**Lucy Ferriss**

***The Misconceiver***

**Q&A**

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1. What does the title mean, *The Misconceiver*?

It’s a euphemism. One of the things I’ve noticed about abortion is that the term itself has become a dirty word. Pro-choice advocates talk about terminating pregnancies, about safe reproductive options. So I wondered, if this trend continued, what would be the word we’d substitute for “abortion”? And since I was imagining a society where gender roles look something like the 1950s, I went to the 1959 Webster’s Dictionary to find synonyms for abortion. There were four—mistake, misconception, monstrosity, and failure—which seemed to sum up the ideas we’re developing about abortion. I chose “misconception” as being the most benign word and also the word I could play around with most—Miss Conceiver, a misconceived idea, and so on.

1. Why set the book in the future? And how different is that future now from the future envisioned in 1997?

First, it’s not set far into the future—looking forward 30 years from 1997, and looking forward perhaps 25 years from now. I didn’t want a fantastic dystopia, like what Margaret Atwood created in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I wanted a world we could imagine fairly easily. When I looked into my crystal ball in 1997, I foresaw changes in the landscapes of politics and technology (some of which I got right, others I missed by a mile); but mostly I foresaw the overturn of Roe v. Wade. And I wanted to face that eventuality square on, to ask myself how I and others would deal with its aftermath. Since *The Misconceiver* was first published, we’ve had 25 more years of reproductive rights, so I hope our resistance to the toppling of those rights will be stiffer than it might have been at the start of this century. But the questions on which those rights and challenges to them turn remain the same as they were when I posed them in 1997: Are our private lives and our bodies our own? Will we lay our planet to waste? What power do we cede to corporations and lobbying groups? Whom do we consider to be full citizens of this country?

1. Is this a pro-choice book?

It’s a book about political awareness, about a woman becoming aware that her actions have political consequences for which she has to take responsibility. Certainly the society I portray, in which abortion is completely illegal, is not a healthy one. On the other hand, the narrator, born as the forced-birth movement gains ascendancy, calls abortion “killing,” because that’s the language she’s grown up with. So if anti-choice advocates wanted, they could cry, “You’ve admitted it! Abortion is murder!” But what I‘m after is far more personal and dramatic than a political tract.

1. Why make abortion the issue in the book, then? Couldn’t your narrator become politically aware in some other way?

Not as effectively. To my mind, then and now, for women living in our century, abortion is the key issue.

1. Why?

Abortion is the place where the personal really does become political, where the most intimate processes of your body and the way you deal with those processes create a political statement, even if you only whisper that statement to yourself. Recall that birth control became widely and legally available only in the late 1960s, and Roe v. Wade was 1973. The one reproductive right followed quickly upon the other, and there’s no reason to believe the same will not happen in reverse. On those two rights the whole business of women’s equality in the workplace, women’s rights in the military, women’s economic parity, has been built. If you take away reproductive rights, it stands to reason that the status of women in society will change radically—that society itself will change. In my book, this is all happening while technology is advancing just as it’s doing now. So abortion, or the want of it, is like a key unlocking a whole new world.

1. How did you begin writing the book?

The proofs for my previous novel, *Against Gravity*, had just come in, and I’d spent several days doing nothing but reading them over. When I finished, I went to take a shower—sort of to wash the book off me, I guess—and in the shower I realized that I was still hearing the voice of the narrator from *Against Gravity* in my head. That book had been in some way about birth, about the loss of control that happens when we give ourselves over to birth. Its protagonist is very different from *The Misconceiver*’s Phoebe in terms of age, personality, and so on, but the voice creating the character had more to say. In the shower, I realized that it had turned to the flip side of birth, which is death, or abortion. The next thing I knew I was sitting at my computer pounding out the first scene of *The Misconceiver.*

1. You must have felt personally involved, to run the risks you run in this novel.

I have had two abortions. See how hard it is just for me to say that? I’ve stood with crowds of pro-choice advocates, and none of us admits to our abortions. Neither of mine had to do with rape or incest. I regret neither. Yet I’ve never worked through the grief that comes with cutting short a life that has begun to grow inside your own body. Gwendolyn Brooks has a wonderful poem called “The Mother,” in which she writes, “I remember the children I got / that I did not get.” That’s how I’ve always felt. Because we are always on the defensive about abortion rights, I’ve never felt free to express my sorrow openly. In the book, Phoebe has a dream I’ve often had, in which she has killed someone—killed them violently, with a knife or sword—and yet she can’t draw a clear picture of the being she’s killed, and no one around her knows or misses this being, so she can’t account for the feeling she has of blood on her hands. I call it the abortion dream. In part, this book is my accounting for my own lost potential children.

1. Yet you’ve dedicated this book to your sister.

Two reasons for that. First, the older I’ve gotten, the more I’ve realized how much the things we do and the stances we take have to do with our families—with the way we were brought up and interacted with those closest to us rather than with firmly held intellectual ideas. Phoebe’s loyalty isn’t to some big political movement; it’s to her sister, who’s larger than life to her, and much of what she does is in homage to or rebellion against her sister. And I have a sister, so some of that dynamic comes from my own history. Second is the business of so-called sisterhood, which is something the feminist movement used to promote but has pulled back on as we’ve discovered that women aren’t quite the united front they were presumed to be. But then sisters are antagonists as much as comrades, aren’t they? And I guess I want the intimate relationship between blood sisters in the book to translate symbolically to the larger picture.

1. Why does the new edition represent a Black woman on the back, echoing the image on the front?

The original book includes several scenes with women of color, who are of course disproportionately affected by the legal ban on abortion. When we speak of reproductive justice, we are talking about the many ways that wealth and skin color afford privileges to some and punish many others. We wanted the new cover to reflect that critical aspect of the novel.

1. *The Misconceiver* does not end happily. Do you think that’s a problem?

I disagree. I think it does end happily. Maybe not with a Hollywood ending where love conquers all and the bad guys are wiped out. But throughout the novel, the protagonist has been seeking to become a complete, individual human being who chooses her own destiny. At the end, she’s done that. The world in which she makes her choice is not a perfect one, but I didn’t want to write a story in which the world changes. Worlds only change when people change, one by one. I imagine Phoebe eventually living a complicated, difficult, loving life marked by periods of joy. Isn’t that what most of us hope for?