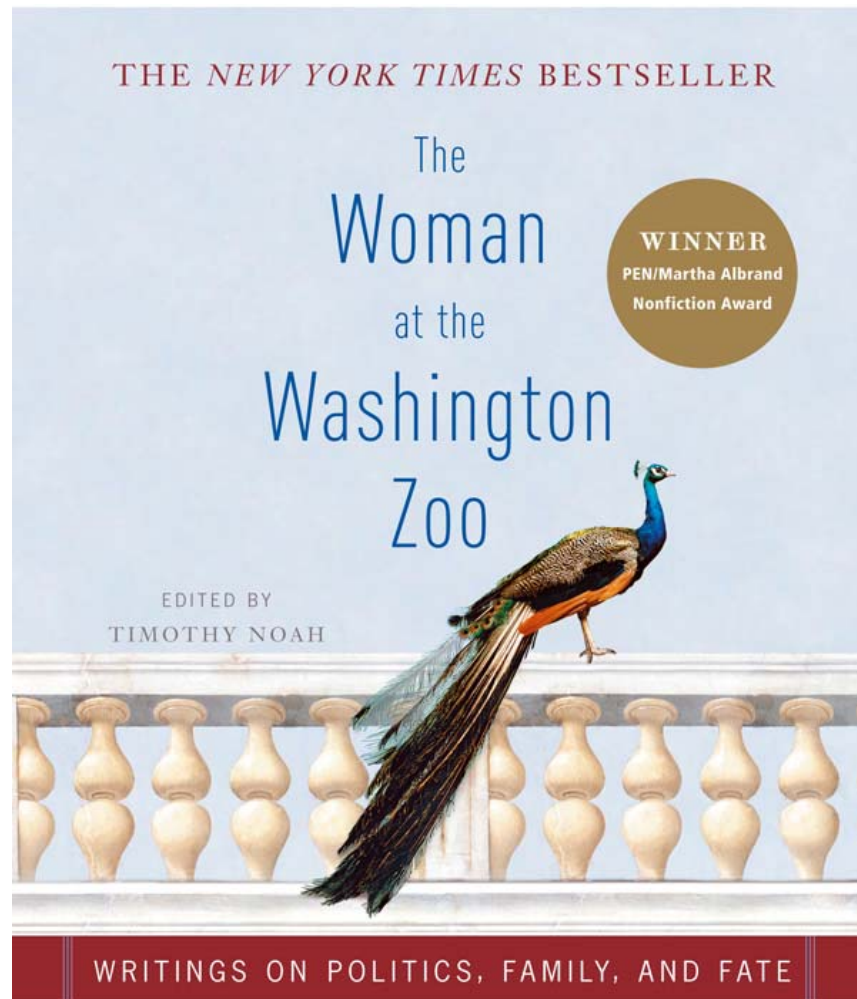




## A Readers Guide to



**MARJORIE WILLIAMS**

"Lovely...Stunning, unflinching...Williams had a special voice, one capable not just of canny political observation but of tenderness and bracing intimacy."

JENNIFER SENIOR, *New York Times Book Review*

## Topics for Discussion

1. In the Introduction to the book Marjorie's husband, Timothy Noah, admits to subverting Randall Jarrell's meaning by casting Marjorie as "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." How is Marjorie like and unlike the woman of the poem's title?
2. Also in the Introduction, Tim describes Marjorie's "unrelenting refusal to accept fraudulent surface reality and her remarkable skill at finding the hidden truth that lay beneath." How does this sensibility reveal itself in her portrait of Richard Darman? Of Barbara Bush?
3. Marjorie's subject matter evolves throughout the book—from Washington personalities to marriage, family and illness and finally, to Marjorie herself. How does your view of the author change as the book progresses?
4. In "Entomophobia" Marjorie defines the "physics of motherhood" as the opposing forces of "maddening disorder, the constant unexamined fear" on the one side, and the "blessedly equal force of ...wonder" on the other. How does this tension play out in the last section of the book? How does it play out in your own life?
5. Marjorie argues that most American women foster the hope that there is "An Answer" to the dilemma of work and family. But she accepts that there is a fundamental, irresolvable tension in working motherhood, writing: "guilt, I now think, is the tribute that autonomy pays to love." Do you agree?
6. In "The Alchemist" Marjorie paints a portrait of her mother as self-denying. How is her mother also, to some extent, selfish? How did Marjorie choose to live her life differently? How are these two life views illustrated through their relationships with food?
7. In "Hit by Lightning" Marjorie describes the fury and frustration of knowing that her time is finite, while at the same time acknowledging that "the knowledge that time's expenditure is important, that it is up to you, is one of the headiest feelings you will ever feel." What does she mean by this?

