

Q & A: OF MEN AND THEIR MOTHERS

Q How did you get the idea for the book?

A Writing a novel is like amassing the ingredients for a recipe, but over a long time. It's hardest to figure out the first major ingredient. I knew I wanted to write about mothers and their sons (I have two sons), and the themes that have always interested me are the small domestic dramas (and comedies) that throw light on a larger world. I'm fascinated by the complications and conflicts that involve work, class, family, home and how and whom to love. One day, a rather scruffy man rang my bell looking for my neighbors. Later, I found out he was coming to pick up breast milk that had been stored for a year or more in their freezer. Because I couldn't shake the picture of that milk out of my mind, it became the catalyst for the novel. All of my books seem to have these iconic touchstones: the mailman in Mail, parasites in Host Family, birds in The End of an Error, an antique chamber pot in How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life—and now breast milk—and, of course, potpies-- in Of Men and Their Mothers.

Q What's with the chicken potpies?

A To me they're funny--the idea of them, what they look like, the possibilities for labeling the different kinds, their retro quality (not to mention a few disastrous culinary encounters I've had making them). And as soon as I came up with the family business of potpies, the family name, Pollock, seemed inevitable—for alliterative purposes and the closeness of Pollock to poulet and pullet.

Q What is the significance of the title?

A Well, all men have mothers. So it seemed the perfect, all-encompassing title. But my publisher, publicist, and the various booksellers I consulted worried that a book called Men and their Mothers would end up shelved in self-help or psychology. *Even with "a novel" printed on the cover?* I asked. *Not good enough*, they said. So I added the *Of*. Two little letters, one little word, which seemed to make all the difference. And I'd like to point out that though the story concerns men and their mothers, women and their mothers also fill these pages. After all, women *are* the mothers; the mother/ daughter relationship is an elemental one. But this time there's a twist. My character has a beloved son whose less-than-beloved and unsuitable girlfriend is forced upon her. She struggles to learn how to mother and mentor her. At the same time, she also mentors a welfare mother who is having custody problems with her own child. I find women who are mentoring—and mothering-- other women a subject full of exciting possibilities for a novelist.

Q In this novel, there is a mother-in-law from hell. What about your own mother-in-law?

A On that, I'll have to plead the fifth.