



MOLLY JONG-FAST INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Molly Jong-Fast, Writer
July 25, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 17 min and 55 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

MOLLY JONG-FAST:

So I got sober when I was 19, and the sort of maxim was that you were kind of given this gift, right? So, I mean, I don't know, I always felt that I was saved, right? That I was 19 and I was saved. And so part of that is that you are — you're dependent on using that for the good. So, I feel — and it's not that I'm insane by any stretch of imagination, going on vacation in two days, but I just feel that I have this opportunity now to highlight people who might not otherwise be highlighted.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Molly Jong-Fast

Writer



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INTERVIEWER:

Let's talk about your family. And I want to go back a bit. Your mother is arguably one of, along with perhaps only Gloria Steinem, two of the most important feminists of our lifetimes and before our lifetimes.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah. I mean, I think if you think about it, Gloria Steinem, Gloria Steinem was — is — really an activist and really did want that role, whereas my mom is really a poet and an academic. And then she had this book that placed her in the pantheon and was able to sort of parlay that into a second wave feminism career. She became a feminist icon. I do not think that she was either equipped or particularly wanted to be that, but I think that for my mom, I don't know that it was necessarily the job she...I think she thought she wanted it, because I think that I don't know that this is true for everyone, but I think for her and certainly for my grandfather and father, this is true, that once they got famous, they just didn't want it to ever end.

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INTERVIEWER:

You grew up around fame?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah.



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INTERVIEWER:

Seeing it both in your mother accidentally and in your grandfather, Howard Fast, who wrote a novel that he had to self-publish.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

In order to get out into the world.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

So my grandfather is an interesting story because, you know, my grandfather had a pathological obsession with work that I relate to. You know, you would get — I would sleep over at their house and you would get up and it would be 5:30 in the morning. You hear the typewriter going, you know, five, 5 a.m. he'd [MAKES TYPING SOUNDS] and you'd think like, what is he doing? You know, he's you know, he's 81 and he's out there and like, he would you know, he would write a book a year. He would write two books a year, you know, he would...well, by the time he died, he had 60, 70 published books. I mean, just completely crazy. And he also wrote a column and he wrote, you know, wrote newspaper columns and he wrote scripts and he wrote movies and wrote



books. So what I would say about my grandfather was he had this pathological desire to work, and part of it was because he grew up really poor, and his mother died when he was young, and he felt he would never be okay. And I really relate to him in some ways more than her, because he was just a, you know, he just wanted to survive. And the way he felt he could survive was through his work. And, he didn't have the same kind...he was self-destructive, and he was lazy in certain ways as he got older. But he wasn't self-destructive in the way my mom was self-destructive. He really just wanted to work. I would say the other thing about my grandfather, which is pretty interesting, is that he — you know, he was a communist and he didn't like sort of what happened with McCarthy, where he ended up in jail and he ended up refusing to name names. He didn't seek that out.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did he talk to you about the experience of going through McCarthyism and specifically about writing *Spartacus*?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yes, he did, and he was very mad about *Spartacus*. You know, he was very mad at Kirk Douglas. It was very hard for him not to be the most famous person. And it was very — he was very tormented by the idea that there were movie stars who were on the screen and not behind it. I mean, I think that for him, you know, he really lacked humility. And so the idea that someone else could get famous saying his words just drove him up the wall. It's such a



weird peccadillo like years later, I think about, like, you never hear any writer complain that somehow the actors are getting credit for his words, but he was furious, and he always felt that the actors get credit for his work, which seemed to make any sense. But yeah. So Howard Fast had an incredible ego and was a total egomaniac. But he was also, I don't know, he did the right thing when it was a moment to do the right thing. And a lot of people did not do that.

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INTERVIEWER:

Right. And by that you mean?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

He refused to name names. He refused to cooperate with the committee, and he went to jail. And in fact, he writes in being read about how he went in to testify. And then they basically just sent him to jail like it was — there were no chances, there were no appeals. He literally just went to jail. He really did have beliefs and courage and bravery. And he did not...he did not, he really did-did protect those people because he believed in it and he believed in the people.

