

Sex Wars: A Novel of the Gilded Age New York

by Marge Piercy

About the Book

Post–Civil War New York City is the battleground of the American dream. In this era of free love, emerging rights of women, and brutal sexual repression, Freydeh, a spirited young Jewish immigrant, toils at different jobs to earn passage to America for her family. Learning that her younger sister is adrift somewhere in the city, she begins a determined search that carries her from tenement to brothel to prison—as her story interweaves with those of some of the epoch's most notorious figures: Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Susan B. Anthony; sexual freedom activist Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president; and Anthony Comstock, founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, whose censorship laws are still on the books.

Praise for the Book

“Unusually entertaining....Engrossing....Piercy has created fascination portraits of women determined to live on their own terms.”

— *Christian Science Monitor*

“An old-fashioned, swashbuckling, heroic Western, with pistols and ponies and señoritas and sharpshooters—an adventure of the heart and mind.”

— **Carrie Brown, *The Washington Post Book World***

“Fascinating and only too relevant....Filling a panoramic canvas, Piercy portrays the tumultuous Gilded Age, its vast extremes of wealth and poverty, social upheaval, and rampant hypocrisy.”

— *Washington Post Book World*

“Mesmerizing, sexy, and forthright....Piercy’s portrayals of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan b. Anthony are strikingly affectionate and funny.”

— *Booklist*

Courtesy of Harper Perennial

About the Author

Marge Piercy

American Writer (1936 -)

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Personal Information

Born March 31, 1936, in Detroit, MI; daughter of Robert Douglas and Bert Bedoyna Piercy; married Michel Schiff (a physicist), 1958 (divorced 1959); married Robert Shapiro (a computer scientist), 1962 (divorced 1980); married Ira Wood (a writer and publisher), June 2, 1982. Education: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, A.B., 1957; Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, M.A., 1958. Politics: Democrat. Religion: Jewish. Memberships: PEN, National Organization for Women, Authors Guild, Authors League, National Writers Union, Poetry Society of America, National Audubon Society, Massachusetts Audubon Society, New England Poetry Club. Addresses: Office: Wellfleet, MA. Agent: Lois Wallace, Wallace Literary Agency, Inc, 177 E. 70th St, New York, NY. E-mail: hagoglem@capecod.net.

Career

Writer. Indiana University, Gary, instructor, 1960-62; University of Kansas, Lawrence, poet-in-residence, 1971; Thomas Jefferson College and Grand Valley State College, Allendale, MI, distinguished visiting lecturer, 1975, 1978, and 1980; Holy Cross University, Worcester, MA, fiction writer-in-residence, 1976; Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, MA, staff member, 1976-77; women's writers conference, Cazenovia, NY, visiting faculty, 1976, 1978, 1980; University of Indiana, Bloomington writers conference, poetry and fiction workshops, 1977, 1980; State University of New York at Buffalo, Butler Chair of Letters, 1977; Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, summer write-in, 1977; Hartwick College, NY, women's writers conference, visiting faculty, 1979, 1981, 1984; Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, writer's conference, 1981; Ohio State University, Columbus, fiction writer-in-residence, 1985; University of California at San Jose, poetry and fiction, 1985; University of Cincinnati, Elliston, OH, poet-in-residence, 1986; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, DeRoy distinguished visiting professor, 1992; Center for the Book, Fort Lauderdale, FL, resident poet, 2000. Also active in political and civic organizations, including Students for a Democratic Society, 1965-69, and North American Congress on Latin America, 1966-67. Consultant, New York State Council on the Arts, 1971, Lower Cape Women's Center, 1973-76, Massachusetts Council on the Arts Poetry Board, 1974, Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Council on the Arts, 1974, Wesleyan University Press Poetry Program, 1982-92, Massachusetts Arts Lottery Council, 1988-89, and Roots of Choice, 1995--. Member of boards of directors, Transition House, 1976, *Contemporary*

Novelists, St. James Press, London, 1985--; Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, 1986-91, Israeli Center for the Creative Arts (HILAI), 1989-1995; artistic advisory board, American Poetry Center, 1988--; Governor's appointee to the Massachusetts Cultural Council, 1990-91. Member, Writers Board, 1985-86, International Board, Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, 1993--; PEN New England, 1996--; *FEMSPEC: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Journal*, 1998--; and Eastern Massachusetts Abortion Fund, 1999--; American Story Project, 2000. Advisory editor, APHRA, 1975-77; advisor, Poetry on the Buses, 1979-81, Siddur Project, P'nai Or, 1986-91, and Am-Ha-Yam, 1988-98; literary advisory poetry panel, National Endowment for the Arts, 1989; served on the panels of *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*, 1982-83, and Massachusetts Council on Arts and Humanities, literature, 1985-86; Radcliffe Bunting Institute Selection Committee, 1987. Judge, Scholastic Awards, 1981, Avery Hopwood Contest, University of Michigan, 1983, 1988, *Negative Capability*, poetry contest, 1987, 1994, Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award, Poetry Society of America, 1993, and Ann Stanford Poetry Prize, University of Southern California, 1995. Poetry editor, Tikkun, 1988- 96; editor, Leapfrog Press, 1997--; poetry editor, Lilith, 1999--.

Awards

Avery and Jule Hopwood Award, University of Michigan, for poetry and fiction, 1956, and for poetry, 1957; Borestone Mountain Poetry Award, 1968 and 1974; literary award, Massachusetts Governor Communication on the Status of Women, 1974; National Endowment for the Arts award, 1978; Faculty Association medal, Rhode Island School of Design, 1985; Carolyn Kizer Poetry Prize, 1986 and 1990; Sheaffer Eaton-PEN New England Award for Literary Excellence, 1989; Golden Rose Poetry Prize, New England Poetry Club (NEPC), 1990; May Sarton Award, NEPC, 1991; Brit ha-Darot Award, Shalom Center, 1992; Barbara Bradley Award, NEPC, 1992; Arthur C. Clarke Award for best science fiction novel in the United Kingdom, 1992; named James B. Angell and Lucinda Goodrich Downs Scholar; Orion Scott Award in Humanities; Arthur C. Clarke Award, 1993, for *Body of Glass*; Arthur C. Clark Award, 1993, for *He, She & It*; American Library Association Notable Book Award, 1997, for *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*; Litt.D., Lesley College, 1997, Bridgewater State College; Paterson Poetry Prize, 2000, for *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*.

