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Northampton, MA

**LETTY COTTIN POGREBIN**

Interviewed by

ALLISON PAYNE

November 6, 2008  
New York, NY

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### Narrator

Letty Cottin Pogrebin is a writer and journalist. She was born in 1939 in Jamaica, Queens. She graduated high school early and entered Brandeis University at the age of sixteen. She graduated Cum Laude with a B.A. in English. After she graduated, she worked for the publishing company Bernard Geis Associates for ten years. She was soon promoted as an executive. Her first book, *How to Make it in a Man's World*, reflected her experience in the company. Because it was extremely well-received, she was able to support herself as a full-time writer, first of a column in the *Ladies Home Journal*. She is one of the co-founders of *Ms.* Magazine and was a frequent contributor to it. Her articles covered a number of observations on women's places in modern American society, from the idea of motherhood to competition among women to short stories for children.

### Interviewer

Allison Payne is a student at Mount Holyoke College.

### Abstract

This oral history covers various aspects of Pogrebin's life but specifically focuses on her experiences at *Ms.* Magazine and her work on nonsexist childrearing.

### Format

Interview recorded on Sony Tape Recorder. One 60-minute tape.

### Transcript

Transcribed by Allison Payne.

### Restrictions

None

### Format

Interview recorded Sony Cassette Player. One 60-minute tape.

### Transcript

Transcribed by Allison Payne. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Allison Payne and Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Letty Cottin Pogrebin.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Tape Recording

**Bibliography:** Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. Interview by Allison Payne. Tape recording, November 4, 2008. An Activist Life Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. Interview by Allison Payne. Transcript of tape recording, November 4, 2008. An Activist Life Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

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Transcript of interview conducted November 6 2008, with:

LETTY COTTIN POGREBIN  
New York City

by: ALLISON PAYNE

PAYNE We'll start from the beginning then, and then we'll see where we can go.

POGREBIN OK.

PAYNE Let's see...can you tell me about what it was like growing up in Jamaica, Queens with your family, um...how did you grow up as a girl, were you treated differently from boys, by you parents, or...?

POGREBIN I never noticed anything.

PAYNE You never noticed?

POGREBIN Did you read *Deborah, Golda and Me*?

PAYNE Yeah.

POGREBIN OK. Um...I don't think there was that kind of consciousness. I mean, I was born in 1939, my earliest memories of anything political was the second world war, I was very aware that Jews were suffering, I was aware that my family was sending food and clothing overseas, I knew about Hitler—I didn't notice anything else. I don't even think I was aware of the inequities in Judaism until I thought back on it, until I was excluded from the memorial minyan for public prayer. When I was excluded I registered this isn't fair, because I had had a full Hebrew school education and I had had a botmitzvah. Are you Jewish?

PAYNE Uh...not exactly. But...so, yeah, my family on my mom's side is Jewish, but my grandmother lost her faith at some point so it never got handed down to my mother, and it never got handed down to me.

POGREBIN It happens. But I'm just saying, you can stop me if you don't recognize any of these terms—you know what a botmitzvah is...

PAYNE Yeah, sure.

POGREBIN So, I didn't really register anything until then. I thought it was extremely unfair because my mother, she was dead, and I was 15, and why didn't I count, and so on—So that was my first recognition of inequality—well, not really. When I was in Hebrew school the boys were given privileges and the girls weren't, and they weren't smart when some of the girls were.

PAYNE What kind of privileges?

POGREBIN Well, they could run the service—the junior congregation service—they could go up and have blessings....It was just clear that there were favored positions for boys. I graduated very early from high school, from college, and I was one of the youngest—was the youngest person ever to go to Brandeis. I was 16 when I entered and 19 when I graduated. So that was a very good experience because I sort of you know without my mother sort of raised myself [CANT UNDERSTAND] And when I graduated I don't think I noticed very much then either because there was no feminist movement, there was nothing sort of raising my consciousness. I went to work because I couldn't have afforded not to, and, uh, I wasn't surprised when I was hired to be a secretary when the boys who graduated got distinct jobs. You took that for granted in those days. That was just the way the world worked. I knew that there was a gross unfairness in salary, I knew that. There was a limit on how much girls would be paid, 80 dollars a week at the publishing company. I remember hearing that the most they'll pay women is 80 dollars a week, and you better get used to that. And that was a lot of money to me then, to be hired at 55 dollars week. So 80 sounded like a lot.