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INTERVIEWER:

What so impressed me about your grandfather was that when he couldn't get the book published, he published it himself.



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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Oh, yeah. Grandpa.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about that.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah. So my grandfather, Howard Fast, was not...he just did stuff, you know, he just didn't care. And I'm just going to curse, but I'm not cursing because I know we're very genteel here. One of the interesting stories which I think is, is relevant and important is that my grandmother came from quite a wealthy family, and they were the Hudson news family, and they were — her father was a connected guy. And so — Jewish, but connected and in this very rough newspaper business. But that made my grandfather able to do certain things that he would not have been able to do. So she could live in Teaneck. Her father had some money. There was a sort of backstop, which I think, like, you know, we when we're talking about equity, we don't necessarily we're never sort of honest. Right. When you think about the sort of billionaires and millionaires you never think about, like they actually had very upper middle class upbringings and their parents were able to give them a couple hundred thousand dollars to start their business. So I just want to say that my grandmother was very crucial in my grandfather's being able to survive



during that period because, remember, he couldn't write, he couldn't make money. They lived in Teaneck right next to her father. People would throw stones at their window, and my grandmother was scared, but she was also protected from her — by her father. So I do think that's really important thing that people never talk about is this idea that there was actually a certain safety net that said, when he got out of jail, he was so incredibly freaked out by the experience, especially as someone who had been, I think the idea that you could be jailed for writing something or having ideas or being not popular with what the government wanted, was so scary to him that when they got out, they went to Mexico because that was the only place you could go where you did not if you did not have a, passport. So they went to Mexico and they were in Mexico for a while, and there was a certain feeling that they could never be safe. And I do think, like, even though my grandfather went on to write many, many books and won an Emmy and do a lot of television, I do think he never got over being jailed for refusing. I mean, being jailed for contempt of Congress, that is just not something that should happen. There's no you know, there's there almost no one has ever been jailed for that.

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INTERVIEWER:

Certainly doesn't happen anymore.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Right, even when there's real contempt in Congress.



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INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you, though, you have this heritage that takes us back to a time when you could be jailed for speaking out.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

And McCarthyism, fueled by Roy Cohn. Do you see a through line that informs you?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah, I actually was thinking about this when we were talking about a just a minute ago. We were talking about my grandfather going to — my grandfather, Howard Fast, going to jail during the House on un-American activities for being in contempt of Congress. And I wondered, you know, I always have in the back of my mind what happens if Trump gets reelected. And I wondered if maybe I would end up in jail if Trump got reelected.

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INTERVIEWER:

And you've written about not just Trump, but Trump-ism.



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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

And the idea that it's not one man McCarthy-ism.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Right.

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INTERVIEWER:

A concept.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Right.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you see the parallels now going back to the —

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I would say Trump what I mean, Trump is just cheap McCarthy. You know, but even tacky or I mean, it's, you know, Trump I mean, you listen to him. He's George Wallace, he's Nixon, he's Spiro Agnew. I mean, Trumpism is nothing new. It's just — it's just that no one in the Republican Party had the lack of historical knowledge and the willingness to touch the fourth rail until Trump came along. Before that, you had people like Paul Ryan saying things like — that were evocative of that time, but not all in. It wasn't until Trump that you really had someone who did not understand history and did not understand the larger implications of what he was saying, Jay Parini about Gore Vidal's biography. And I am struck by his writing. I think about Gore all the time. I reread him and I think about him because he talks a lot about the United States of amnesia and how hard it is for Americans to learn from history and to remember history. And I think about that all the time because even, you know, from election to election, we lose things we've learned. And in even, you know, the difference between, you know, two elections ago and now and, and there were so many lessons with Trumpism that, that we now that we learned briefly and then forgot. So the United States of amnesia really speaks to me.

