

# Mary Gaitskill



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Mary Gaitskill's name has become synonymous with the 2002 film, *Secretary*, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal. It was a Hollywood, *Pretty Woman* version of Gaitskill's novella of the same name from her first short story collection *Bad Behaviour* (1988). Gaitskill comments "I think it [*Secretary*] has charm — *Pretty Woman* has charm too, in a late-eighties sort of way — but that finally it is rather insipid. Even with my reservations about *Secretary*, I don't think it's a piece of junk on its own terms, it is a fun little movie, and I'm sure it brought me some new readers.

Gaitskill's writing contains a vast array of characters, from models to drug addicts, but how did she begin writing? "I started writing as a small child. After learning how to write at six, I wrote a short story. It was a very simple one, but clearly it was something I had a fundamental interest in. It's a way of asserting self and identity. I think that impulse is still present in anyone who continues to do any kind of art into adulthood, but other things come into it. I remember as a teenager being perplexed and disturbed by what I saw happening between people and on a societal level, and I wanted to write about it. Not so much as social criticism, but more to reveal, to say 'look at this.' I didn't feel I had answers exactly, but I felt so much went on that wasn't even seen or acknowledged. Things that were too mysterious to address socially or politically. That at the time was a great inspiration to me. Also I loved to read. Reading great fiction moved me and nurtured me in a way nothing else did. I saw it as a beautiful and benign force, and I wanted to be part of that."

*Veronica* is Gaitskill's second novel,

following *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991). *Veronica* combines the decadence and debauchery of the 1980s, where Alison, a former modeling sensation and Veronica, an eccentric middle-aged proofreader dying of AIDS collide against the backdrop of New York. This electrified period is seen through Alison's present-day situation, suffering from Hepatitis C and working as an office cleaner for a man who once photographed her.

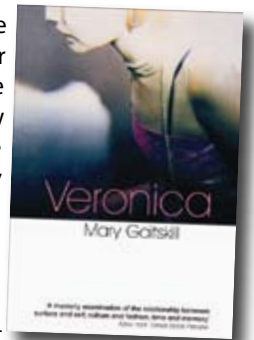
Gaitskill was never a model, or involved in the fashion world, but she explains where the inspiration to write *Veronica* came from, "something that people sometimes don't understand on this subject: how a writer's environment influences her isn't always literal. *Veronica* has a model as a main character and the fashion world as a backdrop for a good chunk of the book. I was never around models much or in the fashion world at all. I did get glimpses of it now and then, but it wasn't part of my environment in a literal sense. However, I started writing the book in the 90s, when popular culture had a near-obsession with models and fashion. I was very interested in this. Intuitively, I found it a good oppositional counterpoint for the subject of illness and mortality."

Gaitskill began writing *Veronica* in 1992, "When I wrote the first draft, I made myself write very quickly and roughly, because I wanted to communicate the rawness of Alison's feelings. I didn't want the fine quality that has characterised many of my short stories, but because I was so loose with the draft, it was very hard for me to work with it, I think partly because I was working with an emotional register that I didn't yet understand mentally, and writing is a very mental process. Over the years, I would take the manuscript out and look at it, and I simply did not know what to do with it. It

contained some of the best writing I had ever done, and some of the worst, and I didn't know how to work with the discrepancy. Basically I would say it took a long time for my mental understanding to catch up with my intuitive understanding of the material."

*Veronica's* themes include beauty and ugliness; sex and cruelty; youth and age and the relationship between surface and self. *Veronica* does not epitomise the sophisticated, falsely iconic myth of "cool", which Alison has learnt to view as ideal in the fashion world. There is an unspoken bond between the two women, which results in a friendship that is ultimately redemptive for both of them. "To me Alison is someone who has learned from her mistakes. She is in some ways a wretched person; she is sick and poor and would seem to have wasted her life. But she hasn't wasted it altogether because she has learned some things many people never learn. She has learned that not everything is about her and that life is vast and strange, and she respects that. She is suffering, but she has learned that life includes suffering, and that her suffering does not make her special, and that many suffer much worse. A person who understands these things is not prone to self-pity."

So what are Gaitskill's plans for the future? "I am finishing a short story collection and I am planning to return to a novel that I started in 2000. I hope it doesn't take me ten years to finish it." *Veronica* is available now in all good bookshops.



Shona Fairweather