

## Introduction

### How Could She Possibly?

Oh, hell. It's a sequel.

Don't worry, there isn't a trilogy in the works because I didn't really want to write this book. I wrote about all the women I wanted to in *Fierce*—the big names, the ones I'd been carrying around in my heart for years, waiting to share them with someone, anyone. My editor Lisa, patient to a fault, had to ask me several times before I threw up my hands and said, "I guess!" Rather like the moment when I took back my college boyfriend after our breakup and began to fall deeper in love with him every day until I couldn't bear to be parted from him (and now we've been married for over twenty years with two large children), once I said yes to Lisa, I began to love these ladies too.

They're an odd bunch: Matriarchs tossed together with mercenaries, various moms alongside prophets and victims, even an actual dude for good measure. I'm not trying to name precisely and once and for all what *really* happened but naming the ambiguity and imagining what might have been. This is a big part of feminist biblical interpretation: not making things up whole cloth but reading between the lines, taking educated guesses at what's being hinted at. We take this tack because so much of scripture and its interpretation since it was written is from a male perspective,

concerned with culturally defined male activities and The Big Story that men are in charge of. This doesn't make it bad by any means, only incomplete. In the very beginning, God created humans in God's own image, male-and-female, the first human containing multitudes. Why would The Big Story working itself out in history use only men as actors?

There's so much more going on underneath any Bible story you'd care to name—more characters, more grime and intrigue and sex. I'm not supposed to talk about sexy things, though, because I'm a priest and this is a book about the Bible. We are meant to be serious and wholesome, the Bible and me, and there's no place for sex-having, much less sex-enjoying, in church. Only, as I talked about in *Fierce*, the Bible is, in fact, R-rated for language, violence, and sexual situations, often all at the same time. The Bible reflects back to us what we're going through, what we see daily in the news, what we fear, and what we desire. The Bible is R-rated because our lives are R-rated. It's moving and transformative precisely because it deals with the real, unsanitized version of existence.

In seminary, they told us the same thing: all this stuff we're teaching you, you can't tell your congregations; they can't handle it. Not the "God loves you" stuff; that's fine—it's the ahistorical stuff, the editing of scripture across generations, the mythic nature of all of Genesis and Exodus, the pointing out of Jesus' violent nature in the midst of his countercultural ministry, God's concern for how we spend our money and complete silence on homosexuality. That stuff won't fly, they told us. You can't.

Oh, I can, and I will.

I'll tell you what, though—after *Fierce* came out, when I was constantly posting on social media and sharing the book trailer and drumming up interest, I got a surprising number of comments from random men quoting Galatians 3:28 at me. In retrospect, maybe it wasn't that surprising. If you're not super familiar with your biblical citations, that one reads, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Beautiful, right? There

are connection and deep freedom found in the community of God. But that's not what these dudes were after. They meant, "You can't do that." Whether the emphasis was on *you* or *that* doesn't matter. They meant, "How could she possibly write this?" They thought Paul meant that not only was there no point in raising up women's stories in this glorious, postgender world we all know we live in, but it was their responsibility to tell me I wasn't allowed. They felt threatened, and bless them, they just didn't understand the wide-open vision God has for creation, a vision that spreads its arms beyond the limits we impose on it.

Aside from these few misguided fellas, all I've heard for years now is thousands of people who felt like a wall came down when they read these stories. Like they'd suspected there was more to what they'd learned but didn't know where to look, like they'd longed to see themselves in scripture but had never been taught, like their shoulders unhunched and their hearts cracked open just a little and their eyes got wider like a Disney princess suddenly coming across a handsome vista or a bucolic man. So you're damn right it's a sequel, and I haven't said everything there is to say.

I wanted desperately to include a chapter this time about biblical trans people. But there are no trans characters in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. *Fierce* and *Brave* are ostensibly about women in scripture, but they're more about those excluded from power structures and cultural memory for not being men. There are some who say the eunuchs mentioned here and there could be understood as trans and, indeed, might be included in the sweeping arc of queer history, though only the Ethiopian eunuch has any substantive conversation in scripture. There's a playwright who wrote Joseph (of *The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*) as a trans man, and I am so here for it. Gender isn't binary, and I guarantee you there are characters in our Bible who didn't fit their culture's definitions. But we don't really know who they were.

We sing a song at the Edge House, the campus ministry I serve, that may get at what I want to say. The lyrics are "In God's image, I was created. Male and female God created me." At first

glance, it seems to suggest a gender binary, but recall the second story of creation in Genesis when God created the first human, the *adam*, genderless and containing all gender. God created humans in God's own image, male-and-female: the most appropriate pronoun for God is *they*. God is male-and-female; God is plural and singular. (The singular use of the pronoun *they* goes back hundreds of years in English, and most of us use it casually every day.) As a cisgender woman, I don't have direct experience, but I try to draw connections to trans experience here and there in this book because God didn't make no trash. To my trans siblings: when I write about women living outside of conventional power or being tricksters or victims or businesspeople or just living their damn lives, those women include you in their embrace.

