

# An Ear for Women

## Interview with Megan Marshall

By Joanne B. Mulcahy

**G**rowing up, professor and biographer Megan Marshall practiced the piano or the harpsichord every day, a discipline that prepared her well for life as a writer. Marshall listens for rhythm and melody in language, her own and that in the letters and diaries of the women whose lives she explores. “A biographer,” she has written, “is like a good accompanist.”

In her most recent book, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast*, she literally accompanies her subject, integrating her experience as Bishop’s poetry student at Harvard in 1976. Meanwhile, Marshall’s two previous prize-winning biographies innovate in other ways, expanding our framework for reading history and women’s experience. In *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*, Marshall deftly blends the stories of the brilliant sisters who helped shape American education, the arts, and the Transcendentalist movement. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her next book, *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, which chronicles the story of this towering intellectual and social reformer.

An earlier book, *The Cost of Loving: Women and the New Fear of Intimacy*, investigated the challenges women faced in balancing family, work, and independence following the second wave of feminism. The questions she posed, which Marshall felt were initially misinterpreted, have only gained relevance. That probe sent Marshall into libraries and archives to explore how women had historically sought balance, a quest that solidified her interest in biography.

**Joanne Mulcahy:** You’ve been called one of the great biographers of women. What led you to that path?

**Megan Marshall:** Part of it was a fascination with women’s stories that goes back to my grandmothers, to whom I was very close. My mother’s mother lived through the San Francisco earthquake, and I loved hearing how she ran outside to find ash from the fires sticking to her bare feet. I loved her stories about life as a schoolgirl in Oakland, too. She was left-handed and her teacher tied her left arm to her chest so she would learn to write with her right hand. That fascinated me. I liked casting my mind back to the past.

My other grandmother was a children’s librarian and a storyteller. She was a font of narrative. I spent one afternoon a week with her in the library while my mother was at work. I became entranced with biographies for children. I remember reading about Amelia Earhart and Marie Curie, and the childhoods of these ultimately great women. I’ve always loved writing the childhood sections of my books. That’s where the reader can begin to identify. We all were children. What shaped this person?

I was a big fan of the “Little House” books, which are great models for historical narrative. They include so much detail of daily life, descriptions of landscape, and cliffhanger endings. While I was writing *The Peabody Sisters*, I read those to my daughters, and it helped to have Wilder’s voice in my head.

I heard about the Peabody sisters in a history course at Harvard—one of the first women’s history courses taught there, and the only history class I took. In the 1970s, the history department faculty was all male, and the student body was 3 to 1 male [to female]. Whenever I “shopped” a history course at the start of a semester, the whole scene was too intimidating. I never got through the door. I wasn’t as brave as the women I’ve written about! But as an English major, I read biographies of Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein. If I were a student at Harvard now, I might major in history—the department is full of fabulous women historians. It’s true almost everywhere now.

**JM:** Because women’s lives have often been misinterpreted, do you feel you have to write against previous biographies?

**MM:** It’s different in each case. The Peabody sisters and Margaret Fuller were trivialized in some biographies, though not all. In their time, some perceived them as busybodies, or too egotistical or ambitious. That’s what I’m writing against more than later biographical interpretations. Some people found Fuller



Megan Marshall

imperious, but how marvelous that she had so much confidence! I’m not a presentist, but I try to show what life was like for these women from their own points of view. That was an important challenge with Elizabeth Bishop, too. She was an extremely private person, and not well understood in her lifetime.

Working from the subject’s interior is key, and writing that way has effects beyond shaping character. People sometimes tell me they never understood Transcendentalism until they read *The Peabody Sisters*. I never set out to define Transcendentalism, but I think readers experience what it felt like to *have* those ideas, to think them, along with my subjects.

**JM:** Could you talk about empathy in writing biography? Did you like all of your subjects? How do you approach them in a fair and balanced way?

**MM:** I really do like all my subjects! Sometimes they scare me—how can I grasp the lives of women who were so much more accomplished than I am? Elizabeth Bishop was difficult as a teacher. But I got to know her by reading her letters and immersing myself in her poetry, and I couldn’t help but admire and even love her. I’ve been lucky that the letters and journals of all my subjects have such authenticity. Fuller and the Peabodys were part of the Romantic era, when self-examination and self-expression were highly valued; those were pre-Freudian times, and they wrote down things that people today might not. Bishop wrote honestly too; some of her friendships were most intimate on the page.

