

LEADING LADY

One of the foremost voices of our time outdoes herself with a vivid, searing remembrance of learning how to love her mother. *By Lisa Shea*

In her prologue to *Mom & Me & Mom* (Random House), African-American poet and memoirist Maya Angelou—best known for her classic coming-of-age testament *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—sets the tone for this latest, and most potent, of her serial autobiographies: “Love heals. Heals and liberates. I use the word *love*, not meaning sentimentality, but a condition so strong that it may be that which holds the stars in their heavenly positions and that which causes the blood to flow orderly in our veins.”

Angelou, who describes her parents as “matches and gasoline,” was three years old and her brother, Bailey, four when they were sent by train from California to Stamps, Arkansas, to be raised by their paternal grandmother. On a family visit to St. Louis when Angelou was eight, she was raped; afterward she was willing to speak to Bailey but otherwise withdrew for a time, becoming a “sullen, silent child.”

At 13, against her wishes, Angelou and her brother returned to California to live with their mother, Vivian Baxter, who had remarried and was running a boardinghouse and casinos. After weeks of refusing to address her at all, the already nearly six-foot-tall Angelou started calling her tiny spitfire of a mother “Lady” because, she told her, “you are

beautiful and you don’t look like a mother.”

This emotional trajectory—from naming her pistol-packing, big-city mom Lady to embracing her as Mother—became for Angelou the consuming psychological work of her adolescence. Their love for each other bloomed—unexpectedly—when Angelou got pregnant at age 16 after an encounter with an older boy. In a scene of terrific poignancy, Angelou describes how she told Lady, who had heard long-distance that Angelou was a few weeks along, that she was in fact eight months “gone.” A healing ritual ensued, and mother and daughter made an unbreakable pact.

Other passages from Angelou’s courageous life—as a struggling single mother, streetcar conductor, dancer, striptease artist, singer, actor, screenwriter, professor of American studies, and member of the Harlem Writers Guild, to name a few—only deepen this tough-minded, tenderhearted addition to Angelou’s spectacular canon.



Angelou

WE HAD IT ALL

A novel about how teens become humans. *By Carlene Bauer*

In 1974, six teenagers meet at a summer arts camp in Massachusetts: There’s Julie (“Jules”) Jacobson, an awkward, wisecracking Long Islander; Jonah Bay, the fragile, ethereal son of a famous folksinger; Cathy Kiplinger, a self-possessed dancer; Ash Wolf, a beautiful New Yorker, and Goodman, her handsome, brutish older brother; and Ethan Figman, a sweet, irrepressible artistic genius. In a youthful

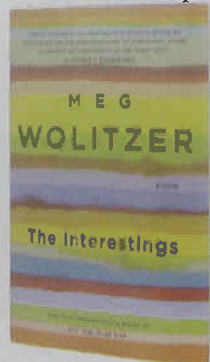
act of self-mythologizing, Ethan dubs this group the Interestings. In *The Interestings* (Riverhead), Meg Wolitzer’s tenth novel, she charts how this group’s collective radiance dims with each of adulthood’s blows.

Its gender-neutral cover, with a rave blurb from Jeffrey Eugenides, is no doubt meant to position *The Interestings* in the same ranks as Eugenides’ *The Marriage*

Plot and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*. One of the ways it differs from those two blockbusters is that Wolitzer’s women are fully realized; but she is truly, deeply committed to all her characters, whose every wavering of conscience—most centrally, Ethan’s longing for Jules, even after his marriage to Ash, and Jules’ jealousy of the golden life the wedded couple appears to lead—is graced with wit or a well-turned phrase. However, because Wolitzer also tenaciously renders the bone-tired, cat-hair-beset fugue state that is part of domestic life, the novel’s pace occasionally flags. More often, though, it soars, primarily because Wolitzer insists on taking our teenage selves seriously and, rather than coldly satirizing them, comes at them with warm humor and adult wisdom. Her portraits of adolescence are sympathetic to its mess of goofiness, pretension, irony, and vulnerability.



Wolitzer



THE ELLE'S LETTRES READERS' PRIZE 2013

15 ELLE readers vote for their favorite of three new releases that we love—this month, memoirs about coming-of-age troubles



1. HARLEY LOCO RAYYA ELIAS (VIKING)

Opinions diverged radically, but our readers very narrowly favored Elias’ spiky, punky memoir, which takes us from her idyllic Syrian childhood to her plunge into sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, and more drugs in New York City’s East Village. Some found Elias’ narrative of addiction and redemption “cringe-inducing”; others just couldn’t get enough.

2. HER CHRISTA PARRAVANI (HENRY HOLT)

The author lost a talented and troubled identical twin to drugs and spiraled down perilously too, until she found her way out of the darkness. For the most part, Elias’ detractors embraced Parravani, while Elias’ fans tended to feel that this book is a bit of a “pity party.”

3. STILL POINTS NORTH LEIGH NEWMAN (DIAL)

Following her parents’ messy divorce when she was seven years old, Newman shuffled between Dad’s outdoorsman Alaska and Mom’s suburban Maryland and ended up finding it hard to feel at home anywhere—or with anyone. Her account of finding peace (and a fine husband) warmed readers’ hearts.