

TALKING WITH MARY GAITSKILL

A NOVELIST OF MESSY DESIRES

Recovering from a glamorous life

BY LIZ BROWN

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'Life isn't made of words,' Mary Gaitskill is saying. 'It's much more physical.' She is talking about the presence of music in her new book, "Veronica" (Pantheon, \$23), which practically vibrates with sound. The author of the novel "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" and the story collections "Bad Behavior" and "Because They Wanted To," Gaitskill has long explored the sensate. She puts the viscera in visceral. Her characters may be made of words on a page but they are definitely creatures of appetite, sex and flesh - always flesh and its messy desires.

In "Veronica," a story of high fashion and AIDS in the 1980s, the body is as central as ever. There is Alison's body: She is a fashion model, caught in the swirling, decadent, destructive world of glamour. Her ambition "was to live like music." And there is Veronica's body: She is an earthy, unpretentious woman with AIDS who "wore shoulder pads, prissy loafers and thin socks" and says, "I think love is overrated. My parents loved me. And it didn't do any good." An unlikely friendship begins after Allison's career collapses and the two meet while temping in Manhattan.

Gaitskill recalls models on the scene in the '80s. "But they weren't that big of a deal," she says over an omelette and tea in a noisy West Village bistro. Things shifted in the early '90s, though. "It was like the whole country became obsessed with . And I did, too. ... I'm a little bit emotionally labile, and I can get pulled into that kind of mass obsession."

The book, which begins in the present, spans one day of Alison's life. Now in her 40s, she is broke, has hepatitis C and lives in Marin County without a car. On her way to clean the studio of her earliest photographer, she takes in small dramas on sidewalks and public transportation while recalling the now-dead woman who broke through the hard sheen she had developed in her skin-deep and soul-gutting runway life.



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The framework of Gaitskill's novel is at once simple and intricate; she is drawn to seeming contradictions, and she mentions "the juxtaposition of nature, of artifice, illness, age, beauty. I like putting together those extremes." Her blue eyes are direct and steady. "Writing is so sophisticated now. It's like people have forgotten that things that are crude and raw are very powerful."

But despite the extremity and rawness, Gaitskill is nothing if not exact in her prose, which is scalpel-fine in the squishiest circumstances. Her characters' desires and actions may spill out in discomfiting ways, but the author's words are always precise, training the reader's eye on the very detail that might make you flinch. A model's sexy torso becomes something else altogether when we see her "hard little drum of a belly with a button like a curled toe."

Gaitskill, who has just gotten off a train from Syracuse, where she teaches, and now landed in a Sunday brunch maelstrom, is exact in person, too. She has written before of her great admiration for Vladimir Nabokov, and the standard query about other literary influences does not receive a standard answer: "I'm not sure I can truthfully say I've been influenced by Nabokov," she declares. "Whenever people are asked who their influences are they always name the ones they think are the greatest, and that's more who they are hoping they are influenced by. But in reality, I think that influence is omnivorous and it doesn't pay attention, and you're probably influenced by people you dislike as much as by people you admire. Possibly more."

She quickly sidesteps the inevitable request for names to go with those negative influences. "I don't know if I want to say. I could, but I think I'll just skip that one."

But if what you don't like tells you what you do like, we may surmise that Gaitskill does not like easy psychologizing or glib pop culture references. Brand names? "I really think it's ridiculous laziness," she speaks quickly, fiercely. "I mean, I know that's old fashioned or something."

"Veronica" moves through the '70s, the '80s and the present day; Alison listens to songs and performs in music videos that could be neatly tagged with a title or a band name. Another writer might have tried to conjure up the passing eras through product placement and pop shorthand. Gaitskill finds that kind of writing may be "a populist notion, a unified notion of what the world is, but to me that's bland in a hideous way, and I just don't like it."

There is one passage where Gaitskill not only identifies singers by name, but also plumbs the depths of what their voices mean to the listener, in this case, Alison's father, a man who is deeply shut in on himself and prefers Jo Stafford to Doris Day. For him, with Stafford "hurt was evoked and tenderly held and healed, again and again, in waves."

Music is definitely an influence, and it is one that Gaitskill does like. And for all the clarity of sensory detail in Gaitskill's writing, she believes there are things that people cannot articulate in speech or on the page. "expresses for them what they would never say and they wouldn't want to say," she explains. "That's what I mean - the secret tender things that people couldn't and wouldn't even want to say in words."

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