



Small Changes

Marge Piercy

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Small Changes is the explosive novel of women struggling to make their places in a man's world. Set against the early days of the feminist movement, it tells of two women and the choices they must make.

Intelligent, sensual Miriam Berg trades her doctorate for marriage and security, only to find herself hungry for a life of her own but terrified of losing her husband Shy, frightened Beth runs away from the very life Miriam seeks to a new world of different ideas, and a different kind of love--the love of another woman...

Small Changes Details

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From Reader Review Small Changes for online ebook

Leni Rayburn says

Apparently I like Marge Piercy's poetry, which I read in college, a lot more than her prose. I read over 500 pages of this 999 novel before giving up. There are several interconnected story lines here - the first of a bride who gives up on her marriage (and no one will blame her who reads it). It abruptly changes to one of her Greenwich Village friends/ housemates - an intellectual Jewish woman with a highly dysfunctional family - who lets the men in her life walk all over her. After hundreds of pages of repeatedly bad relationships I gave up. I may check it out of the library again & finish it, but for now it's just too bleak.

Jade says

Free copy given by Netgalley and Open Road Integrated Media for an honest review

I am not usually harsh with my ratings but I couldn't bring myself to give this book more than two stars. In over 500 pages the author failed to create a connection between the characters and myself. I am a fan of poetry and I love when structure and use create underlying meanings in a story but I just didn't feel that "Aha!" moment while I read. I expected more character development with the main characters but was sorely disappointed and that carried over to any supporting characters. The last chapter in this book is what really left me stumped because it didn't give the reader any kind of closure it just leaves you guessing, which in certain circumstances work wonderfully, but here all it did was annoy me.

Merry says

When I read this in the early 70s, I thought it was one of the best depictions of 60s alternative life I'd read. I read the whole thing in a couple of days.

Alexis Leon says

An epic 542 page tome that tells the respective stories of two women coming of age and finding themselves in the beginning and middle of the feminist movement. Ugly duckling turned Jewish seductress Miriam torn between two men she loves equally, passionately, and differently. Timid Beth who marries the man she believes she loves and decides to escape the lie she's folded into. And happily the twain shall meet, and have adventures and friendship in Boston, discovering and re-discovering their selves. I enjoyed this book thoroughly right up until the last two pages. At that point, the author seemed to be telling me that the lesson to be learned was, despite the many advances women have made and how much better off we are, we can't progress any further or escape the patriarchy until we stop oppressing each other. or something.

Fritze says

I'm just not going to finish this. I read some of the other reviews and remembering the back cover copy, Miriam trades her PhD for marriage? WTF? I'll pass.

I get it that feminism in the early days was often pretty hardcore, but there isn't one male character that is likeable, and the female characters are only so-so. I knew as soon as I started that this wasn't going to be my favorite book, but I expected some of the *uplifting* spiritual/emotional growth common to most "women's lit." Small Changes is lacking that. It's just dreary.

I loved "Woman on the Edge of Time" and I've heard good things about "He, She, It." Maybe I'll check out the second one. But this leaves with doubt.

Mike Finn says

When you reach a certain age you begin to read historical books set in your own lifetime! This is certainly one of those books. Just so much of it was set in worst case 60s social setting, with women written about as if they had the whole world set against them, with man, all men, out to insist their women behaved in a certain way. I nearly gave up a number of times but saw it through not really feeling very positive about the whole thing. Pretty dreary stuff with so much off-focus emptying repetitive verbage.