Some people have asked, “Don’t you feel guilty reading these private letters?” But for the Peabodys and Fuller, letter writing was closer to publication—they shared their letters. Bishop was a great fan of literary letter-writers, saving hers to and from Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore and May Swenson. These letters were saved for a reason. I don’t feel guilty but I do feel a responsibility to use them respectfully.

**JM:** It’s an ethical question for biographers, the use of private documents.

**MM:** Establishing context is really important. I was concerned about Elizabeth Bishop’s letters to her psychoanalyst because certain aspects could easily be misunderstood. Once I realized how central they would be to my narrative, I wanted to find out about the psychoanalyst, Ruth Foster. Nobody had previously identified Foster—she’d died relatively young—but I finally found her. She’s a fascinating person who was heroic in her own way, a woman choosing to train for an innovative profession in the 1930s. She was from an upper-class Boston family, whose parents refused to send her to college. When she came into her own money, she pursued psychoanalysis against her family’s wishes, becoming estranged from them in the process. She treated artists and poor black families in New York, which they hated.

JM: I want to go back to an earlier book, *The Cost of Loving*, where you looked at what women who pursued professional life sometimes sacrificed in relationships. There are many connections between the ideas of independence in that book and your biographies of independent women.

MM: I've always been interested in how the desire for independence conflicts with social constraints on women's lives. As someone growing up slightly younger than the leaders of the second wave of feminism, I was struck by some of the choices I sensed we were going to have to reckon with but weren't prepared for. I felt a real urgency to address these issues, thinking "I have to finish this book soon, or it's going to be too late." But in the end, the book came out too early and was misunderstood. Susan Faludi called it part of the "backlash." That wasn't my intention at all—I wanted to encourage women to face some inevitable complications.

After the really wrenching disappointment over that book—no feminist wants to be accused of backlash!—I decided it was impossible to hit the zeitgeist. I thought back over the interviews for *The Cost of Loving*. Many women in their thirties kept telling me they were the first to face these conflicts. That didn't seem possible. I started looking for a way to write about these choices through the eyes of women from the past. I envisioned *The Cost of Loving* a hundred years earlier. In the women's history class, I had learned about Mary and Elizabeth Peabody as reformers, founders of the kindergarten movement. Then a friend who worked as an archivist told me there was a third sister, who married Nathaniel Hawthorne. The three Peabodys seemed to bring together everything that interested me. As I fell in love with their letters and diaries, I got farther from the idea of applying questions about the 20th-century to women of the past. My childhood love of life stories kicked in.

This was also the golden age of women's biography, inspired by the second wave of feminism. Reading Nancy Milford's *Zelda* and Jean Strouse's *Alice James* and Paula Blanchard and Bell Gale Chevigny's biographies of Margaret Fuller—all of that spurred me on. Then I had to figure out how to write about three people, which was very hard.

Writing biographically left questions about women and love and ambition as undercurrents, but the research helped me answer my own questions. I was married and raising kids while working on the Peabodys, and I learned from them about patience and commitment to family. Even before the sisters started having children, they were taking care of parents and siblings and friends through illness and hard times. They had a respect for what had to be done, even while doing extraordinary things. This was quite different from the Margaret Fuller style of "let's throw caution to the winds and follow our hearts," which became an attractive story for me in a later phase of life. We can't all live that way, but we can all be inspired by "Let them be sea-captains!"

JM: I keep coming back to an idea from the biography of Margaret Fuller, the "fullness of being" that combines private and public life.

MM: Fuller did ultimately find fullness of being—in Italy, as a writer, revolutionary, lover, mother. For me, this has always been challenging, which may be the message of all my books—a comforting message, I hope, because we're all in it together. There were long stretches of time when I felt hopeless about finishing the book. But I think *The Peabody Sisters* turned out to be a much better book thanks to all the experiences that came with being a mother, and that caused me to look to the Peabodys for inspiration and solace.

JM: You mentioned the timing of *The Cost of Loving*. How is this combining of public and private life for young women now, for your daughters?

