats, Cats* and *Dogs, Dogs, Dogs* -

NEWMAN: Especially *Dogs, Dogs, Dogs*! You have a dog!

MOLLOY: I know. [laughs] I'll have to read it to him. Ok, so in a lecture you gave to a college audience once you stated that being a lesbian and being Jewish requires constant fighting um not just for themselves but for everyone. Is your body of work part of the fight?

NEWMAN: Oh, definitely. I mean I don't really think of myself as a fighter, but just giving visibility – my first novel came out in 1986 and the protagonist was a Jewish lesbian and that was a very radical thing to do. Firebrand Books was a very radical press at that point. So I knew in some ways that I was um, oh I don't know, I hate the expression shooting myself in the foot but I'll use it, but I knew that you know that book was not going to get published by a mainstream press, I knew that I was not going to get a huge advance, it was not going to be reviewed in the *New York Times*. Oprah wasn't doing her book club then, but you know, all those goodies that when you grow up wanting to be a writer – maybe you don't expect them and I certainly never expected that, but I always hoped for it. I mean, I think every writer does. But I knew that wasn't going to happen for me. But it was more important for me to be true to myself, and actually that's what prompted my coming out to my parents. Because I wasn't out to them. The book came out when I was 26? 27? No, let me think. 30. I wrote it when I was 27, it came out when I was 30. And I had come out three years before, and I was living up here, and my parents and I were not close, and they didn't really know much about my life, but I did tell them that I was having a book published and I just realized one day, oh my god, they're probably going to read it. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: And that's not fair to shock someone like that. So I told them and it did not go well.

MOLLOY: Can you describe the coming out process?

NEWMAN: Well, I thought the kindest thing to do was to write a letter so that they could absorb that and, you know, not get hysterical. And in hindsight maybe it wasn't the kindest thing to do, because my mother focused on that, focused on the fact that I had done it in a letter. And I was thinking if I had written her a letter and said I was getting married to a man, I don't know if she would be upset that it came in a letter. So it felt like she like used that as a diversion for the real issue. But she wrote me a letter back that was very unkind, and you know, I sweated over my letter, I tried to talk about – I said things like I felt bad we'd been not close for so many years, and I've been keeping this secret from you, and that's part of the reason, and that's my fault, and now I want to not have this secret in hopes that we could become closer, I'm a lesbian, I don't know how you're going to take it, you know, all that stuff. And she wrote back, saying things like I don't know how such a person could have come out of my body, you are the most selfish, self-centered, self-absorbed person I ever met, maybe it's the writing, maybe it's the therapy, but no child of mine, you know, blah blah blah blah blah, so it was very painful time.

MOLLOY: Yeah, I can imagine. When did you reconcile?

NEWMAN: Ah…well you know there was no formal reconciliation. Things changed a little bit when my grandmother died. My grandmother went into a nursing home for the last year of her life, and she was very unhappy about that. And she was very mad at my mother for that. And so I became her primary caretaker. I talked to her every day, I went down to Brooklyn once a month, stayed in her apartment for a week and went to visit her every day. You know, one week out of every month. Took care of her, I was the first person they called when she died. So my mother saw that I wasn't this selfish person that she had made me out to be, and then when I became involved with Mary it was – my parents kept hoping this was a phase, and then Mary just didn't go away. [laughs] In fact, I've been with Mary longer than either of my brothers have been with their wives. [laughs] So she just – I just, I didn't go home that much but I started bringing her when I came so they got used to her, and she's very likeable. It's very hard to dislike Mary. I don't know, have you met her?

MOLLOY: I have not.

NEWMAN: Cause, you know, she works at City Hall.

MOLLOY: Oh.

NEWMAN: She's the messenger.

MOLLOY: Mary Vazquez, now that I think about it I'm sure I've seen her emails –

NEWMAN: Yeah, yeah.

MOLLOY: Through the system.

NEWMAN: Yeah, so um. So that was the smartest thing I did in terms of my family. Because in spite of themselves they had to like her. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: So, but then things really changed, my mother um was very ill four years ago – five years ago now. Four, five, something like that. And I also went to the hospital where she was on life support and took care of her for ten days, for about two weeks, and things changed after that because again she saw that I wasn't this selfish person she had made me out to be.

MOLLOY: So, I'd like to go back to your writing. So you've introduced these topics that have been considered controversial to a lot of people, and a lot of the initial readers of *Heather* are now in their mid-twenties –

NEWMAN: Doesn't that – blow your mind? [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs] Um, what changes have you seen over the past twenty years?

