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Everyday Is a Story, Says Award-Winning Journalist

by Desiree Evans, MSJ03

Sometimes the best journalism comes straight from life experience.

"You've got to figure out how to integrate [journalism] into all you do," said Peggy Orenstein, feminist author, contributor to *The New York Times Magazine*, and a former editor at *Mother Jones* and *Esquire*. Orenstein spoke to an audience of Medill faculty and students gathered on Nov. 11 to hear her lecture on "Reporting on the Politics of Everyday Life." The



Author, editor and journalist Peggy Orenstein spoke in Fisk Hall on Nov. 11 as part of the Literature of Fact Series.

event, part of the Literature of Fact series, was co-sponsored by the Center for the Writing Arts, Medill, the Communications Residential College and the Alumnae Association of NU.

As a feminist, Orenstein has devoted her journalism career to exploring issues that affect women, including motherhood, sexuality, careers and family. She has authored two books: "Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, and Life in a Half-Changed World" and "Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap," in which Orenstein explores corrosive social pressures that undermine the self-esteem of adolescent girls. "Schoolgirls" won the *New York Times*' Notable Book of the Year award in 1994 and is taught in many college women's studies courses across the country.

Orenstein said that self-revelation journalism, using her private life to inspire and fuel her pieces, is sometimes her best writing. At age 16, she developed an eating disorder, which she mentions in the introduction of both her books. "I sometimes start to think

that everything I do is worth writing down... I carry a notebook, take notes, write down my thoughts, make my eyes into a camera," she said. "This is openly organic writing — it requires you to work from instinct, to know what works."



Orenstein told her audience to "integrate [journalism] into all you do."

Orenstein's presentation underscored the importance of reporting on everyday life, which she describes as "looking at the broad sweep of history and social change as reflected and propelled by regular folks."

She explained how anyone she encounters is a potential story: "I write stories in my head as I observe or have discussions with people.

I think of what their responses would be and how they fit into the gender, race and class social order."

When she begins her research, Orenstein finds ways to drop into subcultures otherwise closed off to her, where she waits for something to happen. "I'm always afraid that something won't [happen], but something always does, yet usually not what I expect." She said that finding a subject has been easier in the last few years due to what she calls the "Real Word" and Springer self-confessional culture. "People are more out there now, and expect their 15 minutes of fame," she quipped.

Her advice to young journalists is to write everything down — descriptions, thoughts, ideas and impressions. She also advises them to transcribe their notes within 24 hours of taking them.

Orenstein said journalists need to think about ethics when doing long-form immersion journalism, because they have more time to develop relationships with their subjects and to become involved in their subject's lives. "You must develop your own ethical codes and follow that when you do your pieces."

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