

Wisdom in Edith Pearlman's *Binocular Vision*

By Walter G. Moss

Last year Edith Pearlman received much acclaim after her fourth collection of stories, *Binocular Vision: New & Selected Stories*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction. Before then many learned people had never heard of her. By now, however, many other writers and literary critics have commented on the craftsmanship of the 34 stories (some new, some old) appearing in her latest book. Therefore, there is no need here to stress her skill as a writer. But there is no doubt that it contributes to the appreciation of what I will emphasize: the wisdom contained in her stories.

Wisdom involves not only thought and behavior, but also feeling. No one is completely wise, and some researchers have suggested that wise women tend to emphasize more than do wise men the affective traits of compassion, empathy, and sympathy. These, plus other wisdom values such as love, tolerance, humility, a sense of humor, courage, self-discipline, an appreciation of goodness, truth, and beauty, and what the French call *joie de vivre* (or delight in life), permeate Pearlman's stories.

Her compassion, empathy, and tolerance embrace all sorts of people—young and old, men and women, healthy and sick, Americans and non-Americans, the “normal” and “odd,” and people of the present and people of the past (like Tsar Nicholas II and his family all executed in 1918 and remembered in “The Lineage”: “eight corpses—man, wife, five children, serving-maid—and a crushed spaniel, dying. The corpses, first shot, were then chopped, drenched in acid, burned, and buried”).

In the collection's first story, “Inbound,” we feel for Joanna, the mother of a little girl with Down's Syndrome, whose older girl, Sophia, suddenly vanishes while walking along a crowded street with her mom and dad. Before finally finding her, Joanna fears that Sophia “may end her life as a photograph on a milk carton.” In “Tess” we experience the pain of the mother of the two-year-old Tess “who cannot talk or walk or for that matter make any purposeful motion.” She is kept alive by a feeding tube. An Asian “cleaning person” in the hospital where she resides looks upon her and thinks: “In his country, if Tess had been born at home she would have been allowed to die. If she had been born in a hospital, she would have been helped to die. Why you here? he wonders. Pain and death and sorrow he understands as part of the design that God has created—but life like this?” In “How to Fall” there is the grown daughter of the main character, Joss. Along with his wife, he visits her once a week in an institution and thinks, “If she could only talk. Perhaps she understood, a little.”

In “The Story” Harry Savitsky recalls a tale his Jewish wife has often told about being in Paris during WWII.

I was four. The Nazis had taken over. . . . My father went out every morning. . . . That morning—he took my brother with him. My brother was twelve. . . . Soldiers in helmets grabbed my father. My brother saw the truck then, and the people on it, crying. The soldiers pushed my father toward the truck. “And your son, too. . . . “Son?” my father said. “That kid isn't my son. I don't even know

him." The German still held on to my brother. My father turned away from them both and started walking again toward the truck. My brother saw one shoulder lift in a shrug. He heard his voice. "Some goy," my father said. So they let my brother go. He came running home, and he showed us the ripped place on his sleeve where they had held him. We managed to get out that night. We went to Holland and got on a boat for Argentina.

In "The Noncombatant" a 49-year-old doctor, Richard, near the end of WWII is fatally sick with cancer. Pearlman's compassion for him and his family extends also to the Japanese victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When Catherine hears news of the second atomic bombing on the radio, she says "How terrible," and Richard responds, "All wars are terrible."

Now in her seventies herself, Pearlman seems especially compassionate towards those nearing life's end. Several of her other stories also depict people with terminal cancer like the father of twin girls in "Home Schooling," the friend (Fox) since college of Max in "The Little Wife," and the retired gastroenterologist, Cornelia Fitch, in the collection's last story, "Self-reliance." In "Relic and Type" there is Jay, in his late seventies, with his disease "on the offensive . . . silently waiting for the doctor to mention hospice."

There are also numerous examples of Pearlman's compassion and understanding for the young, the middle aged, the displaced, and even those whom society frowns upon for being "odd."

