

A Conversation with **MARTHA O'CONNOR**
Author of **THE BITCH POSSE**

Q: So much of women's fiction is labeled "chick lit" these days. What does that term mean to you? How does **THE BITCH POSSE** relate to the genre?

A: I don't have any personal vendetta against "chick lit," but as a reader I am bored to tears by the formula, so I only read "chick lit" if it's been written by a friend. (Of course, I am only friends with brilliant people who write books that transcend the genre.) At its most clichéd and horrible, "chick lit" stars a twenty- or thirty-something heroine who lives in a large metropolitan area (preferably New York); we'll call her Chick. Chick despises her horrid boss and is desperately in love with Mr. Wrong. But fortunately Chick's best friend, who was right there under her nose all along, transforms into Mr. Right! (Unless, of course, Mr. Best Friend happens to be gay, which he often is.) Covers are usually pastel and include one or more of the following: high-heeled shoes, martinis, purses, Manhattan skyscrapers, or bright red lips. Who, really, lives like this?

THE BITCH POSSE does not relate to chick lit at all. In fact, in England, they're calling it "anti-chick lit." To me, it's simply a story that moved me... a story I was compelled to write.

Q: You cover a lot of intense subjects in **THE BITCH POSSE**—from underage sex to drug abuse to self-injury to physical abuse. Why include all these gritty topics in the book? What message do you wish to convey?

A: Samuel Goldwyn once said: "If you want to send a message, call Western Union." I didn't make a conscious choice to include this subject matter or to send any type of message—the characters merely led me into their lives, and their lives included all those things. But looking back at it, I think those are the realities for a lot of young people. And a lot of adults have those things in their pasts, but don't talk about them. As a consequence there's a huge disconnect between adults and teenagers. My friends and I faced every one of these ourselves. Talk and write about them, I say!

Q: Did you have any real-life friendships that inspired **THE BITCH POSSE**?

A: There was a group of girls to whom I was very close in high school. We got into a lot of trouble together, and a lot of people did not want us to be each other's friends because they thought we were bad influences on one another. Maybe we were in some ways, but I can honestly say there are days I wouldn't have gotten through had it not been for those friends. Many of us have lost touch and of course, our lives have all changed—but I still look back on my "forever friends" with fondness and if they ever need me, all they have to do is holler. I'll come running.

Q: Would you consider your book a good read for young women the same age as your protagonists?

A: That's an interesting question because I do expect some flak for writing such a candid, raw story. But as I look at the novel I don't think it's any more explicit or surprising than what is readily available on cable TV and the Internet. And I know from teaching eighth graders that teenagers know a lot more than adults think they do. I think it's important for young people not to feel so alone with what they are feeling, experiencing, and faced with at a very vulnerable and confusing time in their lives. If there had been a book like this when I was this age, I wouldn't have felt so alone and desperate. I would have felt hope. I guess that's part of why I wrote it. And I also think this a valuable story for parents of kids this age to read; Katharine Weber said it was an excellent choice for "very brave" mother-daughter book clubs. Hopefully, the novel will spur some conversations among teenagers and adults, and we can clear the air about a lot of these issues that no one wants to talk about.

Q: What advice do you have for writers who are trying to get published?

A: My biggest piece of advice would be to sit your butt down in the chair and do it. 9 out of 10 people who say they want to write a book never finish it. So if you just complete a novel, you're ahead of 90% of the competition. Here's a big secret I wish someone had told me, though. On average it's the fourth novel attempt that gets published. I have four unpublished novels in my drawer. Edmund White told me that FORGETTING ELENA, the first novel he published, was actually the sixth one he finished. So if you don't end up getting that first novel published, write another. And another. And another after that. The great thing is that you get better each time out. But if anyone tells you it's easy every day, either they're lying or else they're Joyce Carol Oates. Stick with it. Also, never pay an upfront fee to an agent and check their credentials with the Preditors and Editors website.

Q: What has surprised you most about the publishing process?

A: How long everything takes! The initial sale was very fast (four days), but after that, it was nearly 18 months before the book hit the shelves. That's far longer than it took for me to grow twin babies!

Q: Your husband is Philip F. O'Connor, an accomplished novelist. Do you involve each other in your respective work?

A: We are each the other's first and best reader. Often I'll hand a scene to him, or he'll hand a chapter to me. He was the first person who read **THE BITCH POSSE**, and he zoomed through it in one sitting. When he was finished, he looked up and said, "Congratulations!" That meant a lot to me because it's not something he normally says.

I admire his work very much and he's also a wonderful teacher of writers, so I'm quite lucky in more ways than one to have him as my husband!

Q: Would you want to see THE BITCH POSSE on the big screen? Whom do you envision playing the roles of the three girls—and then the three women?

A: I would love to see **THE BITCH POSSE** made into a film provided they could get the right director and actors behind it. If I ever get any say into a contract I would like the Pixies to do the soundtrack. The three protagonists—well, you'd have to get actors in their twenties who could get away with playing teenagers as well as thirty-year old women. I'm thinking maybe Christina Ricci as Rennie, Claire Danes as Amy... and Cherry's a tough one. For some odd reason I keep coming back to Lindsey Lohan! There's a certain look of hers that's very tough and sexy, some mood of hers that I somehow connect with Cherry.

Q: In the book, the adult Wren lives in the same county as you do now. Is she the character you most identify with, and if so, why?

A: There are definitely a lot of similarities between myself and Rennie, but I hope I'm not as neurotic and dysfunctional as she is! Certainly, of the three characters, the similarities to Rennie are the most obvious, from being a writer to being involved in politics to living in Marin. But I see myself in all the girls. So many of Amy's feelings about motherhood are blatantly ripped off from my own life, and I've felt some of her frustrations at the loss of identity that sometimes comes with living in the suburbs—though as far as suburban towns go, I can't imagine any better ones than those in Marin County! And like Cherry I take care of people often to the detriment of my own well-being. And don't forget, Cherry's a writer too.

Q: What's next for Martha O'Connor?

A: I'm working on my next book, and I've gotten very involved in diabetes advocacy since my son was diagnosed in July 2004. He's been chosen as a Youth Advocate for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and the whole family will get to meet with Congressional leaders and tell them what it is like to live with Type 1 Diabetes. And my daughter's an actress with her first show coming up in San Francisco—so what's ahead for me? Life, I guess!

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