

Finding a good place in the world

THE HIGH COST OF LIVING
By Marge Piercy
Harper & Row, New York, \$10

Marge Piercy—novelist, poet and essayist—is a very wise woman and one of our truly socialist feminist writers.

To me, as to many others who are active in the women's movement, Piercy is a sister in experience and spirit. Her writings provide nourishment for us in our political work. Though many of us are marginally employed, we scrape together the cash for a copy of her novels when they first come out, and we pass that precious book around among ourselves until it's too soiled and frayed to read.

With *The High Cost of Living*, her fifth novel, Piercy hasn't let us down.

It is the story of a woman's small, hesitant step toward making a commitment to the women's movement—specifically to the lesbian, socialist, feminist, working-class women's community of Detroit. A graduate student in history, born into a working-class family, Leslie is caught in a tangle of political choice, economic necessity and personal needs.

As a woman, a lesbian and a worker, she's up against the threat of economic exploitation and oppression in every phase of her life. A college professorship offers her a chance of financial security and stimulating work. But it also means a sell-out to the straight world—closeting her lesbianism, isolating herself from

other women, doing bourgeois history and kissing the asses of men in power.

A friend in the movement urges Leslie to offer her skills and knowledge to other women by teaching history from a revolutionary feminist point of view in Detroit's newly-opened women's school. Leslie refuses, promising herself that once established in a teaching job, she'll devote herself to what, as she says, she really wants to do.

Piercy is careful not to simplify Leslie's embittering situation—having to conform out of economic necessity, having to betray her principles for some stability and intellectual satisfaction in a society made up of a few people who prosper by devouring the vast majority made up of Leslies.

The book shows how high the cost of living is for the dispossessed, how material and ideological forces prevent people like Leslie from living up to their highest principles and necessitate galling compromises.

What Leslie only begins to understand, but her creator understands so well, is that moral purity of action is a privilege of the rich.

True to the process and contradictions of life, the novel holds out hope of some happiness for Leslie if she can work out a way of combining her "career" with a commitment to feminism, without suggesting that such a way of life will be free of problems.

Leslie does finally strengthen her commitment to the movement by achieving a powerful insight.

Robert M. Shapiro



Marge Piercy

She finds that her attainment of a long-worked-for goal is meaningless because it's a merely personal achievement, with no significance for anyone beside herself. Only when she finds a way to share that achievement with other women does it become meaningful for her.

This insight determines the outcome of the novel and is a key to its politics. Piercy doesn't offer her heroine the conventional route to happiness by falling in love, but presents a new one: working toward radical social

change with other members of an oppressed group.

The High Cost of Living is a grim and somewhat graceless novel, lacking the flashes of joy, lyricism and fancy of Piercy's earlier works. It is disturbing, stimulating and even harrowing to read at times. Its qualities reflect the women's movement today and its change over time.

Much of the early feeling of elation and sisterhood has had to yield to less pleasant emotions because of the inescapable issues facing us: the pervasive violence

against women (woman abuse, abortion restrictions, rape, forced sterilization) and the increasing economic and emotional pressures on us, including most women's "double day" (on the job eight hours, plus all domestic responsibilities).

The High Cost of Living is a novel of its time, and that's very high praise. —Linda Greene
Linda Greene is active in the Bloomington (Ind.) Organization for Abused Women and lives with a cat named after Marge Piercy's novel, *Small Changes*.

From outside the social norm

ROOTLESS GENERATION OF PEACE EMPIRE

By W.D. Ehrhart
Samisdat Press (Box 231, Richford, VT 05476, \$1 each)

Ex-Marine Corps sergeant and poet are two categories not likely to be associated. The same goes for ex-Marine Corps sergeant and anti-war demonstrator.

"It was literally years before the rest of the 'peace movement' would have anything to do with the anti-war NamVets," writes W.D. Ehrhart. "They figured we were tainted, or crazy, or I don't know what the fuck they thought—but we got it from both sides for a long time. Really helped the readjustment situation. Eventually, most of the movement came to understand that we were sincere and knew what we were about."

What some were about became clear in *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam*, a collection of poetry by 100 veterans and sympathizers, published in the Bicentennial year. Ehrhart and Jan Barry, a fellow NamVet for peace, edited and contributed material they hoped would help to demystify the national heritage.

Since then, Ehrhart has published, solo, three more volumes of poetry, chapbooks by Samisdat Press. *Rootless* and *A Generation of Peace* came out in 1977; *Empire* appeared earlier this year.

Of the three, only *Generation* is thematically restricted to Vietnam. The others combine military and civilian experiences, including many of the traditional poetic subjects—love, death, and so forth. But all make it clear that Ehrhart is still about the business of demystification.

Essentially, his is a poetry of plain statement, at its best when self-consciously so:

*The clever ones
dress their sons and policies
in red coats.
They arm the world,
and ride their brothers everywhere*

(from "Bicentennial," *Rootless*)
This is not the judgment of an outsider. Once a kind of modern Paul Revere himself, the poet has seen the heroic ideal give way to

*The kind of guy the young enlisted men
admire:
he can hit a gook at 50 yards
with a fuckin' .45*
(from "Sergeant Jones," *Generation*).

