

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Tracing three generations of women through the 1870s to the late 1960s, *Stranger Here Below* chronicles the shifting politics of race and gender as well as the moving details of the lives of the characters. In 1961, when Mary Elizabeth (M.E.) Cox and Amazing Grace (Maze) Jensen meet at Berea College in Kentucky, they begin a friendship that will survive despite the many obstacles life throws in their way. Maze, a happy-go-lucky girl from Appalachia, is looking to define her life on her own terms and avoid the pattern of single motherhood that her mother and grandmother embody. M.E., a young black woman with a gift for music, struggles to live up to her family's expectations and escape the cloud of her mother's depression. From the last of the Shakers to the first of the draft dodgers, the novel spirals through the history of Maze and M.E., their families, and their country.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Stranger Here Below* is filled with strong female characters, and the male characters range from mere background to actively harmful. Are there any supportive/strong men in the novel? Is this dearth of men indicative of the times, or could it be seen in the modern day?
2. Which of the women (Maze, M.E., Vista, Sarah, or Georginea) do you identify with the most, and which the least? Which is the most interesting to you?
3. The novel alternates between third person accounts and letters. Did these letters offer you a new perspective on the characters? Which style do you prefer overall?
4. How far a cry is Georginea's Berea College, with its compliance with the Day Law, and Maze and M.E.'s, with its subdued racial tensions?
5. Maze and M.E.'s sexual encounter changes the tenor and trajectory of their friendship. Was this encounter just a fluke, or could it have been something more in a different time/setting?
6. How would M.E.'s life have been different if she had played at the recital she walked away from? Would it have been better?
7. In Harris, Maze finds not only a husband but an escape from the cycle of single motherhood that her mother and grandmother embody. Is this a piece of luck, or are her decisions different and/or better than her family's?
8. Why did Mary Elizabeth choose to use Maze's tea to end her pregnancy, instead of accepting Octavia's help in finding a doctor? What would you have chosen to do in M.E.'s shoes?
9. M.E.'s mother Sarah is troubled not only by the terrible nature of her brother Robert's death, but also by her confused feelings for him. Are her feelings unnatural, or harmless

and blown out of proportion?

10. Clarissa gives Sarah the pills that allow her to finally commit suicide. Is this an act of kindness? When (if ever) is suicide an acceptable choice?
11. While Georginea finds a way to escape the limited options for women by becoming Sister Georgia, Vista and Sarah both struggle to fill the roles expected of them by society. Maze rejects life as a teacher, but M.E. is the one who truly rebels, traveling the world and leading an independent life. Would you describe any of these women as feminists? Do you think they would apply the term to themselves?
12. At the end of the novel, M.E. wonders which of Maze's twins (Pilgrim or Stranger) is named for her. How would you answer that question?
13. Rather than proceeding in a straight line, the plot of Stranger Here Below bounces between time periods and characters. How did this non-linear progression affect the reading experience? What would you have changed, if anything?

## **AUTHOR Q&A**

1. What was your research process for this book? How familiar were you with the time periods involved beforehand?

I had some familiarity with the time periods, but not enough; part of what drove me to write the book was realizing how little I knew about the period of Reconstruction and then the Jim Crow era, particularly in a place like Kentucky. And I knew a bit about the Shakers, and hardly anything about Berea College. So I was really starting from scratch. I read widely--about the Shakers, Berea College, Appalachia. But I also spent time at both Berea and Pleasant Hill, including time opening boxes of old newspapers, old notebooks, all kinds of things, in the Archives at both sites. It was a new and exciting process for me.

2. What is your favorite period of American history, and why?

Well, I think I might say the period immediately following the Civil War, because as I understand it, this was a period of openness, with the potential for healing and understanding in this nation, particularly for racial understanding. We seem to be at our best at moments of crisis like that. And then, alas, it seems like we quickly lose focus; fear and the profit motive take over again. That's certainly what happened during Reconstruction and beyond.

3. You mention on your website that it was your husband's idea to visit Shaker sites, and that these visits planted the seed for the novel. If Sister Georgia was the start of the book, which of the other characters came next?

To be honest, I'm not sure whether Maze or Mary Elizabeth came next. I knew I wanted to explore the experience of a student at Berea, and I think that I probably came up with Maze first. But I have to say that it seems to me that Maze and Mary Elizabeth were always together in my

mind--a crucial pair of characters. Even their names reflect that duality, I suppose; I didn't do that (give them names with similar, echoing sounds) intentionally though.

4. While both your books have strong female characters, this is particularly true of *Stranger*. Was this intentional, or did the book evolve that way? Is it harder, as a woman, to write from a male perspective?

I think plenty of women write very convincingly from a male perspective, and vice versa. I guess it's a bit harder for me--though I think it's kind of striking that I'm often exploring female characters who are hardly "feminine" in a traditional sense. I tried to create a fuller and more complex male character in Tom in *In Hovering Flight*; I was aware, in working on that book, that I'd often given male characters short shrift in my work. I have to say, too, in defense of Reverend Cox in *Stranger Here Below*, that while there's a lot that's pretty irritating about him, I do consider him sympathetic in many ways. I also love the character of Daniel, who's mysterious and short-lived, of course--but that's necessary, plot-wise. I also have what I consider a pretty full and rich male character in a short story called "Benedicta, or a Guide to the Artist's Resume," which was published in the Winter 2011 issue of *The Literary Review*. And my next novel will have a very prominent male character. So we'll see how I do with that.