Jessica Foster says

Set in the 70s, against the Women's Lib movement, with the Vietnam war quietly in the background, mostly around the US East, Boston and other parts of Massachusetts, this talky realist novel is so good to delve right into, the plots spirals out, small climaxes rather than a big one--it is a female feminist novel after all! It revolves around two women: Beth, small, mousy, fragile and from a narrow-minded family who cannot afford a college degree but can afford a lush wedding for her and her high school sweetheart-jerk. There is also Miriam, a curvy, bold, studious Jew, who soon comes into her own as a woman and goes on to do a PhD. We follow their lives, which intermingle, over many years. This is hyper-realism--you get to know these people well. And it is in this way Piercy lays out her consciousness raising fiction. As in the book, women gather to talk about the way society fails them, rather than letting them isolate in their female guilt. I was tabbing so many page in this. So much of it is Piercy calling out structural bullshit. At times, this can mean dialogue that seems to just want to make a point--I don't think people would talk that way, but it's not boring, you're nodding your head. I didn't mind, I grew to love the characters, and trust in Piercy's messages. I thought, in a very subtle way, the ending was chilling. You see how men can get away with things, and how a woman not enlightened to this, can fall prey to judging her fellow women. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, they have us conquered and divided. I love reading about communes, this ascetic ideal of life--I know little about the political context of this time. But I think it falls into an important role of women's fiction that sought to illuminate the trapping we fall into. Trapping after trapping I found all these women strong, although completely crushed.

It's such a 70s book too-- it has the context so right (70s novels familiar to me through my childhood love of Judy Blume perhaps). What's scary is that so much is relevant, tab worthy, still happening.

Joanna says

Meh. I got to know the characters--it was a long book--and felt at loose ends when it ended, but not for long. I'm not sure if this just wasn't one of Marge Piercy's more stellar books or if Marge Piercy is just not that stellar to me. To this end, I'll choose another one to read--some of her sentences were amazing and kept me coming back for more. Unfortunately, they were few and far between. Glad I checked this one out from the library.

Jessica Bronder says

This story is about two women Beth and Miriam. Beth is marring her boyfriend from high school. He expects her to be the standard stay at home mother while he watches her maintain the house. But Beth has other dreams and she ends up running away to find herself. We also follow Miriam is a graduate from MIT and bounces around in her relationships. She is against the traditional opinion of marriage and makes her way. This story follows their different paths in life.

This story is based in the 70's when women were starting to reach out from their normal place of the house. I really like following along as Beth and Miriam are stretching and stepping out into the non-traditional roles that they were expected to be in. It was fascinating to follow along both of them as they find themselves in such different paths from where they started.

I think this is a good book that shows a little of how women were changing roles in the 70's. I think it's a great story of no settling for a life of what everyone else expects you to live when you are not happy with it.

I received Small Changes for free from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Ellie says

Must read.

mica-micare says

Despite the fact that this book is set in the 1960s/70s, I found I could relate all too well to the characters Piercy has created here. Watching Beth and Miriam as they go through their relationships (mostly with men) was painful in the way that watching a good friend date shitty men is painful. It is very much about women's emotional labour (though the book never uses that relatively modern term) and unpaid labour such as housework.

Miriam, in particular, felt like a close friend who is miserable but stuck in her "cool girl" phase - who thinks she's unlike other women, who thinks she is somehow immune to all the patriarchal hurdles because she is

different from other women, above the drama and is friends with men. (view spoiler)

This book was written in the heyday of second wave feminism, and it shows. It was really, truly refreshing to read this book that is unabashedly angry at MEN, and not stepping lightly around the topic as if frightened that some fedora-wearing bro is going to hop out of the bushes yelling "NOT ALL MEN". I can actually just imagine cis-het men screaming "not all men" at it because of how the male characters are portrayed. That said, this book effectively explores the issue of sexism, particularly in the context of romantic, heterosexual relationships, and that portrayal is necessary to that accomplishment. And, if I'm being frank, many of the patterns Piercy illustrates here ~still ring true~ so it seems pretty damn relevant.

In terms of intersectionality, this book *could* use improvement. The cast was very white, with the rare exception on the edge of the plot. There are no transpeople mentioned, although, in all frankness, as I read through the book, I was afraid that there *would* be, and that there would be some stupid TERF bullshit to go with it. There wasn't, but since there was simply no portrayal of a transperson, that's not saying much.