NEWMAN: Well it seems to me, though I could just be naïve, that there is less controversy, or at least I hear about controversy less frequently now. With that particular book and you know, I've heard of it being referred to as a classic, which is kind of amazing – and the people who have grown up with that book have – to them it's no big deal if somebody's a lesbian or not which is what gives me great hope, even though we just saw what happened in California, but it just seems its only a question of time.

MOLLOY: Yeah.

NEWMAN: You know, I think about interracial marriage. And that was only in the sixties that that became legal, I mean that's amazing when you think about that, and in fact I ended my brilliant op ed piece [laughs] by saying some day the notion of gay marriage being illegal will be as ludicrous as the notion that we can't have an African American president. So it's just a question of time and people who have grown up – I mean I remember, it must have been the year of Stonewall, so when would that be?

MOLLOY: Seven – no sorry, sixty nine.

NEWMAN: Sixty nine. So I would have been fourteen years old, and we were in the living room of my house, and my mother's reading the newspaper, and it must have been on the cover you know we read *The Times* every day and, uh, *Newsday* and it said something about gay riots or something like that and I remember so clearly my mother saying, "when I was a – growing up gay certainly meant something else." Or, "in my times you know gay certainly meant something else." You know, very huffy and indignant and disgusted and, I don't even think I knew what it meant, but isn't it interesting that that memory has stuck in my mind all these years?

MOLLOY: Right.

NEWMAN: But now, any kid of fourteen that hasn't heard the word gay or lesbian is living with his or her head under a rock. It's in major newspapers all the time, there have been TV shows from *Will and Grace* to *Ellen* to Rosie O'Donnell coming out. It's just out there, so it's just not going to seem so bizarre as people get older – the kids that have been growing up with this, and when I was growing up I did – I never heard the work lesbian, I didn't know anyone who was gay – that I knew of, of course there must have been people. In fact, one of my high school teachers was a lesbian and I didn't know that until maybe 1999 when she was instrumental in getting me inducted into my high school hall of fame.

MOLLOY: Wow.

NEWMAN: Yeah, which was really great. But– and I realize I'm going all over the place so you can stop me at any time.

MOLLOY: No, please-

NEWMAN: So when I went back, there was this whole induction, there were like four or five other people and then the next day we went to high school and we had an assembly, and I came out to like four hundred high school kids. [laughs] And they hadn't told them that I was a lesbian writer, they just told them that I was a writer, so I forget what question it was, but it was a question I could not answer honestly without coming out, maybe what is one of your books about? Or what is your most famous book? And of course I would have had to say *Heather Has Two Mommies* or something like that. So they were asking me what it was like to be a lesbian when I was in high school in Jericho, which I wasn't out then which is what I told them, so then I turned it around and I said, well what is it like to be a lesbian today in Jericho high? And there's this total silence and then one kid said, we don't have any lesbians in this school. And I'm thinkin', right.

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: [laughs] And, a year after that I got an email – I could get very teary about this – from a girl who said that she was in the audience that day and she was a lesbian and she was having a very hard time and couldn't come out until she went off to college – and I forget where she was now but probably somewhere like Oberlin or Hampshire or something – and she was out and she said that I would never know how much it meant to her to have me on that stage, saying I was a lesbian.

MOLLOY: Wow.

NEWMAN: So that is my political work more than anything.

MOLLOY: Right.

NEWMAN: And I was so happy that this girl not only got something out of my being there, but took the time to write and let me know.

MOLLOY: Do you get a lot of that? Reader responses?

NEWMAN: Well now with the internet, yeah. I mean I have, it's at Smith, but piles of fan letters, but now even with email it comes more often. And from all over the world. So yeah, I got a little teary from that story.

MOLLOY: It's a good story, thank you for sharing that.

NEWMAN: And I try to respond to everybody, even briefly. You know I feel like if people take the time to write – but I try to respond in a way that's appreciative and respectful, but not encouraging to continue this conversation. [laughs] You know, cause I need to get my work done.

MOLLOY: Right. I might have told you I'm working on the papers of Joan Biren -

NEWMAN: Uh-huh

MOLLOY: At the Sophia Smith Collection and I've gone through her correspondence which was fairly similar, a lot of lesbians writing her thanking her for making lesbians visible.

