

## “LIVING OFF THE GRID”

Marge Piercy interviewed by Terry Bisson

*Cape Cod? Isn't that a weird, or at least rather sandy, place for a writer to live?*

Not at all. There is a long history of writers, painters and radicals living on the Outer Cape. I don't understand what sandy has to do with it. We grow just about all our own vegetables, our own fruit, many perennials, a garden of organically grown roses, all in the soil you seem to scorn. It's a fecund place.

When I moved here, at a time when in part due to Cointelpro, the movement in NYC was destroying itself. This was a very cheap place to live. I've written about that in an essay in this volume, "Gentrification and Its Discontents." My house was built for \$25,000 by a bunch of stoned hippies. When I moved here, there were many people living off the grid. Several Communists had spent their underground years during the McCarthy era on the Outer Cape. It's still viewed as the wild and woolly boondocks by people who live in the more suburban parts of the mid-Cape and upper Cape.

The last decade or so, we've been inundated by wealthy summer people between July 4 and Labor Day, and now many

suburban types with money have retired here; but there are still remnants of how we lived then. There's still a barter economy that's important to us, and a lot of writers and artists still live and work here—fewer in Provincetown than there used to be, as it's turned way too expensive—but just as many in Wellfleet.

The Outer Cape is very liberal politically, and most residents are ecologically oriented. There's a tradition of acceptance of all kinds of lifestyles and orientations. Gays and lesbians were comfortable here for probably a century before that was true on the mainland. Black sea captains operated out of the Cape while slavery was still legal.

*You have not only consistently published poetry but gained a wide circle of readers who are not poets themselves. That puts you in rare company. What do you think of Edna St. Vincent Millay? E.E. Cummings? Gary Snyder?*

I admire Gary Snyder and his ecological commitment very much. Edna St. Vincent Millay was outspoken and feisty. I admire E.E. Cummings's musicality, less for his visual-only poems, not at all for his occasional anti-Semitism.

*What does the current state of Detroit mean to you?*

That the money and whites fled. That those who made their money out of the labor of hard workers did not give a damn what happened to them. That great music and writing and all kinds of art can still come from a place that is dear to me. That it is possible for Detroit to survive with new ideas but it will be difficult. Growing up in Detroit prepared me to be a lefty and a feminist.

I wasn't white when I grew up. Jews and Blacks were always lumped together in racist and anti-Semitic propaganda handed out by the Silver Shirts on street corners and pumped over the radio by Father Coughlin. The neighborhoods with housing bans (most of Detroit) made no distinction between us.

*Even though you are a bona-fide New York Times bestseller, you describe yourself (in your memoir *Sleeping with Cats*, I think) as a midlist writer. Is that humility or pride?*

I never made the kind of money bestsellers do, and because I am a midlist writer, I can no longer get my fiction published in New York. My poetry does well enough to still get published by Knopf. I'm too old, too left, and too feminist to be a true bestseller author or to be interesting to the young Ivy League trust fund people who are most of the New York editors today. One of the reasons we started and ran Leapfrog Press for ten years, until we could no longer afford to continue, was to publish other serious midlist writers who could no longer find editors in New York houses—of which there are fewer and fewer. Those that remain are like other corporations that produce face creams and detergents. There's little pretense they're doing more than watching the bottom line.

The demise of midlist writers is self-fulfilling. The few New York publishers left put all their effort into a few titles. The rest of the list has to do their own publicity, if they can, and hope that the occasional reviews that still exist help. Then when you come along with your next book, all they look at is how many copies the last one sold.

*Dystopias are easy. You are one of the few writers who tackle serious utopias. What are the rewards of that endeavor?*

Science fiction, speculative fiction, whatever you want to call it, is one of the ways to explore social issues in fiction. You can explore what it's going to be like if current trends continue. You can change a variable and see what that does.

Dystopias are not as easy as you seem to think. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She and It*, I tackle both types. I think *He, She and It* is more relevant today because what I describe in it is happening and happening rapidly. But the reason for writing utopias is to provide a positive image of what can be worked toward, instead of fighting for more of the same, more McDonalds, bigger McMansions, more powerful SUVs, yet more media, cheaper plastic surgery, more deadly and more automated weapon systems. Utopias offer the writer's imaginative portrait of how things might be if we make it so.

