

The Ms Magazine blog

Ms. blog: *Marcella*

Groundbreaking Autoerotic Novel Returns to Print

September 20, 2012 by [Georgia Platts](#)

Award-winning poet and author [Marilyn June Coffey](#) is republishing her groundbreaking novel *Marcella*, 40 years after it made literary history in 1973 as perhaps the first English work of fiction to use female autoeroticism as a main theme.

Marcella tells the story of a young Kansas girl moving into womanhood during World War II. She discovers the private bliss of sexuality only to subsequently discover the “sinfulness” of self-pleasure, which brings on shame and self-punishment. She also learns that sexuality can become a force for abuse.

I recently interviewed Ms. Coffey about *Marcella*'s republication. What inspired you to write *Marcella*?

My psychoanalyst. He asked me, “But have you ever tried to commit suicide?” And I remembered descending to the church basement (as *Marcella* does), selecting a knife and sawing at my wrists. That memory provoked the novel.

How did you expect *Marcella* would be received when you wrote the book in 1973? Were there any surprises?

I thought God might send down a lightning bolt and kill me. But He didn't. The biggest surprise was the strong support from feminists. They lauded my controversial novel. Ms. published the menstruation chapter as “The Day *Marcella* Fell Off the Roof.” Gloria Steinem hailed *Marcella* as “an important part of the truth telling by and for women,” and Alix Kates Shulman praised the book in the *New York Times Book Review*.

What sort of effect do you think your book has had?

Varied. From a refusal to read it to “Thank you for telling my story.”

What kind of response do you expect for the republication?

Lisa Pelto of Concierge Marketing suggested that we offer *Marcella* to a Young Adult audience. This surprised me, since in 1973 my audience consisted of adults. Then I considered the sophistication of today's young adult reader compared to her counterpart 40 years ago. I'm sure

that today's young reader is so much more savvy about sexual matters that my book wouldn't shock her. So I think my audience for *Marcella* will broaden.

I understand that in 1989 you attempted a public reading which was eventually canceled after public outcry. Since you are once again planning a public reading [October 6—see below], I'm wondering how the response has been different and why you think that is.

I think the response to this year's reading is largely different because of place. Omaha, Neb., is a sophisticated city that supports the arts and wouldn't attempt to ban our marathon reading. But in 1989 I had agreed to read a marathon in Orleans, Neb., population 400, in my home county of 4,000. I love my roots, but sophisticated they are not. My Orleans reading was initially accepted, but when word spread about its descriptions of mas-tur-ba-tion, a brouhaha erupted.

How do you see reactions to your book and to public readings as relating to today's War on Women by the extreme right?

I am appalled by the attacks on women's rights by the extreme right. I thought we'd settled all that decades ago. I have three recurring elements in *Marcella*: her Christianity, her masturbation and her love of music. I expect the first two might give the extreme right reason to dislike my novel.

I've heard you describe *Marcella* as being sexually addicted. What do you think caused that? Do you feel her desire for nightly masturbation was addictive, or did the addiction come more after she began feeling guilty about it?

In my experience, sexual addiction is the result of trauma. Two things traumatized her—her belief that masturbation was sinful and Big Jim's unexpected sexual attraction to her.

Do you see parallels between *Marcella*'s pedophile minister and pedophile priests of today?

A pedophile is a pedophile whether in *Marcella*'s day or now. But today children are taught to speak out about behavior that makes them uncomfortable. That has caused, as you know, a tremendous outcry against pedophilia. However, *Marcella* thought that the sexual experience with the minister she trusted was her fault, not Big Jim's. Who could she speak to? No one.

What sorts of letters have you received from those who have read your book—or from those who haven't?

The Internet has coached us to expect many responses from readers, But I received very few letters in response to *Marcella*. They were laudatory. The response I valued most was from a woman who saw me in an art gallery. When she read my name tag, she cried out, "Oh, are you the Marilyn Coffey who wrote *Marcella*?"

Ah, fame! Fleeting but delectable.