The Millions

Words Can Sustain and Save Us: The Millions Interviews Marie Howe

The Millions Interview

Alex Dueben January 11, 2018 | 5 books mentioned

Over the course of three books, **Marie Howe** has established herself as one of the great poets of her generation. Her first book, *The Good Thief*, was chosen for the National Poetry Series by **Margaret Atwood**, and awarded the Lavan Younger Poets Prize by **Stanley Kunitz**. Her second book, *What the Living Do*, is about her brother's death from an AIDS-related illness, and it marked a shift both in what she wrote and how. Since then, Howe has published the poetry collection *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* and edited the anthology *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*.

In her new book, *Magdalene*, Howe writes about **Mary Magdalene**, but she's also writing about all women. The seven devils that plague Mary are devils common to us all and the book depicts Mary raising a child, listening to the news, missing her teacher. She is struggling to be fully alive and to be a spiritual being. Howe writes about growing up in the Catholic tradition, about family, but also about words and the ways that they shape us, sustain us, and can save us. We spoke recently about these issues, *The Lives of the Saints*, public art, listening in the contemporary world, and how they play out in her new collection of poetry.

The Millions: Where did this idea for a series of poems about Mary Magdalene come from?

Marie Howe: I was raised in the Catholic tradition, and grew up with the stories and images of what we called the Old and New Testament. As a young girl growing up into a patriarchal world the female archetypes I absorbed weren't the Greek gods and goddesses but were **Mary** and Mary Magdalene and the other saints: women who seemed to be the subjects of their own lives. They weren't defined by a prescribed plot. They were struggling to understand who they were, what they were here for, trying to reach through the muddle of whatever it is we live in to touch something authentic.

Like so many young women growing up in this tradition I was presented with two deep archetypes: Mary the Virgin Mother and Magdalene the Repentant Prostitute. The early church fathers had created these myths. They manifest this intended split between the spirit and the body, the sacred from the sensual. Women have been wounded by them for a long time. The wife and the whore—the subject and the object. How can a woman integrate her sexuality and her spirituality in such a culture? Magdalene has carried the burden of shame for the sensuality of women. I feel like I've been trying to write through her all my life. Failing—and failing and failing and failing. And then one day several years ago I was walking along the sidewalk and I remembered that she had been possessed by devils. I went back to the gospels and read Luke—Mary called Magdalene from whom seven devils had been cast out. I got to thinking what those devils might have been. That really opened this version of her. For years I've trying to write these poems

and throwing them out, throwing them out. So many. And suddenly there she was. Well—she, me, who knows—but a voice came. And the devils of course were the devils that beset us all. They're internal, they're psychological, they don't have to be blargh.

TM: I remember reading "Magdalene–The Seven Devils" a few years back before the book came out. It opens "The first was that I was very busy" and then you go through these devils and keep revising them. I kept wondering how autobiographical the poem is, which is a question I hate, to be honest.

MH: The whole book of course is autobiographical–and yet, not. In writing you use your life like wood and you burn it up to make the heat and the energy for the poem. To point out the details of the wood seems not as interesting as that. The wood is used to transform something into something else. What I can say is that when I read "The Seven Devils," or many of the poems in the book, people come up to me and say, I know about that. My hope is that people feel more liberated and more identified with each other. There's a quote in the beginning of the book from the Gospel of Thomas: "When will you be visible to us? and when will we see you? He said, When you undress and are not ashamed." What a thing to say? When you undress and are not ashamed. I wanted Mary–a woman–who lives throughout time. Not just back then, but alive now. I wanted her to be able to undress and not be ashamed. Undress her consciousness, if you will.

TM: One reason I phrased it that way is that in this poem specifically you manage to be so very specific but in a way that so many people can see themselves in it, like a mirror. Stanley Kunitz had a line about art so transparent that you could see the world.

