



## Sex Wars

By Marge Piercy  
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### Introduction

The acclaimed novelist and poet Marge Piercy delivers an astonishing historical novel that tells the tale of one woman's efforts to make a better life for herself, set against the vivid backdrop of nineteenth-century suffragette struggle. Post-Civil War New York City was the battleground of the American dream: an era of vast fortunes and crushing poverty; a time notorious for free love and the emerging rights of women, yet one that saw the rise of brutal sexual repression and the enforcement of prejudice. Though life is hard, the promise of change is in the air. Women are agitating for civil rights including the vote. Immigrants are pouring into the city, bringing with them a new energy. Embodying both is Freydeh, a spirited young Jewish woman from Russia. Living in a tiny tenement flat with eight others, Freydeh juggles numerous jobs to earn passage for her beloved family until she learns that her younger sister is adrift somewhere in the city. Her search carries her through brothels and prison.

Interwoven with Freydeh's story is a vividly wrought account of such real-life heroines—often at odds with the law as well as customs and the powerful—as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for President and an activist for sexual freedom. They were tireless fighters who strove to elevate the position of all women. Depicted as well is the fundamentalist crusader, Anthony Comstock, who fought to eliminate sexual expression, pushing laws that still haunt our legal system. In the tradition of her WWII epic *Gone To Soldiers*, Marge Piercy recreates a turbulent period in American history witnessed through the lives of its most notorious figures and explores the changing attitudes toward women, minorities, religion, and sexuality in 19-century America, a land of sacrifice, suffering, promise, and reward.

### Questions for Discussion

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?

### **About the Author**

Marge Piercy is the author of fifteen novels, including *Gone to Soldiers*, *The Longings of Women*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, as well as fifteen books of poetry, including *The Art of Blessing the Day*, *The Moon is Always Female*, and *Circle on the Water*. She lives on Cape Cod with her husband, Ira Wood, the novelist and publisher to Leapfrog Press.