The chief character in the story "Binocular Vision," which also lends its name to the overall collection, is a ten-year-old girl who by the end of the story learns something of "the complicated world of adults," something beyond surface appearances. Harry, the narrating twin daughter in "Home Schooling," describes herself and sister as "boyish eleven-year olds," and it is through her eyes that we experience the final weeks of her father's life and her own understated grief.

"Granski" is about teen-aged cousins who come together in the summer, Angelica from Paris and Toby from Washington, D.C., and have sex together until their grandmother tells Angelica: "All in all . . . a continued liaison would be a great deal of trouble. For you, for him, for all of us. . . . You will tire of this sooner or later. . . . Tire of it now, beloved daughter of my daughter." Pearlman then adds: "For sixteen years she had addressed Angelica by name only. The sudden endearment—a declaration, really—was worth ten of Gramp's long-winded blessings.

What a rich phrase. You could live a life on the income it yielded. Angelica gazed steadily at her grandmother. 'I will do as you say.' She offered her right hand to confirm the agreement."

A central character in both "Girl in Blue with Brown Bag" and "Jan Term" is a high school girl. The first, Louanne, had come to the Boston area just two years earlier from Russia and is attempting to cope with a new way of life. The second, Josie, in the same Boston area, copes with the death of her mother and adjusting to her new stepmother.

“Hanging Fire” is about Nancy, who returns to her home and family (mother, aunt, and cousin) just after college graduation. She spends the summer reading and taking tennis lessons from Leo. Finding herself alone with him in his cabin, she proclaims she would “like to take advantage of the opportunity.” But he gently rebuffs her and tells her to travel and experience some of its pleasures. Like another fictional graduate, actor Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, Nancy is at a confusing stage in life. “Still she wondered: did the present deliver up the future, or must you chase your destiny like a harpoonist?” Pearlman empathizes with her, just as she does the other young girls previously mentioned.

The author also portrays sympathetically the trials of middle aged and older people not suffering from serious illness. In “Unravished Bride” and again in “Ministry of Restraint” a middle-aged man and a woman, both married but not to each other, struggle with how intimate to become with someone new to whom they are attracted. In “Elder Jinks” two older, but not yet retired people, fall in love, marry, and have a major quarrel that leads them to consider whether they wish to risk getting back together.

In “Capers” the story starts with the lines “PICKING UP LOOSE CHANGE—it was Henry’s idea. An activity—not a crime, not even a misdemeanor. And these days any sport that aroused his enthusiasm was worth playing.” The elderly Henry and his wife, Dorothy, evolve into shoplifters, but we sense Pearlman’s empathy for them despite their deviant behavior; for it partially stems from their desire to maintain some adventure despite the increasing limitations of aging. “As they aged they went on doing what everybody in their cohort did—paid the condominium fee, shopped for groceries, went to a movie and modest restaurant once a week. . . . They tended their ailments. But they’d become too weary for travel They canceled their subscription to the symphony . . . the series cost so much. . . . They dropped the *New York Review of Books*. Staying au courant could break their fragile budget.”

Pearlman’s sympathy for the displaced and needy comes through most clearly in “If Love Were All” and “Purim Night.” The first is about a middle-aged Sonya who goes to England during WWII to work for the American Joint Distribution Committee to help displaced Europeans, mainly Polish and German Jewish women and children from Poland, Austria, Hungary, and Germany. In the second story she remains in Europe after the war but now as a co-director of a camp in Germany for Displaced Persons, which she considered a euphemism: “fugitives from cruelty, they were; homeless, they were; despised.” They also included some who were “disabled, paralyzed with despair, stuck in the TB hospital.”

Another story, “Rules” is about people working at Ladle, a soup kitchen for women and children set in the fictional town of Godolphin (see below). There were four rules there: “You can’t hit anybody here. . . . You can’t drink here” was another rule. Shouting and doping were also forbidden. All four rules were frequently broken.” This story reveals not only Pearlman’s sympathy for unfortunates, but also for those who might seem odd to others, like two of the main characters, a mother and daughter dressed like colonial Puritans, who accept the hospitality of the Ladle. “Weirdos,” one of the Ladle workers

labels them. But another worker comes to appreciate the bond between mother and daughter and describes one scene where “they exchanged a long, silent stare—a gaze of peace and intimacy and intricately tangled pleasure. The space between them became briefly radiant.”