MH: "The dream of an art so transparent you can look through it and see the world." My whole life changed when my brother John grew ill and then died with AIDS because that transparency became really important to me. Because the thing as it was was enough. It doesn't have to be a simile or a metaphor. The thing as it is. The ice water next to his bed, the glass shining in the shaft of sunlight, John's hand. That's enough. It didn't have to be anything more than that. In fact to make more of it was to diminish it

TM: I was raised Protestant–and I'm a guy–so I only know *The Lives of the Saints* through women who were raised Catholic and obsessed over the book.

MH: And I bet you loved those women, Alex. [Laughs.]

TM: Well, yes. [Laughs.]

MH: Perhaps women were looking for lives of women who led passionate lives and acted on that passion. The truth of the inner lives of women wasn't available to me growing up. In 1980 **Lucille Clifton** and **Sharon Olds** and **Audre Lorde** began to open the door to poetry. The real stories of women's lives. In the 1950s, in the early 1960s, I was looking and looking for stories of how women searched for God or searched for meaning. My mother had nine children. All of her sisters had nine or 10 children, so I had 100 first cousins. Their lives were–god bless them–given over to this. The saints weren't

necessarily mothers, they had chosen another way. They had chosen a life that wasn't necessarily in the service of others–although sometimes it was. There was an excitement in reading about these people who might have entered a monastery or led an army of France and also they were the only stories I had ever read that were about women's psychological and spiritual development.

TM: In your previous book you wrote a series of poems about Mary, before she was a mother. Did this book grow out of a similar impulse?

MH: I used to write Christmas plays we kids would put for our parents My brothers and sisters did not always enjoy this. They grew increasingly alternative. By 1968 the angel carried a machine gun. [Laughs.] The Jewish tradition of midrash, which is imagining your way into the silences of the stories of the Torah–what we call the Old Testament–has existed for centuries. You could actually imagine what Eve and Adam did on the first day out of paradise—did they have sex? did they not? That tradition has long existed and I didn't know it until I was older, but I feel that the imagination is a way into truth. **Wallace Stevens** said, "God and the imagination are one." There are so many silences in the stories and for me, they carry archetypal values. So Mary Magdalene who was in all the paintings the repentant woman in red–that's nonsense. I wanted to write about a woman's real life–her sexual life, her psychological life, her interior life, her desire for a teacher, her desire for meaning and peace. The dualism that we all live with in this culture is so much rougher on women. Men suffer, too, but women suffer terribly from objectified dualism: virgins or whores, sexual or sacred.

TM: One poem that jumped out at me was "The Girl at 3" and the line "the interiority we create by reading is rich and lonely."

MH: We chose logos over image–word over image–long ago, and there are those who suggest that's what separates us from ourselves and from reality. I think I was reading into that and at the same time my daughter was learning to recognize letters. And of course I was thinking about the paintings where Mary, the soon to be mother, is reading something in the painting and the angel appears and she holds her place in the book to receive the angel. We know that when any annunciation occurs–no matter what it is–you're not the same person after it happens. Maybe it's I no longer love my husband, maybe it's I no longer believe in God, maybe it's I'm going to adopt a child. After any kind of annunciation we're not the same.

The notion of Mary reading at all is of course a fiction. **Meister Eckhart** says that perhaps **Jesus** is the fruit of Mary's enlightenment. Isn't that radical? Jesus is the fruit of Mary's enlightenment. I love that. He goes onto say that each of us can become the mother of God. And he means that in an almost Buddhist sense. That we are that which we seek.

TM: One writer I've talked with has pointed out that grimoire, the old word for spellbook, has the same etymological root as grammar. That to write and read and name things is a form of magic.

MH: In the beginning was the word and the word was made flesh.

TM: The word preceded the world.

MH: Or as Meister Eckhart said in his first sermon, every creature is a word of God. The word of God–whatever God is, I don't presume. When I say God, I wish there was another word. This energy or whatever–every creature is an expression of that. Yes, a spell. But poetry is a spell, isn't it? That's what one hopes. A spell that returns us to ourselves. Not that it bewitches us, but I feel like the poetry that I love is the poetry that returns me to myself whole for a minute. It's so rare to feel that way.

