



ALONE WITH YOU

Stories

Marisa Silver

Author of *THE GOD OF WAR*

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Eight indelible stories that mine the complexities of modern relationships and the unexpected ways love manifests itself.

Marisa Silver dazzled and inspired readers with her critically acclaimed *The God of War* (a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist), praised by Richard Russo as “a novel of great metaphorical depth and beauty.” In this elegant, finely wrought new collection, *Alone With You*, Silver has created eight indelible stories that mine the complexities of modern relationships and the unexpected ways love manifests itself. Her brilliantly etched characters confront life’s abrupt and unsettling changes with fear, courage, humor, and overwhelming grace.

In the O. Henry Prize–winning story “The Visitor,” a VA hospital nurse’s aide contends with a family ghost and discovers the ways in which her own past haunts her. The reticent father in “Pond” is confronted with a Solomonic choice that pits his love for his daughter against his feelings for her young son. In “Night Train to Frankfurt,” first published in *The New Yorker*, a daughter travels to an alternative-medicine clinic in Germany in a gambit to save her mother’s life. And in the title story, a woman vacations in Morocco with her family while contemplating a decision that will both ruin and liberate them all.

From “Temporary,” where a young woman confronts the ephemeral nature of companionship, to “Three Girls,” in which sisters trapped in a snowstorm recognize the boundaries of childhood, the nuanced voices of *Alone With You* bear the hallmarks of an instant classic from a writer with unerring talent and imaginative resource. Silver has the extraordinary ability to render her fictional inhabitants instantly relatable, in all their imperfections. Her stories have the singular quality of looking in a mirror. We see at once what is familiar and what is strange. In these stirring narratives, we meet ourselves anew.

Alone With You Details

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Janet says

There are the books you admire because they're excellent examples of the kind of book you also write. And then there are the books you admire because you could never have written them in a million years. Marisa Silver's short story collection, *Alone With You* falls firmly in the latter category. I'm taken by the oblique way she tells a story--trusting the reader's mind to put together the small pieces of a collage into a satisfying whole. The impact of these low-key stories surprised me, how the details of their parts built up into that big, often contradictory emotion. No easy answers here. The stories are all about people in their most intimate relationships--families, marriages--and the room for individual interpretation that's available at such close range. Subtle and masterful, a kind of book I could never hope to write.

Trin says

Another forgettable short story collection! I remember that one tale had some arty types living in a loft, and someone had cancer in one of them, and there was also maybe a camel. Other than that, there were the typical unresolved endings and a lot of spoiled, unpleasant people being spoiled and unpleasant. Nine times out of ten, I should just stop with the modern short story collections, huh? But that one time...that elusive one time...! Dammit. We all already know that I never learn.

Beth says

Marisa Silver's protagonists reflect on a variety of life issues--divorce, grandparenthood, depression--from a uniquely not-quite-middle-aged female perspective. The writing is predominantly excellent, with a lovely subtlety to it; Silver can extend a theme without hitting the reader over the head with it. The themes of sex, love and death have universal appeal. The abrupt endings with their notes of commencement feel so deliberately crafted as to make me think the author has really studied the American Short Story, but at least the conclusions aren't predictable, and each tale leaves the reader with something to think about.

In "Temporary," Vivian recalls her mother's long illness and her bolder roommate as she contemplates the transparency and transience of relationships amidst her day job as an office assistant at an adoption agency. "Three Girls" is a snapshot of a family at holiday time, attending a Christmas party and helping some strangers during a blizzard, that focuses on the role each sister has in the family unit. The disturbing "Pond" is about a girl with who gets pregnant, and the responsibility for raising her child, a bright and adorable boy, rests with her aging parents. The title story is about a middle aged mom, recovering from a failed suicide attempt with a backpacking trip with her husband, son Teddy, and Teddy's new girlfriend Elise.

The standout story for me was "Leap." It's finely crafted and balances life and death, reality and possibility through plot (Sheila's dog attempts suicide, reflecting Sheila's own state of mind, as her husband has just confessed an affair. Devastated, she sustains a heart attack and he nurses her back to health after a bypass), character (Sheila is a guidance counselor and suspects one client, teen outsider Morton, is gay and maybe suicidal), and setting (Sheila's flashbacks include to an odd situation with a patron of her pubescent lemonade stand is vivid, and a recollection of her experience on the high school diving team: "occasionally

she dreamed of diving, not of meeting the water, but of the seconds before, when the possibility of disaster was unimaginable.")

"How bad did a thing have to be before it was something you would never get over for the rest of your life?" is a central theme. There are some truly wonderful lines, too: "Their marriage felt like the waiting room at the vet's office--everyone waiting in a in expectant tense." and, to convey a young woman with baby fat: "Vanessa carried the flesh of her late childhood with her into adolescence just in case, as though she had overpacked, not knowing what she would need."