I use the phrase "how could she possibly" a lot in this book, mostly in the mouths of people who dismiss the experiences of women and minorities. It comes from a deep place within us, this sense of judgment and deserving and this inability to conceive of another person's humanity. But how we interact with the world is just the opposite: it's all about possibility.

I'm going to confess something to you here: I read a lot of fan fiction. You know, the further adventures of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson where also they have a lot of sex. I mean, not always—sometimes it's a tender exploration of Sherlock's asexuality or John's PTSD. Or it's a slice-of-life piece about a case referenced in the show but that the viewers didn't see. Or it's a poetic treatment of their friendship during an apocalyptic climate event where the earth stops rotating on its axis. It's a way to explore characters and worlds and even our own lives in more depth in the context and comfort of a well-loved story. Fan fiction is about possibility. I framed this as a confession, but I'm not ashamed of it at all.

When I was writing *Fierce*, I went back and forth with the aforementioned editor Lisa about the Mary Theotokos chapter because with each revision, she said, "It feels like fan fiction." We eventually came to an understanding of what she meant by that, and I fixed it and moved on, but in the moment, I kept replying,

“But Lisa, every chapter I’m writing is fan fiction.” I’m taking an original piece of art that has moved me and expanding on it, exploring what it could mean, making it into something different. And funnily enough, much of scripture is a form of fan fiction as well—fans of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs writing stories about them, fans of Saint Paul writing more letters in his voice about the things they were concerned about. It doesn’t make it lesser, just like something being metaphorical doesn’t make it lesser: a metaphor is more than the literal meaning; it adds to it. Fan fiction is more than the literal story.

In scholarly circles, they call them *transformative works* rather than *fan fiction* because the writer is making something entirely new from the building blocks of the original. Fan fiction isn’t simply porn-laden adventures of characters we love; it’s about investment in something we are passionate about, it’s participation in the creative process, and it’s about what we’re missing. Even without adding stories to the main narrative, readers of *Pride and Prejudice*, almost to a person, feel that it is their story, that there is communal ownership of the story beyond author Jane Austen. Obviously, they didn’t write it, but it has taken on a life and a possibility beyond the words on the page. Every movie or television adaptation is scrutinized for what they kept, left out, or added; every actor considered reverently against the book; every glance or touch holding an entire novel’s meaning that they then write, either in their hearts or on paper. Neil Gaiman has made his professional name writing fan fiction, by his own admission. Fans of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* wrote sequels within his lifetime, so he wrote a second book to set the record straight. Half of the letters attributed to Saint Paul in the Christian Testament were likely written by his followers in his name. The Song of Solomon probably wasn’t written by Solomon, and the Psalms, while attributed to King David, were probably written by others in his name. Sometimes these transformations are orgasmic, but more often, they’re cathartic.

I’m telling you all this because there’s a form of biblical interpretation Jewish rabbis do called midrash, which is retelling and

expanding on scriptural stories in order to understand them better. They add in motivations, additional details, and entirely new scenes. My friend Rabbi Yitzi was very clear with me that Jews do not think of midrash as fan fiction. Midrash is imaginative, but it is also authoritative, canonical even. Hagar, for example, is understood as an Egyptian princess who willingly chose servitude with Sarah and Abraham because of their faithfulness, even though this is very much not in the Genesis stories, and Yitzi and his wife Dina do not find this to be an optional detail. But I wonder if there's a fundamental misunderstanding about what fan fiction is, that it is shallow and ridiculous as opposed to compassionate and enlightening. I can tell you that the piece entitled "Alone on the Water" about Sherlock Holmes discovering that he is dying of cancer and John Watson caring for him in those last days has me weeping every single time and trying to make sense of sudden death.

When the people of Israel were ripped out of their homes and their Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE, they tried to make sense of it. They wrote songs and scholarly essays and myths and fairy tales and historical fiction to try to understand how this trauma could possibly have happened. Our ancestors were just living their lives, weren't they? They were doing the best they could, and then there was Babylon invading and pillaging, and where was God? I'll tell you where: God was right pissed off at Israel and was grieving by their side as well. This is how we got most of the Hebrew scriptures—human beings taking the ancestral stories they'd heard all their lives and revising them, transforming them, and retelling them to a new generation in an attempt to keep such tragedy from befalling anyone again.

And this is why I call what I'm doing in this book fan fiction. Because some of it is just picking up what the text is laying down and offering it to you like a crow with a shiny bit of foil. "Check this out; have you seen this?" And some of it is imagining what was going on behind the text, the meaningful looks people gave each other, the unspoken tensions, the physical connections and

violence we gloss over when we read it in church. I wrote this work of fan fiction because I am constantly wrestling with scripture, demanding a blessing and walking away with a limp. I wrote it to answer the question, “How could you possibly?” I wrote it for those of you who longed for more after *Fierce*, for those who struggle to find yourselves in scripture, and for those of you who have never heard of these women and still recognize them as family. I wrote it because I couldn’t possibly not. And I wrote it because I’m a fan.