8. Among the many of life's tensions that Marjorie illuminates, is the struggle between hope and realism—both within herself and embodied in the roles she and Tim take on during her illness. Do you see these same roles played out in your own family?
9. Marjorie writes, "Forced into a corner, I'll choose truth over hope any day." Would you? She then adds, "But...my body enacted some innate hope that I have learned is simply part of my being." Do you agree that hope lingers inside all of us on some unconscious level, no matter how pessimistic we may try to be?
10. In "The Random Death of Our Sense of Ease" Marjorie struggles with having to explain to her little boy that many events simply don't happen for a reason. Has there been an event in your life that made you feel that "there is no logic at all to some of the worst blows that life metes out"?
11. Marjorie writes of having cancer, "You live life the same, except with more pancakes." Have you been in the situation of having to live with a painful reality? If not, how do you think you would cope? How would you explain it to your children?
12. Marjorie writes with remarkable candor of her friends' sometimes ghastly reactions to her illness. Does reading her account change the way you might understand or approach a friend experiencing grief or illness?
13. In "The Halloween of My Dreams" Marjorie writes, "It made me hugely sad to see that my escapes from the taskmistress of literalism are still so rare and hard-won." What does she mean by this? Do you feel you approach life as a realist or do you frequently indulge, as she does in this final moment, in fantasy?

## 10 Questions with Timothy Noah

In the fall of 2005, PublicAffairs published **THE WOMAN AT THE WASHINGTON ZOO**, a collection of the journalism of Marjorie Williams, a Washington journalist who had died of cancer in January of that same year. Timothy Noah, her husband and a senior writer at the online journal *Slate*, selected and edited the essays for this book. Carla Cohen talked to Noah about the life and work of Marjorie Williams.

**CC:** When I read this book I felt like I had a new friend in Marjorie Williams. I had read many of the pieces over the years, but when they are assembled in one place, and you read them at more or less the same time, you see the journalist at least as clearly as the subjects. She must have been uncommonly smart and clear-eyed to write such perceptive pieces.

**TN:** A number of journalists I know, people who admired Marjorie and read her pieces when they came out, said that only now, on rereading them, did they see how well-crafted they were, and how much they expressed the sensibility of the writer. In Washington, information tends to be skimmed—especially political information. So I think the strong literary and personal quality of her work wasn't fully appreciated until it was put between hard covers. I've heard many people marvel at the intimate quality of Marjorie's writing, even when she was writing on impersonal topics.

**CC:** This book has been an unexpected success. Public Affairs had to print more copies and the book is being purchased throughout the country, not simply in Washington. Collected nonfiction essays are generally a hard sell. Why do you think *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* fared so well?

**TN:** Partly, I think, it reflects baby boomers' newfound interest in the topic of mortality. It's been widely noted that 2006 is the year the first baby boomers will turn 60. Much of Marjorie's book is about the liver cancer that killed her. Marjorie writes about her illness, consciously, from the perspective of a cancer patient who wants to explain to a healthy person, as concretely as possible, what it *feels like* to be dying. I think the success of Joan Didion's new book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*—whose sales apparently surpass anything Didion wrote previously—also reflects baby boomers' interest in death (in this instance from

the perspective of one who is grieving). Carole Radziwill's book, *What Remains*—which I haven't read—is another book about grief that's been selling very well.