Another “odd” character is the child psychotherapist “Milo—Aunt Milo, Queen Milo, Dr. Milo” —in “Aunt Telephone,” who on one occasion is mistaken for a woman. Pearlman tells us “Milo’s colleagues respected his peaceable bachelordom: they recognized asexuality as an unpathological human preference, also as a boon to society.” The narrator of this story recalls her experiences with him from the days of her childhood to those when he interacted with her own children. When they make fun of him, she says: “I inform them that Milo represents an evolved form of human life that they might someday emulate or even adopt. That sobers them. So I don’t mention that he was once valued and then exploited and then betrayed and finally discarded; that, like his displaced parents [from Hungary], he adjusted gracefully to new circumstances.” Pearlman also suggest Milo’s “unnerving power of empathy.”

Like “Rules” and a number of other stories, “Aunt Telephone” is set in the fictional Godolphin, described as a “leafy wedge [or suburb] of Boston.” In an [interview](#) Pearlman stated: “I dreamed of a place where odd people could be themselves. Godolphin, through many stories, evolved into such a place. It has the human scale of a small town and provides the rich opportunities of a big city. It welcomes immigrants. It is home to austere Yankees and skeptical Jews and believing Catholics, to straights and gays, to families and solitaries. It is tolerant and inefficient and modest.”

Tolerance is indeed important to Pearlman. In “The Little Wife” she writes: “Luckily, the Whitelaw daughter and the Chernoff son turned into healthy adolescents and then healthy young adults—nobody nowadays considered male homosexuality an affliction, not out loud, anyway.” In “Day of Awe” Robert Katz has come to accept his grown son’s gayness and helps him care for the Central American child he intends to adopt. In “The Story” the Savitskys have friends who are a “pair of lesbian teachers.”

In “How to Fall” Pearlman describes the family of a young girl who writes letters to a television actor: “Mamie came from a large, loose, wisecracking family. . . . The men were sales representatives, the women salesladies, an optimistic crowd tolerating in its midst members who were chess players and members who were racetrack habitués and members who were fat and thin and good-natured and morose and peculiar . . . and even Republican.”

Although Pearlman is Jewish, as are many of her fictional characters, she is cosmopolitan in her delight in the intermingling of peoples. In “Relic and Type” Jay tells his Japanese daughter-in-law: “We were then only Jews and Irish [and Protestants]. . . . Now we are Russian, and also Vietnamese, and also South American, and many others there is no necessity to mention.” He is surprised to learn that one of his Japanese teachers is married to a Jewish woman. But when he asks “she’s Jewish?” he is told, “Yes, whatever we mean by that these days. . . . Some of them are probably Quakers or

Zennists or whatever.” In “Day of Awe” the Jewish Robert Katz’s gay son is not only going to adopt a Central American boy, but Robert’s daughter, living in Beverly Hills, has married a Mulloy, and they have a Mexican housekeeper. In “Mates” the story is mainly about a likeable couple, Keith and Mitsuko Maguire, and their three sons: “In each son the mother’s Eastern eyes looked out of the father’s Celtic face.”

In “Allog,” which is set in Israel, the most praised character is the non-Jewish Joe, who has come there from his native Southeast Asian country to work. His ability to fix all sorts of things and his good disposition lead old Mrs. Goldfanger, for whom he works, to declare “Joe is a wonder,” and “He’s descended from the angels.” Trained as a pharmacist, he was unable to find adequate work in his own nation. “Joe’s wife, a teacher, also could not find employment at home. She worked as a housekeeper in Toronto. Each hoped to be able to send for the other, and for the eight-year-old daughter who had been left in the care of her grandparents.” The title word “Allog” is from Joe’s native language, and he explains that “the elderly allog, the wise one . . . is consulted on great questions,” while the young allog “acts as a troubleshooter.” Pearlman clearly intends the word to apply to Joe.