Sahar Sabati says

I read really fast and was expecting to finish this small, 153-page book relatively quickly, all the more that it's a collection of short stories.

How wrong I was.

Alone With You: Stories is one of the most compelling and honest portrayals of human nature written by a (relatively) new author that I have read in a long time. Emotions are treated like the multidimensional and exquisitely complex things they are rather than the boiled down version we are often treated to in contemporary literature. The intricacies of these short stories are so masterfully weaved together that they form a seamless tapestry reflecting raw slivers of contemporary Americana. The harshness of some of the stories is blunted by the skill with which Marisa Silver presents them to the reader.

Each story is like a rich truffle; with an incredible variety of points of view (the latch-kid child, the mother of a mentally challenged child, the father of a teen, the daughter whose mother is dying, the woman with a mental illness, the woman whose husband leaves her for another, the patient attendant at a VA hospital) it is certain that at least one character will strike particularly close to home for every reader.

The intricacies of the stories in *Alone With You*, seemingly easily put together, are also a testament to the acuity of the author's perception. She is as skilled an observer as she is a writer, and the two combine to create these incredible adventures into the darker side of human nature while managing at the same time to remain delightfully lighthearted. The father who hit his son in anger; the friend who sleeps with her roommate's boyfriend; the mentally challenged young woman impregnated by Down syndrome patient: these actions are treated like burdens to be carried rather than over-the-top melodramatic events. In an era of sensationalism, it's quite refreshing.

Even more refreshing is that the characters in *Alone With You* are far from perfect; some of them can actually make the reader quite uncomfortable. Amongst other things that can make readers uncomfortable are the little shocks as the characters are openly curious about typically taboo things, especially for women. I fidgeted when I read about Sheila in "Leap," a preteen thrilled at the attention of a sexual predator. My friend's button was pushed in "The Visitor," when Candy is fascinated by the different gashes, wounds, and stumps of VA hospital patients.

But these beautifully weaved tales of surprising introspective quality turn these situations into occasions to reflect on human nature, be it our own or others'. They also will leave you feeling uplifted as the characters, of all ages and both genders, display a sense of strength as they go through mundane, day to day hardships of life without losing the ability to reflect and grow from their experiences.

The word "slivers" has been previously used to describe the tales in this collection, and appropriately so. Each short story shares enough about each character and her situation that the reader can empathize without getting too emotionally involved, thus hampering our ability to reflect in a dispassionate way. I was reminded of literary para-sailing as I worked my way through *Alone With You*, since just like the author with her stories, you don't know when and where the wind will pick you up and where it'll take you, but you know that you are going to enjoy the process and gain a lot from it.

Alone with you is a fantastic collection of short stories that will give readers insights into the human psyche, whether it is evoked by the characters, or the secondary figures. These often dryly humorous stories are introspective in an unsentimental way, making them all the more powerful, while overall, Marisa Silver's work remains humble yet moving, lending it strength and significance.

(First published on Blogcritics and <http://saharsreviews.wordpress.com>)

Suzanne says

I've seen many great reactions to Marisa Silver's other books, so I picked this up to try her out. Uneven, but still impressive. The first few of these eight stories left me fairly cold, but I absolutely loved the other four, so it gets 4 stars overall. Most of the stories revolve around parent-child relationships.

My favorites:

"Pond" examines a father's conflicted feelings about his twenty-something daughter who is autistic and little more than a child herself when she gets pregnant during an unsupervised moment at her day care facility. The grandchild, who is completely healthy and normal, makes his affection for Martha more complicated. Burton's relationship with Martha and with his grandson reveals itself as something more than he had supposed in the wake of a near disaster.

Gary's perfection hurt Burton in a physical way. He felt as he did when he watched a theorem unfold seamlessly, the sheer elegance of it almost painful to witness because its presence in the world threw into high relief the incomprehensible mess of his life.

In "Night Train to Frankfurt" a grown daughter accompanies her cancer-stricken mother to a facility in Germany where an alternative treatment offers a last-ditch hope to the ordinarily super-practical and realistic Dorothy.

She proclaimed, if not a belief in, at least a tolerance for this latest of her mother's nonmedical solutions to "the cancer problem." This was how Dorothy referred to her illness, as if it were a tangled political issue that might be written about on the editorial page of her beloved New York Times, and then hotly discussed with the butcher or the man at the shoe-repair place when she went out each day on her brisk round of errands.

Helen tries to guess at Dorothy's motives in pursuing this uncharacteristic course when she has always been the most predictable of women, while she deals with her own disappointment at failing as a professional musician. On the train journey,

Helen apologized for the jolts to her mother's body, for the cold smack of air that greeted them on the platform, for the distance they had to cross to reach the cab stand, until she realized that what she really meant to apologize for was the fact that no amount of flinty-eyed pragmatism would help Dorothy through this moment. The fact of simply being was sometimes an unbearable mess and what was hoped for in life was so rarely reached. The shortfall between those two things was so much more fumbling and base than anything Helen could ever have imagined.