But that only partly explains the book's success, and it's a fairly reductive explanation. I think readers are responding powerfully to Marjorie's voice—to the vividness and the strong appeal of Marjorie's personality. In the book's introduction, I invite readers to experience "the intense pleasure of her company." Marjorie was a very compelling person, and people enjoyed being around her (unless, of course, she happened to be profiling them). To a great extent, that aspect of her personality came through in her writing, too.

**CC:** I don't understand the relationship between Marjorie and the woman in the Randall Jarrell poem that gives the book its title. To me she seems as utterly different from the Jarrell poem as anybody could be.

**TN:** Yes, she is quite different. In the book's introduction, I apologize for subverting Jarrell's meaning. The woman in Jarrell's poem is defeated, dehumanized, de-sexed; all color has been drained from her. Marjorie was nothing like that; her plumage couldn't have been more vivid. It was, however, convenient for me to borrow the notion of a woman at a zoo, observing the animals. In my construct, the woman is Marjorie, and the animals are the various social types in Washington—"The Pragmatist," "The Philanthropist," "The Hack," etc., which are all chapter titles in the book's first section. This has absolutely nothing to do with Jarrell's use of these same elements.

My construct breaks down after the book's first section, but so does the awkwardness of the book's relationship to the poem. In parts two and three, the book's title gradually becomes more faithful to Jarrell's meaning. Jarrell's poem is, after all, written in the oppressed woman's voice; it's a hair-raising cry of protest against the loss of vitality and autonomy. As Marjorie delves deeper into her own story, we hear a similar cry. We see Marjorie's anguish over her mother's loss of vitality in "The Alchemist," and, in the book's final section, we see Marjorie struggle to maintain her own vitality as her body is failing her. The poem's final lines are, "You know what I was,/ You see what I am: change me, change me!" In this she is both successful and not. As her illness progresses, Marjorie maintains her clear-eyed perspective, and remains alive to life's possibilities. At the same time, she reconciles herself to the inevitability of her death.

I'll grant you it's not a perfect fit, and there's a limit to my willingness to see my wife's death in literary terms at all. In part, I'm just trying to follow her own lead. Marjorie herself made use of the Jarrell poem in her tribute to the late journalist Mary McGrory (which appears at the end of the book's second section). Marjorie absolutely adored Jarrell. She was especially fond of his comic novel, *Pictures From An Institution*.

**CC:** It would seem that Marjorie found a great subject in Washington and its characters. Can you talk about Marjorie's feelings about her city?

**TN:** She liked Washington quite a lot; much preferred it, for instance, to New York, which she moved from in the mid-1980s. She liked its smaller scale. I guess it felt to her like a half-step back toward Princeton, which is where she grew up, though she never put it quite that way. I was paging through one of Marjorie's childhood journals not long ago and, in a passage about visiting Washington in early 1973 to protest the Vietnam war with her father, she wrote about how beautiful she thought it was and said that she'd like to live here someday. I'm sure she'd completely forgotten writing that by the time she actually did move here, but maybe some of the underlying feeling lingered.

Marjorie explains her feelings toward Washington at the end of "Flying to L.A.," a chapter in the book's second section. There was much in the place that she found conventional and conservative, but she liked to write about the contrast between Washington's constricted code of behavior and what she called "the messy human stuff" that everyone pretended wasn't there.

**CC:** Will you tell us about how you selected the pieces that you included? I particularly loved the profiles. Are there some that you left out?

**TN:** I left quite a bit out. In my first cut, I found that I had to limit Marjorie's many superb profiles of powerful and ambitious white males—especially powerful and ambitious white *Republican* males—because after you read two or three, one after the other, they started to sound alike. The blame, I think, lies not with Marjorie but with the white males themselves. The profiles included in *Zoo* are very deliberately diverse, not out of some politically-correct impulse so much as the need to emphasize variety within the Washington bestiary—perhaps a bit more variety, in truth, than exists in the real Washington.