At a time when minority births have surpassed white births in the United States, it is especially heartening to come across such a welcoming of ethnic and other types of diversity. Pearlman’s attitude reminds one of Hopkins’ poem “Pied Beauty”: “Glory be to God for dappled things . . . All things counter, original, spare, strange. . . .”

Pearlman’s own approach to God, however, seems best expressed in her story “Elder Jinks,” where she writes about Grace: “She hoped he’d send it back to her in Northampton—she had not yet sold her house there, thank goodness, thank Providence, thank Whoever was in charge.” In another [interview](#), Pearlman referred to that “Whoever” as “our own Button Maker . . . which is as far as I care to go into theology.” And she added that “Wit recognizes that we do not understand the workings of the Almighty Button Maker, only the workings of our own world, to which we are bound to accommodate.”

The mention of “wit” in this humble statement brings to mind what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote: “Humor is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humor is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to ‘stand off’ from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions.” “Aunt Telephone” ends with Pearlman suggesting that the effeminate Milo possessed just such a type of humble self-deprecating humor. “He is grinning back at us as if he shared our mild mockery of his performance: as if it were his joke, too.”

Like the master short-story writer Chekhov, whom Pearlman lists as one of her favorites, she sees a connection between compassion and humor. In the second [interview](#)

mentioned above, she said “I think that Compassion and Wit not only do not war with each other, they belong together.” And like the modest and humble Chekhov, Pearlman weaves much humor into her stories. At times it is a just a brief phrase or several lines—like Chekhov, she is often masterfully terse.

Regarding the children who came to the soup kitchen Ladle in “Rules,” Pearlman writes, “They had learned somewhere that when you grabbed a toy from another child you had to shout ‘Share!’” Max’s wife, Gail, in “The Little Wife” is “still pretty: the tilted chin, hers by right; the tilted nose, hers by rhinoplasty.” In “Chance, the narrating daughter states: “My mother was a devoted convert [to Judaism], but she could not convert her transcendental profile. Even in the harsh glow of the lamp, she was, in the words of my nasty great-aunt Hannah, a thing of beauty and a goy forever” (a clever substitution of “goy” for “joy” in a famous line from the poet Keats).

Often humor serves as a tonic for dealing with the inevitable physical declines of aging. Thus, in “Elder Jinks” Pearlman writes about Grace, “Her skin was only slightly lined. . . . Her figure was not firm, but what could you expect.” In “Capers” old Henry sometimes has “lunchtime beer, which turned him cheerful for a little while and occasionally even amorous. And so, sometimes, in the early afternoon . . . But he always needed the pill, and they had to wait an hour.”

Sometimes the humor requires more explanation, as in the following example of sad humor in “Rules.”

She had interrupted Concepta peppering her grandson, a niño of eighteen months. “Peppering him?” Donna asked. “Peppering him with what?” “Peppering him with pepper. She had him on her lap and she was shaking the pepper jar over him as if he were a pizza. I don’t think any got into his eyes. But I wanted to strangle the bitch.” Pam bit her lip and bent her curly head. “What happened next?” Donna mildly inquired. “I said, ‘Please stop that, Concepta. You can’t hurt people here.’”

“Jan Term” contains the most sustained humor. Josie’s employer for the month of January, when students at Caldicott Academy are supposed to perform volunteer work, writes an excuse to her teacher for her late term paper: “There was an upheaval in her family due to her stepmother’s unexpected return on January 31 after a two-month absence. You probably know, too, as does most of the town, that her father greeted his wife’s homecoming by throwing crockery at the wall and pouring Scotch into the family’s aged computer. . . . I continue to think that Jan Term is Caldicott Academy’s devious method of giving teachers an extra month’s paid vacation and in the process driving parents frantic with worry. The fifteen-year-old girls who volunteer at shelters, veterinary establishments, ethnic restaurants, and Central American villages are at risk for TB, psittacosis, salmonella, seduction, kidnapping, and deep boredom. Josie, working at my [antique] store, at least avoided the first five.”