Works:

Poetry

- *Breaking Camp*, Wesleyan University Press (Middletown, CT), 1968.
- *Hard Loving*, Wesleyan University Press (Middletown, CT), 1969.
- (With Bob Hershon, Emmet Jarrett, and Dick Lourie) *4-Telling*, Crossing Press (Freedom, CA), 1971.
- *To Be of Use*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1973.
- *Living in the Open*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1976.
- *The Twelve-spoked Wheel Flashing*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1978.

- *The Moon Is Always Female*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1980.
- *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1982.
- *Stone, Paper, Knife*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1983.
- *My Mother's Body*, edited by Nancy Nicholas, Knopf (New York, NY), 1985.
- *Available Light*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Mars and Her Children*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1992.
- *What Are Big Girls Made Of?*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Early Grrrl: The Early Poems of Marge Piercy*, Leapfrog Press (Wellfleet, MA), 1999.
- *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Colors Passing Through Us: Poems*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Crooked Inheritance: Poems*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.

Novels

- *Going Down Fast*, Trident (Roseville, MN), 1969.
- *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1970.
- *Small Changes*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1973.
- *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1976.
- *The High Cost of Living*, Harper (New York, NY), 1978.
- *Vida*, Summit (New York, NY), 1980.
- *Braided Lives*, Summit (New York, NY), 1982.
- *Fly Away Home*, Summit (New York, NY), 1984.
- *Gone to Soldiers*, Summit (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Summer People*, Summit (New York, NY), 1989.
- *He, She & It*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1991, published as *Body of Glass*, Michael Joseph (London, England), 1992.
- *The Longings of Women*, Fawcett Columbine (New York, NY), 1994.
- *City of Darkness, City of Light*, Fawcett Columbine (New York, NY), 1996.
- (With husband, Ira Wood) *Storm Tide*, Fawcett Columbine (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Three Women*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Sex Wars: A Novel of the Turbulent Post-Civil War Period*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.

Recordings

- *Marge Piercy: Poems*, Radio Free People (New York, NY), 1969.
- *Laying Down the Tower*, Black Box (New York, NY), 1973.
- *Reclaiming Ourselves*, Radio Free People (New York, NY), 1974.
- *Reading and Thoughts*, Everett/Edwards (Deland, FL), 1976.
- *At the Core*, Watershed Tapes (Washington, DC), 1976.
- *Louder, We Can't Hear You (yet!): The Political Poems of Marge Piercy*, Leapfrog Press, 2003.

Has made several sound recordings or contributed to recordings, including a reading on cassette of excerpts from *Braided Lives*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and poetry, American Audio Prose

Library (Columbia, MO), 1986; *New Letters on the Air*, interview and poetry reading, University of Missouri-Kansas City (Kansas City, MO), 1989; audiobook, *The Longings of Women*, Time Warner (New York, NY), 1994; BBC Radio Drama, broadcast of *Body of Glass*, 1995; excerpt from *Mars and Her Children* included in oratorio *Women of Valor*, by Andrea Clearfield, 1999.

Other

- *The Grand Coolie Damn*, New England Free Press (Somerville, MA), 1970.
- (With husband, Ira Wood) *The Last White Class: A Play About Neighborhood Terror* (produced in Northampton, MA, 1978), Crossing Press (Freedom, CA), 1979.
- *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt: Poets on Poetry* (essays), University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 1982.
- (Editor) *Early Ripening: American Women Poets Now*, Unwin Hyman (Cambridge, MA), 1988.
- (With Nell Blaine) *The Earth Shines Secretly: A Book of Days*, Zoland Books (Cambridge, MA), 1990.
- (With husband, Ira Wood) *So You Want to Write: How to Master the Craft of Fiction and the Personal Narrative*, Leapfrog Press (Wellfleet, MA), 2001.
- *Sleeping With Cats: A Memoir*, Morrow (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Third Child*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Pesach for the Rest of Us: Making the Passover Seder Your Own*, Schocken Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Work represented in over one hundred anthologies, including *Best Poems of 1967*, Pacific Books (Kailua, HI), 1968; *New Women*, edited by Robin Morgan, Joanne Cooke, and Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1970; *The Fact of Fiction*, edited by Cyril Gilassa, Canfield Press (San Francisco, CA), 1972; *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness*, Dial (New York, NY), 1973; *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, third edition, edited by J. Paul Hunter, Norton (New York, NY), 1986; *Half the Human Experience: The Psychology of Women*, fourth edition, Janet Shibley Hyde, Heath (Lexington, KY), 1991; *The Book of Eros: Arts and Letters from Yellow Silk*, edited by Lily Pond and Richard Russo, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 1995; *The Oy of Sex: Jewish Women Write Erotica*, edited by Marcy Sheiner, Cleis Press (San Francisco, CA), 1999; *Bearing Life: Women's Writings on Childlessness*, edited by Rochelle Ratner, Feminist Press (New York, NY), 2000, and *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies*. Contributor of poetry, fiction, essays, and reviews to periodicals, including *Paris Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Transatlantic Review*, *Mother Jones*, *New Republic*, *Ms*, *Woman's Day*, *Lilith*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Village Voice*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Interviewed in anthology *Fooling with Words: A Celebration of Poets and Their Craft*, edited by Bill Moyers, Morrow (New York, NY), 1999. Advisory editor for *APHRA*, 1975-77, and *Poetry on the Buses*, 1979-81, and poetry editor for *Tikkun*, 1988--; poetry editor for *Lilith*, 2000--.

Piercy's books have been translated into many foreign languages, including French, Danish, Dutch, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Swedish, and Turkish. Piercy's

manuscript collection and archives are housed at the University of Michigan Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library.

Media Adaptations

Gone to Soldiers has been designed for Macintosh Power Books, Voyager Co, 1992; television mini-series rights to *The Longings of Women* were attained by Granada Television, 1995.