Last thing, neither here nor there in terms of the quality of this book - there's a lot of sex in this novel. The heterosexual sex sounds pretty mediocre-at-best (there's a lot of coercion and rape as well) and the lesbian sex isn't really given much description. More importantly, it's sex with multiple partners in the late 60s and 70s. And OH MY GOD FOR THE LOVE OF EVERYTHING PEOPLE WEAR FUCKING CONDOMS I DON'T CARE THAT THERE'S A DIAPHRAGM OR THE PILL OR THAT AIDS HASN'T YET KILLED MILLIONS (it already existed then, people just weren't paying much attention yet) THERE ARE SO MANY OTHER STIs JUST WEAR GODDAMN CONDOMS. #readingolderbookswithsex

Kat says

Women in Marge Piercy's novels have messy lives, and I wonder if that's why *Small Changes* got short shrift in a one-line review in The New York Times in 1973: "A rambling story of two women, one working class, the other middle class, and their doomed stratagems for escaping hellish marriages." No mention of the fact that the two women are radical feminists, or of Piercy's messy, brilliant details about how we lived then: applying diaphragm jelly, going on gay rights marches, and burning bread.

Small Changes is a fast-paced novel with fascinating characters, but it is also a brilliant study of the women of the counterculture of the 1960s. Piercy interweaves the stories of two radical women, Miriam, a flamboyant, sexy mathematician-turned-computer-scientist-genius who is in love with and has sex with two egotistical men, and Beth, a working-class woman who runs away from a controlling husband, works for low wages as a typist, and eventually forms a women's commune.

Few novelists successfully managed to capture the earnest feminist politics and experimental living arrangements of the '60s and '70s. Piercy is savvy not only about feminism but about communes: she knows both the loosey-goosey house-sharing and the politically-motivated structures. The few communes I knew of were essentially house-sharing for the poor. I heard much more about "collectives": A friend's parents lived briefly in a collective, organized around radical politics.

When we first meet Beth in Syracuse, she cannot believe she fell into the marriage trap. Beth muses about how women's magazines encouraged her best friend Dolores and herself to build a life around men.

"If your hair didn't please, you cut it or you curled it or you straightened it, and if your parents let you, you

streaked it or dyed it. If your voice didn't please, you went around trying to talk in your throat. You did exercises supposed to make your breasts grow and your waist shrink, and always you dieted. You shaved your legs and under your arms and bought creams and lotions and medicines to fight pimples. The constant message in the air was that, if you didn't attract boys, you must change your body, rearrange your head, your personality, your ideas to fit in with what was currently wanted."

When her husband flushes her birth control pills down the toilet, she runs away to Boston and changes her name. She reads widely and gets to know some interesting people in a commune. When she tires of the power struggles between the men and women, she starts her own commune for women. They want to form an identity outside the world of the nuclear family and consumerism. At night they do improvisational theater.

Miriam, a brilliant computer science student at M.I.T., is sexy friendly, and maternal, and worries about and coddles Beth. Some men love Miriam, but she is working in a man's field, and weak men resent her success.

"The night before, something gratuitously nasty had happened. She had run into Barnett from her course in compiler generator systems and he had asked her how she had done. At her answer he had given her a mean squinty smirk and said, "Maybe if I had tits to shake in his face I'd ace it too." He had walked off leaving her feeling daubed with vomit. As if she hadn't been eating and sleeping and breathing that course."

Who of my generation hasn't had such an experience in school?

And Miriam has such bad taste in men. It is very painful to read about her experiences with Phil, a poet who writes sexist songs that insult Miriam, and Jackson, Phil's sadistic best friend. Miriam, Miriam, Miriam! Get out! But when she marries another computer scientist, things get even worse. And then we see the worth of Phil.

I very much enjoyed this novel: it really is a (fictional) record of women's history. Most of Piercy's novels have been reissued as e-books by Open Road Media. She won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for her science fiction novel, *He, She, and It*.

