on Marge Piercy, Ai, and Erica Jong

Milo Miles
Crimes of Passion, is that the risk is worth taking. Wallace Stevens once criticized surrealists because there was “too much invention without discovery”; and yet, there cannot be discovery without risk; nothing buys you nothing. Stokes’ poems bristle with things discovered, and these things are taken to heart, even though they still may be harboring a stiletto, a hook, or a kiss that drives you mad. No question that Stokes is sometimes a quirky, difficult poet. But then, who wants an easy poet?

—David Long

WINGING IT

TO BE OF USE
poems by Marge Piercy
Doubleday Paperback $2.95

CRUELTY
poems by Ai
Houghton Mifflin Paperback $2.95

FEAR OF FLYING
a novel by Erica Jong
Holt, Rinehart & Winston $6.95

One of the most important changes that could come from the Woman’s Movement is the appearance of a brand-new consciousness—a whole segment of humanity discovering and articulating itself. These three books pull it off. In each one a female voice literally sings from the page, free from the comfortable definitions and restrictions of male art. Not evolution from the masculine, it’s a revolution.

No surprise, then, that Marge Piercy is a sixties revolutionary too, as her early novel (Dance the Eagle to Sleep) and poems (Breaking Camp) demonstrated. But right up front in To Be of Use is a section of poetry called “A just anger” which deals mostly with what Piercy elsewhere calls her “third movement,” feminism. In poems like “In the men’s room(s)” and “Right thinking man” Piercy stabs with clear perception into the personality of an oppressor who is both the male chauvinist and Government The Father.
Yes, keep your eyes on the hands, let the voice go buzzing.
Economy is the bone, politics is the flesh,
watch who they beat and who they eat,
watch who they relieve themselves on, watch who they own.
The rest is decoration.

("In the men's room(s)"

Piercy confronts oppression from people she loathes and people she loves, but never misses the hook, even inside the candy. As she says to a radical companion:

The revolutionary says, we can let go.
We both used to say that a great deal.
If what we change does not change us
we are playing with blocks.

("A shadow play for guilt"

Friends aren't lacking, though; allies under the heel. The poet speaks warmly to old friends, new sisters, Janis Joplin, pets, even her own hair ("Hello up there").

Marge Piercy does not doodle around or resort to roaring cant in defining what bugs her, and she keeps the sharp, simple tone when writing poems of useful work and love. "The spring offensive of the snail" is the second section of *To Be of Use* and describes some of Piercy's personal alternatives to the Watergate World.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

("To be of use"

"The spring offensive of the snail" also contains "Doing it differently," a remarkable love poem which probes deeply into the emotional mechanics of living with another person, with blending lives and matching fantasies. Piercy has much to say about fragile human needs and the wisdom of making only equal compromises.

What feels natural and easy, is soft murder
of each other and that mutant future
striving to break into bloom
bloody and red as the real rose.

Periodic, earthy, of a violent tenderness
it is the nature of this joining
to remain partial and episodic
yet feel total: a mountain that opens like a door
and then closes
like a mountain.

But the real showpiece of the book is the final section, "Laying down the tower." This is a series of eleven poems based on a "political
reading” of a Tarot card spread. Piercy weaves all the threads of idea developed previously in To Be of Use into a darting, driving vision of a woman vigorously cleaning the doors of perception. But as the series moves into the last cards, Piercy emphasizes a recurrent theme of her work; all effort is group effort, we function best as a community and to be of use we must be of use to other people; “Change is qualitative: we are each other’s miracle.”

If it is true, as Piercy says, that “whatever is not an energy source, is an energy sink,” then she must be one of the headwaters of the Energy Nile— To Be of Use radiates strength. Like Gary Snyder, Piercy uses the organic attack to bring down sterile society, but she forges her individual effects. More than a book of poetry, To Be of Use is almost a companion, a guide to a sharp perception of a remarkable variety of human contacts. Everybody’s here: Mom & Dad, the good lover, the false lover, the Big Pig, and the whole swirling kaleidoscope of society and emotion around the poet.

There is something of the pioneer woman in Marge Piercy; she sings her story with direct and simple language. The straight-ahead approach makes for one or two dull poems and an occasional trite line, but Piercy strengthens her words with the fresh evaluations she brings to our emotions. To Be of Use is a book to be kept on a hand-cut wooden shelf, to be read by groups in the evening.

Yes, for some time we might contemplate not the tiger, not the eagle or grizzly but the snail who always remembers that wherever you find yourself eating is home, the center where you make your love, and wherever you wake up is here, the right place to be where we start again.

(“The spring offensive of the snail”)

Cruelty is Ai’s first book of poetry and she already has a small cult following. About two years ago these poems began appearing in small magazines and caused a stir; Ai was obviously a strong young poet with an original voice. And the poems were weird—set in a stone-age world of aggression and blood, a voice in both sexes chanting of rape, hatred, and murder. The titles are enough: “Hangman,” “Warrior,” “Forty-Three-Year-Old Woman, Masturbating,” and of course, “Cruelty.” Ai is striking, irresistible, and many of the poems are unforgettable.

