



Marge Piercy

Three Women
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A Conversation with Marge Piercy

Q: You have written that in your own family, there were three versions of every story. Would you share a little more about that, and how, coincidentally or on purpose, that also happens in this novel?

A: I have said that my mother was a fine storyteller, and my grandmother an even better one, but that when they were telling the same story, it was extremely different. This was true whether it was a story out of tradition or a story about someone in the family or family history. If my Aunt Ruth, who was halfway between my mother and myself in age, told the story, it came out differently again. My mother's take on stories tended to be dramatic, even sensational, then moralistic at the end. My grandmother's take was more spiritual and closer to folklore, and things did not always end right side up. My Aunt Ruth loved detective stories, and she tended to turn stories into discoveries, leading from clue to clue to what she perceived to be the truth of the matter. I learned thus that each person has an individual way of looking at things, and that each of them perceives truth differently. That was education about viewpoint that would be very useful to a writer. In *Three Women*, Beverly, the mother of Suzanne and the grandmother of Elena, sees things very differently than her daughter Suzanne or her granddaughter Elena. After she suffers a stroke, for instance, Beverly sees being moved out of her old apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and into Suzanne's house in Brookline, Massachusetts, as a terrible uprooting inflicted on her. Suzanne sees herself as being self-sacrificing in moving her mother, with whom she has always had a rocky relationship, into her house and assuming the financial burden of her care. Elena is delighted to have Beverly in the house, because her grandmother has always taken her side against her mother Suzanne. Beverly keeps Elena's secrets, even when they are damaging and Suzanne believes she should have known what was going on. Thus the ongoing events of the novel are perceived and interpreted differently by each of the three women of the title. The novel is different for the reader depending on whether she or he identifies most strongly with Beverly, with Suzanne, or with Elena.

Q: Your books often deal with not just personal, but social issues. Did you tackle any social issues in this book that you haven't written about before?

A: I was dealing in *Three Women* with the sandwich generation to which Suzanne belongs. She is a professional woman who finally has an empty nest. With her teaching law at the university, consulting and speaking, dealing with appeals that interest her, beginning a romance with a new man in her life - the first such relationship in twelve years - she finds her plate satisfactorily full. But Elena at 27 moves back home when her job and her living situation implodes. Suzanne is not delighted, exactly, but she hopes that she will become closer to her older daughter as a result. Then her feisty political mother, independent and still sexually active in her early seventies, suffers a stroke and is incapacitated. Suzanne must care for her mother and worry again about her daughter close at hand. All these changes are reflected not only in her daily routine or the destruction of it, but in any physical alterations she must make to her cozy home. Another theme I was embodying in the action and characters of *Three Women* is whether there is a right to die. Do we have a duty to help those we love let go of life if they demand it of us? A third theme is an exploration of the possibility of forgiveness and healing within the family. Are we all so comfortable and accustomed to our familial roles, even when they are hostile, that we cannot move past them? Or can we learn to respect each other within and across the generations in a family? Can we learn to express affection in new and more useful ways?

Q: Was there any particular event in your own life that sparked the plot of this book? Are any of the characters based on people you know? Or, as you have spoken about happening with other writings of yours, did any of the story lines originate in a conversation overheard by you?

A: I have been concerned about stroke because it is programmed into my genes. My mother and my half-brother died of stroke. Many of my friends are in that sandwich generation who must still care for their children and suddenly find themselves also caring for their mother or father. It is most commonly women who find themselves in this care-giving role, often, like Suzanne, without being able to cut back on professional and other demands. I rarely base characters on a single person. The first time you meet a particular constellation of characteristics, you don't know what it all means. It's the third or fourth time that you meet someone of a particular type that you begin to understand what their strength or weakness is, because over time you have learned how the stories come out. That's when you begin to be able to build a character who shares those traits. Then people read the novel and the characters are convincing and real to them. They can identify with particular characters or they can feel, I knew a woman just like her. Or they can feel, what a fascinating character, and how interesting it is to enter him or her and experience the world through such different eyes and ears.

Q: Do you think a male writer can write authentically from a woman's viewpoint, or vice versa? Have you ever created a male protagonist, or would you ever?