But when I got to that point where I couldn't go any further, I knew that I wasn't fair. But I didn't make a fuss, we didn't make a fuss back then. So, I...I kind of went through my 20s as a career woman and as a mother and as a wife, and didn't really pay attention to anything, um, about equality or not equality, cause I advanced fairly quickly in book publishing, and uh I became an executive, and eventually I was paid a lot of money, cause I moved from the publishing company to [CAN'T UNDERSTAND]... And uh, when I was uh 29 years old, I think it was, I started writing the book *How to Make it in a Man's World*, about my career. Um...that made me sort of how to think about my life a little more analytically. When that book was published my editor said, You know, you're going to be attacked by women's lib. I said, "Who's that?" She said, "It's a movement, and they're gonna look at your book and it's gonna be all about you and how you made it and how, you know, you're a Queen B." I said, "What's that?" (laughter) I'd never heard of any of those things. And then my editor—you know, this is when the manuscript had just been handed in—and she gave me all this stuff to read, and one of the things she gave me to read was the manuscript for Kate Millet's book, *Sexual Politics*. And it just blew my mind.

- PAYNE                    So was that, like, your first awareness of feminism then?
- POGREBIN                Mm, no. My first awareness of feminism was after my book was published, when I had to be forewarned that I would go on radio and television shows and that I would probably be put on in kind of an adversarial situation with a women's libber, and by the time I had read all the material that my editor had given me—because she knew all about this stuff because she was publishing Kate—by the time I was done reading all of that stuff I had converted myself and my husband.
- PAYNE                    (laughs) Just out of curiosity, how was your book received, did you get the response that your editor—
- POGREBIN                Uh-huh.
- PAYNE                    --anticipated?
- POGREBIN                Well I got, you know, perfectly pleasant and unchallenging response from most people, most women, because you had to be ahead of the curb to know what was going on in the radical sort of circles. But I did have some women's liberation people challenge me on the grounds did I think that my career as described in *How to Make it in a Man's World*, if that was something anyone could do? And at that time I knew of course...no. 'Cause I had read all of these analysis, I had become awakened to the fact that there were some places where women were limited to 80 dollars a week, you know, and that equivalent. So...I was sort of, um, self-educated at that point, and I knew enough to place my experience in a context.
- PAYNE                    Mm-hmm. OK. Um...so, how has your attachment to feminism—this is a very broad question—how has your attachment to feminism changed over time, if at all?
- POGREBIN                Well I should first probably tell you about how I got involved in the women's movement. From my career in publishing to my becoming an active feminist on a day-to-day basis was a, a sort of a giant step. When my first book was published, I left my job in publishing to become a full-time writer. Why? Because I got asked to write a column for the Ladies Home Journal called "Working Woman," and I also got many assignments from them. That's not how it works, usually. Writers scrounge and claw and I was just very fortunate that I got a good review for my first book. People reached out to me, so I started writing on women's issues, and next thing you know I get a call from Betty Freidan. I don't remember if this is in Deborah...
- PAYNE                    I don't think so.

