

Interview with the Author

What made you write this book?

I've always been fascinated with Miriam's role in the Old Testament: she saved Moses by ferrying him down the river in a basket so that he might survive (the Pharaoh's wife discovered and raised him), and it sure sounds to me like she was one of the key grassroots organizers of the Exodus. My Hebrew name is also Miriam, and it's been part of my last name since I was in my early 20s, so I've also felt drawn to her as someone who modeled qualities worth aspiring to in our everyday lives.

Who exactly was Miriam in the biblical stories?

Most people know she was Moses' sister, and they also had a brother named Aaron. From the little hints in the bible and lots of commentary on her role for eons, including the song we sing each Shabbat – the Mi Chamocho -- there's a lot of celebration of Miriam for leading the women, a tambourine in her hand, singing and dancing right out of bondage. She's also credited with “Miriam's Well.” The story there goes that wherever the wandering Jews landed in the middle of those 40 years wandering the desert, Miriam did an amazing cosmic magic trick: she used a stone she carried to call forth a well, and once there was water, the people could quench their thirst, feed their animals, and grow some food. So biblical Miriam fed her people – with inspiration and sustenance.

How is your novel's Miriam an embodiment of biblical Miriam?

My novel's Miriam also feeds people in a similar way. While she doesn't have a magic stone, she does have a knack for cooking and baking, and she's utterly compelled to put her skills in the kitchen to good use, whether she's slinging hash at a greasy spoon, cooking up hippie stew at People's Park, putting the finishing touches on fancy desserts at a resort, or teaching marginalized teens how to make a living through cooking. Wherever she shows up, she ends up feeding people one way or another, and that other sometimes has to do with singing in way that makes people feel cared for and loved. There's a running metaphor in the book that her singing makes people think of running water also – she sings in a smooth and satisfying way, a little like Laura Nyro in my opinion. Most of all, she's wandering, looking for her promised land. Also, Miriam isn't the only nod to storied figures from the bible – be on the lookout for David, Ruth, Naomi, and others.

Both Miriam's brothers in your novel seem to stay put without so much wandering. Why is Miriam different?

Many of us have a propensity to find our home and stand by it, no matter what, and having lived in Kansas for 36 years, I'm one of those people. Miriam isn't like that. She's so in touch with her calling – her purpose that propels her to help people while also seeking out where she belongs in a breaking and broken world – that she just can't stay put so easily. Sure, she loves adventure, but it's more that she lives in response to things happening in the world that pull her to them, whether it's helping people in an earthquake in L.A. or rushing in to volunteer after the Oklahoma City bombing. Just by virtue of living that way, it's hard for her to hold onto jobs, homes, and communities. At the same time, she's also seeking with all her soul answers to big questions about who her people are and where her place is.

How autobiographical is this novel? How much of you is in Miriam?

I know I write a lot of autobiographical poetry, not to mention memoir, and my first novel, *The*

Divorce Girl, which drew on some of my experiences. But *Miriam's Well* is actually very fictional. Miriam is far more purpose-driven than I am, and to live as she did, wandering for so many decades, would drive me crazy. She's also fairly selfless at times, and one of the most instinctual beings I've encountered. The places she lived and traveled, however, are mostly places I've been to, and in some cases, spent a lot of time exploring. I'm passionate about extreme west Texas, I find western South Dakota to be a place of extreme history and beauty, I was dazzled by Utah and Idaho, I loved swimming in the wild waters off the Maine coast, and I fell in love with Laramie, Wyoming. Of course, I also grew up Brooklyn until I was eight, and although I haven't lived in western Kansas, I've been there many times, and it's one of my favorite skylines. The one character in the book who is autobiographical is Ben, modeled after my late friend Ben Zimmerman, a wildly soulful community organizer who taught me a lot about what it takes to change the world and live with integrity.

Speaking of characters, this is a book that brings together a lot of diverse people, including Miriam and her family.

When I started writing the book, I just knew Miriam's father was African-American, her mother was white, and she and her siblings were being raised Jewish. That's kind of how the characters and set up for the book came to me close to two decades ago. Following this starting point, and also Miriam's propensity to reach out to people on and over the edges of America, how could this book not include many people of color as well as people from many backgrounds? Also, it would seem just wrong to tell any kind of modern-day Exodus story with only white people. As a white woman writing this book, I also wanted to be cognizant of my own privilege and what that blinds me to, so I consulted with people of other backgrounds and drew on a lot of research.

Speaking of research, how much of the American history presented in the book is true?

I hope that most of what I represented from our history is accurate. I did a lot of reading and investigation about where and when Miriam was, and I aimed her toward certain places at certain times to engage with important moments of American history, such as People's Park in 1969, Wounded Knee in 1973, the height of the AIDS crisis in San Francisco in the 1980s, and many other moments that changed and shaped some of the edges of what it means to be American. I love history, and in fact, did my BA in American history, so it was a pleasure to study so many crucial moments. Of course, since this is a work of fiction, I did insert my characters in and around some distinctly American moments. For example, Miriam is living on Key West when the Keys whimsically succeed from the rest of the country by, among other things, throwing stale Cuban bread at some federal officials. Miriam ended up baking the bread thrown.

How is this book a modern day Exodus?

Miriam is searching for home throughout her story, and for her, home is particularly complex, tangled up in extensive grief and trauma. She wanders the desert of her own heart to some extent, drawn to find something probably not so clear to her until she gets much older in the book: understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and most of all, a sense of truly belonging to a place and a people. Throughout her story, she struggled with exile from that sense of deep belonging, but like any true story of finding our place, she ultimately finds a way to belong to both herself and her people.

Finally, why does this book include recipes?

It seemed natural to include not just some of Miriam's specialties but recipes from other characters'

favorite dishes. When you get to the end of the book, all those recipes together will make great sense.