



Little Nothing

Marisa Silver

Fernanda Eberstadt interviews Marisa Silver

Fernanda Eberstadt: Your last novel, *Mary Coin*, was set in the past, but it was a very specific geographical, historical moment—1920s Dustbowl America—and inspired by Dorothea Lange’s documentary photograph of a migrant worker. For *Little Nothing*, you also reach back into the past, but a kind of magically non-specific Central Europe at-the-turn-of-the-century. A world that’s on the brink of modernity—indoor plumbing, psychoanalysis, world war—but also still a world of gypsy curses, circus sideshows, and rural poverty. It’s about as far from your own 21st century Los Angeles experience as a person can reach.

Marisa Silver: It’s true, and this is a very different book for me. All my stories and novels, up to now, have been firmly rooted in realism, either social or historical. After I finished *Mary Coin*, I had a strong impulse to create something totally imaginative, something unhinged from the here and now, both in terms of history but also in terms of the kind of storytelling we have come to expect from modern realistic fiction. I suppose part of this was an instinct to push myself outside of some familiar writing territory. I wanted to explore the condition of being through the lens of the uncanny, the way a fable does, by positing patently impossible events and allowing the reader to discover in the surreal something resonant about how we live.

FE: What happens when a writer is freed from her own here-and-now?

MS: First: fear! When I reached the first transition point for Pavla, a moment where her physical form makes a radical change, I was terrified. Could I make this big, illogical move and have readers stay with me and with her? Would readers fall out of the narrative in disbelief? We discover our books as we write them, and what I learned was that if the internal, albeit peculiar logic of my novel was consistent, and if the surreal events were undergirded by a sense of emotional inevitability, than the reader might follow me. Once I was inside my novel, I stopped thinking about it as something surreal or magical. It was a real story for me about very real people and so I approached it as I would any story, by making sure the characters were palpable, that Pavla’s transformations, if not entirely causal, were motivated by some deeper existential truth of her life.

FE: What were the pros and cons of setting this novel in a time and country of your own imagining, as opposed to the Great Depression?

MS: The pros were that I didn’t have to worry about, say, where oranges were grown in the year 1922 in central California as I did when writing *Mary Coin*. But at the same time, this was a con, because a spe-

cific time in history, such as the Great Depression, offers an historic anchor and an overall structure for a novel. Time, that essential element of fiction, is already mapped out for you. But there is such a sense of play and possibility when the imagination is let loose, when anything can happen, even things that are scientifically impossible. I had to write from an intuitive, almost subconscious place, somewhere beyond or behind my analytical mind, so that the story would, like fables and myths, reach the reader in a place she might not be able to articulate but that she would feel, that would feel essential. So I guess the answer to the question is that what was difficult and what was liberating about writing in this form went hand in hand.

FE: What were the origins of the book, the seed from which *Little Nothing* grew?

MS: I ran across an obituary for one of the last munchkins from *The Wizard of Oz*, and read that, as a young boy in what was then called Bohemia, his parents had, unsuccessfully, tried to have him stretched. I was astonished, horrified, and mesmerized by the idea that a child would be put through this kind of torture simply for occupying the body he was born into. I was captivated by the idea of transformation and the malleability of identity, and so I began to write about Pavla, a girl born a dwarf whose parents have her stretched. In my telling, the stretching works, but it opens the door to a series of transformations Pavla goes through as she moves in and out of human form, as she is enslaved, then hunted, then incarcerated, then finally, in a most unexpected way, freed.

FE: Some of the most powerful novelists today—A.S. Byatt, Hilary Mantel, Toni Morrison—have used fairytale or fable for their fiction. *Little Nothing* opens with a scattering of fairytales—the stories mothers tell their daughters, whether about handsome princes or cautionary tales about the horrors of sex, pregnancy, childbirth—and it proceeds through a succession of myths and fables. It's a story of magical transformations: Thumbelina becomes a werewolf-woman who becomes a full-blood wolf who becomes a kind of prisoner-saint escaping her prison. Yet what's so appealing about the novel is its combination of mythic universality with a raw raunchy earthiness and a force of terror, grief, and courage. What to you is the power of myth and fable?

MS: The way in which myth and fable reach us at a very primal place, and their psycho-sexual implications are, of course, well documented. But what I was really drawn to while working on the novel is their unapologetic tone. Fables and fairytales tell of the most magical and horrifying events with a frankness that eschews psychological realism and back-story, all that post-Freudian modern fiction, in large part, demands as a way to explain behavior. And yet, the very frankness of the telling of these fables allows a reader to open herself up to believing in them, logic be damned. *Little Nothing* is about many things, one of which is stories. Why do we tell them? Why do they offer solace? We pass them down from generation to generation as if they were valued heirlooms. What is their particular currency? I am fascinated by the way stories make time into a circle by being told and retold. By the end of the novel, Pavla becomes, in a way, a story that is told by the two people in the novel who have loved her all along.

You mention the raunchiness of the language in the novel. The story of Pavla is a story of the body, of the female body in particular. It is the story of how the female body is reviled and hunted and often harmed simply because it takes the form it takes. It seemed right that the language of a novel about the body should be sensual, physical, and robust. I wanted the language to be assertive, to refuse decorousness, because what happens to Pavla's body is not decorous in any way.

FE: *Little Nothing* seems to be deeply skeptical about authority—whether doctors, armies, hospitals, prisons. Even loving parents unintentionally betray their children. Yet you show the strange power of your heroine—an outcast, a “freak”—to win people's love, admiration, wonder through her cleverness and resolve. Do you believe in the power of individual bravery to conquer human evil, stupidity, indifference? What is the novel's message, and where is its central core? What would you like readers to take away from it?

MS: Most people's lives are determined by power they have no relationship to and cannot effect. This is certainly the case with Pavla and Danilo in the novel. Each time one of them becomes tangled up with a structure of power, their identity suffers. It's only when they manage to break free of these institutions that they have a hope of determining their fates.

When I write, I don't think about meaning. I don't

imagine what the larger themes of the piece might be. I don't want to shape a narrative to fit some pre-determined idea. This precludes what is so necessary in creating fiction, namely allowing the novel become itself. My job is to write a compelling and complex story that mirrors the richness and messiness of life. Meaning is in the hands of the reader.

FE: Is it a love story?

MS: I'm not sure it's a love story in the classic sense, but it is definitely a story about love. Danilo loves Pavla. No matter what forms she takes, no matter how outlandish his love seems to the outside world, he loves her. And through his determination to find her against all odds and all logic, I think he figures out that love exists beyond the realm of the physical, that it is a driver, a motivator, a way of finding out who you are and what you care about.

FE: The book is so raw and searing in its emotional honesty and force. How did it feel going to that dark place—did you have to make yourself experience those same extremes of suffering and humiliation and endurance that your heroine and her loved ones undergo?

MS: Well, writing is a bit sadistic, in a way, isn't it? We create characters and we put them through their emotional paces. We have to be close enough to them to know how they move and feel and think, and to know how they will behave under the pressure of what we throw at them. But then we get to leave them in whatever peril we've created and step away and think about things like tone and structure and language and rhythm. So I think the writer part of me, the one who is concerned with craft, protects herself from being completely sucked under by the turmoil I put my characters through. I get to step away and, you know, make a cup of tea and consult my thesaurus.



Marisa Silver is the author of the novel *Mary Coin*, a *New York Times* bestseller, and of *The God of War* (a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist), *No Direction Home* and two story collections. Her first short story appeared in *The New Yorker* when she was featured in the magazine's first Debut Fiction issue. She lives in Los Angeles.

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