MM: I don't think it's any easier. When I was writing and taking care of the kids, I stopped earning for some years. I don't know if that's possible for men or women or a couple with children anymore. People work around the clock. I was in Japan recently as a visiting professor. Some of the young parents I



Elizabeth Bishop





Marshall, in striped t-shirt at age six, with her grandmother Elizabeth during story hour.

met there brought home for me how practically any other country has better childcare than we do. It's guaranteed by the government in Japan, along with much longer maternity leaves. Here you're facing a false set of choices that seem very personal or about your belief system. That's all hogwash but very painful hogwash.

JM: In a piece in *Literary Hub* about your Elizabeth Bishop biography, John Kaag wrote that women writers take greater risks in using the first person. We can be seen as self-indulgent. I wonder how readers have reacted to the memoir part of the book. Do women take greater risks with the first person?

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MM: Most readers have loved the memoir passages, which is what I'd hoped for. They can identify with me as the novice poet, and then get into Bishop's life. Mostly it was male reviewers who were critical. There may have been a generational difference in response, too; younger readers may be more willing to accept a hybrid form.

About a month after the book came out, I read a review of a male biographer's book. The reviewer commented matter-of-factly, "His previous books have incorporated memoir into biography," and went on from there. It was a statement of fact, no judgment. I can't say that's because the biographer was a man and I was a woman, but I was struck by that. Maybe it also had something to do with my writing about a female subject. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but it seemed to me that the male reviewing establishment was saying, "Well, she's come this far but no farther." I'd surprised them by winning the Pulitzer—*Margaret Fuller* was only the fifth biography of a woman written by a woman to win the prize in a hundred years. More than the criticism, I was struck by the tone, which was disrespectful and weirdly personal. You'd never think they were reviewing a book written by an experienced biographer.

I was so connected with that book that I took the criticism personally. But I am going to continue to follow my subjects' examples and keep setting myself new challenges in the way I approach biography. One of the best things about writing is the way that books have a life in the world that you can't predict—I think that's the way books are most like children. At one point I thought, "I hope nobody sees *The Cost of Loving* for a while." But the most amazing thing happened. When I came up with the idea of including my own experience as a student in my biography of Elizabeth Bishop, I worried it wouldn't be possible. I'd thrown away all my poems from the class. Out of the blue I got an email from Millie Nash, a student in that class. She'd been visiting her daughter in Nevada, and at a library book sale, she came across *The Cost of Loving*. She couldn't believe it was written by the same person who was in her class, because it came out so soon after we graduated. She asked the librarian to make sure the author was the Megan Marshall who'd written *The Peabody Sisters*. Millie bought the book and loved it so much she tracked me down. She thought it was amazing I'd had those perceptions early on. The book spoke to her about the issues she'd confronted as a professional woman and mother. I said, "Interesting that you should write. Do you happen to have anything left from our class?" Millie turned out to be an incredible keeper of documents: her own journals, all my poems from the workshop, and a correspondence and friendship with Bishop. I could never have written the book without her. So *The Cost of Loving* gave me a great gift in the end.

JM: Biography is archaeological. You dig up the shards and then figure out how they fit together. They may seem to be forming a square and then you discover a letter that changes the shape entirely.

MM: Yes. This is part of what the book on Elizabeth Bishop is about—the biographer and subject are in a kind of duet.

JM: Is there a difference between writing a feminist biography and simply a woman writing about a woman?

MM: I prefer to say that I write biography from "a feminist perspective." The subject needs to take the lead, and most of my subjects didn't have "feminism" in their lexicons. My feminist perspective causes me to pay attention to certain aspects of a life and influences the topics I look out for. But writing a "feminist biography" sounds as if the book will have an argument, and I prefer to let the life speak for itself. I'm choosing and shaping, and making my subjects heroic, each in her own way. But it is better for a reader to learn feminism from reading about a woman's heroic life—often it involves struggling against constraints on women's lives. Of course, a male writer could write a biography of a woman or a man from a feminist perspective. But there are also important (heroic!) aspects of "simply" being a woman writing about a woman's life. That is a feminist act in itself. A woman writing is a bold person, and choosing to write about a woman is bolder still. ♀

Joanne B. Mulcahy has taught at the Northwest Writing Institute of Lewis and Clark College for thirty years. She is the author of *Remedios: The Healing Life of Eva Castellanoz* and is currently writing a biography of 20th-century artist Marion Greenwood.