

Notions of purity: An interview with Mary Gordon

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

One of America's most admired writers, Mary Gordon writes about women's choices and about moral and spiritual struggles in the context of strong family connections. She has a deeply Catholic perspective, though not exactly an orthodox one. Her novels include Final Payments (1978), The Company of Women (1981) Men and Angels (1985) and Spending (1998). She has also written a memoir of her father, The Shadow Man (1996), and a biography, Joan of Arc (2000). I talked to her about her latest novel, Pearl, and about her connection to the church.

Is your use of the biblical names Maria and Joseph for characters in *Pearl* a signal that this novel has religious resonances?

I think I wanted to turn our idea of the holy family on its head. In the novel Maria certainly isn't the passive, maternal, holy or silent Virgin Mary. She's not virginal at all. And she really butts her head against the world. Joseph is Pearl's foster father, as the biblical Joseph is the foster father of Jesus. He's like the biblical Joseph in that he's a good provider. But then he crashes and burns at the end, in a way that the biblical Joseph doesn't—at least as far as we know.

The novel contrasts Maria's life as a student in the 1960s with her daughter's life in the 1990s. It seems that the younger generation feels more helpless, less confident that it can change the world.

That is one of the things that most marks the difference between the generations. On one level, the 1960s were a darker time—think of the assassinations, the race riots, and the terrible Vietnam war stretching on. Yet somehow we believed that things would get better, that we could change them. Now there's a general feeling of hopelessness. That's why I end the book with hopefulness, with the final line "We will hope for the best." Hope is a very fragile virtue.

The theme of purity seems to be important to you, even as you know that the search for purity can take dangerous forms.

I wanted to tease out what can be valuable in the idea and what is pernicious. Since it doesn't go away, it must have some sort of power, some sort of resonance. We on the left thought that the dangerous parts of the idea would just disappear, but somehow they don't. People on the right have grabbed hold of notions of purity, taken them into their teeth and poisoned them. If we don't examine such powerful ideas carefully, they become deeply perverted. But nothing that powerful is without merit. We must take the idea apart and disinfect it.

The idea of purity seems to be integral to us. Nothing in life gives us the basis for it—life is impure, mixed, never single—yet there is still this dream of purity, of being one pure thing, of a certainty unto death, that comes from somewhere. At its worst, the idea is death-dealing, and is very connected to death. But if you simply say, "Let's get rid of it," then large acts, acts beyond the self, are impossible.

For example, an artist strives for a kind of purity that's impossible. The lover and the beloved also strive for a pure love that's impossible. If we don't have that image of purity, we don't become our best selves.

I like to reconfigure the notion of purity to mean giving one's utmost, not having a narcissistic interest in what we do, but doing whatever we do for the thing itself. The trouble is that the notion of purity has been used—as in my Catholic background—as a sort of tool for punishing women. It was too narrowly defined as sexual purity, and that purity applied only to women. That's a pernicious tincture in this brew that has to be guarded against.

There's a lot in your recent book about our relationship with our bodies. Why is this subject so important to you?

I think it's a challenge for women to get into a sensible and nondestructive relationship with their bodies. The female body is such a vessel of hatred and self-hatred, and yet it ought to be a vessel of joy.

A friend of mine once said, "If men had come together and said, 'Let's find a way to distract women, to keep them from changing the world,' they couldn't have come up with anything better than weight obsession." At any given moment in the Western world a majority of the women are worried about being too fat. With the amount of

mental energy spent on that, we could start a revolution. It's a very good way of tamping down the energy of women.

I don't think that the women's movement has made a dent in this issue. And now there seems to be an epidemic of cosmetic surgery—girls are getting breast jobs for high school graduation. It's crazy.

Yet I don't want to be puritanical. One of the things younger women didn't like about our wave of feminism is that they thought we were puritanical about things like clothes and make-up. I think that both genders should be able to play with adornment and to enjoy it, but not be tyrannized by it. It's a hard balance to strike. We're aesthetic creatures, we like to look beautiful. But to have such a narrow definition of beauty, based on the image of a 15-year-old boy, is perverse.

What is your relationship with Catholicism at this point in your life?

I go to church. I guess I'm a practicing Catholic, though I like Mel Brooks's comment: "I don't have to practice. I'm very good at it." I'm glad I grew up Catholic, because the terms were very large, and it was serious. And I loved the liturgical cadences. I think I'm a Catholic of a particular progressive stripe.

I'm very uncomfortable with the official hierarchical church, often very ashamed of it, particularly lately—ashamed not only of the pedophilia scandal, but of the behavior of the American hierarchy during the presidential election. The church has really squandered its moral patrimony by its sexual phobia.

On the other hand, the church is in my blood and my bones, and I don't think the world would be better off without it. At its best, it offers an aesthetic and a historical and ethical framework that is very appealing.

I also like being in a community. I like that in a large, urban Catholic church I'm with people I would never be with otherwise. And I like being in a place where no one has to deserve being there. At the university, in the literary world and in the middle-class world in which I live, everyone has to earn a place. No one has to earn a place in church. Anybody can come.

Do you find the mother-child relationship as difficult as the people in your novels do?

I have two grown children, 25 and 21, who are the great passion of my life. They're mysterious to me, but I like to think that I'm more conscious than Maria is, that I pay more attention and listen. I'm not as confident as she is, so I've felt that I had to look around a bit more. So far my children, thank God, are doing well.