TM: Do you think of writing as a spiritual act at its core?

MH: I do, because it involves a wonderful contradiction which is in order for it to happen you have to be there and you have to disappear. Both. You know, nothing feels as a good as that. Being there and disappearing–being possessed by something else. Something happening through you, but you're attending it. There are few other things in the world like that, but writing is pretty much a relief from the self–and yet the self has to be utterly there.

TM: People have talked about the relationship between poetry and prayer and how do you think of that relationship?

MH: As **Bob Dylan** says, you've got to serve somebody. [Laughs.] Might be the devil or might be the lord. I feel like poetry for me is in service to something greater than myself. Everything is greater than myself. [Laughs.] But [in service] to the great mystery of being alive. So many people I have loved are dead now. And I will be dead one day. How strange is that? To know that we're alive and that we're going to die. Poetry can hold that. It holds that knowledge and it holds that dialectical energy field–we're alive, we're going to die, this is now, and in a minute it will be past but it will still be now. All of that that occurs when we read a poem.

TM: Writing is its own thing, but to read poetry, to recite it, definitely has some of the quality of prayer.

MH: I've been thinking about the word sacrament lately and what is sacred in our culture. I think poetry is one of the last places where the inner life of someone is held sacred. How it feels to be alive is held sacred. That reading it is a sacrament. Writing it–when one is in the right attitude and position, whether it fails or succeeds–is a kind of sacrament.

I studied with **Joseph Brodsky** the great Russian poet and how do I say this, he thought we were lazy American students. We had to memorize 500 lines a week and come in and write them out for him. He said, you Americans are so naive. He said, you think that evil is going to come into your houses wearing big black boots and climb up the stairs–it begins in the language. Look to the language. He said, in the Soviet Union, nothing is

permitted and everything is important. In the United States, everything is permitted and nothing is important.

What is important? Especially now that so much is externalized through social media. The inner life, where we actually live most of our minutes of our days, is still a sacred place. That's where transformation occurs, where all sorts of things occur, but it has to be nurtured. My concern is that with externalizing of experience many, many young people are not nourishing that inner space. It hurts to do so. It hurts to read a poem sometimes. It's demanding in a way. It calls you to yourself and it's sometimes difficult.

TM: Speaking of language, your last book was titled *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, which is a phrase with religious meaning. Today people talk about real life and real time in a way no one did just 15 or 20 years ago.

MH: Remember how it started, when things began to be in quotes? Like "home made" food or "natural" food. When people began to put those words in quotes, what does that mean? Now the quotes are gone. It's real life, real time. There's no way we can stop this, but we can drag our inner lives along with it and try to make sense of it. I feel like people are hungry. People my age want to be together and read books and talk. I wish we could spend days talking about what we're losing with all of this speed. People are lonely. We want to be in the same room with each other. We want to talk and hang out and we're just so busy. It's consumerism and capitalism. Capitalism has stolen our sense of time–that truth that time belongs to us.

TM: You were the Poet Laureate of New York state, you did a lot of public events, and when you first got the post, you said that you wanted poetry to be as ubiquitous as Gap ads. Which I love. I think that's my fantasy of a city.

MH: Wouldn't it be great? The Poetry Society of course puts poems on buses and we need more and more and more. People are hungry for it. We just did a huge event called The Poet Is In at Grand Central Terminal. We've done this three times now but this one was the biggest. At Central Terminal at Vanderbilt Hall, right next to that clock, from 11 in the morning until 8 at night, there were six desks beautifully produced by the MTA art and design people and a production company called Wizard.