*What's a worming?*

It's a group criticism/self-criticism session familiar to anyone who has read *Fanshen* or anybody who was active in New Left groups toward the later 1960s.

*In the utopian vision of Woman on the Edge of Time, there are no cities, or at least no Big Cities. What happened to the girl who wanted to eat New York?*

I lived in NYC twice, the last time for seven years. What I saw was not delightful: the increasing ownership of the city by the ruling class, the poor and finally also the middle class being pushed out, terrifying police work (believe me, the Red Squad were no philanthropists), real estate prices from hell. Pollution. Being right next to an aging nuclear power plant—but so are

we here on the Cape, with no way to evacuate when the local Fukushima clone blows.

I lived in many cities for the first half of my life—Detroit, Chicago, Paris, Boston, San Francisco, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. My lungs were weakened by years of smoking and breathing pollution. I was gassed several times in antiwar demonstrations. By the time I moved to Cape Cod, my lungs were seriously damaged and I was sick. My lungs cleared here.

*You have a distinct poetic style combining (for me) the easy lope of Whitman with the taut line of Dickinson. Can you say something about contemporary poets who have influenced you?*

You named the poets who influenced me just when I was beginning to write poetry at fifteen. Influence is a matter of adolescence and early adulthood. I'd say the other major influences in late adolescence were Muriel Rukeyser and William Butler Yeats. Muriel was very important to me, as a writer who wrote honestly, passionately, and well about being a woman, as a writer with politics, as a writer whose work was written to be said aloud.

After going through college and learning that proper poetry had to be composed of sestinas written about works viewed in the Uffizi in Florence on a Guggenheim, I dared to go back to writing in my own voice and about my own life after hearing Ginsberg read—but I've included an essay about that in this volume. Needless to say, although I tried numerous times for Guggenheims—for instance to do research for *Gone to Soldiers* and for *He, She and It*—I have received extremely few grants or any free money in my life. I've worked since I was twelve, and what money I have I've made from working for it.

*Was your great-grandfather really a pirate?*

Great-great-grandfather. I have no idea. My mother told me that about my father's father's father's father, but my mother loved drama and was leery of the Piercys. I know little about my father's family other than that the men went to sea a lot. I saw a memorial to a Piercy captain in the cathedral in Kent.

I know far more about my mother's family and my grandfather on that side, who was a radical and was murdered by the Pinkertons for unionizing the bakery workers in Cleveland. I know about my great-grandfather who was a rabbi in a *stetl* in Lithuania and finally married my grandmother and grandfather when he was fleeing the Czar's police after an unsuccessful revolutionary attempt. I was very close to my maternal grandmother, whom I've written about in my memoir *Sleeping with Cats*. She gave me my religious education, gave me a strong sense of female-based Judaism, told me tales from the *stetl* and from her own difficult and hazardous life. Magic realism? She was a master of tales infused with that.

*You got started as a writer pretty early. Or would you call it late?*

When I was fifteen, we moved from a small asbestos shack where I slept first in my parents' bedroom and then in a room that was for storage and a passageway, to a much larger house where I had a room of my own upstairs, away from my parents although across the hall from boarders. The bathroom I could use was downstairs and my room was tiny and unheated, but I loved it and began to write seriously in an attempt to deal with contradictions in my life and assorted traumas. A girlfriend I was close to died of a heroin overdose that year, my sweet cat was poisoned by

my next-door boyfriend because our little house was sold to an African-American family—the neighborhood was predominantly Black but segregated by blocks. I had gone to school with Blacks and played with them since I was little, so it was hard for me to understand our neighbors' fury. Of course their kids went to a parochial school that was all white.