Most of Ai’s work takes one of three courses: emotional confrontations (usually between man and woman) in a seeming “rural American” setting; or strange, slightly magical poems which seem to belong to a culture-consciousness more elemental than ours; and some short works reminiscent of W. S. Merwin and the haunting bursts in
Bill Knott’s *The Naomi Poems.*

Ai isn’t any “virgin and a suicide,” though:

**PROSTITUTE**

Husband, for a while, after I shoot you,
I don’t touch your body,
I just cool it with my paper fan,
the way I used to on hot nights,
as the moon rises, chip of avocado

and finally, too bored to stay any longer,
I search your pockets, finding a few coins,
I slip your hand under my skirt
and rub it against my chili-red skin,
then I put on your black boots.
I stick the gun in my waistband,
two beaded combs in my hair.

I never cost much,
but tonight, with a gun, your boots . . .

After the shock wears off, the sexuality and unchained violence in these poems loose some impact, but more important qualities emerge on re-reading. Working in such a vein, Ai could easily spill over into melodrama, but the thorny language and the courage in the poetic voice win out even when the poem does not. Ai surges through her lines like “a great, black fire,” and the reader feels the heat even when it really has little to do with being an old whore or a horny dwarf. The texture and world-view of *Cruelty* remain strong.

Ai’s poems twitch with a wild vitality that is sexual:

I’m the same size, shape, make as twenty years ago,
but get inside me, start the engine;
you’ll have the strength, the will to move.
I’ll pull, you push, we’ll tear each other in half.
Come on, baby, lay me down on my back.
Pretend you don’t owe me a thing

(“Twenty-Year Marriage”)

or emotional:

Now you kill flies, your body rains sweat, you wet your pants
if I don’t get them down in time.
Holding the bucket of paint, I dance and sing.
You think you can walk a step without stumbling, you sonofa-bitch?
Just try it. Fall! I don’t give a damn.
You’re hurting, so am I,
but I’m strong enough to let you cry alone.

(“The Rivals”)

or physical:

I raise the rifle, as she presses a white shawl
far down in the water, and fire.
She dies quietly; even her heart spits blood
through clenched teeth.

(“The Deserter”)

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Cruelty is not a varied book of poems, but Ai has time to develop in range and depth; hopefully she will not flare and then crash like some other strong early voices, because her road could be fascinating. Some of the most disturbing imagery appears when Ai dips into the realm of primitive dreams:

When you are standing in the river,
you grab a fish,
tear its flesh open with your teeth, and hold it,
until the bones in your fingers break up
and fly about you like moths.
The river, a fish, your fingers, moths,
the war song churning in your belly.

("Warrior")

"The Root Eater," "The Color Thief," and "Hangman" are effective the same way.

Ai strikes close to the core of her poetry in these lines from "Before You Leave":

Fill my tunnel with the howl
you keep zipped in your pants
and when it's over, don't worry, I'll stand.
I'm a mare. Every nail's head
in my hooves wears your face,
but not even you, wolf, can bring me down.

Ai is the Bitch Goddess of masculine nightmares, and Kali, the Death Mother, weaving her dark science in a cave. Cruelty is a worthy successor to Ariel, but almost none of the violence is turned inward—even the act of suicide is framed in aggressive terms ("The Suicide"). The blood, much of it menstrual, becomes the juice of life, and if Ai is deadly, she is also free and wonderfully powerful:

to listen to my heartbeat inside the rocks
and scream as my own death slides into bed
with her ass bloody and sweet when I lick it,
one stalk of wheat no man
can pull from the ground and live to eat.

("New Crops For A Free Man")

A friend of mine (female) says that Erica Jong was a real little snot back at Columbia—could be, since Isadora Wing, the heroine of Fear of Flying, sure grinds 'em alive. But Jong herself has warned that even in directly autobiographical writing only a poetic image of the author emerges. Doesn't matter—purely as a work of fiction Fear of Flying is a stone, howling joy of a book. Although Fear of Flying contains elements present in endless older works, the combinations and attitudes involved almost raise this first novel into a whole new category: healthy woman on the prowl. Once again, the currents beneath the surface are more telling.
The surface is simple enough. Isadora Wing is attending a welcome-back psychoanalyst convention in Vienna with her second husband, Bennet Wing (a silent Chinese Freudian, obsessed by death, always right for all the dull reasons). Right away Isadora meets fellow convention-goer Adrian Goodlove (a Liangian always right for the wrong reasons) and falls for his hip raunchiness. After a lot of classy nightlife, emotional agonizing, and covert sexual adventure, Isadora resolves to break away from Bennet at least for now and ramble about the turned-on junkscapes of Europe with Adrian Goodlove, her Anti-Hero, her “zipless fuck.” Sure enough, when Adrian tires of the free-form game he has lured Isadora into, he reveals his scheduled trip to check on the ex-wife and kids, then dumps Ms. Wing in Paris. Whereupon Isadora drags her monster suitcase through the streets, meditates upon her psyche and situation, has an epiphany. She traces Bennet to London, boldly enters his empty apartment:

“If you grovel, you’ll be back at square one,” Adrian had said. I knew for sure I wasn’t going to grovel. But that was all I knew. It was enough.