I also left out profiles of people who were not obvious Washington types. Michael Lewis, about whom Marjorie wrote a riveting profile in *Vanity Fair*,

didn't strike me as properly classifiable as a Washington type even though he actually had lived in Washington when the story was first published. Ditto, Larry King. Others, like Anna Quindlan and Patricia Duff, weren't living in Washington when Marjorie profiled them for Vanity Fair, so they didn't really fit.

Even with this template for exclusion, the original manuscript of *Zoo* was about twice as long as the book that was finally published. I was particularly distressed to cut Marjorie's *Washington Post* profile of Clark Clifford, which many people remember as her best, from the book. It was just too long. The good news is that the strong success of *Zoo* probably makes it inevitable that I will publish a follow-up volume. When I do, Clifford will definitely be included.

**CC:** I also thought that many of the articles seemed fresh and relevant even after as many as 15 years. Did you have that in mind as you chose the articles?

**TN:** To my mind, the pieces never stopped being fresh and relevant because they read like short fiction. The key, for me, was to choose pieces not on the basis of how important the profile subject was, but on the basis of how well Marjorie conveyed that person's psychology, and what the person's story showed about the sort of place Washington ever shall remain. Some people, I'll grant you, were so boring that I couldn't even bring myself to reread Marjorie's profiles of them, much less include their profiles in the book. Sam Skinner, who was chief of staff to Bush 41, is an example. I figured that if I barely remembered that Marjorie had profiled Skinner, then it couldn't have been one for the ages. Maybe 20 years from now I'll take another look and discover I made a terrible mistake.

**CC:** I don't know many of the people that are featured in Marjorie's journalism, but I know Vernon Jordan a little. Marjorie captures Vernon Jordan brilliantly – I could not believe she did that piece 15 years ago. What did he think of it?

**TN:** I don't think he much liked it, though I don't recall the details; I heard about it third-hand. That one was a little awkward for me because at the time Marjorie wrote it Jordan sat on the board of directors of Dow Jones, which owned the *Wall Street Journal*, for which I worked (I don't work there anymore; now I work for *Slate*, which is owned by the Washington Post Co.). Marjorie and I had sat with Jordan and his wife at a *Journal* function not long before she wrote the piece. Of course, that's one of the themes of Marjorie's profile—Jordan's sheer ubiquity, which tends to silence anyone who wants to write about his troubling transformation from civil rights leader to corporate fat cat.

Jordan is among the most charming people I've ever met. Marjorie was, among other things, a great connoisseur of charm and its uses; she studied at the feet of a master (her father), as she explains in the book. She puts this talent to great use in the Jordan chapter.

**CC:** Marjorie clearly had a novelist's eye for character. Nowhere is this more evident than in her remarkable dissection of her parents. It's an extraordinary essay. Some of the lines are so memorable. About her mother: "You could eat at her table every night and never taste the thing that you were really hungry for." Did she think about writing a novel?

**TN:** Yes. She started one, and left behind some fiction-writing exercises, but she'd only made a few baby steps in that direction when she died. I have no doubt that eventually Marjorie would have written some very good fiction. At the same time, I think the quality of Marjorie's best writing demonstrates that the best nonfiction makes as strong a literary claim as the best fiction. I think "The Alchemist," which is the essay you refer to, is the best thing Marjorie ever wrote. There's certainly more of Marjorie in it than there was in anything else she put to paper.

**CC:** Finally, I had the feeling that most of the pieces in this book could only have been written by a woman. They represent a woman's eye and sensibility. Of course, she also writes about "women's issues," but I just felt the power of her women's voice throughout. Do you feel that way?

**TN:** Yes. Jennifer Senior, in a wonderfully perceptive review in the *New York Times Book Review*, made the same point, but with some trepidation, as though she worried such a judgment might appear to diminish Marjorie's work. I don't think it diminishes Marjorie at all to say that she was a very distinctively female writer. That was a term of praise Marjorie herself often used to describe other people's work. Of course she thought much of the stuff peddled as "chick lit" was hackwork. But many of the women writers Marjorie most admired—Anne Tyler, say, or Penelope Fitzgerald—she admired specifically for their skill at conveying a woman's sensibility. Marjorie would be proud to be thought so herself. Which, of course, doesn't mean her book is just for women. If it were, I promise you, I'd have lost interest before completing its assembly. It's just a wonderful book. I can say that, you know, because I didn't write it!



