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### Lives on the Line: Review of *Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir* by Marge Piercy and *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* by Andrea Dworkin.

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# Lives on the line

by Meryl Altman

**Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir** by Marge Piercy. New York:

William Morrow, 2002, 345 pp., \$25.95 hardcover.

**Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant**

by Andrea Dworkin. New York: Basic Books,

2001, 198 pp., \$24.00 hardcover..



Juxtaposing these books illustrates two ways to work as a feminist activist writer: Andrea Dworkin the impassioned and lacerating orator, all fire and drama; Marge Piercy the thoughtful sifter, joining no faction and settling no scores, yet capable of wielding as sharp a verbal knife as anyone and directing it unerringly at the heart of the problem. Both of these feminist militant writers, now in their sixties, could have chosen the title “memoirs of a survivor”—except that Piercy does not dwell on the trials she has seen and suffered, and Dworkin writes as though her survival was still continually in doubt.

Andrea Dworkin still spells Amerika with a K—which makes more sense to me now than it would have six months ago—and in every paragraph she writes or speaks she seems to be walking on razorbldes, only an inch from annihilation, from the ground zero of the sex war, about to be silenced, about to be shot. Dworkin has always cared less for the drawing of fine intellectual distinctions (“academic horseshit”) than for arousing the reader’s empathy for the brutalized, even when this requires brutalizing the reader.

Like much of her work, *Heartbreak* passionately denounces Dworkin’s enemies, both some personal political nemeses and her class enemies—rapists, pornographers, pimps and their supporters and sympathizers inside and outside feminism. The book begins as a speech for the defense—“I have been asked, politely and not so politely, why I am

myself”—but it soon turns into a speech for the prosecution. Nearly every page reads like a peroration; story after story pits a beleaguered but indomitable Andrea against the forces of sexual violence, racism, gynophobia, feminine self-deception, anti-Semitism, beginning in the sixth grade, through Bennington, an abusive marriage, the sex trade, the sexism of the New Left, the anti-pornography crusade of the 1980s. She never quite loses; she never quite wins; she goes on writing.

No other human being appears in this book as anything but a brief Brechtian type of evil or good, and those who seek personal details and revelations will be disappointed. *Heartbreak* seems to be the answer to Jill Johnston’s old question: How would it feel to be the heroine of your own life? While unwearying self-righteous melodrama may not be to everyone’s taste, the writing is often vivid and the testimony will be valuable, particularly to those who already share Dworkin’s political positions. And when she tells us that a woman who speaks angry truths to power takes tremendous risks, she’s still absolutely right, more than ever.

Marge Piercy is no tame pussycat either. Unforgettable poems like “Barbie Doll” and “For Strong Women” still draw blood; “The Grand Coolie Damn,” her 1969 exposé of sexism, the abuse of sexual trust and general male power-tripping in the anti-war movement and the male Left, is still

definitive. Piercy was the one who said it wasn’t good enough for women to keep making the coffee and running the mimeo machines while the men were off on power trips about theory and leadership. There are no mimeo machines any more, of course, and the term “power trip” sounds as quaint as “groovy,” and yet... I expect women who could not define the term “mimeograph” to save their young lives are still emailing it to each other. *Vida* asked hard questions about what happens to the revolutionaries when the revolution doesn’t come; *Woman on the Edge of Time* blew open the casual abusiveness of the mental health professions and *The High Cost of Living* did the same for the academy.

Take these lines about her mother from “the good old days at home sweet home”:

How did you become a feminist  
interviewers always ask  
as if to say, when did this

rare virus attack your brain?  
...I think it was Tuesday  
when she ironed my father’s  
shorts.

Irony sharpens the blow rather than softening it.

But like the great realist novelist she is, Piercy always lets us see enough of the other people in her stories that we remember another point of view is possible. Near the beginning of *Sleeping with Cats*, she says wryly, “I have tried to make myself look good, but I am aware that sometimes my honesty and my attachment to what happened prevent me from presenting myself as the blameless heroine.” All memoir writers flirt with narcissism, but only some of them drown.