Throughout all this, Isadora is remembering, remembering everything; her six psychoanalysts, her hectic family history (Isadora’s mother, a frustrated artist, has a fetish for anything “not ordinary”), and most of all her series of sexy but ultimately disappointing lovers. Jong reels off Isadora’s flashback memories with captivating cool. Most of the longer tales occur in the second half of the novel when Isadora jets off with her volatile lover.

When I threw in my lot with Adrian Goodlove, I entered a world in which the rules we loved by were his rules—although, of course, he pretended there were no rules. It was forbidden, for example, to inquire what we would do tomorrow. Existentialists were not supposed to mention the word “tomorrow.” It was banished from our vocabulary . . . Behind us was the past—which we invoked more and more to pass the time and to amuse each other . . .

The memories are revealing and colorful; they add variety to the narrative even though the past lacks the explosive humor of Isadora’s present-tense personality. Chapter Twelve, “The Madman,” is absolutely brilliant. Here Isadora describes her first husband, Brian Stollerman, a genius-type sensitive trapped in market-research who goes schizophrenic and tries to stroll over Central Park Lake to prove he’s Jesus Christ. Isadora’s story is a sure and compassionate account of a relationship.

Isadora comes off as an upper-middle class New York kid with some of the Jewish blues but mostly the female blues and the artist blues and great leaping hunks of the sexual blues—but she never fails to somehow find that . . . satisfaction.

He was so beautiful lying there and his body smelled so good. I thought of all those centuries in which men adored women for their bodies while they
despised their minds... I understood it. Because that was how I so often felt about men. Their minds were hopelessly befuddled, but their bodies were so nice.

So despite a lot of real pain, *Fear of Flying* reads much more upper than downer. The language helps; like all good poets, Jong is crazy about words and names:

I was already an adulteress, and was only holding off the actual consummation out of cowardice. That made me an adulteress *and* a coward (cowardess?). At least if I fucked Adrian I'd only be an adulteress (adult?).

It was definitely Brian's braininess I flipped for... he knew he knew and knew and knew about things... pipe rolls and Political Augustianism, Richard the Lionhearted and Rollo, Duke of Normandy, not just Abelard and Alcuin...

But Isadora also ponders the role of women ("Being unmarried in a man's world was such a hassle that anything had to be better."), attacks stuffed psychiatrists, and mutters endless literary quotes and comments (she even plugs *The New Yorker*). It's really incredible. *Fear of Flying* zaps your head like the cover illustration: a zany montage of angels, lovers, airplanes, towers, tailways, and clocks.

So this book wears different faces. Isadora Wing fulfills one fantasy by being involved in an exotic and romantic adventure, but there are equal parts of comedy, autobiography, self-analysis, and sex book. Central to the novel is "fear of flying" itself. The narrative begins with a transatlantic flight, and Isadora's familiar neurosis: "I happen to be convinced that only my own concentration (and that of my mother—who always seems to expect her children to die in a plane crash) keeps this bird aloft." Eventually, "fear of flying" becomes associated with the terror of being yourself, not defined by any other person's backdrop—winging it. One of the ties that binds Isadora to others is her recognition of their own "fear of flying." After the final break-up, Isadora is attracted to Adrian Goodlove chiefly because he seems to be "the unattainable man," a true loner. Isadora struggles to become a bit unattainable herself. *Fear of Flying* is both lyrical and humanistic, but to ignore that the focus and interpretations flow through a woman is to miss half the impact. Isadora Wing (and Erica Jong) searches with art and wisdom.

Me: Think of Simone de Beauvoir!
Me: I love her endurance, but her books are full of Sartre, Sartre, Sartre.
Me: Think of Doris Lessing!
Me: Anna Wulf can't come unless she's in love... what more is there to say?
Me: Think of Sylvia Plath!
Me: Dead. Who wants a life or death like hers even if you become a saint?
Me: Wouldn't you die for a cause?
Me: At twenty, yes, but not at thirty. I don't believe in dying for causes. I don't believe in dying for poetry. Once I worshipped Keats for dying young. Now I think it's braver to die old.
Me: Well—think of Colette.
Me: A good example. But she's one of very few.
Me: Well, why not try to be like her?
Me: I'm trying.

There's plenty of vital writing and thought in *To Be of Use*, *Cruelty*, and *Fear of Flying*. They are among the best of a huge art wave gushing from feminism, which has become the most radical, the most immediate, Jesus, the most *speakable* revolution going. Get a subscription to *off our backs* and dig into the meat and bones of these books. Meanwhile, look out, pig—this is the real thang.

—*Milo Miles*