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: And I was always impressed with her ability to respond in that way, very courteous and very like, thank you.

NEWMAN: Uh huh. Does she keep her – what she sends back, cause I never do.

MOLLOY: She keeps a lot of what she sends back-

NEWMAN: I should do that.

MOLLOY: Most of, um, that kind of correspondence correlated with her books–

NEWMAN: Uh huh.

MOLLOY: So 1979 and 1986.

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: 86-87, so a lot of that was handwritten, so I'm not sure, you know, her last film or the work that she's been doing now in the internet age-

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: How much correspondence she's getting.

NEWMAN: Mmm-hmmm.

MOLLOY: But, yeah. That's a skill. [laughs]

NEWMAN: Yeah yeah, I'll tell you one thing, whenever I hear from a young lesbian, that's under 18, I'm very careful how I respond. It still makes me a little nervous. Sometimes I'll get a letter from a girl who says – you know, a young woman, I'm 16, and I think I'm gay or a lesbian, I don't know who to talk to, I found your book in the library, my parents don't know I read it – and I'm like, I could get into trouble here, and I just tell her that she needs to find an adult that she knows that she can talk to and that I'm really sorry that I can't help her. It breaks my heart but I'm just really scared if someone's a minor that parents could come after me so it's difficult, it's a difficult position to be in.

MOLLOY: Have you ever been in a situation like that? Have you – do you feel like you've ever crossed that line?

NEWMAN: Once, I had an experience that in hindsight I'm thinking, how did I do this and it was really scary. I was on an airplane and I was sitting next to a young girl, actually a college student, and we were just chatting and she asked me what I did and I said I was a writer, and she asked me what I wrote, and she seemed, you know, like your basic liberal college student so I told her I wrote *Heather Has Two Mommies*. And she was fine, we talked about it and then something happened and the plane was delayed and we had to land somewhere else and we had to stay over. And you know, I just – my maternal instincts said, do you want to get a hotel room together, it would be cheaper and whatever, and I could tell she got really uncomfortable and then when we got off the plane, I saw her like rush to a pay phone and I thought, oh my god is she turning me in? Does she think I'm a child molester? I mean, I could be making all this up but I got really scared that I had done something incredibly stupid without meaning to. So that was a lesson to just kind of like – I mean you know I meant no harm, I was trying to be helpful, a young person alone in a strange city and then I just thought, wow, that was really stupid.

MOLLOY: Wow. Um, let's see. How do you think diversity should be taught to children?

NEWMAN: I think diversity should be taught via osmosis. Ok, I don't think there should be any big deal about it, but I just think that it should just be a given that in any classroom you're gonna read books that are gonna show a wide variety of people, you're going to talk about a wide variety of people, you know, your history everything that you do is going to be focused on representing the different cultures in our country.

MOLLOY: I agree.

NEWMAN: Seems simple, right? [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs] Yeah. You would think.

NEWMAN: You would think. You know, and I grew up in New York so it wasn't so much of an issue as a place like New England because it was just there.

MOLLOY: Right.

NEWMAN: I mean maybe not so much in the books that we read, but definitely in the classroom. Just the kid next to you.

MOLLOY: Right. That's a good point. We should just ship everyone off to New York for a year.

NEWMAN: You know, people say to me, oh Northampton is so diverse and I'm like, what are you talking about? [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs] I'm with you, they say the same thing about Smith College.

NEWMAN: [laughs] Where are you from?

MOLLOY: I'm from Minneapolis.

NEWMAN: Oh, ok.

MOLLOY: Ok. So you've talked to me about the response from your family when you came out. What about your friends?

NEWMAN: Well, at the time a lot of my friends were gay, so their response at the time was my god, you finally figured it out, we've known for years. [laughs] Yeah, I can't really think of any – you know I wasn't really that in touch with too many people I grew up with. I'm still in touch with my very best friend from elementary school through junior high to high school, who I was totally in love with, of course. [laughs] And she still has questions about it, like when did you know? I don't know if it makes her uncomfortable, I mean nothing sexual ever happened between us but we were inseparable, there was no question about that. But yeah most of my friends were feminists and or lesbians so, you know, not really a big deal.

MOLLOY: What drives you to explore butch/femme identity?

