

Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket by Hilma Wolitzer, foreword by Elizabeth Strout

About this book

From her many well-loved novels, Hilma Wolitzer—now ninety-one years old and at the top of her game—has gained a reputation as one of our best fiction writers, who “raises ordinary people and everyday occurrences to a new height” (*Washington Post*). These collected short stories—most of them originally published in magazines, including *Esquire* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, in the 1960s and 1970s, along with a new story that brings her early characters into the present—are evocative of an era that still resonates deeply today.

In the title story, a bystander tries to soothe a woman who seems to have cracked under the pressures of her life. And in several linked stories throughout, the relationship between the narrator and her husband unfolds in telling and often hilarious vignettes. Of their time and yet timeless, Wolitzer’s stories zero in on the domestic sphere with wit, candor, grace, and an acutely observant eye. Brilliantly capturing the tensions and contradictions of daily life, *Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket* is full of heart and insight, providing a lens into a world that was often unseen at the time, and often overlooked now—reintroducing a beloved writer to be embraced by a whole new generation of readers.

For discussion

1. The epigraph at the beginning of the collection comes from Evan S. Connell’s novel *Mrs. Bridge* (which is later directly referenced in the last story of the collection, “The Great Escape”). What kind of frame might it create for the stories within?
2. Every story in the collection is dated with the year it first appeared, spanning from 1966 to 2020. What cumulative effect might this consistent time-stamping have on the reading experience?
3. Similarly, the stories reflect the time(s) in which they were written. In what ways do they also feel contemporary?

4. As Elizabeth Strout notes in her foreword, Hilma Wolitzer once told an interviewer, “I don’t believe there’s such a thing as ordinary life. I think all life is extraordinary.” Strout then describes the characters in the collection as “women and men who live their daily existence with all the turbulence of the unexpected” (xiii). On the surface, many of the stories revolve around common events of domestic life, but how does Wolitzer elevate the daily “turbulence of the unexpected” to the extraordinary?
5. In which ways does the title story encapsulate the themes of the entire collection? In turn, what themes that emerge in “A Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket” do you see Wolitzer continue to explore in her later works?
6. All of the stories feature female narrators and/or protagonists, but male characters—from the store manager, Mr. A, of the title story, whose “munificence knew no bounds” (8), to the amorphous absent father of “Waiting for Daddy,” to Michael and his ironically named lawyer Dick in “Bodies,” and the reappearing husband, Howard—remain essential to each narrative. In what ways do they help the women reach their goals—and what ways do they impede them?
7. Two stories in the collection, “Photographs” and “Mother,” center around the experience of childbirth, which is usually portrayed as just as rewarding as it is difficult, and ultimately, the best day of a woman’s life. But Wolitzer contrasts the convention of hard-won bliss with a focus on the painful struggle of labor, the “extraordinary violence of this, worse than mob violence, worse than murder” (32). What other dark sides to women’s experience does Wolitzer illuminate in her stories?
8. Amidst the moments of darkness in the collection, there is also a great deal of humor: a hapless ex-wife who moves in with her former husband’s new family; a disastrous Zoom book club meeting; and a mother who offers unsolicited and unwelcome comments and advice, about lovemaking—“All cats are gray in the dark,” (25)—and about her pregnant daughter’s Lamaze course—“What are they going to teach you—how to scream?” (25). How would you describe Wolitzer’s particular brand of humor and what effect does it have on her stories?
9. In the story, “Sundays,” narrator Paulie talks about how her husband Howard is “the beauty in the family . . . What’s wrong with a little role reversal, anyway?” (40). In what

other ways do Paulie and Howard reverse roles or display traits stereotyped to the opposite sex in “Sundays,” as well as in the rest of their series of stories?

10. At the end of “Sundays,” Paulie asks Howard, ““Are you happy?’ I must know, restorer of faith, giver of life. . . . As I wait for his answer, my own ghosts enter” (51). We get a glimpse of these ghosts in the following story, “Nights,” where Paulie is plagued with insomnia. How are Paulie’s anxieties treated differently from her husband’s—by both Howard and herself?
11. In the story “Bodies,” the main character Sharon reads an interview with Sartre, finding the line, ““We yield our bodies to everyone, even beyond the realm of sexual relations: by looking, by touching”” (105). Sex and the body are recurring themes throughout the collection—how do you feel this quote relates to the way Wolitzer handles exploring them in her work?
12. “I waited all my life to become a woman, damn it, to sit in a kitchen and say grown-up things to the man facing me, words that would float like vapor over the heads of the children” says Paulie in “Sundays” (44). How else is the line drawn for Paulie and other women in the collection between childhood and adulthood, or more specifically, womanhood?
13. In “Bodies,” Sharon “realizes that she has never regretted being female, ” (119), calling to mind Paulie musing “. . . is the egg the bully, after all, waiting in ambush, ready to mug the first innocent stray?” (23) in “Photographs.” What do statements like this say about the way the women perceive their gender? How do they regard its power and advantage? In what ways might they still be victims, if at all?
14. The idea of death is frequently discussed by characters throughout the collection and the last story focuses on a death from Covid-19. How do you think the title, “The Great Escape,” might relate to the way death is portrayed throughout the collection?
15. The woman in the supermarket cries, ““I have tried and I have tried, and there is no end to it”” (2). If you had to put a name to the “it” she speaks of, what would you call it? How do similar forms of “it” reappear in the rest of the stories in the collection, and how does each story’s narrator respond? What respective “aisles” may be blocked for each of them?

Suggested Reading: *Mrs. Bridge and Mr. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell, *The Easter Parade* by Richard Yates, *The Lone Pilgrim* by Laurie Colwin, *The Amateur Marriage* by Anne Tyler, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* by Alix Kates Shulman, *Happenstance: Two Novels in One* *About a Marriage in Transition* by Carol Shields, *The Shame* by Makenna Goodman, *The Little Disturbances of Man* by Grace Paley.

Hilma Wolitzer is a recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, and a Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award. She has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, New York University, Columbia University, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Her first published story appeared when she was thirty-six, and her first novel eight years later. Her many stories and novels have drawn critical praise for illuminating the dark interiors of the American home. She lives in New York City.