Kat Heatherington says

i found this book when i was 16 years old, and it, along with much of Piercy's early poetry, has undeniably had a formative impact on some of the ways i think and feel about relationships, gender, politics, interpersonal relations. it couldn't have had that impact if i wasn't already bending that direction, but rereading it (for maybe the 7th or 8th time) 20 years later, i can see it very clearly. Piercy is problematically second-wave in the way she handles gender dynamics -- i don't think there's a single wholly sympathetic adult male character in this novel. but for all of that, i adore both Phil and Jackson, and identify with big pieces of both Beth and Miriam. the book is also insightful, thoughtful, complex and forgiving. (even Jackson learns to bend, at the end, and Phil is utterly transformed, as are Beth, Miriam and Doreen -- she perhaps most of all.)

this book is not perfect; Piercy handles her politics like a bulldozer, and sometimes it overwhelms the story. but it's still one of my absolute favorite books of all time, and one from which i have learned a lot, and in which i see a lot of the world reflected, and shining.

Mandy says

This overly long and detailed novel is a portrait of the 1970s and the rise of feminism, the era of women rebelling against the past when they “knew their place” and were expected to keep to it. From an historical point of view you can’t fault it. It’s all here. Page after page after page of it. It starts quite promisingly with the young Beth falling into marriage and then gradually realising how restricted her life is. She finally finds the strength to escape and runs away to New York where a whole new world opens up to her. So far so good. But then the book becomes repetitive and tedious. The writing is flat and uninspired, which doesn’t help, and although there is a narrative progression there’s little actual plot and it all becomes a bit dull. Worth reading for the history perhaps but otherwise a bit of a slog.

Samantha Luce says

If you enjoyed the movie, Carol then you may want to check this book out. It's another period piece detailing the struggle of women who don't fit the cookie cutter stereotypical roles of being stay at home wife/mothers. These women long for something else and they are brave enough to venture out and try to find it. There's lots of detail about what was happening in the 60s and 70s. The struggle was real and sadly it still is today, but thankfully getting a little better. Baby steps.

I give it a pretty solid 3.5 stars rounded up to 4. I think it was a bit long and could have done with some tighter editing but overall enjoyed it.

I received a NetGalley ARC for an honest review.

Cyndy Aleo says

Almost ten years ago I discovered the author Marge Piercy when I read her novel *He, She, and It*. As I do with any author whose book I really, really love, I ran right out and bought every other book of hers I could get my hands on, including *Small Changes*, which the cover blurb promised showcased two women and the changes they make in their lives.

::: First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage :::

The first character we meet is Beth, a recent high school student who is apparently getting married to her boyfriend Jim fresh out of high school. Beth had been studious, and a good student, but her parents either didn't have the money for college, or, as the book insinuates, didn't see the point of sending a girl to college, as she mentions that her wedding would have paid for two years of school. The novel is told from a third-person omniscient perspective, and Beth is shown to be very disconnected from the events surrounding her on her wedding day, an almost unwilling participant. *Small Changes* having been written in the midst of the feminist movement, of course, Beth soon finds herself in a dead-end job, married to a man who forces her into the traditional "wife" role where she has to cook and clean while Jim sits around and watches her. She decides one day that she is desperate for escape, and takes as much as she can to work with her, then skips out on work and goes to the bank, where she forges her husband's signature, takes half their money (which should legally be hers, right?) and hies off to Boston.

::: Bohemian Rhapsody :::

In Boston, Beth begins an affair with a man she meets through her job at MIT. She is very disconnected with him as well, but seems to fall into the affair and continue it almost for a "learning experience." Through the man (Tom Ryan), she meets the other people in his shared apartment: Dorine and Lennie, who seem to have a decent relationship that started with Dorine posing for Lennie's art; and Jackson, an often angry Vietnam veteran who needles Beth mercilessly. Beth also befriends Miriam, a graduate student at MIT who is working in the relatively new field of computer science, who is independent, seems to need no man other than on her own terms, and bounces back and forth between Jackson and his friend Phil, a poet and bartender.

When Beth ends her relationship with Ryan, she is more saddened at the loss of the others who surround the apartment, until Miriam gets together with Jackson again and gives Beth an in. It's at this point that the perspective switches over to Miriam, with huge chunks of exposition on her childhood in Flatbush. She is raised by an attention-demanding musician father and a subservient mother. She bucks their expectations that she will get married (marriage is referred to as her only "prospect") by going to college and planning on graduate school. She begins an affair with Phil while still in college, and ultimately, as her father is dying and she is sitting with Phil, who is on a bad acid trip, has to choose between her family and Phil.