In the term paper Josie eventually turns in she follows her teacher’s guidelines in telling why she chose the volunteer work she did and what she learned from it. In her paper she mentions that one customer said, “I know your family your mother was a saint your

stepmother is a slattern your father is a tyrant. Like that, with no punctuation.” But in a footnote to this passage, Josie adds:

This is perhaps the place to correct the woman’s mistakes. My mother was not a saint. She didn’t do anything to end wars or cool the globe or rescue the homeless. When a pie crust crumbled she told it to fuck itself [sic]. She was very nearsighted and didn’t sew, and even wearing her eyeglasses, she blinked a lot, which because she was so tall made her look like a confused giraffe, but not a saint. [Stepmother] Tina is not a slattern, just disorganized. She’s twenty-three. She was eighteen when she met my father and got pregnant with Tollie [Josie’s half-brother]. While she was staying in the North End with her Friend, she thought about her life here and came to the conclusion that its pluses outweighed its minuses. My father is not a tyrant. He’s absentminded and preoccupied with biostatistical research and sometimes gets quite irritable, but he’s turning over a new leaf.

“Elder Jinks” contains a funny scene when new husband Gustave comes back home earlier than expected from a conference to find his new (but by no means young) wife Grace slithering on the floor, while two of her friends (Lee and Lee) stand “naked back to back”—the three of them were acting out a Charades phrase (nude eel, i.e., New Deal). In addition the sweet smell of marijuana filled the house as she (on her belly) spots first his polished shoes, then his pants, and then the belt she had given him. “‘Ask these people to leave,’ he said in a growl she had never before heard. . . . He’d mistaken a frolicsome manner for lasting charm. She was merely frivolous, and the minute she was left unsupervised. . . .”

Yet, in this story, as in some others of Pearlman, a mature love shines through. Gustave and Grace both “realize the dangers in so ambitious an enterprise [marriage].” As he foresees, “he too would have to be known, and his shabby secrets revealed, and his out-of-date convictions as well. They’d endure necessary disappointments, and they’d practice necessary forgivenesses, careful to note which subjects left the other fraught. Grace’s mind moved along the same lines.” In three consecutive stories (“If Love Were All,” “Purim Night,” and “The Coat”) the love of Sonya for Ronald Rosenberg slowly develops. In the second one, we read: “‘Roland, I love you,’ she said, for the first time ever. And she did, she loved the whole silly mess of him: the effeminate softness of his shoulders, the loose flesh under his chin, the little eyes, the breath redolent of processed meats, the sparse eyebrows, the pudgy hands, the fondness for facts. Were these not things to love? Oh, and the kindness.”

In general her noblest characters face life courageously and with self-discipline. In “Allog” “Mrs. Goldfanger was eighty-five. Her doctor said she had the heart of a woman of thirty, and though she did not believe this outrageous compliment, it strengthened her physical courage, already considerable.” The main character in “Vaquita” is the elderly Polish-Jewish Marta, now minister of health in a Latin American country where many of her fellow former ministers have been replaced and ended up in Miami. She wonders if the new government will “arrest her in the chopper, or upon their arrival at the airstrip. . . . It didn’t matter; her busybody’s career had been honorably completed. . . . And now—deportation? Call it retirement. She wondered if the goons had in mind some nastier punishment. That didn’t matter, either; she’d been living on God’s time.”

Most of Pearlman's dying people are also not self-pitying but courageous. (The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once stated that the true test of wisdom was maintaining a positive approach to life in the face of death.) Several of them remind me of a friend I once had who lived on for about a decade after an automobile accident had made him a quadriplegic dependent on a ventilator. He had always loved classical music, and it provided great solace to him in the years after his accident.

In "Home Schooling" twin daughter Harry (Harriet) says of her father, a classical violinist: "I think he guessed what was coming—the tumor's steady growth, the blindness in the right eye, the new operation, the new operation's failure." She recalled that whenever he played with his quartet or the symphony "he sat up on the stage, remote, as if the music lifted him away from us, as if his bow gliding back and forth drew him to some place we couldn't reach. He was separated even from himself." She then describes his final visit home: "He played a few sweet things—some Mendelssohn and some Gluck—and Aunt Kate did well with the accompaniment; very well, really, since she was quietly sobbing. Then he played 'Isn't It Romantic?' [a Rodgers and Hart song] and Kate recovered and pushed through with a nice solo bit. . . . We knew the tune and the lyrics, and we could have hummed along or even sung along. But we sat mute on the sofa, flanking our mother." In "The Little Wife," during Max's final visit to Fox, they play a piano-cello duet together, as they often had in earlier years.

