

INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA ARDINGER  
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# SECRET LIVES

*Always remember who you are*

In the prologue to *Secret Lives*, the citizens of a peaceful Neolithic village are poised to flee from the invading horsemen. Their shaman speaks:

*And always remember who you are. Who you have been. When you begin to forget — tell the old stories. Even when you help to build those new cities, disguise and protect yourselves. Hide and remember. Although our children and their children, perhaps to the thousandth generation, must live in the new world that has forgotten Her, they must never forget. She will return.*

Fast forward to 1989 in Long Beach, California, and a group of wise women are surreptitiously practicing the arts of the ancient, magical, feminine ways. *Secret Lives* is a fantastical novel of magical realism featuring the adventures of a coven of colorful crones as they navigate a stream of encounters with a multiplicity of goddesses. Each captivating chapter is a stand-alone story in which the circle of women builds its mystical muscle. The chapters are braided together, and ultimately the women, in an

energetic showdown, go head to head with negative forces that echo from long ago.

Written in meticulous, vivid detail, *Secret Lives* opens the reader's mind to the possibilities of intentional group energy. While the action addresses many serious issues, it also delivers ample doses of humor with characters that often inspire a chuckle, if not a belly laugh. Most wonderful is the wealth of goddess spirituality, women's history, and ritual and magic woven through the characters' adventures.

For author Barbara Ardinger, *Secret Lives* is a departure from her nonfiction works, including *Practicing the Presence of the Goddess*, *Goddess Meditations*, and *Pagan Every Day*. For my part, I immersed myself in every sumptuous word of *Secret Lives*, and I felt very fortunate to talk with Barbara Ardinger about her imaginative and scholarly creation.

**MH: What inspired you to write *Secret Lives*?**

*Barbara Ardinger:* I wish I could remember! One thing I do remember is that I was taking a class about crones at Long Beach WomanSpirit in 1989, and there were women in that group in their thirties who said they were crones. That is nonsense. It made me so mad I did some serious research. The word “crone” comes from a Dutch word that means “corpse.” I learned about the second Saturn return [which comes at approximately 54 years of age], too. The idea to write the book came from suggestions from friends and older women I was meeting at the time.

**You wrote this book years ago, but just published it in 2011. Why now?**

Women in the baby boom generation are reaching retirement age — the years when women become what Donna Henes and I refer to as Queens. There are more old people and more very young people in the U.S., and there’s a gap between these generations. I’m hoping *Secret Lives* will help close that gap by bringing some understanding to younger readers of the fact that older people are still pretty frisky. Pretty juicy. Still doing interesting things. I’m also hoping to make the word “crone” understandable to a mainstream audience.

***Secret Lives* features a collection of vivid characters, each with her own unique personality, and even regional accents and colloquialisms. How were they inspired? How did you keep track of them?**

Every character in the book is invented — well, actually, they just started walking around in my head — but they all have characteristics based on real people I’ve known, starting with my grandmothers. (I just found photos of my grandparents at my wedding; in those photos, they were ten years younger than I am now.)

How did I keep track of the characters? *I made lists.* Lots of lists, and they’re all still in the back of the three-ring binder along with my research notes. I know the back story of every character in the book; I know when every one of the women was born, where she was born, what her family was like. I know where the characters that don’t live in the Towers live. Matthew, for example, lives in a house a friend of mine owns about three blocks up the street from me. Joe lives over the store.



Holde lives in San Pedro. I know what kinds of cars they drive. None of the characters is me, but there are tiny bits of me and of people I’ve met in them. I suspect that nearly everyone who has ever been to a mainstream metaphysical church will recognize Rev. Debbie, Gwennie, and Donnathea. I once saw a woman standing in front of a famous metaphysical center. Donnathea looks just like her, but to this day, I have no idea who that woman was. I went to college in Cape Girardeau and traveled in the Ozarks and heard people actually talking like Emma Clare. I also did a lot of library research on life in the Ozarks. I had to make sure the details were correct, and that meant more lists.

**Nestled into your story is lots of information about goddess spirituality, including references to obscure deities we rarely hear about. Is educating your reader an important part of *Secret Lives*?**

A novel isn’t just a made-up story. Like myths and legends, good novels both entertain and teach. Historical fiction, for example, shows us what life was like in 19th-century England or Napoleonic France. In any novel, day-to-day details — of how people dress, what they eat, how they travel, what they believe, what commerce is like — all of this must be accurate. This is called verisimilitude. You can’t just “make things up.”



Goddess spirituality is the basis of *Secret Lives*. I learned a lot as I wrote the book and also got help from Goddess scholars I'm fortunate enough to know. As the women in the book tell us, worshiping and living a life in the Goddess isn't just chanting and dressing up and making pretty little *tchotchkes* to go on our altars. Living a life in the Goddess is dealing with the world as it is and trying to make it better.