NEWMAN: I think it was just my preference when I finally realized I was a lesbian. It's funny because when I was straight I was very hesitant to ever dress in any sensual way, I always wore baggy pants and flannel shirts and I probably looked like a lesbian more when I was straight. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: And then when I came out I discovered the butch/femme community and it again it just felt like home and I was – have always been attracted to butches, never been attracted to femmes, or even people who are androgynous, so it was just kind of natural progression of coming out and exploring who I was.

MOLLOY: Can you describe the butch/femme scene in Northampton?

NEWMAN: No, I can't. [laughs] I don't really know anything about it. Now I'm an old, married lesbian and I have my certain friends but I don't, I'm not really involved in any kind of scene.

MOLLOY: Were you back when you first moved here?

NEWMAN: Mmmm, not so much, I mean there were a lot of things going on in the community, there were a lot of dances, a lot of social things, a lot of, you know, Kate Clinton and Suzanne Westenhoefer and all the comics came through and

there was just a lot of stuff going on, Take Back the Night marches. And there's probably stuff still going on, but again it's kind of the next generation and where they decide to go. Now I'm basically at home with my butch and my cat, very happy. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs] Um, let's see. So a lot of your writing does deal with lesbian and Jewish identity–

NEWMAN: I was going to show you, I don't know if you recognize Mary from City Hall.

MOLLOY: Oh!

NEWMAN: Oh, you're distracted by the cats.

MOLLOY: Sorry, I was totally looking at the cats. Where does she work? She's the messenger?

NEWMAN: Yup, she works in Communications, she's the messenger, she's on the second–

MOLLOY: She's in the mail!

NEWMAN: Yup, she's in the mail room.

MOLLOY: Yes! I just dropped off a whole mailing for her the other day.

NEWMAN: Ok, so you know who she is.

MOLLOY: I know who she is.

NEWMAN: Ok.

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: That's my girl. And we only have the one cat, Sammy died.

MOLLOY: Oh.

NEWMAN: But I can't bear to take him out of my wallet.

MOLLOY: No. Yeah, I just read the piece you wrote for *Obit*-

NEWMAN: Yeah, yeah. Well actually, I didn't even get into his ashes, we have other cats' ashes.

MOLLOY: Ok.

NEWMAN: Cause he had a terrible death that I can't really talk about because I get too upset.

MOLLOY: I understand. So I was asking you about lesbian and Jewish identity. How have those terms changed meaning over time?

NEWMAN: Well, I don't know that they have, for me. My primary identity, I still feel and probably will always feel, is being a writer. And then these other parts of me are secondary to that. I was gonna say I've been a writer longer, but I guess I've been a Jew since I was born, so that would be an identity I've always had, though I rejected it, and kind of the jury's out on have I been a lesbian since I was born. I mean, I think if I had grown up in a society that didn't presume heterosexuality, probably, but no, it took me a long time to find that, and I've wanted to be a writer since I can remember. So they just, it's like a braid with those three strands I would think.

MOLLOY: Right. So a lot of women grapple with the conflicts that exist between multiple identities. Have you experienced this?

NEWMAN: Not really. Not really, it was never really a problem to be a Jew in the lesbian community, it maybe was more a little bit of a problem to be a lesbian in the Jewish community, but again not in Northampton. We live in a very special place, I've even gone to sisterhood meetings at the synagogue here, which are traditionally made up of very conservative women, but in Northampton their saying is, this is not your mother's sisterhood. [laughs] Which is kind of nice. So yeah, I haven't seen a conflict, I mean more of a conflict I think – and not for me but maybe for my family – is that I never wanted children. Even when I was a little girl I didn't play with dolls, I just never envisioned myself as a mother, and that was particularly difficult for my grandmother, even more difficult than being a lesbian.

MOLLOY: You know, that reminded me of the "unmother" article that you have just written–

NEWMAN: Uh huh, and some of the poems, I don't know if you bought my book-

MOLLOY: I didn't buy it.

NEWMAN: Ok, so there's this whole section in *Nobody's Mother* about not being a mother, I didn't read those poems, that was the other night, but there's this whole section about that that come right after the first couple of poems I read about my mother's childhood, and then my childhood. And then there's, it kind of moves into not being a mother.

MOLLOY: I think a lot of part of the family of choice is saying that your pets can be your children–

NEWMAN: Mmm hmm.

MOLLOY: And whatever you want can be your children.

NEWMAN: Right, but of course they're not going to take care of you in your old age, which is what that article was about.