In "Self-reliance" Dr. Cornelia Fitch "endured a vision [of her worsening self]: emaciation, murky awakenings, children obediently keeping still. She squinted at a bedside visitor, she sat dejectedly on the commode, she pushed a walker to the corner mailbox and demanded a medal for the accomplishment, she looked at a book upside down. The mantle of responsible dependency . . . it would not fit." So she takes a different path, which also requires courage.

Like the stories and plays of Chekhov, Pearlman's stories reflect a realistic approach to life. It is full of tragedy but also many joys and moments of transcendence. As some of the above lines indicate, it is often music that provides such moments. In "Elder Jinks" Gustave and Grace go to Paris on their honeymoon. "They sat in Sainte-Chapelle for two hours listening to a concert performed on old instruments—two recorders and a lute and a viola da gamba. That was the most blissful afternoon." In "On Junius Bridge" the character Andrei playing his harpsichord gives a European inn a special distinction.

In "Purim Night" there is a wonderful music-filled Purim costume party at the Displaced Persons' Camp. Sonya thinks, "Why should she too not dress up for the Purim party? Choose life, choose beauty." The "orchestra was playing: strings, one trumpet, woodwinds, an accordion, a balalaika, three guitars, one drum. . . . The orchestra fluted, blared, strummed. Persons danced, changed partners, danced again." When it took a break, Sonya played the piano.

She played "You and the Night and the Music" She played a Strauss waltz and the waltz from *Faust*. The smoke thickened like roux. The air in the room was clouded and warm and vital; life itself might have originated in these emanations from burning tobacco. She played "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." She played "The Merry Widow" She saw Ida waltzing with the general.

Ida looked up at him from under her hat. As they turned, Sonya saw an inquiring look on her lovely face. As they turned again she saw the look change into one of admiration. As they turned again she saw the look become one of pleasure.

Apparently, the general was pleased with what he experienced at the camp because afterward more supplies started arriving and money, which enabled the lovely Ida and some others to make their way to a new life in Palestine.

Despite Pearlman's appreciation for ethnic and national diversity, the range and tone of her *Binocular Vision* stories is limited—for example, we come across no African-American individuals in them; nor does she describe any great passions conflicting with one another. But the characters she does portray, she does so wisely. And permeating the whole collection, despite the many sufferings depicted, is a quiet zest for life and an appreciation of goodness, truth, and beauty (the last two mentioned as two of his “transcendent values” by Louanne's old and wise tutor, Francis, in “Girl in Blue with Brown Bag”).

In “The Noncombatant,” the dying doctor, Richard, thinks about his wife, Catherine, and family: “How lucky he had been in her, and in their children, and in his work—and yet how willingly he would trade the pleasures of this particular life for life itself. He would hide in a cave, he would skulk in an alley, he would harness himself to a plow—anything to remain alive.” And Max's wife, Gail, in “The Little Wife,” looks forward to seeing her husband's dying friend Fox “with as much curiosity as dread. Every death foretold your own—there would be something to learn. She had been a schoolteacher; discovery was a lifetime habit.” In the story whose title is also that of this overall collection, the young girl narrator discovers, as do some of Pearlman's other characters, that life always has more secrets to reveal. In “Vallies,” a name for stories that are really “Case Histories of Ethical Dilemmas,” told by Valerie, the middle-aged nanny, she thinks of a new family who wish to hire her: “This family had no gaiety.” But Pearlman does. We see it in such lines as this one about Jay in “Relic and Type”: “He grinned—an air of mischief had always endeared him to women.” And in Sonya's thinking in “Purim Night”: “Why . . . not . . . Choose life, choose beauty”?