- POGREBIN I got a call from Betty Freidan, and um she said we're gonna be starting a National Women's Political Caucus and we're having a conference in Washington, and I want you to come down and help me. So that was the sort of way Betty Freidan operated—"You will do this, you will do that," and you did it! And when I got down there to this conference I met Gloria Steinem, and I found that I was much more compatible with her and her kind of feminism, which was more inclusive and less white middle-class.
- PAYNE Yeah. That's a good point.
- POGREBIN So then I got friendly with Gloria, and she asked if I wanted to help start Ms., and so that how I got into kind of professional feminism.
- PAYNE: About Ms. Magazine, um...What was the environment like in the early days among the founders and the writers?
- POGREBIN: Well, very...ultra-egalitarian. In other words, everyone was assumed to have authority and everyone was assumed to be equal and of course that wasn't true, it was idealized because who were incapable of doing things were given jobs on the grounds that women have been suppressed and if you give them a chance they can do it—and they all were not able to be editors or writers. So that took us a while to sort out. We were using shoestrings, my desk was the carton from a dishwasher that somebody had thrown out. I cut a little hole in the carton for me knees, put my typewriter on it.. It wasn't even an electric typewriter, it was a manual. And we, we were five women who started Ms. Magazine and we were in two tiny offices, adjoining offices. It was very low-key, low-budget...
- PAYNE: So...it was a garage band, then.
- POGREBIN: Yeah, it was, it really was. And you know, we were so low-budget we would have published on mimeographs. But somebody came along and advised us that it would be cheaper to publish a real magazine, in the long run...We professionalized...Well, I should tell you, when we first published, we assumed that the magazine would be on sale for six weeks, eight weeks...and it sold out in 8 days all over the country.
- PAYNE: Wow.
- POGREBIN: And that's when we knew we really...
- PAYNE: There was a real interest.
- POGREBIN: There was a movement.

- PAYNE: Yes, there was. Ms. Magazine founders were of all different backgrounds, just across race, class, um, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. How did this influence, contribute to, perhaps even disrupt group dynamics, if at all?
- POGREBIN: The fact that people were all different things?
- PAYNE: Yeah, or how did it change or represent the magazine as a whole?
- POGREBIN: It being the diversity?
- PAYNE: Yeah.
- POGREBIN: Um...well we were aware of the need for diversity. We had, we had, you know, black women—not the original first five. The original first five were two Jews, two Protestants—no, yeah Christians, I'm not sure what kind—and Gloria who was half and half. But we didn't have any black women or any Latino women in the first five. But we were very aware of that and our editors were all different kinds, and our—and in our articles we were always very aware of it, and—you know, the hardest issue was class. Class is a very tough issue still to this day. Because you want to acknowledge the authentic experience of everyone, but...you're not going to be able to have a high school drop out as an editor.
- PAYNE: Yeah.
- POGREBIN: So you have a problem there. Who's going to represent a constituency of lesser-educated, economically, you know, challenged people? So that was tough.
- PAYNE: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Um...did group dynamics change after Gloria Steinem's rise to fame?
- POGREBIN: She was already very famous.
- PAYNE: At that point?
- POGREBIN: Yes. Famous enough to get people to raise money by her having lunch with people. She was famous, she was beautiful, she was smart, I mean, I think the magazine really benefited from all the things she brought to the table.
- PAYNE: How did working with Gloria Steinem and the whole Ms. team influence your ideas on feminism?
- POGREBIN: Well, I think by the time I joined Ms. I think I had become a pretty committed feminism from everything that I'd read. I'd read myself into

feminism, and I, you know, I became an editor immediately, and... what I'd probably brought to the table, I think I was one of the few that had children. So I brought a kind of awareness of the family woman's issues and the challenges of the home and raising kids and also having a job. I brought that. I also started the Stories for Free Children section in the magazine, which every month ran children's stories, which was pretty ironic because one of the claims was that feminists didn't like children and were anti-family. You know, they would like to defame us in any way that they could. So that was one of the charges... Meanwhile, we were the only magazine that had a children's stories section. We who hated children had devoted at least four pages a month to children.... We had many articles on childrearing and marriage and house work... you know, and the inequities of the homemaker's role... I think we were remarkable in that we were so ahead of the game.

PAYNE: Definitely. And that is very important, especially then—at any time, really—because so many members of your audience probably also had children.

POGREBIN: Yes they did.

PAYNE: And so—

POGREBIN: It's a full time job.

PAYNE: A struggle...

POGREBIN: Yeah.

PAYNE: What do you think was your most well-received article at Ms.?

POGREBIN: Um...I did a piece on motherhood... Um...that was talked about a lot, because I really looked at the structure of motherhood and sort of the sociology of motherhood... Um...I did a piece called, Do women make men violent? Which was talked about a lot.

PAYNE: I'm sure.