Sidelights

Feminist poet/novelist Marge Piercy writes about the oppression of individuals she sees in society, infusing her works with political statements, autobiographical elements, and realist and utopian perspectives. "Almost alone among her American contemporaries, Marge Piercy is radical and writer simultaneously, her literary identity so indivisible that it is difficult to say where one leaves off and the other begins," wrote Elinor Langer in the *New York Times Book Review*. A prominent and sometimes controversial writer, **Piercy** first became politically active in the 1960s, when she joined the civil rights movement and became an organizer for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). After a few years, she concluded that the male power structure associated with the mainstream capitalist society was also operating in the anti-war movement and that women were being relegated to subservient work. In 1969 Piercy shifted her allegiance to the fledgling women's movement, where her sympathies have remained.

Piercy openly acknowledges that she wants her writing--particularly some of her poems--to be "useful." "What I mean by useful," she explained in the introduction to *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy*, "is simply that readers will find poems that speak to and for them, will take those poems into their lives and say them to each other and put them up on the bathroom wall and remember bits and pieces of them in stressful or quiet moments. That the poems may give voice to something in the experience of a life has been my intention. To find ourselves spoken for in art gives dignity to our pain, our anger, our lust, our losses. We can hear what we hope for and what we most fear in the small release of cadenced utterance."

Piercy's moralistic stance, more typical of nineteenth-than twentieth-century writers, has alienated some critics, producing charges that she is more committed to her politics than to her craft. The notion makes Piercy bristle. "As a known feminist I find critics often naively imagine I am putting my politics directly into the mouth of my protagonist," she told Michael Luzzi in an interview collected in *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt: Poets on Poetry*. "That I could not possibly be amused, ironic, interested in the consonances and dissonances. ... They notice what I have created and assume I have done so blindly, instead of artfully, and I ask again and again, why? I think reviewers and academics have the fond and foolish notion that they are smarter than writers. They also assume if you are political, you are simpler in your mental apparatus than they are; whereas you may well have the same background in English and American literature they

have, but add to it a better grounding in other European and Asian and South American literatures, and a reasonable degree of study of philosophy and political theory."

Fellow feminist and poet Erica Jong sympathized with Piercy's dilemma, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* that Piercy is "an immensely gifted poet and novelist whose range and versatility have made it hard for her talents to be adequately appreciated critically. "Piercy's sense of politics is deep-rooted. She grew up poor and white in a predominantly black section of Detroit. Her mother was a housewife with a tenth-grade education and her father a millwright who repaired and installed machinery. From her surroundings, Piercy learned about the inequities of the capitalist system: "You see class so clearly there," she told Celia Betsky in the *New York Times Book Review*. "The indifference of the rich, racism, the strength of different groups, the working-class pitted against itself."

Piercy wrote candidly about those early years in her 2002 memoir, *Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir*. One of the title felines is Fluffy, the author's childhood pet, and the two would spend hours curled up together on the creaking porch swing. While inquisitive and intelligent, Piercy found that school was no haven from her hardscrabble home life; she recounts "the stench of urine and the yellow dirty halls" of her elementary school, the "old books, old desks, and the contempt of the teachers for us and themselves." Her parents, taking a disinterested stand in the girl's education, made it clear that they would have preferred their daughter to be a "healthy flirtatious little girl, a sort of minor-league Shirley Temple," as Pierce wrote in *Sleeping with Cats*. Rebellious, Piercy became a shoplifter and sexual adventurer instead. But the young girl's academic success overshadowed the negative images; she went on to win a scholarship to the University of Michigan and became the first in her family to attend college.

An enthusiastic undergraduate, Piercy was encouraged in her writing by winning several Hopwood awards. Still, professional success did not come easily. Ten years elapsed before Piercy was able to give up a series of odd jobs and support herself by writing. Her first six novels were rejected, and she suspects that *Going Down Fast* found a publisher largely because of its lack of women's consciousness and its male protagonist. The narrative features a Jewish teacher, Anna Levinowitz, who sees issues of class and sexual politics while watching her childhood home being razed: "The outer wall and circle of windows were gone to dust. The pale blue walls were nude to the passerby. She felt a dart of shame." In an essay for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Sue Walker saw *Going down Fast* as a book that "confronts the questions, 'What have I done with my life? Where am I going?'" Anna's role as a sexual object for her lover is depicted in a kitchen scene, where the man pinches Anna as she prepares his meal. "Piercy finds that men often see their relations to women as taming and dominating," noted Walker.

Piercy kept writing political novels featuring female characters, often with backgrounds similar to her own. In 1973, she published *Small Changes*, a novel that *New Republic* contributing critic Diane Schuller labeled "one of the first to explore the variety of life-styles that women ... are adopting in order to give meaning to their personal and political lives." Addressing women's issues head on, this book conveys what *New York Times Book Review* contributing critic Sara Blackburn called "that particular quality of lost identity and desperation, which, once recognized as common experience, has sparked the rage and solidarity of the women's liberation

movement." In an essay she wrote for *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies*, Piercy describes the book as "an attempt to produce in fiction the equivalent of a full experience in a consciousness-raising group for many women who would never go through that experience."

To demonstrate the way female subjugation cuts across social strata, Piercy includes both a working-class woman, Beth, and a middle-class intellectual, Miriam, as main characters in *Small Changes*. In her depiction of these women, Piercy concentrates on what Catharine R. Stimpson of *Nation* called "the creation of a new sexuality and a new psychology, which will permeate and bind a broad genuine equality. So doing, [Piercy] shifts the meaning of small change." Stimpson continued: "The phrase no longer refers to something petty and cheap but to the way in which a New Woman, a New Man, will be generated: one halting step after another. The process of transformation will be as painstaking as the dismantling of electrified barbed wire."

Widely reviewed, *Small Changes* received qualified praise. No critics dismissed the novel as unimportant, and most commended Piercy's energy and intelligence, but many objected to the rhetoric of the book. "There is not a good, even tolerable man in the whole lot of characters," observed Margaret Ferrari in her *America* review. "While the women in the novel are in search of themselves, the men are mostly out to destroy themselves and anyone who crosses their paths. The three main ones in the novel are, without exception, stereotyped monsters." For this reason, Ferrari described her reaction to the novel as "ambivalent. The realistic Boston and New York locales are enjoyable. The poetry is alluring and the characters' lives are orchestrated so that shrillness is always relieved. ... In short, the novel is absorbing despite its political rhetoric." After praising Piercy's "acute" social reportage and her compelling story line, Richard Todd raised a similar objection. "What is absent in this novel is an adequate sense of the oppressor," he wrote in the *Atlantic*. "And beyond that a recognition that there are limits to a world view that is organized around sexual warfare. It's hard not to think that Piercy feels this, knows that much of the multiplicity and mystery of life is getting squeezed out of her prose, but her polemical urge wins out."