This section also includes background information on Phil's childhood, and brings Miriam's story up to speed with Beth's.

::: Now Begins the Switcheroo :::

Once we've been sufficiently "introduced" to the two we are assuming are the two main characters, Piercy begins to switch back and forth between each of their perspectives, as well as introduce countless subplots involving new (or barely mentioned) characters. Beth's husband sends a detective after her, who threatens her with jail unless she returns, so like a sheep she does. Miriam sets up a menage a trois with Phil and Jackson to keep from having to choose between them. Beth runs off again, this time to California, where she falls into what appears to be an almost mentally abusive lesbian relationship. Miriam gets a job in a computer lab and works on her thesis. Beth returns to find Miriam married. And so on, and so on, and so on.

::: Dated Themes :::

While I understand that this book was originally written toward the end of the Vietnam War and smack in the middle of the Women's Movement, Piercy sacrifices plot and character development to repeatedly bash her reader over the head with the idea that marriage is BAD. Not one marriage in *Small Changes* is portrayed as a good one, from Phil's father's repeated abuse of Phil and his mother to Miriam's eventual loss of self married to her former boss.

In case you missed the above point, we were originally supposed to become attached to Beth and Miriam. Miriam ends up in a big house as a forced stay-at-home mother while Beth moves from commune to commune, living with women, joint-raising other women's children, and ultimately, committing herself to another lesbian relationship. Beth, who has almost no material comforts, is happy. Miriam, who has fiscal security in her marriage, is trapped by a husband who has forced her into a stereotyped role, with her doctorate buried in a drawer.

::: You've Come a Long Way, Baby :::

As a child of the 70s, I don't remember all that much about the Women's Movement, but I do remember communes. *Small Changes*, however, was re-released in 1997, and even at that point, it was out of date. The

plot takes place over (my best guess) approximately five years, but by the end of the book, you feel like it's been about 40 years. Chapters jump from person to person and one moment to one months in the future with no transition at all, leaving you wondering what just happened for about half the book. Worst of all, I spent nearly 550 pages reading about characters who still had so little depth that I really didn't care about them. All I knew after all those words was that marriage is bad, and did you know that marriage is bad?

I consider myself a product of the feminist movement; I was able to make the decision myself whether to continue with my career (not unlike Miriam's in the programming, a male-dominated field), or whether to stay home with my children. Feminism is about having a choice, and Piercy's perspective in *Small Changes* is every bit as limiting as what she claims marriage is.

This review previously published at Epinions: http://www.epinions.com/review/Small_...

Sarah LaFleur says

This book is hands-down my favorite book of all time. Wow, just wow. The characters felt like real people to me and the way they interacted with each other touched me so incredibly deeply... Piercy paints a portrait of love, sexuality, and womanhood that is so real and human and moving.

Blair says

It's such a comfort to read a book about the experience of being a woman (a white woman, rather) in male world. It's a comfort to read a book that talks about issues that I grapple with in daily life but still (still!) rarely encounter in literature. The novel alternates between two women's points of view. I found Beth endearing and relatable. The sections with Miriam were more difficult for me to read because she becomes so dishonest with herself, and so much in denial about her life, that at some times I just wanted to shake her and tell her to get out. In contrast, Beth becomes increasingly self-aware and self-actualized over the course of the novel and at one point I almost feared that Piercy was going to turn her into a saint but it never got to that point for me.

The chapter titles are witty and add a lot to the reading experience. Occasionally I felt like character interactions were just an excuse for Piercy to hash out two sides of an argument, but not often enough for it to be bothersome. Joining a commune has never been more appealing to me.