Ehrhart's war poems, the ones that expose the nastiness, are successful as they are shocking and spare of decorative language. Metaphor works only when it is the natural choice of nightmare:

*This last time
it returned as yellow frightened faces
spilling from the bellies of birds*
(from "To the Asian Victors," *Generation*).

The civilian poems come out of the poet's personal life and adventures. (He has been, among other things, a reporter, a legal assistant to the Pennsylvania Department of Justice, a merchant seaman, a construction worker, a college student—Swarthmore '73, and an M.A. candidate in poetry at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.) Their language tends to be more figurative, their images more conventional. But many of them speak unconventionally to the problem of complacency, moral lethargy. And most explore the fears and doubts and understanding that come from being outside the social norm—a locus Ehrhart knows something about.

—Janis Butler Holm
Janis Butler Holm teaches at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Imagine

The conversation turned to Vietnam.

He'd been there, and they asked him what it had been like: had he been in battle? Had he ever been afraid?

Patiently, he tried to answer questions he had tried to answer many times before.

They listened, and they strained to visualize the words: newsreels and photographs, books and Wilfred Owen tumbled through their minds. Pulses quickened.

They didn't notice, as he talked, his eyes; as he talked, his eyes begin to focus through the wall, at nothing or at something deep inside. When he finished speaking, someone asked him had he ever killed?

(from *Generation*)



W.D. Ehrhart

Demystification is the essence of his poems.

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SHARON ROSENBERG



Thirty-two hours on a bus, even an airconditioned bus with a toilet in the back, is no way to spend a July weekend. "It's only \$50 roundtrip," said a cheery voice from the Chicago Committee for the ERA. It was the first of half-a-dozen phone calls an enthusiastic person named Mary Selvas at committee headquarters made to me during the two weeks it took me to decide on the ordeal. "We'll be saving money, since we spend both nights on the bus," Mary emphasized. After my initial groan, she left off the "both nights" part.

Surprisingly, some 200 other Chicago-area women, about a dozen men, and a handful of children also took advantage of this money-saving, body breaking offer to go to NOW's July 9 demonstration for the Equal Rights Amendment in Washington, D.C.

When we got to Washington, we found ourselves part of an estimated 800 from Illinois and 100,000 from throughout the U.S. to take part in the march and rally in behalf of the ERA and for an extension of the time needed for its ratification.

But when we left Chicago, we had no idea we were heading off to the biggest Washington demonstration since those against the war in Vietnam. We had taken the words of the rally planners that a crowd of "up to 30,000" might be expected.

We had been told to bring something white to wear—"in honor of the suffragettes" of 60 years ago. Most also brought lunches, and a few remembered pillows and blankets.

The buses pulled out promptly at 2 p.m. the day before the rally, heading for the Chicago Skyway and the turnpikes east.

"I see the need for the ERA a lot in everyday things that happen to you," said Deborah Ostwald, 27, one of the bus riders. She's a vocational-rehabilitation counselor with the Illinois Department of Mental Health and a member of Local 785 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees in Waukegan.

"Someone hit my car, and the insurance company was dropping me," Ostwald added. "It didn't respond to my letters. My father called the underwriters, and they said if

NORMA HANZ



Photos/Pat Strandt

EX-PRESS

Thirty-two hours on the bus leaves a lot of time to think and reflect on the meaning of ERA.

he'd write a letter, he'd get more attention, and they were right.

"The only response I got from the insurance company began, 'In response to your father's letter...'"

"I'm 27 years old," Ostwald said, a choke in her voice.

Vicki Jorgensen, 22, a clerk at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, said she was going to the demonstration because "The ERA is important in work and industries. Women get inadequate wages, and people decide you can't do a job because you're a woman. My sister had to train a man who knew nothing about it to do her job and be her boss."

Unlike Ostwald, who said she was nostalgic for the anti-war demonstrations she took part in years ago, this was Jorgensen's first such experience. "I was 12 years old during the Vietnam war," she said.

DEBORAH OSTWALD



Norma Hanz, 50, went to Springfield, Illinois' capital, once on behalf of ERA. "I believe in it," she said. "I—half the human race and should have the same rights the other half has. I was born that way. I never had my consciousness raised. There are millions of instances of discrimination. I work in an office. You have to be blind, deaf, and dumb to think you're not discriminated against there. Only the men have the executive positions. ERA won't make things more equal right away, but it is going that way. It will get rid of the silly little laws. I have a granddaughter...you don't do things just for yourself."

"I used to work in the same place as Norma," said Janet Lucas, 24. I'm going back to school to study social work and special education. I'm tired of being treated like something less than a human being, like a piece of meat, a piece of property. Offices treat you on an unprofessional level, like a housekeeper away from home, the wife that can't be there. I just don't understand why I should have to fight for something that should be mine."

"We need equal rights for people," said Clara Whitfield, 35. "After Martin Luther King's death, we were in an emotional depression. No more people were speaking out. Women are identified by the man who's name you're carrying, never mind if he's a deadbeat, a drunk, no good. And women can't get help unless they have minor children to support. No more children, no more help."

"My political consciousness has been active on and off for the last five years," said Sharon Rosenberg, 31, a medical technologist and a member of the Committee for the ERA. "The late '60s and early '70s were times for political change. I was married then and I was just a housewife and I didn't enjoy it. Very unproductive, very stagnant. I

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