Piercy challenges the validity of such criticisms. "People tend to define 'political' or 'polemical' in terms of what is not congruent with their ideas," she told Karla Hammond in an interview collected in *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt*. "In other words, your typical white affluent male reviewer does not review a novel by Norman Mailer as if it were political the same way he would review a novel by Kate Millet. Yet both are equally political. The defense of the status quo is as political as an attack on it. A novel which makes assumptions about men and women is just as political if they're patriarchal assumptions as if they're feminist assumptions. Both have a political dimension." And a few reviewers conceded their biases. William Archer, for instance, speculated in his *Best Sellers* review that "the special dimension of this book becomes apparent only through a determined suspension of one's preconceptions and a reexamination of their validity."

If *Small Changes* delineates the oppression of women, *Woman on the Edge of Time* affords a glimpse of a better world. The story of a woman committed to a mental hospital and her periodic time travels into the future, the novel juxtaposes the flawed present against a utopian future. "My

first intent was to create an image of a good society," notes Piercy in *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies*, "one that was not sexist, racist, or imperialist: one that was cooperative, respectful of all living beings, gentle, responsible, loving, and playful. The result of a full feminist revolution." Despite a cool reception by critics, *Woman on the Edge of Time* remains one of Piercy's personal favorites. "It's the best I've done so far," she wrote in 1981.

With *Vida*, her sixth novel, Piercy returned to the real world of the sixties and seventies, cataloging the breakdown of the anti-war movement and focusing on a political fugitive who will not give up the cause. Named for its main character, Davida Asch, the novel cuts back and forth from past to present, tracing Vida's evolution from liberal to activist to a member of a radical group called the Network. Still on the run for her participation in a ten-year-old bombing, Vida must contend with a splintered group that has lost its popular appeal as well as the nagging temptation to slip back into society and resume normal life. "The main action is set in the autumn of 1979," explained Jennifer Uglow in *Times Literary Supplement*, "as Vida faces divorce from her husband (turned media liberal and family man), her mother's final illness, her sister's imprisonment and the capture of an old colleague and lover. The pain of these separations is balanced against the hope offered by a new lover, Joel." At the story's close, Joel, a draft dodger, is captured by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Vida, for whom the loss is acute, is not certain she can continue. But she does. "What swept through us and cast us forward is a force that will gather and rise again," she reflects, hunching her shoulders and disappearing into the night.

A former political organizer, Piercy writes from an insider's point of view, and critics contend that this affects the novel. "There is no perspective, there are not even any explanations," wrote Langer in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Why we are against the war, who the enemy is, what measures are justified against the state--all these are simply taken for granted." And while a state of "war" may well exist between American capitalists and American radicals, the 1960s revolutionaries are not of the same caliber as the French Resistance workers or the Yugoslav partisans, according to *Village Voice* contributing reviewer Vivian Gornick. "Vida Asch and her comrades are a parody of the Old Left when the Old Left was already a parody of itself," she stated.

Politics aside, reviewers found much that is praiseworthy in the novel. "The real strength of the book lies not in its historical analysis but in the power with which the loneliness and desolation of the central characters are portrayed," noted Uglow. Lore Dickstein called it "an extraordinarily poignant statement on what has happened to some of the middle-class children of the Sixties," in *Saturday Review*. And Langer commended *Vida* as "a fully controlled, tightly structured dramatic narrative of such artful intensity that it leads the reader on at almost every page."

In Piercy's following novel, *Braided Lives*, she "reminds us, growing up female in the 1950s hurt," wrote Brina Caplan in a review for the *Nation*. Jill Stuart, the protagonist, relates how difficult it was for women to survive this time period with esteem and independence intact. Jill describes the obstacles and events that challenged young girls coming of age in the 1950s, including attitudes toward sex, career, marriage, rape, abortion, lesbianism, verbal and physical

abuse, sexual harassment, and women in general. " *Braided Lives* affects us by contrast--by distinctions made between then and now, between those who have and have not survived and, most important, between the subtleties of individual development and the more general movement of history," stated Caplan.

In the novel, Jill finds life at home almost unbearable; her father is indifferent and her mother is manipulative. Her parents expect that she will follow traditional ways and get married after high school, have children, and be a homemaker. Jill manages to escape this prescribed female role when she receives a scholarship to college. At college she and her friends vow never to end up as their mothers. "I don't know a girl who does not say, 'I don't want to live like my mother,'" Jill asserts in *Braided Lives*. Jill and her female friends enjoy their initial independence at college; they discuss philosophy and politics and engage in sexual experimentation. But these women are ambivalent and unsure of what they really want out of life. "One moment they are declaiming the need for total honesty with men and vowing that they will never end up possessive and dependent like their mothers. The next, they will do something 'castrating' to their boyfriends, in whom they wouldn't dream of confiding their frequent pregnancy scares," pointed out *New York Times* reviewer Katha Pollitt.

"Is it our mothers, ourselves, or our men who mold us?" Jill wonders as she watches some of her friends succumb to cultural pressures and follow the path of their mothers. Many of Jill's friends fare poorly under traditional female roles. Donna, her best friend and cousin, is "haunted by a despair that she believes only marriage can alleviate," according to Caplan. She marries a man who later secretly punctures her diaphragm because he thinks she should get pregnant; when Donna does become pregnant, she gets an illegal abortion and bleeds to death. Another friend, Julie, marries and exists discontentedly in domesticity, while Theo is committed to an institution, first by her psychiatrist who raped her and, again, when she is expelled from college for sleeping with another girl. Out of her circle of friends, Jill alone survives with independence and esteem intact, despite the cultural pressures.