A: I think James Joyce did a pretty good job with Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, proving a male writer can do it if he studies women and if he is really open to female experience and interested in it. I have written male viewpoint many times. One of the earliest pieces of fiction that was published had male viewpoint, "Love Me Tonight, God," printed in *The Paris Review*. It was about a cast out fundamentalist who becomes a rock star. Half the viewpoint characters in my first published novel *Going Down Fast* were male. The same was true of my second published novel, *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*. Phil is a pretty good viewpoint character in *Small Changes*. *Gone to Soldiers*, my novel about World War II, has several viewpoint characters who are men, as well as several who are women. In my recent novel about the French revolution, *City of Darkness, City of Light*, half of the six viewpoint characters are men: Robespierre, Danton and Cordorcet. When Ira Wood and I wrote the novel *Storm Tide* together, there were three shifting viewpoints. In first draft, I wrote Judith and Johnny, and Ira wrote David. In the second draft, I worked on David, and he worked on Judith and Johnny. Then we put it all back together and wrote it through several more drafts.

Q: How demanding is your art? How did you get to a point where you were able to make writing your "day job"? Can a serious writer, do you believe, be just a "weekend warrior"?

A: Both poetry and fiction are demanding indeed. When I wrote the memoir, *Sleeping with Cats*, that Morrow/Harper Collins is publishing

this January, I thought it would be much easier. After all, who knows my life better than I do? But it turned out that writing about my life was harder than writing about other people's lives; it was like eating bricks for breakfast. It was difficult to relive painful parts of my life, to revisit friends I have lost, to revisit the graves of friends, of my parents. Part of what I was writing about was the choices I made to put my writing first, finally, not an easy choice. I made it again and again in various forms. I left graduate school and what security a university career would have offered - the choice of many writers, and I understand why - because I felt I could not be the writer I wanted, the writer I needed to be if I stayed in academia: For years, I was a bottom dweller in cities, surviving on part time jobs while I tried to learn to write the kind of poetry and the kind of fiction I envisioned. I think there is a definite advantage to living out in the society at large, in different places, as opposed to a university town, in seeing how life goes on for Americans. I have friends who are writers, I have friends who are artists, I have friends who are intellectuals, but I also have friends who are in an enormous cross-section of jobs, of professions and trades and ways of life from shellfish farmer to judges, from rescue squad personnel to carpenters. Writing for a living is not an easy choice even yet. There is no security to it. My income goes up, my income plummets. Basically we have managed to eke a middle class existence out of it. I live on Cape Cod where I own my house and land and it is not an expensive place to live. I do a lot of gigs - mostly reading my poetry. I am a good reader and audiences are responsive. My husband Ira Wood and I teach workshops together in fiction and personal narrative; we also give individual workshops. Mine are often in poetry. When people call me prolific, they are often comparing me with writers who teach. When I have run out of money - for instance in writing *Gone to Soldiers*, which took twice as long to write as most of my novels - and taken a teaching job for a quarter, I have written little. It is because I have chosen to survive on what I can make from my writing that I am able to write full time. If you write full time, you can write a great deal more because you work intensely and can shut out most distractions. You can focus more fiercely on your work. You can do more research for the book you are working on or the next book down the line - I often do that. Instead of grading papers on an evening, I am doing research for my novels. There is a myth around that if a writer produces a book every ten years, that writer must be more serious about his or her craft, must work harder. But it may merely mean that the writer has another full time job or the writer prefers teaching or prefers doing something, or anything, else - philandering, skiing, watching films or soap operas, working out, hanging out, getting drunk, drinking coffee with friends, having babies, sailing - to writing. I am a writer who actually likes to write. I think it's great when I get paid for it. I would rather write than do most other things. I enjoy the company of my life partner, Ira Wood; I enjoy friends and my cats; I am a passionate gardener and politically involved; I enjoy reading poetry particularly and I listen to many kinds of music. I like to dance. I enjoy cooking, and I'm an excellent cook. I like to entertain. I like to walk in the countryside. But I have learned to put writing ahead of all these pleasures, because it is the most sustained satisfaction I know. It feels right. It feels as if it is what I was born to do. I never feel as complete as I do when I am writing; it's right up there with making love with someone I absolutely and totally love. It fulfills me.