There are painful, often terrible stories in *Sleeping With Cats*. The prostitute high-school friend who died of a heroin overdose, the life-threatening self-induced illegal abortion, the anti-Semitism of her Detroit ghetto grade-school days that turned Piercy into a street fighter. The impatient father slamming the car door on her hand, the casual family violence of poverty, the wrench away from class and family as she crossed into a college where status was measured in cashmere sweaters. The first “what was I thinking?” marriage to a French particle physicist who disliked poetry and feared sex; the beatings and gassings at demonstrations; the faction fights of the New Left in the 1960s that destroyed the dream of a beloved community changing the world; more recently, struggles with painful and dangerous eye operations and the threat of blindness. While the memoir begins and ends with a lyrical evocation of what seems an idyllic domestic life in the present—cats, gardens, the ocean, a wonderful loving husband, more cats—it can never be taken for granted. (I thought of Jane Kenyon’s words: “It could be/ otherwise.”)

Piercy just tells us what happened in the bad years, as though they were bad enough without embellishment or framing. That’s how people like us lived, then: like one’s grandmother shrugging, “that’s how it happened, don’t stare at me like that.” History speaks for itself. With a matter-of-fact good humor, and through the layers of seemingly irrelevant detail that serve as guarantors of realism, she communicates the texture of the everyday—and, somehow, makes herself a reliable narrator, a voice we can trust.



Andrea Dworkin

Both Piercy and Dworkin face a technical problem as they turn to memoir after having mined emotional and actual autobiography in previous work. The risk is that, as with Doris Lessing, the autobiographical retelling will fall flat alongside the brilliant transformations of the earlier art. (One almost feels in Lessing’s case that this happens on purpose, since she sometimes seems to write autobiography more from a grumpy impulse to spoil the ground for future biographers than out of genuine enthusiasm for the form.) Dworkin solves this problem formally by giving us a series of quick disconnected vignettes, almost a slide show, rather than a sustained narrative. This succeeds from a dramatic point of view, but the result feels like a series of sketches around the edges of a story we are already supposed to know by heart. Readers who don’t may find it puzzling. As in Greek tragedy, much of the real action occurs offstage; if you want to know where her parents came from or what the cops actually did to her in the House of Detention, or if you just need an overall chronological grasp, you have to turn to a piece on her website which remains otherwise unpublished (why?), or to her fiction, or to the early organizing talks collected as *Our Blood*, where I feel she has used autobiographical material most powerfully.

Piercy too has written so powerfully and honestly about her life that it is hard to see how she could go back over the same ground without disappointing us. In speaking of her turbulent relation to her mother, for instance, how could she go beyond “Crescent Moon Like a Canoe”?

Don’t do it, they’ll kill  
you, you’re bad, you said, slapping  
me down  
hard but always you whispered, I  
could have!  
Only rebellion flashed like  
lightning.

I wanted to take you with me, you  
don’t  
remember.

Well, she couldn’t do better, so she reprints the whole poem here. Along with the “spine of cats” that structures this autobiography (more on them in a minute), there is a spine of poems, some familiar and wonderful, some wonderful and new. All show her trademarks: honesty, insight and verbal wit, as well as a skill at balancing line and stanza that shows itself by remaining invisible. Piercy is hardly a “poet’s poet” (as the memoir tells us, she turned down the chance to study at Iowa, and it shows), but she’s one of the best, a truly transformative figure in feminist poetry who has given voice to so many others—in case this still needs saying.

*Sleeping with Cats* is worth reading simply for the language, for the occasional one-line zingers that like her best poems stay in the mind long afterwards. Of her parents: “I grew up in the trenches of their war.” Of visits to her



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father's family: "We were always being observed to see if we would do something Jewish like crucify someone in the backyard." Of high school: "a time of pervasive, massive boredom, boredom as thick as peanut butter, as bland as vegetable shortening... My daydreams, the stories I told myself, were like knitting I carried with me and took up at any odd moment." Of the decision to agree with her second husband's desire for an open marriage: "I thought, when you get a second cat, you don't stop loving the first. Why shouldn't it be that way with people?"