Piercy considers *Braided Lives* one of her best and most original works. In general, critics liked the writing too, but some note that the novel deals too excessively with the problems of women. Caplan pointed out that *Braided Lives* seems "to accommodate almost every humiliation to which women are liable." Similarly, Pollitt found that Piercy "makes Jill & Company victims of every possible social cruelty and male treachery, usually more than once." Pollitt commended, however, Piercy's representation of female characters as fighters by noting that even those who did not survive the cultural oppression fought against the attitudes of the day. Pollitt concluded that the book "is a tribute to Piercy's strengths" and "by virtue of her sheer force of conviction, plus a flair for scene writing, she writes thought-provoking, persuasive novels, fiction that is both political and aimed at a popular audience but that is never just a polemic or just a potboiler."

A strong protagonist and an engaging plot are also the components of *Fly Away Home*, Piercy's eighth novel. Thanks to these strengths, this oft-told tale of a woman's coming to awareness because of divorce becomes "something new and appealing: a romance with a vision of domestic life that only a feminist could imagine," wrote *Ms.* reviewer Ellen Sweet. Though Daria Walker, the main heroine, is a traditional wife in a conventional role, Alane Rollings deemed her "a true

heroine. Not a liberated woman in the current terms of career-aggressiveness," Rollins continued in *Chicago Tribune Books*: "she is a person of 'daily strengths' and big feelings. When we first meet her, she is a success almost in spite of herself, a Julia Child-type TV chef and food writer, but more important to her, a loving wife and mother in a lovely home." Sweet concurred, calling Daria a "Piercy masterpiece."

Not everyone agreed with this assessment. Because Daria's self-awakening is tied to her growing awareness of her husband's villainy, and because Ross, the husband, is a sexist profiteer who exemplifies the inequities of the capitalist system, some critics suggested that "politics sometimes takes precedence over characterization," as Jeanne McManus put it in the *Washington Post Book World*. "Daria's not only got to get her own life together but also take on a city full of white-collar real estate criminals who are undermining Boston's ethnic minorities. And she's not just a full-figured woman in a society of lean wolfhounds, but also a bleeding heart liberal, a '60s softy, in an age of Reaganomics. It's a pleasure when Piercy lets Daria sit back and just be herself, frustrated, angry or confused." Piercy contends, however, that she does not try to control characters like Daria; the characters write themselves. In an interview with Luzzi, Piercy asserted that her "characters do have their own momentum and I can't force them to do things they won't do. Sometimes in the first draft, they disturb the neat outlines of the previously arranged plot, but mostly I try to understand them well enough before I start to have the plot issue directly out of the characters." And in the eyes of some critics, Piercy succeeds at this task in *Fly Away Home*. As Sweet observed in *Ms.*: "The real plot is in Daria's growing awareness of herself and her social context."

Piercy's 1991 novel, *He, She & It*, again deals with women's roles and participation in society at large. Rather than dealing with contemporary time periods, however, Piercy has events take place in the twenty-first century, also weaving in a myth from the sixteenth century. In the novel, the author creates a Jewish community of the future called Tikva where the scientist Shira has come to stay with her grandmother, Malkah, after losing a custody battle for her son. Malkah has recently helped develop a cyborg named Yod to protect their community from outside warring forces. While working with Yod, Malkah is reminded of an old Yiddish myth about a rabbi who creates a man of clay, a golem, and gives it life and socialization so that it will protect a Jewish enclave from their enemy. The golem saves the city and the Jews, and then is destroyed when he becomes uncontrollable. Like the rabbi, Malkah has given life to Yod and designates Shira the task of socializing him; eventually Shira falls in love with Yod. Yod saves Tikva, assists Shira in rescuing her son, and in the end, destroys himself and the workshop he was produced in so that his prototypes can not be used as weapons against their will. Shira considers recreating a new lover from the remaining data but concludes that, for the importance of free will, all the information should be destroyed.

Piercy's innovative technique in *He, She & It* was hailed by some critics. "Her approach is so lively and imaginative, her people so energetic, her two worlds realized in such stimulating detail that the novel is never a typical sci-fi adventure or a depressing account of disasters," commented Diana O'Hehir in her review for *Belles Lettres*. The distinguishing feature of the novel, according to London *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Anne-Marie Conway, "is the way Marge Piercy combines the story of Shira and Yod with the Yiddish myth of the Golem."

He, She & It received mixed reviews overall. Admiring Piercy's creativity, O'Hehir commented: "I was amazed at the fertility of Piercy's imaginings," but then pointed out that "what is lacking is an examination of the questions about creativity, science, and destruction that Piercy appears to be raising at the beginning of her book." "Marge Piercy confronts large issues in this novel: the social consequences of creating anthropomorphic cyborgs, the dynamics of programming both humans and machines, the ethical question of our control of machines that might feel as well as think," wrote Malcome Bosse in his review for the *New York Times Book Review*. He then noted that Piercy's "ambitious new novel is not likely to enhance her reputation." Bosse finds Piercy's futuristic account beyond belief and contends the book "reads more like an extended essay on freedom of conscience than a full-rigged work of fiction." Conway found, however, that once the novel moves past the heavily detailed opening chapters, "Piercy relaxes and begins to enjoy telling her story."

In *The Longings of Women* Piercy returns to contemporary times in offering the stories of three women. Mary, at sixty-one, finds herself homeless following a divorce from her first husband and abandonment by a more recent lover. She stays alive by cleaning houses, typically sleeping at the airport or in churches. One of her clients, Leila, is the novel's second main character. A college professor, Leila is unhappily married to a philandering husband. The third protagonist, Becky, is a twenty-five-year-old woman accused of conspiring to murder her husband. Despite their different circumstances, all three women long for a place of their own--a place in which they can find privacy and from which they can seek love.

Critics once again noted Piercy's strongly feminist stance. Terming the novel "lively, densely textured" and "a feminist cautionary tale," Chicago *Tribune Books* reviewer Judith Wynn remarked that "Piercy is not an elegant writer. Interesting, swift-moving plots and careful social observation are her main strengths." Other critics found it more difficult to overlook Piercy's craft in favor of her message. *Washington Post Book World* contributor Constance Casey, for instance, called Piercy's writing "artless and humorless." And Pauli Carnes in *Los Angeles Times Book Review* focused on the author's creation of another "sorry lot" of men: "murderous; alcoholic; self-indulgent; irresponsible; immature; emotionally stunted." Still, Casey praised Piercy's "militant sympathy and her eye for concrete detail."