Donna Davis says

This title was originally published in 1973 during the second wave of feminism that followed the US Civil Rights movement, and then the anti-war movement against the US invasion of Vietnam. Marge Piercy is a prominent veteran writer who spoke to women's issues during that time and in years to follow. She doesn't need my review, and neither does Open Road Integrated Media, I suspect, but my thanks go to them and Net Galley for letting me reread this wonderful novel digitally. I received this copy free in exchange for an honest review, but the reader should also know that I came to this galley with a strong, strong affinity for Piercy's work already, and my bookshelves are lined with paperbacks and hard cover copies of her books. But they are thick and sometimes heavy to the arthritic hand, and it's a joy to be able to read them on a

slender electronic reader.

In 1973, many young adults had cast off the fetters of the impossibly repressive social relations of the 1950's and early 1960's. Their parents, on the other hand, were frequently entrenched in the mores that had been with them all of their lives, and felt threatened by the new ideas—some of which were actually pretty stupid—that many Boomer era teens and twenty-somethings embraced. Some notions that were new then are ones most of us now take for granted. Most of western civilization is no longer troubled, for example, by the idea that a woman may want to have a career, and that some women don't want to have children. Most parents no longer speak of marrying a daughter as a way to transfer the expense of feeding and sustaining her from themselves to a man.

But in 1973, these social mores were still really prevalent. So to readers younger than fifty, or perhaps younger than forty, some of Piercy's text is going to appear to be over-the-top, a vast exaggeration. It isn't. And I have to thank Piercy for the gift of her insights, which came to me while I was a young woman still determining what was and was not acceptable in my own relationships.

The sly way Piercy makes her most prominent point is in following the lives of women, two in particular: Beth, who at the story's outset, is indeed being "married off", and Miriam, the least-favored child of the family who goes away to school and moves into a series of unconventional relationships. There's a lot of the cultural flavor of the late 1960's and early 1970's here, and Piercy uses her narrative to describe ways in which even the most enlightened women, those seeking to build bonds with other women and support them as they set out to fulfill their dreams, nevertheless find themselves mired in unequal, sometimes physically and emotionally abusive relationships. Women that believe they have liberated themselves by refusing to marry, or by joining a commune and not being monogamous, nevertheless find themselves trapped in destructive situations. Piercy shows us how every woman in her story can see that a good friend is in a bad place; each woman doubts herself first when she starts to reconsider her own entanglements.

It is interesting in hindsight that communal and non-monogamous relationships could be discussed freely, but lesbianism was still so far out on the periphery that not even the most trusted of straight friends were necessarily going to be in on the nature of the coupling. And this is dead accurate given the time period; I was there. And gay sex among men was a mental cobweb to be brushed away. Trans sexuality was still considered a sign of mental illness by nearly everyone, and it isn't in this book.

Because it deals with relationships and the internal narratives primarily of women, with occasional side-trips into the heads of the men both women encounter, and also of other women Beth and Miriam are close to, this novel is likely to be labeled "Chick Lit", a genre title I have become increasingly reluctant to use. Think of it this way: how many women have read novels that are entirely about men or one man, and considered what they just read to be relevant and at times, superior literature? And now I have to wonder why, when a book is almost entirely about women or a woman, told from a feminine perspective, it is assumed by so many people that men should not be interested in that literature also?

Note that this tome exceeds 500 pages. The text itself should be accessible to anyone with a high school diploma or equivalency, but not everyone has sufficient stamina to make it through a book of this length. However, if one is on the borderline, and especially if one is a woman interested in evaluating the nature of our most important relationships, this would be a fine place to begin reading longer books.

For those that enjoy reading about this time period, and for those interested in modern feminism as well as the history of American feminist thought, Piercy's body of work, including this title, should be unmissable. Her towering feminist presence was a beacon to so many of us, and many of the issues that were so urgent

then are still urgent now.

Dennis says

This was a somewhat predictable yet somewhat unpredictable book because none of the women ended up precisely where I thought they would at the end of the story. A tale of the poor options offered to women sometimes and the poor choices they sometimes make but with the end result being that given the choices they have to change things, they sometimes choose well and sometimes not. What I liked was that this really reflected the unpredictability of it all very well.