POGREBIN: I did a piece on the power of beauty...so I kind of deconstructed beauty to be more honest about it, because as feminists we like to believe that beauty doesn't count, it doesn't matter, no make-up, no this, no that, but that was never a general rule, we simply unpacked it, we picked it apart, we looked at it in our lives, like what role it played in getting hired, not just in getting boyfriends or husbands but you know, in lesbian relationships it figures just as much, in jury selections—up and down the line beauty plays a role and people didn't really wanna look at it frankly or analytically and we did.

- PAYNE: It's a symbol of your worth.
- POGREBIN: Yeah. Still is.
- PAYNE: What do you make of the evolution of Ms.?
- POGREBIN: Well, I think it's gone through a lot of incarnations, and now it's operated by the Feminist Majority, and I think it's fine. It doesn't have a real kind...populace...mass market feeling, which we at that point, we really did. You could pick us up at the newsstand, but you can't do that anymore. And we were able therefore to appeal to a very broad spectrum. Now, Ms. appeals to committed movement women and people in college. Which is fine, because you know what, all the other women's magazines now run stuff that we used to be the only ones that ran, things on sexual harassment or rape or poverty, I mean, you can read that now in Redhook and McCall. If there is a Redhook and McCall now.
- PAYNE: I don't about Redhook or McCall, but you can read it in Oprah, definitely.
- POGREBIN: Yeah. So Ms. doesn't have to have any CANT UNDERSTAND that we did. And I don't think you can buy it on a newsstand. But I think it's useful for college people to see international feminism.
- PAYNE: Yeah, definitely.
- POGREBIN: What school are you from?
- PAYNE: I go to Mount Holyoke.
- POGREBIN: How did you come to me in the first place?
- PAYNE: I'm taking a class at Smith called Oral History and Women's Activism.
- POGREBIN: Mmhmm.
- PAYNE: And we each have to find someone who we would like to do an oral history on. So I chose to get in touch with you because I'm very interested in journalism and you worked with Ms. and I love Ms.
- POGREBIN: I see.
- PAYNE: Um...So, back to the questions. So much of your work has been about non-sexist childrearing. I was wondering if you could talk about how you came to this subject...I'm guessing you had children?
- POGREBIN: (laughs) Good guess.

PAYNE: Go me...

POGREBIN: In 1971 the first issue—um...the first issue came out—actually, January of '72, but we were working on it in 1971. In 1971 I had two six year old girls and a three year old boy. So my kids were raised on my—I was educating myself as I was raising them—and, if you get to read that article you'll see how it made me stop and think about everything I was doing. And it basically happened when I was coming home from work—I worked 3 days a week, a ten hour day, so by the end of the week I had worked maybe 30 hours or 36 hours, and then of course I brought work home and I wrote and so on. But the point is that I was working at Ms. and I was able to do both. And the other four days—or the two days of the weekend—I was really like a full-time mom. So...I never kind of looked at my life in any sort of—Well, what should I change or what should I challenge or what would a feminist do except where my own life was concerned. I never looked at it where my kids were concerned. So one day I come home from work with a basketball set that you attach to a closet door and it comes with a little nerve door that don't beak the lamps...And I put it on the door of my son's closet. And my husband came home and said, "Why did you put it on David's door, he's 3 years old!" You can't do this. (laughter) And it was like, a light when off in my head—Yeah, I have two six year old girls, very athletic, they're very active, they do everything, and I put this on my son's door. It was like this unconscious boy equals basketball. That I will always remember was my first moment of...epiphanic moment, and I started to look at everything I did that was so unthinking. You know I mean, 'Have the boys do this and the girls do that,' and it had nothing to do with age, it had nothing to do with reality, it had everything to do with pink is girl and blue is boy. And so I started to, in their rooms, I would make sure that the girls had every kind of toy—trucks and action toys and books about adventure—and the boy's room would have tea sets and dolls. That's why you see in that painting, he has two dolls, he also has a rocket. (laughs) You know what I mean? They were a product of the open-opportunity childhood...In 1976, my girls were eleven, so they had had many years of our changed way of childrearing. I became fascinated by how we track and brainwash children and don't let them become who they are, who they're meant to be. So I started to kind of...blow that all open and... You know Free to Be You and Me?

PAYNE: No...

