Margaret Mead, the noted anthropologist, sits down for an extensive interview on the occasion of the publishing of her letters. She discusses her life in Samoa and her feelings about having children.

Keywords

Transcript
Margaret Mead Reminisces
TOM BROKAW, anchor:
Sincerely yours, Margaret Mead. How would you like to have that letter in your collection, one that was written more than fifty years ago? Well, it’s possible, it turns out. Here’s Jane Pauley with Margaret
JANE PAULEY reporting:
And this is over my shoulder how she looked as a girl of twenty-three when she went alone for the first
time alone to the islands of the South Pacific to study the peoples of Samoa. That was in 1925. Then over
the next fifty-two years she observed and she published and she wrote letters home. Now these letters
have been collected in a book, Letters From the Field, 1925-1975 and the write of course is Dr. Margaret
Mead.
It must have seemed pretty scandalous, shocking I should suspect to the people in 1925 that a young girl,
twenty-three, would go abroad, live among natives, but reading your letters, your early ones, I was almost
struck how it wasn’t so much living among natives as with them, yet apart from them. You were always
pretty conscious of being a white woman, weren’t you?
Dr. MARGARET MEAD: Yeah, I was conscious of being an observer. You know, one of the ways that
made early anthropology good was that we couldn’t pretend. It was quite clear who we were because we
looked different and came from another world. And so we weren’t accused of being spies and things of
that sort, as social researchers are often today.
PAULEY: How did the--those early natives if I--is that the proper terminology?
MEAD: They were called natives then, they’re called peoples of the Pacific now.
PAULEY: Well how did those early peoples of the Pacific react to you? I know at one point in the book
there is the fascinating image of you as a younger woman, I think in your 30s at this point in New Guinea,
being carried up the mountain by the natives wrapped up in sort of a…
MEAD: A hammock.
PAULEY: …a hammock.
MEAD: I was carried just like a pig and they sang pig-carrying songs as they carried me and sometimes I
was almost upside down, sometimes right side up. And people today remember their grandfathers carried
me up that mountain.
PAULEY: Why were you carried? Why couldn’t you walk?
MEAD: I had a very bad ankle. And it was very bad, very bad roads. And you don’t want to get sick, you
know. It takes a long time to get out there, it costs a great deal of money to get there, but once you get
there the one thing you mustn’t do is to get sick.
PAULEY: Now you know, and I’ve heard the criticism of Margaret Mead and your early field work, was
that you did become too involved with those natives people. And yet, I was really taken with the fact that
you always lived in a separate house. And many times at one point the people were actually blackmailed
as it were to build a house for you and your husband.
MEAD: No, they blackmailed each other. What happened was two hut--two parts of the village wanted
this. And so finally, I said each one could build it, and we’d build in the one we liked best. But I slept in
native houses a good deal, but you can’t work in native houses, there isn’t much light. You have to sit--
sitting on the floor cross-legged typing with dogs and children running around isn’t the best place for
carbon paper, you know.
PAULEY: I spend better part of the weekend reading Letters written by Margaret Mead and I swear,
you’re still a mystery. If-- You have written so much, so prolifically about family life, about love, about children, and still do, and yet, don’t really know a lot about your own life. There were certain high marks. I know there were three marriages for instance. Do you consider those, that what, three times better than one marriage, or three failures?

MEAD: No, I don’t consider them either one. I consider they were professional marriages. All three of my husbands were anthropologists. Anthropology is hard on marriages, it uses it up faster.

PAULEY: How?

MEAD: But we got lots of things done. Well you work together in a very odd environment, you see each other 24 hours a day, sometimes the people are people that appeal to you, sometimes to your husband, and so this gets into the marriage, and you work terribly hard.

PAULEY: Did you ever consider having a non-professional marriage? A personal one?

MEAD: I’m a child of a non-professional marriage, a grandchild of a non-professional, I don’t mean of a professional. I wouldn’t really know what marriage is about if I were married to someone who couldn’t talk the same language and do the same kind of work.

PAULEY: And yet you write so much about marriage and courtship.

MEAD: Well there are all kinds.

PAULEY: Are you a student of them, or?

MEAD: Well, I’ve done a lot of work in the cultures I’ve studied. I’ve tried to find out what those marriages were like and I’ve kept up with this country over the last fifty years and what was happening here.

PAULEY: At age 38, you had your first child. How did Margaret Mead come to the decision to have a child?

MEAD: Oh I wanted children all along, but I was one of those people that in those days were told couldn’t have children, you know they used to do that to a great many women. And so I thought I couldn’t have children. Then I worked with the people called the Mundugumor that disliked children. And I decided that no matter how many miscarriages I had, I was somehow going to have a child, because having a child was a necessary attachment to life and to the future.

PAULEY: Why did you need to have a child? Did you approach it as a woman needing to fulfill her womanliness? Was it curiosity? An extension…

MEAD: No, I was a baby carriage peeker. I enjoyed children very much and I would have enjoyed at those days, I would’ve wanted six children, course I wouldn’t today, but then I would have. And, but what I felt was the way you were attached to the future is through children. Now, you can do it through other people’s children but you don’t have as close of a relationship, an understanding of the future as you are fortunate enough o have a child of your own.

PAULEY: In giving advice to today’s woman, more and more of whom are going back to work, and yet having children too, how did you raise your daughter?

MEAD: Well, I had a nurse who had a daughter and--and I’m--my mother set up as a standard: if you’re going to have people take care of your children, make it possible for them to keep their children. And so I had a nurse and a fourteen-year-old daughter and I selected an apartment to fit them and what they could
do. I always started with a baby and worked backwards. I started with the pediatrician to pick the obstetrician, you know, and I started with the nurse and the baby to pick the apartment.

PAULEY: Were you a good mother?

MEAD: Well, I enjoyed it, and I have a very happy, successful daughter, but I don’t think one can take much credit. You know you can take credit for not ruining your children, but you can’t take credit for what they do.

PAULEY: I was also surprised in reading through your letters and they’re not the “Dear Mom, it rained today” letters by any means, even as a 23-year old girl. These are scholarly letters. And they’re warm and they’re funny sometimes, but they’re pretty formal. And not one of them says, “Boy am I lonely?” Were you ever lonely or do you note what that means?

MEAD: Yes, I was sometimes very lonely. But these were letters I was writing to my whole family, to my in-laws, to my college friends, to my colleagues, you know, and so they’re intelligible, because they’re written general, literate, unprofessional audience. And you don’t burden people down when they’re 10,000 miles and at least three months away by mail, just by saying you’re miserable.

PAULEY: But you were?

MEAD: Because they get a three month list sometimes, very lonely.

PAULEY: Well, Dr. Margaret Mead was not--not too terribly lonely and thank heavens left us with a prolific body of published work and personal letters as well. Thank you.