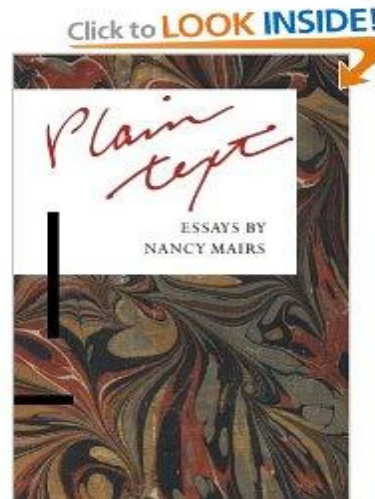


NANCY MAIRS

1943-



Background:

Nancy Mairs, who was born in Long Beach, California in 1943, received the A.B. *cum laude* from Wheaton College (Norton, Massachusetts), which made her a Doctor of Humane Letters thirty years later. She earned an M.F.A. in creative writing (poetry) in 1975, a Ph.D. in English literature in 1984 and has taught writing and literature at the University of Arizona and the University of California at Los Angeles.

A poet and an essayist, she was awarded the 1984 Western States Book Award in poetry for *In All the Rooms of the Yellow House* (Confluence Press, 1984) and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1991. Her first work of nonfiction, a collection of essays entitled *Plaintext: Deciphering a Woman's Life*, was published by the University of Arizona Press in 1986. Since then, she has written a memoir, *Remembering the Bone House*, a spiritual autobiography, *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*, and three more books of essays, *Carnal Acts*, *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer*, and *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*. A fourth book of essays, *A Troubled Guest: Life and Death Stories*, was supported by a fellowship from the Project on Death in America of the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute. Most recently, she published *A Dynamic God: Living an Unconventional Catholic Faith*. The Arizona Humanities Council gave her their 2008 Arizona Literary Treasure Award.

She and her husband, George, a retired high-school English teacher, continue to live in Tucson, though they make public appearances throughout the country. A Research Associate with the Southwest Institute for Research on Women, she has also served on the boards of the Arizona Center for Disability Law, Kore Press, the Coalition of Arizonans To

Abolish the Death Penalty, the Arizona chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and ARTability.

“On Being a Cripple” from *Plaintext*



In this superbly written essay, Mairs defines the terms in which she intends to interact with the world. She refuses to be named by others and so she names herself--a cripple. She chooses a word that represents her reality, and if it makes people "wince," she says "[p]erhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely." She muses on the euphemisms that are used by others, concluding that they describe no one because "[s]ociety is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles."

This essay, written with humor and irony, is frequently cited and often used in medical humanities classrooms. Mairs keeps her readers off-balance, just as she herself is kept off-balance by the twists and turns of an unpredictable disease. She explains how she continues doing many of the things she always did, then writes, ". . . I don't like having MS. I hate it" (12). Proceeding to enumerate further all of the professional and family activities she can enjoy, she then lists many of the ones that she can no longer do, and the depressions that she experiences. "These two elements, the plenty and the privation, are never pure" (13).

Mairs makes many astute comments about how disability does not fit well in our youth-oriented, physical-fitness-obsessed culture, and on how social expectations influence whether she adapts or fails to adapt. She also understands what is at stake for the medical professionals who care for her: "I may be frustrated, maddened, depressed by the incurability of my disease, but I am not diminished by it, and they are" (20).

After this essay was published, Mairs continued to write about disability issues from her personal experience and particularly from her position as a woman with disabilities. She discusses issues she, her family (and others who are disabled) must deal with as her

physical condition continues to deteriorate. See, for example, "Opening Doors, Unlocking Hearts" in her collection, *Waist High in the World* (1996). The essay, "Sex and Death and the Crippled Body: A Meditation" explores the position of disabled women, sexuality, parenthood, medical paternalism, suffering, and assisted suicide (in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*; editors Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson; Modern Language Association of America, New York, 2002).

Janice Dewey, a friend and colleague, filmed Mairs over a five-year period and her video documentary, entitled "Waist High in the World," was released in 2002. Some of the later segments are particularly moving, such as a discussion by Mairs's husband, George, about how the disease has affected him and his interaction with his wife.

Questions to Ponder:

1) Word choice is a major concern for all writers. Many people keep a dictionary and a thesaurus on their desk so that when they get stuck for just the right word they can hunt for something to jog their memory. Mairs opens her essay with a humorous anecdote, but then moves into an explanation of why she chose the word "cripple" to describe herself. Notice that for her, the best word isn't necessarily the longest or the fanciest. What do you think about Mairs' discussion of her choice of words?

2) This essay provides a richly detailed account of Mairs' experience with MS, but it does not tell the story of her experience in chronological order. Consider all the paragraphs and passages that deal with her experiences before her illness. Then identify those that deal with the later phases of her life. What difference(s) do you notice between her earlier and later reactions and attitudes toward MS? How do you account for the differences? Why do you think she chose not to narrate her life experiences in chronological order?

3) How does Mairs' depiction of "being a cripple" compare with your own prior conception, or observation, or experience of being crippled? In what respects are your perceptions similar to hers? In what ways, if any, have you revised your perceptions on the basis of reading her essay?