Neither of these writers falls into the trap of writing a "recovery narrative." Dworkin is unreconstructed in every way and proud of it; Piercy describes herself as having changed in a general way, become more capable of putting her own writing, and herself, first. "Feminism had given me a spine," she writes of the period when her second marriage was exploding, and "I was no longer the earth mother... everyone's mama." But, to steal Robin Morgan's phrase, she "disowns none of her transformations." She fully conveys the heady excitement of New York in 1968—"like a medieval fair... intense friendships, intense sex, intense politics, intense pleasures, intense terrors." Self-righteousness and score-settling are almost entirely absent: "I hated the factionalism, but I did not hate the people." And when she turns to feminism, she does not tell tales out of school; she seems concerned to keep the peace and preserve the possibility of coalition, rather than to take personal credit. There are many things (specific and general) about the early feminist movement I still want to know, and she could have been more informative or analytical. But I do prefer this approach to the wrangling about exactly who invented which slogan exactly when that has begun to surface elsewhere.

Similarly, Piercy describes the period when she and her second husband chose to "live differently" and yet stay together as a series of politically rational, emotionally sustainable commitments, rather than some crazy youthful phase. "We believed in honesty... We believed we were making a new world in every way, on every level. Nothing could be taken for granted." She ends this section with "To Have Without Holding," the familiar poem about "love with the hands wide open," which conveys better than prose can that difficult dream of building something together, choosing to love differently but (as Rich put it) with all one's intelligence, not with the cunning of the dependent slave who needs the master but with some idea about knowledge, self-knowledge and knowledge of the other. What would a world that truly recognized the idea that most people love and want more than one person, that trying to own other human beings is not the most ethical move imaginable, be like? People trusting each other that much. Well, it was a fine dream in its way, though the world has moved on.

Finally, it is my duty as a reviewer to say that the title of the memoir is not coy or sly; Piercy does in fact give a very great deal of space to the animals that have shared her life and her various beds from girlhood ("I was an alley child, and my cats were alley cats") to her present menagerie—five at the beginning of the book, four by the end. Cats often understood and comforted and were there for her when humans

were not, and she gives each one full and individual credit. As a woman writing memoir by means of cat life she is far from unique; in fact I was intrigued to learn from the flyleaf that there is even a Library of Congress category called "women cat owners—united states—biography." (This is the number three subject heading given to Piercy's book; number four is "cats—anecdotes." I'm afraid this is not wholly unfair.)

Writing well and seriously about cats is almost as hard as writing well about sex: there's such a tradition of trite and sentimental associations to overcome; so many existing examples are cutesy, or smug, or self-righteously moralizing, or all three at once. Piercy never falls into the worst excesses of Sartre with her "fur person" and her "dear pussies." Still, whether readers who prefer dogs, or tropical fish, will be fully fascinated by the exploits and idiosyncrasies of the various Burmese, Siamese, korats and regular old lovable strays, is a question I am not well-positioned to answer.

I'll admit there are things about Piercy's life and opinions I wanted to know more than I want to know which cat sits where and why. But somehow building the narrative around the cats has helped her avoid any of the more annoying reductive master narratives that are certainly available to frame her life—from "promiscuity" to true love, from politics to domesticity, up from poverty to the American Dream. Cat stories give the book a lumpier and a different shape, less like a story of willful progress and conversion, more like actual messy life. Perhaps it makes ethical sense to treat one's cats like people, provided one does not treat the people in one's life like pets. Or perhaps cat ownership provides a useful model of independent relatedness—you're necessary to them, but they don't let you get too full of yourself about it. "The love of a cat is unconditional, but it is always subject to negotiation."