Piercy's 1998 *Storm Tide*, penned with her husband, Ira Wood, was described by *Library Journal* reviewer Andrea Lee Shuey as "a well-written novel, where imperfect people do foolish things with unfortunate results." The novel focuses on David Greene, a former small-town baseball hero who years later returns to Cape Cod and begins an affair with a married lawyer, Judith Silver. David, at the request of both Judith and her husband (who doesn't mind the affair), decides to run for a position as town selectman. David's opponent is supported by one of the leading men in the town, Johnny Lynch, and David begins an affair with one of Lynch's employees, Crystal Sinclair, which contributes to disaster for David. "Sex is played like a weapon in [*Storm Tide*], and David's [the] perfect target," remarked *Los Angeles Times* contributor Thomas Curwen.

A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called *Storm Tide* a "clunky, bloodless collaborative effort from two authors who have each produced better solo work," but added that "the novel does succeed on a lesser scale in its perceptive, stinging depiction of a parochial seaside resort." In

Library Journal Andrea Lynn Shuey praised the work, explaining that *Storm Tide* contains a "well-constructed plot" with "characters [who] are real."

Three Women, Piercy's 1999 novel, tells the story of independent women covering three generations in a family. The main characters are Beverly Blume, a seventy-two-year-old civil rights activist and feminist who recently suffered a stroke; Beverly's daughter, Suzanne, a forty-nine-year-old attorney and mother of two daughters who is beginning a new relationship; and Suzanne's oldest daughter, Elena, who has returned home after facing several personal troubles, including drug use. The novel, showing the growing bond that develops between the three women, is told from each of the main characters' perspectives, though focusing on Suzanne. Francine Fialkoff, in *Library Journal*, deemed *Three Women* "a somewhat disappointing effort from an old stalwart [that] may nevertheless be in demand among her fans." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer observed that "Piercy keeps the plot humming with issues of motherhood, Judaism, generational tensions, sexuality, and independence," doing so in a pacing that is "confident." The same reviewer concluded: "Piercy's insight into her characters' emotional lives is an accurate reflection of intergenerational tensions."

In *Sex Wars: A Novel of the Turbulent Post-Civil War Period*, Piercy examines the lives of the American feminist pioneers of the late nineteenth century. Its fictional protagonist, a Russian Jewish immigrant named Freydeh, comes to New York in 1868 seeking work and a way to bring the rest of her family to the United States. In the process of trying to better herself, Freydeh runs into the institutionalized misogyny and patriarchal systems that discouraged women from having meaningful and lucrative careers. "Woven into Freydeh's story of survival," explained *Library Journal* reviewer Marika Zemke, "is the real-life fight for women's rights," featuring historical characters like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In order to support herself, stated a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, "Freydeh goes into business making condoms to survive. She raises a family and becomes a real-estate owner despite a year in prison," where she was sent by crusading Christian reformer Anthony Comstock (another historical figure) for the crime of promoting birth control. "The story," declared *Herizons* reviewer Diana Gault, "is compelling with its large cast. Piercy breathes vivid life into the complex political differences among the characters and presents many different viewpoints with equal credibility."

As in her earlier works, Piercy centers her story on the conflict between the historical expectations between men and women. "Piercy's great theme," Donna Seaman stated in *Booklist*, "is always the battle between the sexes and the hardships misogyny imposes on women." "She's seen it all, yet she remains an optimist," Diane Postlethwaite wrote in the *Women's Review of Books*. "And she generously lets her historical heroines (and feminist alter egos) have it all: political and economic clout, motherhood, great sex, and wonderful female friendships." "Piercy's plots, played out in the well-lit public arena of politics," Postlethwaite concluded, "are of necessity optimistic: change may be difficult, but progress must and can be made."

In addition to her novels, Piercy has published books of poetry, each of which reflects her political sympathies and feminist point of view. "I am not a poet who writes primarily for the approval or attention of other poets," she explained in her introduction to *Circles on the Water*. "Usually the voice of the poems is mine. Rarely do I speak through a mask or persona," she once

told CA. "The experiences, however, are not always mine, and although my major impulse to autobiography has played itself out in poems rather than novels, I have never made a distinction in working up my own experience and other people's. I imagine I speak for a constituency, living and dead, and that I give utterance to energy, experience, insight, words flowing from many lives. I have always desired that my poems work for others. 'To Be of Use' is the title of one of my favorite poems and one of my best-known books."

Piercy's poetry recounts not only the injustices of sexism, but also such pleasures of daily life as making love or gardening. "There is always a danger that poems about little occurrences will become poems of little consequence, that poems which deal with current issues and topics will become mere polemic and propaganda, that poems of the everyday will become pedestrian," observed Jean Rosenbaum in *Modern Poetry Studies*. "To a very large extent, however, Marge Piercy avoids these dangers because most of her poetry contributes to and extends a coherent vision of the world as it is now and as it should be." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Margaret Atwood referred to Piercy's perception as "the double vision of the utopian: a view of human possibility--harmony between the sexes, among races and between humankind and nature--that makes the present state of affairs clearly unacceptable by comparison."

In her poems, Piercy's outrage often explodes. "You exiled the Female into blacks and women and colonies," she writes in *To Be of Use*, lashing out at the mechanistic men who rule society. "You became the armed brain and the barbed penis and the club. / You invented agribusiness, leaching the soil to dust, / and pissed mercury in the rivers and shat slag on the plains."

Some critics claim that Piercy at her angriest is Piercy at her best, but the poet does not limit herself to negativism. She also writes of sensuality, humor, playfulness, and the strength that lies buried in all women and the ways it can be tapped. In *Hard Loving*, Piercy describes the energy in women's bodies as it moves through their hands and their fingers to direct the world, while a verse from *The Moon Is Always Female* contains advice about writing.

In addition to social problems, Piercy's poetry focuses "on her own personal problems," Victor Contoski explained in *Modern Poetry Studies*, "so that tension exists not only between 'us' and 'them,' but between 'us' and 'me.'" Her poetry is both personal--that is, addressed from a particular woman to a particular man--and public, meaning that it is concerned with issues that pertain to all of society. "Doing It Differently," published in *To Be of Use*, stresses that the legal system still maintains laws that treat women as property, demonstrates that even private relationships are tinged by social institutions, and questions the equality between men and women.

