

# **The Longings of Women Short Guide**

## **The Longings of Women by Marge Piercy**

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# Characters

Leila Landsman is the character perhaps most closely allied with Piercy herself. A married, middle-age academic, an associate professor and expert on abused women, she frequently writes of cases considered too sordid or sensational for academic accolades.

Hence, Leila is regarded an outcast of sorts within collegial circles; she is not liberal enough for the "true" feminists in her department, and is too liberal for the Ladies Guild. Leila has long known her theater-director husband has affairs with young actresses he casts, but it takes the death of her best female friend for Leila to acknowledge how shallow her marriage has become.

Leila accepts a contract to write a book about Becky Burgess, a young woman accused, with her teenage lover, of murdering her husband.

Becky Burgess "grew up longing to escape the overcrowded, shabby house where her fisherman father and gentle mother raised seven children in undisguised poverty. She studies the women she sees on TV: the way they speak, dress, act. She knows she's as smart and pretty as they are." Once Becky breaks free of the shackles of poverty and commands the attention of a wider world, she imagines reaping rewards she will never, ever, willingly give up.

Becky yearns to be remade through the magic of media. She gets her wish, perversely, when the camera turns its calculating eye on her after she becomes a murder suspect.

Mary Burke, sixty-one, is the eldest of Piercy's ensemble. She cleans for the affluent of the Boston area, including Leila Landsman, and never fails to be on time. Meticulous, respectful Mary is quiet, conservative, nearly invisible in her client's lives. What none of them knows — and must never guess — is that Mary is homeless. Once she lived as they do, until her husband "traded her in," and her children made lives for themselves that do not include her.

With cunning and care, Mary conceals her homelessness by sleeping at client's homes while they're away, maintaining a post office box, and a checking account. In this way, she is able to "pass" in a land where homelessness is criminal — at least, for a time. Leila, Becky and Mary share the same longings: to be seen for who they are, to be valued, loved, but most of all, to have a physical and emotional home that cannot be taken away.

A host of other characters round out those who people *The Longings of Women*. Many are sympathetic; a few, less so. It is perhaps worth noting that Piercy's male characters in this novel, while not center stage, are more dynamic and believable than are most male characters in her previous novels.

## Social Concerns/Themes

her twelfth novel, *The Longings of InWomen*, Piercy gives readers her most fully-formed ensemble yet: three women, whose lives intertwine, each searching in her own way for a place in the world that cannot be lost to the vagaries of relationships, work, or the economy. This need for a physical and spiritual home supersedes all other quests herein, and *The Longings of Women* examines that quest from many angles. Rosellen Brewer calls Piercy's portrait of homelessness poignant, and perceptive. In this novel, it is clearly the social issue of greatest magnitude, for the author.

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas claims *The Longings of Women* is "about the best account I've seen of the condition of women in America during the recent past. ... It vindicates what every woman over fifty already knows only too well, and presents young women with a chance to gain wisdom without actually aging." What Women Want (vs. what women get) is thematic throughout.

Other issues include redefining "family" to include relationships beyond those long-held culturally normative; specifically, the family as composed of father, mother, two kids and one pet. Despite the danger, the fear, the pain and persecution her characters confront, each knows the redemption of acceptance — and of having "a place" — before this novel's close.

## Techniques

The sixty-five chapters in *The Longings of Women* are variously labeled Leila, Becky, and Mary; each is written from the third-person, limited omniscient point of view; each character's chapters could be a stand-alone novel or novella. Episodic yet roughly chronological with frequent flashbacks, Piercy's novel pointedly knits together the lives of three women even as the author respects the separate strands of their distinctive identities. Never does the "collective" story overshadow those of individual characters. However, the use of three limited viewpoints does enable readers to know more, on the whole, than Leila, Becky or Mary know about one another.

Hence, readers occasionally watch occurrences through multiple lenses, which heightens awareness of character flaws, self-deception and unreliability.

The physical descriptions of homes herein are rendered with a keen eye in vivid detail. From Becky's birthplace in love and squalor to the chilly artifice of her pompous in-laws' domicile, settings mirror the souls of their inhabitants, and Piercy is ever-faithful to her premise. Some reviewers decry this rich description. Patricia Volk says: "Marge Piercy can seat 15 strangers around a Thanksgiving table, and by the time dessert is served you'll know all of them . . . But do we really need to be told 'Leila aimed to be a good woman'? A novel this generous requires no work, but robs the reader of those participatory moments when a truth is discovered on its own." Elayne Rapping, however, finds much to redeem in "such richness" of detail. She says: "These tales are mostly a bit too pat for my taste and intelligence . . .

But the strengths of the novel, found in Piercy's complex insights and deep compassion for her variously damaged and flawed heroines, overshadow its narrative simplicities."



## Key Questions

Consideration of this novel might begin with individual definitions of home and homelessness. To spell out parallels between the fictitious characters in *The Longings of Women* and real women known to members of the discussion group will underscore ways in which Piercy intends her writing "to be of use." Is homelessness different for women than for men? If yes, how so?

What societal factors contribute to the growing problem of homelessness in America? Connecting Leila, Becky and Mary to "real life" counterparts portrayed in the media might enable greater understanding of the scope, range and intensity of this problem.

1. How do Mary, Becky and Leila differ in their attitudes toward marriage, children, friends, family, work?

How does each change and/or grow in the course of this novel?

2. Research the problem of homelessness in your community. What steps being taken to alleviate or address this problem seem to be meeting with some success? Does Piercy advocate any action in *The Longings of Women* that could potentially reduce instances of homelessness in your community?

3. What does the author seem to be saying in this narrative about the changing shape of families?

4. While writing about Becky, Leila discovers some truths about her own life and marriage she had previously denied, or ignored. What are they?

5. What does Mary "admire" about Leila? What does Leila "admire" about Becky? Why does Becky seem to really admire no one?

6. Where, in this novel, do readers see each of the three central characters express the longings "to be seen for who they are, to be valued, loved"?

Who does not see, value or love these three women?

7. What might lead a reviewer to suggest that Piercy has "deep compassion" for her characters?

## Literary Precedents/Related Titles

The Longings of Women returns to elaborate a theme — home, homelessness, having "a place" — visited briefly by Piercy in earlier novels, and poetry collections. *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), *Vida* (1980), *Braided Lives* (1982), *Fly away Home* (1984): In the broadest sense, all of Piercy's prior, written work provides precedent for this novel.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) also explores the emancipatory effect a safe and private place can have on women. And the flip side of place, place as prison house, being kept patriarchally "in place," is explored in *The Longings of Women* as it is in Charlotte Perkins's "The Yellow Wallpaper."



# Copyright Information

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