After my beloved and loving grandmother died, I revolted against Orthodoxy starting with my anger at the rabbi at her funeral. Nothing in my life or around me was the way it was supposed to be according to TV, according to school, according to the propaganda everywhere about America. I had been in a sort of proto-gang where I felt accepted—until we moved. I had been sexually active early but stopped when we moved, as the girls in this new neighborhood were "good girls." I felt like a different animal than those around me. I had already developed some left politics, called myself a socialist. I did not fit in anyplace I could see. I started writing both fiction and poetry. I wrote much better poetry than fiction for a long time. But it all started in a desperate attempt to understand myself and my life and Detroit around me.

*You went to Cuba back in the 1960s. What was that like? Do you think of yourself as a socialist today?*

I was invited by the Cuban government to spend the summer in Cuba in 1968. It was a very vital time. The blockade had not stifled the economy that much and the arts were free and percolating. I was one of the founders of the North American Congress on Latin America—NACLA—one of the only New Left groups still active today. I subscribe to their newsletter, one of the best sources of information on what's really going on south of the

border. I had friendly relations with the Cuban delegation to the UN. That was why I was invited.

I spent the first month trying to explain the New Left to party people and seeing all the official sights. Then I was turned loose. I traveled around Cuba freely, met amazing dancers, painters, filmmakers, poets, all kinds of men and women who'd fought in the revolution, and peasants in the countryside. I argued with party members about sex roles and freedom for sexual orientations, but loved a lot of what I saw and experienced. Cuba is very beautiful and there are lots of pristine wild places still, amazing bird, reptile, crustacean, mammal life. I like Cuban food.

In New York, life was edgy. I received death threats with some regularity from right-wing groups. I'd been beaten in demonstrations. I had been under surveillance in New York—mail cover, at one point a live tap on my apartment, and strange guys in the basement of the apartment house. The men who worked in that building were from the Dominican Republic; they resented the American invasion there and were sympathetic to me and my politics. Plus, I spoke Spanish fluently then and used it every day with them and in the neighborhood. They always warned me about surveillance. If I ever doubted, Ira found proof years later, after I had moved to Cape Cod.\*

I had a huge old-fashioned desk I used till I got my first PC in 1982. The desk was not a good place to work on a computer, so Woody built a new desk for me. The old desk had to be broken up to be burned. As Woody was prying it apart, he found an electronic bug on the bottom of one of the drawers. A tiny mike and wires leading away.

Yes, I'm a socialist-anarchist-feminist.

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\* Her partner Ira Wood, a.k.a. Woody.



*Is Vida based on anyone real?*

I knew a lot of the people in the Weather Underground and kept in touch with them. Three of them are still close friends. The character Vida was not based on any particular individual or individuals. I don't work that way. I did not agree with about half of their politics at that time, but I am loyal to friends. And I was proud of how so many of them ran rings around the FBI. *Vida's* still one of the most accurate portrayals of life underground, what led to it, and how the people survived.

*You teach a lot, and you and Ira Wood have written a how-to book on writing. Yet in a poem you say that all one can learn is someone else's mannerisms. So which is it?*

I don't actually teach a lot. I give a lot of readings, some speeches and three or four workshops a year. I've taught in college on three occasions, two of them for just a quarter or a semester. I did my best, but I was out of my element in academia.

Woody and I both teach craft workshops. You can teach craft. Beyond that, it's pretty much bullshit. If you take four writing workshops, you'll hear four opinions, four definitions of excellent, four sets of instructions and recommendations for writing. The worst workshops are given by people who only write books about how to write but pretty much can't do it themselves. The best way, we always say, to learn to write memoirs is to read memoirs and learn from those that don't work for you as well as from those who do. Look at how they did things. Separate out the craft elements. If you want to write detective stories, read them. If you want to write historical novels, read them.

*You seem to share Rexroth's old-fashioned idea that the poet has a public and political, as well a personal artistic, responsibility. How would you describe that responsibility today?*

The idea that poetry should be devoid of politics is a modern heresy designed to diminish any slight power we might have, to render us irrelevant. It is a notion that poets before about 1940 would have found really weird. Shakespeare's plays are rife with politics; same with Milton, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and that's only a few British poets. All the Irish poets had political ideas. Go back to the Romans. Find one without politics!

