



Three Women

By Marge Piercy
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Introduction

"I write character-centered fiction, which means it is almost never high concept, and my plots are neither tight nor ingenious... Most of what happens simply proceeds from the interaction of the characters with one another and their environment, their history, their circumstances." -Marge Piercy, "Life of Prose and Poetry: An Inspiring Combination," *The New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1999.

A teenager's secret *menage a trois*, a desperate suicide, a police shooting, a forbidden affair, and a mercy killing are just some of the events experienced by three women, all mothers and daughters, in Marge Piercy's immensely moving novel. Like all of us, these three women fashion their worlds from their habits and hopes only to encounter the unpredictable tragedies that shake or shatter us, leaving us fractured and changed -- but perhaps emerging from the pain, as Hemingway wrote, "stronger in the broken places." Told from each character's point of view in alternating chapters, *Three Women*

lets us watch, like a peeping Tom through a window, the most intimate and emotional moments of three lives.

Suzanne Blume, the first woman to teach Constitutional Law at a Boston university, is, at five foot three, "too small for her role in the world." Divorced, heading for menopause, and embracing life with gusto, she litigates explosive legal cases, has met an interesting man over the Internet, and is about to have her meticulously organized days thrown into chaos when both her difficult-to-please mother and troubled oldest daughter suddenly move into her home.

Beverly, Suzanne's mother, has always been a firecracker. A political organizer for half a century, she has dared to take lovers, have a child on her own, and fight for justice in the factories and streets. An independent, feisty, opinionated woman, her *raison d'être*, or reason for existing, is to help others in need. A stroke is about to profoundly alter that. **Elena**, a ravishing dark-haired beauty now in her late twenties, is the "problem child" of the family. While her sister Rachel, clearly her mother's favorite, is studying to be a rabbi and planning her wedding, Elena has bounced from job to job. Haunted by a tragedy from her teenage years, she distances herself from her emotions, prefers sex to love, and now, fired again and adrift, she has come back home. With immense empathy and insight into women's feelings, Marge Piercy shows us what happens when these mothers and daughters are confronted by the conflicting forces of resentment and love. They face, in Suzanne's neat middle class home outside of Boston, a coming together that becomes a final chance to learn what they never have before -- how to appreciate each other's gifts and tolerate faults; how to balance one's own needs with the demands of family; and how to make the choices that are never easy, but that give us our dignity, release our passions, and allow us to be our authentic selves. **Discussion Questions**

1. The three women who hold center stage in this novel are all mothers and daughters. Do you think their inability to get along stems from being too different, as Elena insists, or being too much alike?
2. Would you call Beverly a good mother? Is Suzanne? Is it possible for a woman to be a "working mother" and a good mother? How can we evaluate how well a child turns out? By accomplishments? Values? Personality? Happiness?
3. Suzanne is an example of a woman in "the sandwich generation," caught between caring for an aging parent and her child. What are its effects on her? What alternatives does she have?
4. The incident we slowly uncover in Elena's past has had a tremendous impact on her mental and emotional states. How do you think a person can overcome a trauma of that magnitude? Do you think Elena has by the end of the novel? If so, what has changed for her?
5. Who are the men in this novel? Are any of them admirable? None of the women in the novel has a stable relationship with a man. Why not? Do you think any of them can?
6. Who is responsible or culpable in the love affair between Elena and Marta's husband Jim. Elena insists she "came on to him." How do you view the situation? How can vulnerable young women be made wiser without learning in the "school of hard knocks"?
7. Perhaps the toughest question in the novel is how to care for Beverly. It is one most women face as their parents age. The book is especially effective in revealing Beverly's perspective, even when she can't communicate it to others. Knowing that, was there another way to handle her care? Could there have been a different end for her?
8. Piercy doesn't flinch when she throws the reader into the midst of the emotional inferno sparked by Beverly's plea to help her die. How is the request consistent with her character? Is it ultimately a selfish thing to ask...or the right thing? Did Suzanne and Elena make the best choices?
9. There are a number of guns -- and guns going off -- in this book. Not stated explicitly, but there nonetheless, is the controversy over gun ownership. Suzanne and Marta both believe they need to own a gun because of their work, yet both use the gun, not for protection, but as an outlet for their emotions. Discuss how they do this, and discuss whether owning a gun, when all is balanced out, is a necessity or a tragedy waiting to happen.
10. Change is not the same as growth. All the characters in this book change, but which of them grows? Who is "stronger in the broken places" by the end of the book?

About the Author: Marge Piercy is one of America's finest poets and novelists. Making her living entirely from her writing, conducting writing workshops, and giving poetry readings, she has created a impressive body of literary work. Her novels include *City of Darkness*, *City of Light*, *The Longings of Women*; *He, She, and It*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *Gone to Soldiers*. Among her best known collections of poetry are *Early Grrrl* and *The Art of Blessing the Day*. An activist and feminist, she lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts with the author and publisher Ira Wood, and four cats.