POGREBIN: Well go right out—run, do not walk—and get Free to Be You and Me. You will...really, you will be so charmed... And you know, Stories for Free Children, the stories that were in every issue of Ms. Magazine, I put together a book of those stories and they were all about, you know...girls becoming adventurers and boys discovering their feelings and mommies can be anything and all of that. And that became a

fascination, almost an obsession of mine, and I wrote about called *Growing Up Free*, which is on nonsexist childrearing, published in 1980.

PAYNE: Just a quick question... Did you find that your nonsexist childrearing ever conflicted with the messages your children were receiving from the media—

POGREBIN: Oh, yes.

PAYNE: How did they deal with that?

POGREBIN: Well it was completely counter to the received wisdom all around them, which was that boys don't play with dolls. But everyone who came to this house—we had consciousness raising meetings in this room and they would be up there sitting on the balcony listening, so it was normalized in our family. But they would see me on—every year I used to do a review of the toys on the market, and this room would be full of sample toys, because I would write about them in the magazine. You'll see if you look back at the December issues every year, toys for free children. And so my kids would see me testing toys and I would say, Look at this package...[CAN'T UNDERSTAND]... And it really makes girls feel odd, choosing. Same with pink and blue. So they kind of came along with me, and we would all try out the toys. First of all, most of it was junk. I would rate them based on safety, quality, packaging, and sexism. And they [my children] were tuned in. The rest of the culture would be sending them messages and they would feel sorry for the rest of the kids who weren't allowed to play with certain toys. They were allowed to play with anything! I never said, You can't play with that because you're a boy, or You can't play with that because you're a girl. So...they started to feel sorry for kids who were limited by parents who were, like...nuts. Why doesn't their mom let them do that? You know, and we would have discussions about it.

PAYNE: Yes, they sound much freer.

POGREBIN: They were much freer. Help yourself to nuts if you want.

PAYNE: Oh, thank you.

POGREBIN: Chocolate.

PAYNE: It's so good!

POGREBIN: Go to it. That's why they're there.

PAYNE: OK. What were some difficulties in raising children—sons in particular—to be nonsexist?

POGREBIN: Well, only that he had the safety in this house of being whoever he wanted to be. And when he went out into the world he was...unconventional. So he would have to answer for himself. And that was very strengthening for him. My son loves to cook, he ended up going to chef school, he became a chef, now he's in the restaurant business.

PAYNE: Does he have a restaurant in the city?

POGREBIN: He works on the West Side. He's a general manager. Have that.

PAYNE: I don't want the sound—

POGREBIN: Oh, the crinkle?

PAYNE: Yeah, so—

POGREBIN: OK, crinkle and I'll speak after you crinkle.

PAYNE: (laughter) OK. (crinkling) It's crinkled.

POGREBIN: OK. I'll always remember when—I don't know if you've ever been to summer camp.....we were listening and we were all sitting around here....And at one point he said we have a wonderful man-made lake, a great art program.... The guy leaves, it sounded like a really wonderful camp, and my son says, "I'm not going to that camp." So we said, "Why? What's wrong with it?" And he said, "it's sexist." And we said, "Well how do you know it's sexist?" "He said they had a man-made lake!" ... He would never say man-made, he would say artificial. Because when a kid hears "man-made" they see men making something. And he knew enough—he was very tuned-in to language... Another time, he was with his class somewhere—in the Botanical Gardens, I think—and he said, "Oh, that's such a lovely flower!" And his friends made fun of him for saying lovely.

PAYNE: That's sad!

POGREBIN: I know, it's awful. But he talked back. He knew enough to say, "I use all kinds of words. I use all the words that I know. And that is a lovely flower."

PAYNE: It shows that feminism can liberate men too.

POGREBIN: Exactly.

PAYNE: So...I wanna shift the conversation more towards feminism in general. You wrote in your book, Deborah, Golda and Me, "every woman is the

author of her own emancipation.” I love that. How would you describe your own emancipation?

POGREBIN: Well certainly it was through my research. I researched feminism in a way that freed me to become who I was and also freed me from the scriptures of old thinking. I was an executive in a book publishing company, but I would have spent my life in a very naïve universe had I not come to understand the condition of other women.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Allison Payne, 2008.*

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