What then, to return to my starting place, can we learn about political survival from this finally tranquil portrait of a life in balance? That resistance, like sex, is a part of life, not apart, or instead of. That living in a constant state of emergency is not good for one's body or one's writing. That the ability to live alone is essential, but loneliness is not required, not morally superior. That it's not shameful or selfish to be personally happy, to eat well, enjoy sex, enjoy life. "I don't admire despair," Piercy has written elsewhere. Is this our old adversary, the retreat into the individual solution? I don't think so. Unlike Dworkin, Piercy presents her life, not as the solution to a problem ("I did it, so can you") but simply as a life. She isn't asking us to do anything, one way or the other. She's asking us to remember.

Dworkin asks far more, asks more than most people can give. Elements of a possible feminist intellectual creed in a dangerous time: I will speak truth to power, where I can... and when I have figured out what the truth is. I will not pretend things are simpler than I know they are. I will not pretend to any impressionable person that I understand better than I actually do or am any better informed than I am. It must be possible: some non-terrorized form of mindfulness and some way of breaking through fear and inertia that does not require the constant white heat of irrational rage. But to see with both the red light of anger and the white light of truth you might have to look at both simultaneously—and squint.

## Mind over matter

by Mimi Wesson

### Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self

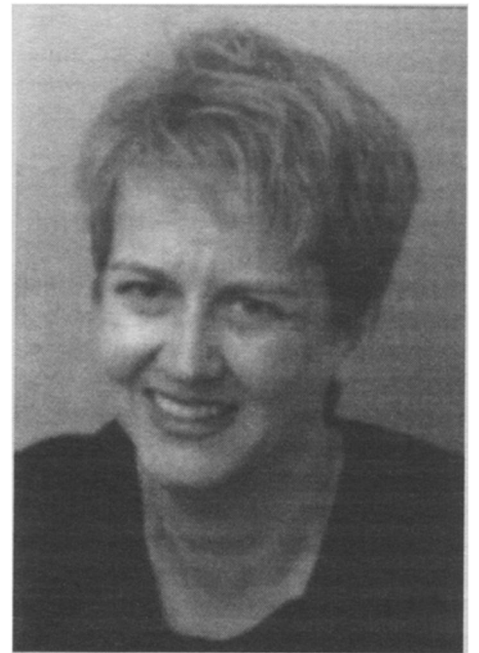
by Susan J. Brison. Princeton, NJ: Princeton

University Press, 2002, 156 pp.,

\$19.95 hardcover.



Susan Brison, trained as a philosopher and employed as an academic, reminds us that in her profession many of the comforting premises that sustain us through everyday life are not taken for granted. Many philosophers doubt the proposition that each person has or is a continuous self, a core of identity that is unchanged from birth to death. The subjective experience of this self is, they argue, merely a very powerful illusion. Or consider the philosopher's insistence on the non-navigable gap between experience and memory. It's less startling to the rest of us than the denial of personal identity because we have all experienced mistakes and forgetting, but once we understand that some philosophers deny even the possibility of a reliable memory, maintaining that even the memories in which we have the greatest confidence are inaccurate, we are troubled. We wonder how one endures a daily life inflected by such pessimism. Yet many philosophers seem to enjoy what Brison


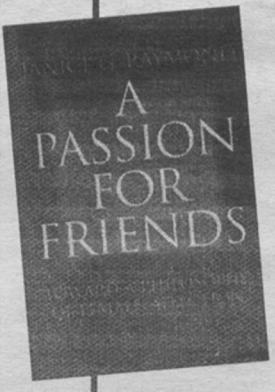
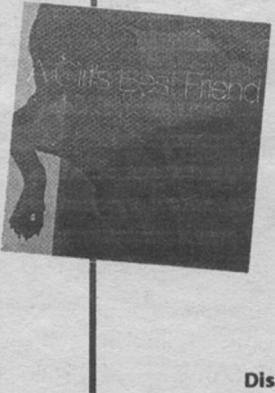


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calls an "ability to feel at home in the world," a talent for proceeding through life without the nourishment of the familiar illusions (if they are illusions)

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