MOLLOY: Right. Yeah. But hopefully within our reconstituted families-

NEWMAN: Well I have to say I was very instrumental in taking care of my friend Victor– remember the poem I read, "The Last Supper"? It was about wheeling him to the restaurant.

MOLLOY: Yes.

NEWMAN: So, I was very instrumental in his death along with some other friends and it really taught me that it doesn't have to be someone you're biologically related to, because nobody from his family of origin was there. They didn't even come to the funeral. But a very good friend of his actually moved into his apartment in Provincetown and lived with him until he died. And other people came, there was this whole schedule of caretakers, and I just saw that community really comes through.

MOLLOY: Right. That's very important.

NEWMAN: Yeah, and there's going to be more of us without kids, more and more women are choosing not to have children, and, you know, we can't all be out on the street. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: I hope.

MOLLOY: We'll make the old childless lesbian home.

NEWMAN: Exactly. And then I think I have really good genes – my mother's 81 and by all– because of the health crisis she went through she really should not be around. And my grandmother lived to be 99, so I think I'm going to be around for awhile. Knock wood. Knock something.

MOLLOY: [laughs] Formica.

NEWMAN: Here. [knocks]

MOLLOY: Now you've said that you've recently entered back into the Jewish fold. Can you describe–

NEWMAN: I had a Bat Mitzvah!

MOLLOY: Yes, you said that, what 2004? A couple years ago?

NEWMAN: 2005 I think.

MOLLOY: Ok.

NEWMAN: Yeah, yeah.

MOLLOY: What brought you back in? Or why did you choose to?

NEWMAN: Well, what happened was a friend of mine's husband died very unexpectedly and she wanted to go to synagogue and she didn't want to go by herself. So I went with her, and it was more like a nostalgic thing, like hearing the melodies, you know, that minor key really can get to you. And I just realized once again how ignorant I am. I have no Jewish education, so the synagogue was starting this two year class to become an adult Bat Mitzvah, in my case it happened to be the whole class was women, that was just a coincidence, but that was nice for me, and about half of us were lesbians. So I decided to explore that, and so I learned how to read Hebrew, and I learned what the service is about, and I'm not ignorant anymore. But what it did was, and this was not intentional, it reminded me of why I strayed from the fold. [laughs] It reinforced my good instincts, cause I don't really believe in that patriarchal, punishing God, he doesn't really do anything for me. So I wouldn't say I once again left the fold, but it certainly did not inspire me to go to services every week or become more religious. And actually my older brother has become very religious, for the past maybe ten years – he's two years older than me – he started his own synagogue, he keeps Kosher, like it's the center of his whole life.

MOLLOY: Well, at least you have the reasons firmly in your head as to–

NEWMAN: Yeah.

MOLLOY: Yeah, it's not a pubescent decision.

NEWMAN: Yeah, right, exactly. I wanted to see – I ran away from it as a teenager so, is there anything there for me now. And it it's not like there's nothing there for me, I still go to the synagogue on the High Holy days, I still firmly identify as Jewish, and I feel like I have this kind of ironic, self-depreciating, shlumpy look on life [laughs] that I grew up with. The saying in my family is, there's no problem so big that it can't get worse. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: So, that's how I look at life.

MOLLOY: Yeah. So you're in the middle of your term as the poet laureate.

NEWMAN: I am!

MOLLOY: How is it going for you?

NEWMAN: It's been great, I really feel like this is my Miss America year, or two years, and I'm enjoying every minute of it, I really am. And I've met so many great people, I've been to events at the Florence Poets Society, and the Monday Night Forbes Discussion Group, and I've really made it a point to go to as many poetry readings as I can. And I've turned back to my own poetry, which is the biggest gift of all. I'm going to be running this contest, I've met poets through the newspaper column that I'm doing, it's just been fantastic. And I've also realized the power of poetry, I mean I think that more than any other art form, maybe because it can be accessible to so many people it really empowers people, it really brings people together, it really politicizes people. I mean it's really pretty great.

MOLLOY: Definitely. Can you tell me a little bit about the upcoming books that you have and any other projects that you see yourself doing in the future?

NEWMAN: I have a novel coming out next year called *The Reluctant Daughter* which is about a mother-daughter relationship of a, again semi-autobiographical, a childless woman in her late 40s and her strained relationship with her mother.

MOLLOY: New theme.

NEWMAN: New theme, right, right. [laughs] Actually after I finished that novel, I really thought I had put that to bed, and then I wrote the poems that you heard last night. Or whatever night that was. So who knows. There could be more.