## Touring for a book I didn't write.

Author, Author

By Timothy Noah

<http://www.slate.com/id/2131567/>

chatterbox

I've been touring the country lately promoting a new book. Nothing unusual about that, but I happen not to be the author of the book I'm hawking. Its author is my wife, Marjorie Williams, who died this last January of liver cancer.

The book, titled *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*, is a collection of her writings, many of them previously published in the Washington Post, Slate, and Vanity Fair, and a couple of them previously unpublished. In the introduction, I state that editing the book—which I did in the months after Marjorie died—was an act of mourning. This is particularly manifest in the final section, which consists of essays Marjorie wrote about her illness and her thoughts about impending death. As you might imagine, I am still very much consumed by—sometimes paralyzed by—grief.

But I don't want readers of *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* to feel they're paying tribute to a writer who died too young. I want readers to experience the pleasure of reading a writer who is witty, playful, trenchant, wise, and very much alive. Even if you didn't know her, Marjorie was and is wonderful company. I want the reading public to make her acquaintance.

The catch is that to do this, I have to be Marjorie—to impersonate her, after a fashion, as I represent the book in media interviews and public appearances. The task, though necessary, is wildly presumptuous. In a couple of weeks, I'm supposed to talk about the book before a group of Washington women who regularly meet to discuss the conflict between family and work, a subject the book addresses at some length. I don't know precisely what Marjorie would say about my claiming expertise on this subject, but I imagine it would include the word "buster" and make reference to the addictive properties of the Internet as experienced by the American white-collar male.

In some ways, not being the author of the book I'm touting is quite liberating. There is no obstacle to my saying, as I often do at bookstore appearances, that *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* is a wonderful book. That isn't a boast because I

didn't write it. At the same time, it isn't necessary that I defend every opinion expressed in the book, because the opinions aren't mine. I didn't choose the contents according to what I agreed with; rather, I chose the pieces, and the arguments contained therein, according to what I found interesting. Those were usually—but not always—the same thing.

At bookstore readings, people ask me what Marjorie thought about this or that, and I tell them. I am, as her widower, the world's leading authority on what she believed and felt. But I try to remind myself as often as possible that even my expert opinion is of limited value. In his book *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis laments that the wife he mourns is really only his idea of his wife, unchecked by the little daily corrections and surprises of her actuality:

Slowly, quietly, like snowflakes, like the small flakes that come when it is going to snow all night, little flakes of me, my impressions, my selections, are settling down on the image of her. The real shape will be quite hidden in the end. ... The rough, sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness is gone.

This is a blunt and disturbingly persuasive assault on the comforting notion that those for whom we grieve live on in our hearts. It isn't Marjorie that I carry inside me, but my idea of Marjorie, which starts out imperfect and will grow faultier over time.

Thank heaven, then, for Marjorie's words, which help me plow through snowdrifts of accumulating misconceptions. She put an enormous amount of herself into her writing; that's a large part of what made her writing so good. While rereading the many pieces that I considered including in the book, I felt soothed by the presence of Marjorie's voice. It felt as though I were experiencing her vibrancy firsthand, unpolluted by memory or grief. Even now, after choosing and footnoting the contents and proofreading them countless times, I still feel that a few minutes paging through the book will put me back in touch with what my dear wife was really like. It's deeply gratifying to see other people—people who never knew her—respond to Marjorie's warmth, her gumption, her humor.

The hitch is that not even a writer can ever be only, or even mainly, her words. Even if I were to confine myself to the words Marjorie wrote down—which exceed the capacity of any conceivable volume—that would leave out the things she said to me, the things she said to others, the things she meant but didn't say, the things she said but didn't mean. And even if I could sort all that out, I would fail to capture the infinity and brilliance of her dimensions beyond language or

thought. Marjorie wasn't, and isn't, a book. It's just as close as she—and I—can manage.

Timothy Noah writes "Chatterbox" for Slate.