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LI's Erica Abeel talks about 'The Commune'



Erica Abeel, author of "The Commune," in the 1970s at the house on Long Island that inspired her novel. Credit: Susan Wood

By Marion Winik Special to Newsday Updated September 29, 2021 1:45 PM
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Like William Faulkner with Yoknapatawpha County, Long Island native Erica Abeel has transformed her home region into a fictional place she returns to again and again in her novels. Islesfordd, a body double for East Hampton, is back again in Abeel's sixth book, a semi-autobiographical satire called "**The Commune**" (Adelaide, \$22.30). The millionaires, the monstrosities, the pashas and the parties are all here, skewered with wit, style and insider intelligence — "a rollicking, irreverent party of a book," according to no less a local authority than The East Hampton Star.

"The Commune" is set in 1970, when a motley crew of writers, artists and hangers-on took shelter on the Island from the cutthroat world of New York and incubated the Women's March for Equality that took place that August — now considered the beginning of contemporary feminism. As Abeel puts it, "They were a little group of extremely flawed, self-seeking and hyper-ambitious individuals in a group house in the Hamptons who launched an event that transformed the world."

Like Leora, her protagonist, Abeel was there — a struggling journalist and single mom on the fringes of the group, making notes for a novel which 50 years later is in our hands. Based now in Sagaponack, she joined us by Zoom for a literary conversation.

Why write this book now, after all these years?



Erica Abeel, author of “The Commune,” today. Credit: Elena Siebert

"The Commune" is dedicated to my grandsons, Jasper and Otis. For one of the recent women's marches, they made a poster for us to carry that read WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS. Looking at their blocky, childish handwriting, I suddenly made the connection — this commune is where it all began. This is the reason we have women's marches, and that my grandsons are feminists.

To what extent is the novel a roman a clef, in which fictional characters and places can be mapped to real ones?

Their iconic leader, the man-chasing Gilda, is, of course, Betty Friedan. Her rival, Monica Fairley, much discussed though she never actually appears, is Gloria Steinem. The others are either composites — based on figures like Phyllis Chesler, Andrea Dworkin, Clay Felker, John Leonard, Lee Radziwill, Little Edie Beale of Grey Gardens fame — or entirely invented.

Anything else?

Their house, Cormorant Cove, is also a composite, typical of the white elephants the communards would rent, easy to score because impossible to heat. The actual place, in Wainscott, was called Sheldrake Cove and overlooked Georgica Pond. I melded it with a rather spooky pile on Drew Lane in East Hampton.

Gotham magazine is clearly New York, the Rottlesey Club is the exclusive Maidstone Club in East Hampton. And the awful mansion they visit, Dragon's

Gate, is a rather accurate description of an infamous Southampton monstrosity called Dragon Head which I believe is now owned by Calvin Klein.

You have a lot of fun depicting the different sectors of Islesfordd society.

This is a culture that is perfect for a satirist, because there's so much pretension and self-congratulation. Nouveau riche characters like Kaz horrified the posh Lily Pond Lane types, with their pop art lawn sculptures and other ostentation. And while the Old Guard hated the idea of a group house — so vulgar, and illegal, for that matter — somehow the communards won them over. The charades parties I depict in the book were real, and on Saturday night, eclipsing all the lavish Benefits, they were the hottest ticket in town.

And the feminists in the book are all man crazy.

Most of all Gilda, the Mother of Feminism! Yet all of them experience the tension between romantic love and ambition. On one hand, they're wrestling with Vivian Gornick's idea that women cannot have romantic love and self-respect at the same time. Or perhaps love is OK, but the problem is men — like my character Edwina, many embraced lesbian relationships.

These women created a revolution, but were they ready to live up to its ideals? They whipsawed back and forth between the more traditional past they came from and the new ethos they were creating.

Will you be taking your readers back to Islesfordd anytime soon?

The book I'm working on now is partly set in Sag Harbor. I'm interested in the efforts by developers to despoil that charming little town and turn it into Disney World, like what's become of parts of the Left Bank in Paris. Already they've fouled the view of the harbor with ghastly glass condos — stratospheric price tag attached — that bear no relation to an old whaling town.

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