Available Light and *Mars and Her Children*, Piercy's subsequent books of poetry, cover a diverse range of topics, including nature, eating fruit, kitchen remodeling, love, and death. In an interview with *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Jocelyn McClurg, Piercy explained her range and diversity by stating: "I think I'm somebody who believes there are no poetic subjects, that anything you pay attention to, if you truly pay attention, there's a poem in it. Because poetry is a kind of constant response to being alive." *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman viewed *Available*

Light overall as expressing the confused feelings of growing older but described *Mars and Her Children* as a "spectrum of moods" dealing with Piercy's love for life.

What Are Big Girls Made Of?, Piercy's 1997 poetry collection, "invokes several public and private issues that have long haunted or angered her," according to John Taylor in *Poetry*. Several issues and subjects are examined in this collection, including marriage, Piercy's deceased older half-brother, dysfunctional families, sex, animals, society and politics, and feminism. Lara Merlin in *World Literature Today* commented of *What Are Big Girls Made Of?* "The volume as a whole can be seen as Piercy's attempt to come to terms with the damage and waste she feels characterizes gender relations, and perhaps relations in general, in this country and then to begin to change them." Merlin also called the collection "a series of angry, often humorous, sometimes striking poems in an unabashedly feminist vein." Some critics appeared to find Piercy's poems of a political nature in this work not as strong as those of other subject matter. For instance, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, though commenting that "less fully felt are poems with a social conscience," praised Piercy's use of "more transcendent subject matter." The same reviewer claimed that the collection is "as accessible and as crammed with experience as a novel." Judy Clarence in *Library Journal* stated: "Most of these poems are very effective, and magical moments abound." Clarence called the work a "strong collection" that she "highly recommend[s] for all libraries."

Piercy is also the author of two 1999 poetry collections: *Early Grrrl: The Early Poems of Marge Piercy* and *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*. Of the first of these works, Ellen Kaufman in *Library Journal* commented: "This selection may not include her strongest work, but will be important to those who follow her closely." *Early Grrrl* collects various pieces of Piercy's from the mid-1970s and earlier on, including pieces from works currently out of print. *The Art of Blessing the Day* "is in many ways the best [of her poetry collections] yet," according to Judy Clarence in *Library Journal*, who further added that the work "brings together poems written to celebrate Piercy's Jewishness."

In a *Judaism* review, Steven Schneider elaborated on that theme, pointing to one entry, "The Chuppah," concerning the hand-held canopy under which Jewish marriages are performed. In Piercy's view, the chuppah is a metaphor "for all the activity that takes place between Piercy and her third husband. ... Just as the chuppah creates an open space beneath its canopy, so too does Piercy envision her marriage as an open space, where she and her partner live, eat, sleep, celebrate, and struggle together." These poems, wrote Schneider, "draw upon traditional Jewish symbols like the chuppah and the mezuzah [a portion of the Talmud, sealed to the front door of a Jewish home], and Piercy will use these as a springboard for lyrics that represent her own distinctive relationship to Judaism. She consciously makes such ritual objects her own by integrating them into her life and poetry."

In an essay for the *Guardian*, Piercy compares fiction to poetry, and finds that each genre can inspire the other. When working on a novel, for instance, she explains that if stuck in a difficult passage, "I may jump ahead to smoother ground, or I may pause and work on poems exclusively for a time. If I lack ideas for one genre, usually I have them simmering for the other." The mind "wraps itself around a poem," Piercy continues. "It is almost sensual, particularly if you work on

a computer. You can turn the poem round and about and upside down, dancing with it a kind of bolero of two snakes twisting and coiling, until the poem has found its right and proper shape." Her fiction, she adds, "comes from the same party of my psyche that cannot resist eavesdropping on strangers' conversations. I am a nosy person. I have learned to control that part of myself, but I am still a good interviewer and a good listener because I am madly curious about what people's lives are like."

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Marge Piercy – FAQ's from the author's website

When did you start writing?

I began writing both poetry and fiction when I was fifteen, right after my family moved into a house where I had a room of my own with a door that shut – in other words, when I had privacy for the first time. Some of my very early poems are included in *EARLY GRRRL*, a collection of poems from out-of-print books and some never before collected. It is published by Leapfrog Press.

What writers influenced you?

Like most young writers, I imitated a great deal in my early years. I began with those two parents of American poetry, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Everything truly American since is a descendant of theirs. I read the Romantic poets, Byron and Shelley and Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and imitated them also. My earliest contemporary passions were T.S. Eliot and Muriel Rukeyser. We are talking about high school.

What's the difference between writing fiction and writing poetry?

Poetry comes far more directly from my life. Basically I get to exorcise my autobiographical impulses in poetry. I explore other people's lives in my fiction. Often for me fiction embodies the choices I did not make, the paths I did not follow. Poems are built out of sounds and silence. Rhythm and sound values are far more important in poetry than in fiction. Images are central. Poetry to me is more organic, more passionate, more spiritual, more intense. Fiction is about time – what happens if you make one or another choice. What happens next. And then and then and then, as a result of every choice made, what happens? Fiction to me is an art of empathy and imagination. Each novel is like a small world I inhabit for a period of two or three years, and then move on to another small world. The way the I work, I learn each time about different things – areas I would never have studied for my own life.

Do you write both at the same time?

Usually I do. That is, I may or may not write both on the same day, but in the same block of time, usually I am alternating between poetry and fiction. The only time I am not likely to be writing poems is when I am finishing a late draft of a novel to deadline, when I work so many hours a day that I don't want to read when I finish, let alone write anything. My eyes are too tired and so is my brain.

About the only time I am not writing fiction is when I have sent off a novel to my agent or to the publisher. Then I write poetry very intensely and no fiction at all.

I've written a much more detailed piece about this subject for The New York Times Writer's On Writing Series that might be of further interest to you. It's called *Life of Prose and Poetry*.

Do you consider yourself a feminist? (Or, the variation: Why are you a feminist?)

Yes, I consider myself a feminist. I was involved in the second wave of feminism when it began, basically around 1966 and I remain politically active and involved. Why am I a feminist? I was born a woman. I can't imagine not identifying strongly as a woman and not wanting things to be better and safer and more fun and less dangerous for myself and other women.