5. Which character was the hardest to write? Which was the easiest?

I would have to say that Sarah (Mary Elizabeth's mother) was, paradoxically, both the hardest and the easiest character to write. She was the hardest in that I felt afraid of writing about her; her experience was too radically different from my own, I thought, and the pain she'd experienced too hard for me to face. In fact I avoided writing about her for a very long time (until Fred Ramey at Unbridled Books gently pointed out that I couldn't give Maze's mother Vista such full coverage and completely ignore Mary Elizabeth's mother). When, at last, I sat down to try to tell Sarah's story, though, I found that it just poured out of me. It was some of the most fluid and (though it feels strange to say it, about such a tragic character), *exhilarating* writing I've done. I think I longed to tell her story--once someone (in this case, Fred) had essentially given me permission to do so.

6. Music plays an important role in your characters' lives -- M.E. with her piano, Vista with her Victrola. How did you choose the composers and bands? Was listening to music a part of the writing process?

Sure, listening to music was a very big part of the process. As I recount in my playlist notes for the Large Hearted Boy site ([http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2010/10/book\\_notes\\_joyc\\_1.html](http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2010/10/book_notes_joyc_1.html)), I've loved those Debussy *Children's Corner* pieces since I was in college and my good friend Rita (Stone) Horn played "Dr. Gradus ad Parnassum" for me. Another friend, Virginia Wiles, and her friend Charles Rix helped to educate me further about classical piano; it was Charles who suggested that Mary Elizabeth decide that she's going to try to play Stravinsky--that this could be the composer her aunt had always wanted, but failed, to learn to play.

I grew up hearing a lot of old-time country music, so the sounds of the Carter Family, and of songs like “Cripple Creek” and “Sally Goodin,” are soothing and familiar to me. I’ve loved finding new musicians and groups who are doing new versions of these old songs (like Roseanne Cash’s “Wildwood Flower,” the Charlie Haden Family’s “Single Girl, Married Girl,” Hot Club of Cowtown’s “Sally Goodin”).

7. Your two novels (*In Hovering Flight*, *Stranger Here Below*) are stand-alone pieces. Have you ever considered writing a series? Is there a character from either book you wish you could write more about?

A number of people have said to me that they find themselves wondering about how things turned out for Scarlet and Bobby, at the end of *In Hovering Flight*, and my brother Stu did ask me (jokingly, I think) if I was going to write a sequel about them. But somehow I can’t imagine writing a series of novels about the same characters. There’s something about creating the world of a literary novel that just feels, well, exhaustive (and exhausting) somehow. Like there just isn’t more to say. I’m afraid that’s going to sound arrogant, and I don’t mean it in that way. I admire a lot of the book series for young readers that are being published right now (as does my daughter). But somehow I can’t imagine myself writing about characters over a series of several books. For some reason this has made me think of Charles Dickens, who of course was ridiculously productive, and whose novels, which appeared serially, people waited for in the way today’s readers have waited for the next Harry Potter or Percy Jackson or Hunger Artist novel. And yet for Dickens, each individual novel was its own contained world.

8. What do you hope readers will take away from *Stranger Here Below*?

I hope they’ll take away a more nuanced awareness of racial history in the U.S., of the valiant efforts of people like John G. Fee (the founder of Berea College) to do the right thing. And also a richer sense of Kentucky and Appalachia, with all its history and complexity, beauty and suffering.

9. What book(s) and/or sites would you suggest to readers interested in learning more about the Shakers?

Readers can certainly learn a lot at the Pleasant Hill Shaker site at <http://www.shakervillageky.org/> --or better yet, by visiting Pleasant Hill themselves. There are LOTS of books out there about the Shakers, particularly about their beautiful art, furniture and architecture. To list only a few: *Shaker Design: Out of this World* by Jean M. Burks; *The Encyclopedia of Shaker Furniture* by Timothy D. Rieman and Jean M. Burks; and *Simple Beauty: The Shakers in America* by William C. Ketchum, Jr. And three books that were particularly helpful to me in doing research for *Stranger Here Below* were *Shaker Communities*, *Shaker Lives* by Priscilla J. Brewer; *Mother’s First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion*, edited by Jean M. Humez; and *Pleasant Hill and Its Shakers* by Thomas D. Clark and F. Gerald Ham.

10. What are you working on now?

I'm doing revisions on a personal/reflective essay, tentatively titled "Why Rent?," about--among other things--efforts to dam the Delaware River back in the 1960s; the successful fight against those plans is considered a key moment in the American environmental movement, but the story is far more complicated and interesting than a simple tale of victory in a fight against the Army Corps of Engineers (this essay was eventually published on *The Millions* at <http://www.themillions.com/2011/08/why-rent.html>). I'm also in the very early stages of work on a new novel--so early that I'm reluctant to say much about it at this point. I know it will involve a relationship between an American woman and an Eastern European man; secrets and lies in this couple's relationship; and complicated personal histories, especially as those histories are depicted--and manipulated--online.