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: I have the first two board books for kids with two moms or two dads coming out, I think you might have seen that on my website, *Mommy, Mama and Me*, *Daddy, Papa and Me*. I have a picture book called *Little Miss Tutu* coming out about a little girl who wants to be a ballerina, I have a book coming out called *Just Like Mama* which is a very sweet mother-daughter story. And I've just recently finished a children's book that's a Passover story that hasn't found a home yet, and I also just recently finished a book that I really want to publish. It is called *Donovan's Big Day*, and it's a picture book that takes place at a gay wedding.

MOLLOY: Oh wow.

NEWMAN: Very timely. Yes. So that is out there looking for a home and I'm really hoping that someone will snap it up and get it illustrated and publish it soon.

MOLLOY: Would you ever consider self-publishing again?

NEWMAN: No. No.

MOLLOY: No. [laughs]

NEWMAN: No, I would not. [laughs] You know when I – and technically I didn't really self-publish *Heather Has Two Mommies*, I co-published it with um Tzivia Gover who was running a very small press at the time called In Other Words Publishing. It was basically a desktop business for pamphlets and things, and then *Heather Has Two Mommies* was the first and only book. Though, I was much more involved than an author typically is in the publishing, that's why I say co-publishing project, but at that time nobody in the world would publish *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Now the possibilities are much more open, like Tricycle Press who did *King and King* and *King and King and Family*, and even Simon & Schuster did *And Tango Makes Three* and *The Sissie Duckling*, and I forget who did Nancy Garden's newest book I think FSG, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. So the avenues are not closed the way they were when I published *Heather*, In Other Words publishing. I shouldn't say never, I mean maybe I would consider it if I had to float all other options, I mean now with the internet and all it's not as hard to do it as it was back then. But it's not really the direction I want to go in.

MOLLOY: Right. Maybe you could do an ebook.

NEWMAN: Eh, that – I'm too old-fashioned.

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: You know, *Donovan's Big Day* has only been to one press, and I and actually the publisher really liked it, but it's a very big major mainstream press and he said, you know, we're just very careful of what we're acquiring right now, and basically said, I wish I could acquire this but I just can't. The powers that be above his head basically– now every book has to be a guaranteed best seller, well…

MOLLOY: Wow.

NEWMAN: Yeah, time's tough in the publishing world, like everywhere else. So.

MOLLOY: Well, is there anything else that I didn't touch on that you'd like to talk about?

NEWMAN: Um. Well, you know, the book that I really um like to men-, well there's two books I like to mention, one is my book *Still Life with Buddy*, do you know that book?

MOLLOY: I've heard of it.

NEWMAN: It's a book of poems that, well the publisher called it a novel in 50 poems. I think that's stretching it, but it's 50 poems that do have a narrative arc, and they're all about the same subject, which is a gay man dying of AIDS and his friendship with a lesbian. That book won me an NEA fellowship which I'm very proud of. But people say to me, which books of yours are your favorites, and the book to me is very, very close to my heart, and also as a poet it was a huge stretch to write 50 poems on the same subject. And then of the books of mine

that's different than every other book of mine is the book *Hachiko Waits*, which I don't know if you've seen but it's, well it's a book about a dog, so you have to see it!

MOLLOY: [laughs]

NEWMAN: It's a historical novel about Hachiko who was the most famous dog in all of Japan, and he was born in 1923 and died in 1935 and waited 10 years at the train station for his master's return. So um-

MOLLOY: That'll bring it back.

NEWMAN: Oh yeah. It has in most ways no obvious, no autobiographical content as much of my work does except that my relationship with my own dog growing up is the emotional research that I had to do in order to write that book. But that book really expanded my horizons in terms of thinking about myself as a writer with more possibilities than just rehashing my childhood over and over again, which I have a tendency to do. But that there's a whole world out there of other things you know that one can write about.

MOLLOY: Right. Well, I look forward to reading them.

NEWMAN: I think that one you'd really enjoy but you should have tissues near by. [laughs]

MOLLOY: [laughs] Yes, especially lately everything needs tissues near by. [laughs]

NEWMAN: [laughs]

MOLLOY: Well, thank you so much for spending time and talking to me about this.

NEWMAN: Oh you're welcome. So do you think you need a part two? Or will you not know until you go through this and maybe –

END TAPE 1

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Erin E. Molloy, November, 2008.