**The characters in *Secret Lives* engage in lots of rituals, which you describe in great detail right down to the color of the candles. The book could almost act as a guidebook for ritual. Was this your intention?**

*Secret Lives* is a novel about women who do rituals, not a ritual guidebook. It was not my intention that readers could reproduce the rituals — there are fifteen of them, by the way — and get the same results. (I doubt that anyone will create a dragon or travel inside a cone of power!) But readers can recreate Janie's menarche ritual, Marie's crowning (without the special effects), Sarah's flower ritual, and the reversings. I've been extremely careful with the rituals and guided visualizations, so that no one could injure herself by trying them out. I've received emails over the years from people who have read and done my rituals (from my non-fiction books) and been very satisfied with them.

**You have said that *Secret Lives* is a work of "magical realism." Can you tell us more about what that means?**

Magical realism — a literary term — is a genre in which the magic depicted in the story is a normal part of the realistic lives of the characters. Jennifer Bothamley, in her book the *Dictionary of Theories*, defines magical realism as "a quasi-surrealist technique of writing in which clearly-delineated realism is juxtaposed with fantasy, dreams, and myths. The effect is often bizarre, puzzling, or shocking."

The first book of magical realism I ever read was *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, in which all sorts of mystical things happen that are perfectly normal in the context of the story. In *Secret Lives*, there are many magical elements — the dragon, the talking cat, the Green Man, the mad Norns, and the inquisitor — that are realistic in the context of the story. I do not, however, know how it's possible for Wendell to play poker with four cartoon rabbits nor where in Tibet Madame Blavatsky was watching Marx Brothers movies nor why she talks like she's from New Jersey. Don't even ask.

**Many chapters in *Secret Lives* seem to be complete in themselves, with their own plots and lessons. Why did you structure the book that way?**

Each chapter is its own story, but, like Janie's cord, they're all braided together. Originally, I wrote the prologue and maybe twenty of the stories. Then I let a few people read the manuscript, and some of them said that the women were casting their circles all wrong. So I wrote the story about the young Gardnerians who come to correct the old women. Someone else said that Milly was too nice so I gave her a mid-life crisis. I needed to get a communication from the old country to Herta, and so my version of Red Riding Hood came to the Towers. Characters are sometimes mentioned briefly in an early story and then become major characters in later ones.





Barbara (left) and Meloney (right) take a moment to relax during a reading of *Secret Lives*.

There is more sex in *Secret Lives* than might be expected in a book about older women. What's your perspective on sex?

It was fun to write those sex scenes! Of course, I hate anything that makes people into objects, but healthy sex is a good thing and the energy raised that way does, in fact, have magical uses. And, yes, the dirty jokes in the story really did come from old ladies. Cross my heart!

One of my favorite scenes in the book takes place at the church, when one of the characters shows off her magical powers. It's like the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* gone mad! Why did you write it that way?

My aim was to make that scene as outlandish as possible, to make it just too, too, *too much*. I'm a really big fan of musical theater, so I used singing and dancing to make it more entertaining. I've been to psychic fairs that needed to be livened up a little, so I just let my imagination go wild.

I've also known teachers like Rev. Debbie and could easily imagine how they'd react to all that nonsense. All of Rev. Debbie's attempted exorcisms come from real books of ceremonial magic; and nearly everyone who loves the Goddess knows Deena Metzger's *Goddess Chant*. But in that story we also learn some important lessons, one of which is that "harm none" really means something. That's why Bertha and the cat get their reversing lesson.

Fear of being discovered as a worshipper of the Goddess is a common theme in the book. Does that still apply today?

Twenty years ago, we had to be much more careful. There's lots of examples of the controversy that can accompany being "out of the Broom Closet." I've been to public rituals (plus a couple of AIDS walks and a 2011 appearance in Long Beach by the Dalai Lama) that were picketed by Christians carrying really big banners, and I remember when a store in Orange Co. was nearly shut down back in 1990 because a tarot reader was doing readings there. The fears that Emma Clare and Herta express were realistic at the time. Today, things are more open; more people are out all kinds of "closets."

One unique aspect of *Secret Lives* is the free Reader's Guide you created to accompany the book. What can you tell us about it?

I love to watch movies with the commentary track on; often the director tells us how she set up a scene, what happened off-stage, what details we should notice, and much more. The *Reader's Guide* on my website is a sort of really big footnote in which I explain literary allusions, give references and resources, and make comments, some of them personal. (For example, I confess to putting my hairdresser and the man who bleaches my hair in the book; and the dreams I had when my grandfather died that the floors fell out of the house appear in Hannah's nightmares.) It's a way to communicate with readers in an intimate way but without interrupting the flow of the book. I invite my readers to connect with me, and the Reader's Guide is one way to encourage that interaction.

Wouldn't it be fun if readers enjoyed the Guide, commented on my Facebook page, and made *Secret Lives* an interactive book? @

To find out more about BARBARA ARDINGER and enjoy the free *Reader's Guide* to *Secret Lives* check out her website: [www.barbaraardinger.com/](http://www.barbaraardinger.com/).

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