How and when did you first get published?

Like a lot of writers, I was first published by publishing myself. I co-edited the college literary magazine with a friend of mine during my senior year at the University of Michigan. I had won awards by then, but I had never had a poem published. Becoming the co-editor of a magazine fixed that.

What is your advice to young writers?

You wouldn't start out in particle physics by trying to invent the field. As a would-be poet or fiction writer or playwright or writer of scripts, you must know what has been written in the past and what is being written right now. You have to read all the time and read a lot. It isn't that you are imitating what you read after you get out of college, but that you read as a writer does – noticing technique. You constantly learn the "how" of writing from other writers. The "what" is your own, but the "how" is learnable. You never get done noticing the techniques of other writers any more than a doctor can ignore advances in her field.

What is your day like?

Ira Wood and I get up early, usually – around six. We have coffee together and plan out the day and fuss up our cats. Then we exercise inside or outside, take a bath, have breakfast and go to work in separate offices. Mine is in the house. His, which is also the Leapfrog Press office, is in town in a large old building on the harbor. How long I work depends on what I am doing. I am lucky to get two to three hours of intense work done on poetry. After that, I tend to read. With first draft of a novel, four to five hours is tops. By the time I am on second draft, I can work six to seven hours a day. When I am doing third, fourth or whatever draft, I work till I can't go on – eight to twelve hours depending on my energy level, the type of revisions involved, and deadlines.

Do you ever get writer's block?

The advantage of working in more than one genre, is that if and when you get stuck in fiction, you can switch over to poetry, or vice versa. So I manage to avoid writer's block. Besides, there are so many things in the world that interest me, I have not yet run out.

What do you like to read?

I read a great deal of poetry for pleasure. I read less fiction, but some. I don't really enjoy mysteries or thrillers, generally, but I read what's called mainstream fiction and also science or speculative fiction. I read far more books than magazines, but there are some zines I read regularly, like SCIENCE NEWS, ARCHEOLOGY, NATURAL HISTORY, ON THE ISSUES, THE WOMEN'S REVIEW, LILITH, etc.

I am usually doing research on something or other and sometimes a lot of something for my novels. So much of my reading time is used up by research.

What kind of place do you live in?

We live on Cape Cod in a house on a fresh water marsh, in mixed oak and pine woods. We have vegetable gardens, fruit trees and bush fruit and grapevines, lots of flowering bushes and flowers.

It's outside a village. People here work in shellfish farming, the building trades, servicing tourists. There are a lot of artists and writers who live here year round. The summer people tend to be more affluent than the year rounders.

How many cats do you have?

We have four cats now. If you have read my memoir, SLEEPING WITH CATS, you will notice that we have only two of those cats with us now. Dinah, my elderly Korat, died some years ago. We still have Malkah, an orange tabby from a shelter, who is very large for a female and the matriarch of the tribe. Next comes Efi, who is a chocolate point Siamese, very playful and jealous of her prerogatives. She believes Malkah is her mother; Malkah believes Efi is her daughter. They are extremely close and affectionate with each other as well as with us. We have a sable Burmese, Sugar Ray, a sweet gentle lover of a cat, who became top cat when Max was killed by coyotes. Then there is the youngest, Puck, a blue Abyssinian, who has a fondness for mango, cataloupe, ice cream, and all human food. Sugar Ray accepted Puck from the first moment he saw him, when Sugar began to purr. They play together constantly. Sugar Ray tries to teach Puck manners and games. All the cats get on well with each other, although the two males are close and the two females are close. They are all strong personalities, beautiful indoor cats. Because of the coyotes who infest the Cape, they can no longer go outside, as did my other cats for thirty years.

Courtesy of <http://www.margepiercy.com/interviews/faqs.htm>

Discussion Questions

1. *Sex Wars* consists of four intertwined stories about Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Freyden Levin. Which of these stories were you most interested in, and why? All of these characters except for Freydeh were real people. What did you know about them before reading this book? Were they depicted as you would have expected?
2. How are women's friendships portrayed in this book? What about sisterhood, such as that between Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennie? How is Elizabeth Cady Stanton's relationship with Susan B. Anthony closer than that with her husband?
3. What are the marital relationships like between Victoria Woodhull and Colonel James Blood, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Henry Stanton? What role does sex play in their marriages?
4. How does Freydeh Levin create a new family for herself after the loss of her husband, parents, and younger sister? Do you think she was right to enter the kind of business that she did, or did she have no other choice?
5. How do the circumstances of his upbringing influence Anthony Comstock as an adult? Do you find him to be a sympathetic character in any way?
6. Elizabeth Cady Stanton says, "Slaves have no names but what their masters give them.... Similarly, a woman's name disappears upon marriage because she becomes property too." What other connections did feminists draw between the abolition of slavery and women's rights? What obstacles did they encounter when they tried to get abolitionists to support their cause?
7. Although most women during this time period were expected to marry, what advantages did women who never married, such as Susan B. Anthony, have over women who did marry? If you were a woman living at this time, would you choose to marry for security? What if you were impoverished?
8. Victoria Woodhull accomplished many "firsts" in her life—she and her sister were the first female brokers on Wall Street, she was the first woman to address Congress, and she was arguably the first woman to run for president. How did her views on subjects such as free love hurt her campaign? Do you think a woman running for president today would face the same kind of prejudices?
9. The closely contested presidential election of 1876 between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden is described as the following: "Weeks turned into months and still the election was in doubt. The election finally came down to Florida and disputed votes there. The States had no president. The Democrats were protesting fraud. Finally the election was thrown into the Supreme Court, where Republicans outnumbered Democrats." What other parallels did you find between political situations described in this book and more recent ones?

10. What hardships did Freyden Levin encounter as a Jewish immigrant in Post-Civil War New York? How were immigrants perceived at the time? Have these perceptions changed?
11. Freydeh Levin is thrown into jail for manufacturing condoms. Another character, Madame Restell, is arrested for giving women abortions. What were the moral and legal attitudes toward contraception and abortion in late 19th-century America? Do you think these issues are as controversial today?
12. Some of the censorship laws enacted by Anthony Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice are still on the books today. What do you think about censorship? Are you closer in your views to Anthony Comstock or to Victoria Woodhull?

Courtesy of Harper Collins