There were six poets that changed every hour so you could come and sit down and talk with the poet and the poet would write you a poem after talking to you. Forty-eight poets participated in the course of a day and the line of people waiting for a poem was an hour and a half long. And people waited. An hour and a half. It was so amazing. You would ask a lot of questions and then you would take their answers and transform them and give it back. You would type it out on the typewriter with carbon paper, stamp it, sign it, separate it and you would read it to the person. People cried all the time. The person cried, the poet cried, and then you would give them poem to them–free. I want to do this all over the country. I think we're not used to being heard. We're not used to someone listening to us. And somehow transforming what we said to them and giving it back in a way that only poetry can do. It's so startling.

TM: Right now we're at a moment where rapacious capitalism is running the government and they don't believe in arts funding among other things, and people are now asking in a very fundamental way about what is important and what do we value.

MH: I was just outside Chicago and in Indiana and the world is so big, the country is so big, but everybody wants to read a poem when their father dies. Everybody wants to read a poem at their wedding. Everybody wants to read a poem at these crucial moments in their life. When there's a ritual. When there's a sacrament, essentially. They want something that can hold the moment. If people don't turn to art and they don't turn to religion, we're left with consumerism.

After September 11th in New York these big sheets of paper would go up and people would write on them. Like by the arch in Washington Square Park. People were reading what other people had written. It was so amazing. People would crowd in and read all sorts of things that other people had written. We need public squares.

TM: We need moments where we stop and listen to each other.

MH: Poetry stops us and gives us something in common. I still believe that we could get poetry more into the public world. Unfortunately a lot of people believe they can't read poetry because they were taught in school that it was difficult. Some poems are difficult, but many are not and so people are afraid–they don't know where to go they don't know what to do. I feel like we have to ambush them with something to realize that they don't need to do anything more than just read and they'll receive it.

TM: The last line in your book is "the moonlit path over the un-walkable water." It's a beautiful line and I feel like moonlight is an image that comes up a lot in your poetry.

MH: I'm in love with the moon. I mean, who's not? It's so amazing. To me, what we'll call the divine is unseeable, unknowable. But we can see a reflection of it. We see it reflected in each other's faces, we see it reflected in art, we see it reflected in the beauty of the world, the sorrow of the world. My friends actually mock me about this. We spend time in Provincetown every summer and the moonlight across the ocean makes that path, that wide amazing radiant path. It looks as if you could walk upon it to whatever is next. But of course you can't walk on the water. I was also thinking of Peter who walks on the water when Jesus says, you can do it. Jesus walks across the water to the boat in the storm and he tells Peter, come on, and he starts to, but then Peter says, I can't walk on water, and falls.

It is un-walkable for most of us, and yet it's so compelling. The sun is the source of life and everything that is, but we can't look at it. We can only look at it indirectly. The beauty of that indirectness is also the moon and how it falls onto the ground and onto us. I just love the whole physicality of it. What Mary is facing is human limitation, sensing that there's energies that are beyond us and yet seemingly known, but not being able to utterly participate. It's what you said early, just there but not quite.

TM: I guess in some sense that's poetry. It's the word describing something, a reflection of the thing itself.

MH: Beautifully said. The word isn't the thing itself and yet it can be close enough because we have this imagination and we can say apple and we can picture an apple. And the apple is there.

Alex Dueben has written for The Believer, The Paris Review, The Rumpus, The Brooklyn Rail, The Comics Journal, and other publications.

https://themillions.com/2018/01/tk-the-millions-interviews-marie-howe.html

2 comments:

1. **damascus-fright**

   January 11, 2018 at 3:45 pm

   This was a really interesting project. Will have to purchase the book.

2. **Ken Chawkin**

   January 16, 2018 at 9:44 pm

   Thank you for this lovely interview! Marie Howe's beautiful poem about Mary in "Annunciation" also relates that same mystical experience she imagined to herself as a poet, when she is able to step out of the way, get out of herself, and allow the poem to magically come through her. I heard her describe to Krista Tippett how it happened, and then read it during her interview for On Being. I posted both on my blog: https://theuncarvedblog.com/2013/09/22/new-york-poet-laureate-marie-howe-reads-annunciation-to-krista-tippett-on-being/.