

Donna M. Gershten

Kissing the Virgin's Mouth
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Interview with Donna Gershten

Q: You've written a very powerful story about strong women, focusing in particular on Magda: Were there any strong women figures in your life that helped shape Magda's character?

A: I meet strong women everywhere - in my neighborhood, the grocery store, on the street corner. There is no shortage. Magda was not created from any one personality I encountered in life. Her clear voice was born of many voices I have heard all over the world, and her story was inspired in part by stories of so-called saints and whores. There are a couple of memories from Mexico and a few historical or biblical obsessions that were the initial fuel for Magda's creation. In telling me about her childhood, a Mexican friend once said, "My father walked the malecón with his girlfriends every Sunday instead of his family and my mother, llore, llore, llore, crying at her table. I told myself that no man would make me cry at my table, that no man would use me, though occasionally, I have had to use the man." My friend's honesty and straightforwardness knocked my politically correct socks off. It delighted me. On a cold morning in Puebla, Mexico in a breakfast restaurant on the zócolo, I watched a waiter pick up the coin that was his tip. Standing beside the table, he closed his eyes, held the coin in his fist, slowly crossed himself with that fist and then kissed it before putting the coin in his pocket and cleaning the dishes from the table. No one paid him any mind. The bustle of the other patrons and waiters continued around him. I found it to be remarkable, unapologetic, daily grace. Also important to Magda's creation are the stories of Doña Marina La Malinche, Cortés' mistress and mother to the first mestizo; of Magdalene, the prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet; and of the dark Virgin Guadalupe. Their stories fire me to ponder women's circumstances, the development of their strategies for survival, and how it is that women come to be blamed, hated, forgiven or adored. I had not begun to write fiction when I lived in Mexico. Ten years after returning to the US, a clear voice of a woman began to speak in my head. It was a voice I'd never known before, a new voice that possessed unrelenting gratitude, and the strength and slap-my-face directness of many plain-speaking women I have known. Voices, old stories, and the memories of a waiter were springboards to my imagination. Magda took hold, became, and bossed me around for years.

Q: Even though you lived in Mexico for a number of years, you were still an American living abroad. Yet, the novel is written as if you were a native of the country, from the vivid way you describe the characters, their culture, their music, and their rich language. How were you able to capture so much about the people of Mexico in your novel after only living there for a few years?

A: Carlos Fuentes said that Latin America starts at the Mason Dixon line. I moved to Mexico in 1982, and the place was at once familiar and foreign to this North Carolina girl. Mexico contains much that I recognize from the South - grace, a love of conversation, etiquette, religious faith, a special sense of time - and yet is juicier, noisier and more openly passionate. I fell in love with a country and its cultures, and I can only speculate that love made me attentive. I inhaled Mexico - its food, language, smells, sounds - right into my cells. But it is not just manners and religion that are familiar. The South and Mexico share something more important to my writing. In both places, amazing grace and personal morality coexist with extreme poverty and violence. It is this irreconcilable juxtaposition of the genteel and the base, of the sacred and the squalid, that are too familiar and that stir me to write. How did I write about a Mexican woman though I am American? How did I write about a mother and daughter from the mother's point of view though I have no children? The best of life and writing cannot be explained logically. There is some magic in the heart that gives us the capacity to expand our limited experiences so that we can embrace a reality that is more than the sum total of our small selves. It is the blessing and grace of empathy.

Q: You've also written a number of short stories previous to this, your first novel. Were your short stories vehicles to help you hone the characters in your novel, or is *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth* an entirely new story?

A: I hope that all writing hones future writing. I would hate to think that my craft is not improving with each piece completed. But if you're asking if the setting and characters appeared in short stories completed before writing *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth*, the answer is no. My previous short stories were of a completely different ilk. I did, however, attempt to write Magda's story as a short story. It failed. Miserably. I put Magda aside and began other short stories, one about a woman whose braid is caught in a Ferris wheel engine, another about a woman who is almost blind until the age of eighteen. It became clear that I was writing about Magda's history and family. I reluctantly conceded that *Kissing* would be a novella, perhaps a long novella: Working and writing and writing, I tricked myself, and *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth* became a novel.

Q: What scene in the book did you most enjoy writing?

A: I cannot give only one. Scenes are perversely satisfying in different ways, but discovery is what I most enjoy. I loved writing the braid caught in the Ferris wheel because it came so fluidly and because I wept throughout the writing, and because the image and metaphor of a woman caught in the machine helped to illuminate the rest of the novel. I enjoyed writing the scenes in which Gordo Chuy and Magda mouth the dialogue along with movie stars because Gordo, the weak and strange romantic, appeared as a complete surprise while writing. I also enjoyed the scenes in which Magda's first mother-in-law, the Widow Aguilar, "trains" Magda in upper class etiquette and sexuality. I discovered so much about each character while writing their conflict. Two equally strong women from distinct classes encounter parallel dilemmas with parallel strategies.

Q: Both Mami and Magda suffer from vision problems. What does the vision impairment of both mother and daughter symbolize?

A: I can only answer that with hindsight. No pun intended. Any "symbols" in my work are usually the workings of my subconscious. I wondered what it would be like to suddenly have vision corrected after a lifetime of near blindness, and what life with impaired vision would be. From noodling those obsessions, Magda's mother was born. Later Magda began to lose her vision, and I first thought it a way to tie the struggles of two generations. It was not until far along in the writing that I realized that Magda's sight corresponded to her intention. When she sets her sights on a desire or goal, her vision is straight and narrowly focused. Magda's direct focus is effective in the accomplishment of her goals, but essentially blinds her to all that exists in the periphery. Though her clear and sharp intention or vision works well for gain in the material world, it proves to be limiting in relationships. Magda's narrow strategies fail her, and her world is

expanded and softened as her vision softens. Oddly, my own middle-age vision weakened as I wrote about blindness. I wonder sometimes if it is not intended and appropriate that our vision blurs with age. It's as if the clear sharp edges of youth are blurred to allow the perception of a softer ambiguity.

Q: What message do you hope readers will come away with after reading *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth*?

A: I wrote the book. It's up to the reader to interpret it. Magda has much to offer. A reader might come away with a sense of fierce, daily gratitude, or be inspired by Magda's personal faith, honesty and resiliency, but each reader brings to and takes from a book what she will. In writing, my hope is to expand and deepen a reader's experience. I want to inspire in readers what Robert Coles calls moral imagination - the ability to conceive how meaning and consequences develop in a life. My hope for my work is always simple and the same: that I can make it possible to delve into and understand the whole heart of "another," an experience rarely afforded in real life.