Poets and novelists and memoirists and essayists are all citizens like your plumber or neighborhood cop or clergy. If you don't take an interest, politics may come down on your head, may take away your livelihood, pollute your air, give you cancer from the food you eat, teach your children garbage and false history, make you pay for wars you don't believe in and actually hate.

*Do you have a different strategy for writing poetry and fiction? A different schedule? A different desk in front of a different window?*

Ideas for novels can't be mistaken for ideas for poems and vice versa. I do both usually all the time but seldom on the same day. I can write prose for a lot longer duration than I can poetry, which is much more intense and concentrated.

*You once compared talent to phlogiston. Was that a compliment?*

Phlogiston is the substance that the scientists and philosophers of an earlier time used to explain fire. So it stands for any invented

thingie that people label the cause of a phenomenon they don't understand.

*I read Dance the Eagle to Sleep when there actually were rebels fighting underground in the USA. If you were writing it today would the protagonists still be teens?*

No, they'd probably be sixty-five-year-old women.

*Like me, you were drawn to SDS even though a bit too old. Out of school. Was that a problem?*

I joined SDS after searching around to find a group opposing the war in Vietnam that I could agree with. I was a premature antiwar activist, from about 1962 on, before we had officially entered the war. I had a friend who spent time in Vietnam and wrote letters about what was really going on. I had trouble finding anybody else who cared for some time.

I went to one of the big rallies in Washington in 1965 and joined SDS then. I organized off campus in Brooklyn from 1965 on. I worked for *Viet Report* and tried various ways of relating. Then we started NACLA and I was fully involved there. I did power structure analysis and created and ran a database on power structure, the CIA, interlocking directorates among the ruling class, etc. I was recruited into the regional office of SDS because I was one of the few people around who had any experience organizing off campus. I had done some in civil rights and local politics. I was a precinct captain in Chicago during the Kennedy election.

Nobody thought I was much older. I've always looked younger than I am, still do. I was in an open relationship and

had many relationships in the Movement. Bob Gottlieb and I started Movement for the Democratic Society to do off-campus organizing after Progressive Labor launched a coup and took over the regional office of SDS. We had teachers, social workers, city planner groups, affinity groups like the Motherfuckers (primarily a motorcycle gang), street theater, buying co-op, child care, etc.

*What kind of car do you drive? (I ask this of everyone.)*

When I drive at all, it's an old stick shift Volvo. Mostly Woody does the driving, in a truck with four-wheel drive, a Toyota. Most year-rounders here on the Cape drive trucks.

*Do you read poetry for fun? Who?*

Martín Espada, Dorianne Laux, Joy Harjo, Laura Kasischke, Wisława Szymborska, Tony Hoagland, Philip Levine, Adrienne Rich, Rita Dove, Lucille Clifton, Yehuda Amichai, Paul Celan, Kevin Young, Leslea Newman, Nelly Sachs, Maxine Kumin, Audre Lorde.

*One might say all novels are historical. But City of Darkness, City of Light and Gone to Soldiers definitely are. Can you say something about how research informs your work? What about other novelists (thinking in particular of James Jones and Hilary Mantel)?*

Generally I've done a lot of research on the period before I begin work. I work on characters then for some time before I write. After first draft, I know what I need to research and generally do a lot of it all the way through to final draft. The research for

*Gone to Soldiers* was seven times longer than the novel. For *Sex Wars* (my most recent novel), my research came to 1,900 pages.

What interests me in history is how those periods influenced the present. In *Sex Wars*, one of the alarming aspects is that in the period after the Civil War they were dealing with the same problems and issues we are dealing with today: the rights of women and minorities, immigration, abortion, contraception, income inequality, prison reform, election manipulation.

Bernard Cornwell does excellent research for his novels.

*If you had to abandon fiction or poetry, which would it be?*

No contest: poetry would win. You can write poetry in a jail cell. If you have no paper, you can memorize your poems. You can say a poem in front of a firing squad. Poetry is highly portable. Novels are not. These days I'm inclining more toward short stories than novels. As I get older, I like shorter forms better than longer ones.

But poetry will always win out. I also make more money these days from my poetry—readings and advances—than from fiction or other prose.