"In the New World" a Polish immigrant to the U.S. and owner of a small construction company has problems negotiating relationships with his well-to-do clients and with his teenage son who has gotten a girl pregnant. Anticipating his son's future reactions to unfolding events, he dips into the past, remembers his relationship with own father, his father's grief at losing three other children, and understands the universality of parental fear for one's children.

The title story, "Alone With You," opens with Marie walking with a camel across the Sahara. She has had mental health issues and has come on this trip with her husband, son, and son's girlfriend, ostensibly as "an adventure," but actually so she can work out some answers to questions of her own.

They had come halfway around the world to have "an experience." And yet, there were moments when she felt more ephemeral than ever, when the gaudiness of this experience-hoarding made her all the more unsure of what it meant to be living.

The lack of authenticity in the tourist experience juxtaposed with her struggle to hold on to her own identity leads her to a decision before the trip is over.

John Wyszniowski says

I'm disappointed with this collection of short stories. Formulaic in structure and subject matter, Marisa Silver does have a strong voice and possesses a subtle way of revealing emotional layers through her characters. However, none of them spoke to me in a powerful way.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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Bea says

The last two stories were pretty good. The author is a good short story writer, I just didn't care for the stories that much. They don't stick with you like Elizabeth Strout or Ron Rash or Ethin Canin or Tim Winton.

Maybe if the subject matter were a little more compelling....

Myles says

(1.3/5.0) Insubstantial and often exhausted.

Rachel says

For the most part, I thought that the stories in this collection lacked in both focus and resolution, with Silver's simple language and focus on ordinary domestic characters in unextraordinary circumstances contributing to this meandering feeling.

But! The last two stories, "In the New World" and the title story, "Alone With You," were fantastic. Both are similar in motif, in part about a parent observing his or her teenage or young adult son's awakening to the opposite sex. Where Silver takes each of the stories from there is vastly different, though both stories have a tightness of focus (without being obvious) that made them satisfying.

"Alone With You" especially was unforgettable. In this story, a mother is on vacation in Morocco with her husband, her reserved 20 year old son and his ebullient girlfriend. Silver is at her best writing about this girl, who has the "magnetic property of the self-involved" and "carries [the son:] away in her squall, his heart tossed this way and that." The mother also observes the way that her similarly reserved husband reacts to this girl, everyone drawn to her liveliness. If you find yourself becoming discouraged by the rest of the collection as I did for similar reasons, I'd advise sticking it through to the end.

Teresa says

3 and 1/2 stars (for what I think is an uneven collection)

I don't know if these stories were written over several years, but I'd bet I could guess which ones came before others. While some of the stories are stupendous, a few, even while carrying some original insights, jarred with lazy or facile phrasing here and there that took me out of what I was reading. Perhaps I was dissatisfied with those few, because I'd read "Night Train to Frankfurt" in *The New Yorker* (also included here and worth the reread) and it had set the bar so high.

Despite the disappointments, I learned some new things and feel this book is certainly worth the read, especially for stories like "Pond" and "In the New World." Both featuring a father dealing with a child growing up, they are wonderful stories with marvelous writing.

Cynthia says

You can see sunlight through Silver's prose. It's like a spider's web without the cloy. But suddenly you're in tears. As I read I kept looking back at the cover art of Hopper's 'Sunlight In Cafeteria' with his characteristic

use of light flowing across a casually gussied up woman and a suit clad, bespectacled man who gazes at her as she looks down at her coffee. They sit opposite one another but at different tables, both alone and separate though just a few feet from one another lost in their own thoughts. What a perfect metaphor for how Silver's people bumble around trying their best to do the right thing and then find themselves caught up in another's life they try and make sense of what's happening and how to make things better. One of my favorite stories was `Night Train to Frankfurt' where a cancer patient and her grown daughter go to a German facility for a last ditch alternative treatment. Her daughter realizes just how ill her mom is and tries to ease her mental and physical pain. The worst is neither knows what to do with their hope. Hope that this treatment might work while being hyper aware that this is likely the last of their time together.

I've already said her prose is wonderful but here are a few bits that stood out:

"(She) carried the flesh of her late childhood with her into adolescence just in case, as though she had overpacked, not knowing what she would need."

Another:

""You're going to hurt me, aren't you? You're going to leave"

(He) looked pained. "I love her. I'm sorry"

His clarity rendered her speechless. How could she have known that the bed thing she would never recover from would be love?"

What a writer! I kept looking for the seams to figure out how she accomplished it but couldn't find them.

Rctgale says

Snapshots of relationships. Left me hanging.

Alyssa Knickerbocker says

Lovely, but somehow forgettable...

Katherine says

“Their ski lift tickets were attached to the zippers of their jackets like price tags” (68).

I could have given this 2.5 stars; it is well-written, just not terribly interesting.