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INTERVIEWER:

Well, let me ask you about being present, because that really does seem to inform, how you view both the world outside and your own life, your ability to be in the moment, to be present right now, but present every day has come from those lessons you learned.



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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah. I mean, I came from a very chaotic childhood, and my parents got divorced when I was three. They were very mad at each other for about a decade. And, so I had, you know, sort of very destabilized upbringing. And, I got sober when I was 19. I got married when I was 23, and I had my first kid at 24, and he's now 19, and then I have another two who are 15. And I would say that, you know, I came from a very disjointed and-and I needed stability. And so I was able to sort of find that for myself.

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INTERVIEWER:

One of the things I've been so struck by is your writing that's been informed by your sobriety, because it seems to inform almost every aspect of your life.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

You know, I came from a family that was riddled with alcoholism, and my mother had struggled with alcoholism and my grandmother struggled with alcohol. They did quite — my mother and father did quite a lot of drugs. Smoked quite a lot of marijuana and, you know, lived next door to a rock band on the Pacific Coast Highway. So it was not. It was very much, you know, of the time. I got sober when I was 19 and it informed almost everything about me. And I've been sober for almost 26 years. And, you know, I would not have any of the — my material possessions, but more than that and sort of that



ability to stay present and, you know, be able to do what I do for a living if I were not sober.

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INTERVIEWER:

Thinking about what you hope you can do. Not your mother, not your grandfather. What-what do you look forward to accomplishing?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

I want to use my privilege to help other people and to, especially with the podcast, I get to do that all the time, you know, to talk about ballot initiatives in Ohio and to highlight activists in Texas and, you know, help the Cherokee Nation get a congressional seat. You know, I've had so much privilege in my life. And it's funny because my husband too grew up very privileged. And, you know, we both really committed ourselves to trying to use that privilege to elevate others. And that is what gets me out of bed in the morning. You know, I love to write and I'm delighted that I get to write.

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INTERVIEWER:

So you're at your typewriter at 530 in the morning?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:



Yes. I'm not as as focused as he is, but I'm also not as narcissistic as he is. So it's a trade off, but, I really like working. I love what I get to do. I'm so, you know, the other thing is that I remember I had a career when I was in my late teens and early 20s, and then I didn't have a career for like about ten years. So I was able to come back by, you know, writing for the Jewish Daily Forward. You know, that's how I rebuilt my career. And I wrote these columns every week, and some were good and some were not as good. And I sort of rebuilt my career. So at 44, I feel incredibly grateful that I get to have another whack at the apple. I just feel that I have this opportunity now to highlight people who might not otherwise be highlighted. And so, I feel very lucky to get to do it and—

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INTERVIEWER:

More than that, though, you have, now a 19 year old and two 15 year olds.

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

How do they — how does being a parent inform you? And what do you see from them as they look toward the future? What are you looking for them, and what do you see from them?



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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

I mean, one of the great things that my mother taught me, and she was a very complicated, mother. But the one of the amazing things she taught me was she said, just do it right, like just write the book. So I wrote my first book at 19, and I never felt, you know, it was naive, but it was also I just never felt that I couldn't. And so I think what I've done with my kids is I've said, just do it. Don't you know one — my older kid has written for a ton of publications and my younger kids — and, you know, I've just said, like, you can do...there's no reason why you can't do you know...I'm here to empower you. But, you know, I'm not just here to empower my kids. I'm also here to empower my listeners and my readers. And the goal here is to get people doing what, you know, we're in such a precarious political state, that we need people to be, you know.

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INTERVIEWER:

Are-are you hopeful?

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MOLLY JONG-FAST:

I am...yeah. I'm hopeful. I think people are largely good. And I think that, you know, we American politics ebbs and flows. But, you know, even at our worst, this most recent round, we weren't nearly as bad as we might have been and could have been and have been historically. So I think we're getting better. I think the trend lines up.



END TC: 00:17:55:00