

Mother Inferior


Susan Fish

It was a spring morning in 2009 when the phone rang. On the other end was a person with an accent I could not quite place—something between Italian and Irish. The caller determined that it was me speaking before claiming that my visit to a convent in Florence, Italy, three weeks before, with my husband, had resulted in damage to one of the twin beds in our room and that there was evidence that two people had slept in one bed. Then the caller could no longer contain her laughter.

It was my mother. It was April Fools' Day. She had got me.

A year later the phone rang again. Every year since, on the first of April, the Mother Superior, as she calls herself, has telephoned with long-standing concern for this broken bed.

When my parents started needing more help with household and yard chores, my husband and I began making regular visits. I am not particularly handy—years before, my young

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daughter was incredulous when I had repaired something, saying, “*You* can fix?”—but my husband is. My mother began calling him Saint David for the help he gave her. My job was mostly to make

tea and sit and talk with them while he fixed things. My skills were ones they valued but that would not fix the dishwasher door or get the winter wreath down from over the garage. I was exceedingly proud of myself the day I figured out how to empty and reload their mousetraps.

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As the years passed, I began to write a novel set in a fictionalized version of the Florentine convent where we once stayed. It, too, has twin beds and a Mother Superior fierce enough to make calls for more than a dozen years if need be. But unlike me, my protagonist travels alone. There is no risk of two people in one twin bed in this story.

This novel began as a pleasant story about Italy, and my protagonist was going to have a version of the lovely trip I had had. I wrote scenes that took me back. Then in my own life I experienced a sequence of parenting events that flattened me, leaving me feeling like a Mother Inferior indeed.

Carrie Fisher famously stated, *Take your broken heart and turn it into art*. And so I did. I began to imagine that my character had gone to Italy not out of desire but out of necessity—that she had fled there after a family crisis. That was where fiction came in: the events that left her feeling that she needed to leave the country bore precisely no resemblance to the events in my own life, but as I drew on the feelings, the novel quickly found its shape.

Now with the book coming out this year, I have to contend with the feelings once more. Like the allegedly broken bed, not all is mend-

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ed even years later. But how do I speak of this? My most recent novel is about a widow who hosted weekly soup suppers—and people have asked me again and again about my own hosting of such dinners, my own widowhood, unwilling to believe that fiction is not thinly veiled autobiography. The reality is that only the occasional, small, real-life detail ever makes it into my fiction—a kiss on the ear, a shop I have visited, a line from a

movie I have loved. But I also believe I am in there too, only not where you would think to look for me.

Maybe it is true to say that two people sleep in the bed that is my novel, squashed together. Me, the author, and my character. We bump elbows and breathe bad breath into each other's faces. We pull the covers off each other in our sleep. We might cause the bed to sag some or to creak ominously. But there are two people in this bed, not just one, not just me. No matter that the other is fictional: she takes up her own space and is not the same person as me.

But I also suspect that there is more than one person in every mother. And that is one thing this book addresses: the strong desire to be the best mother you can be—the mother superior—but also the reality of being a mother inferior, the mother who is all too human and who aches with the mistakes she has made along the way. Parenting books may encourage us to drop the guilt and the comparison, saying that *superior* and *inferior* suggest a competition of sorts, but ultimately such books encourage us to be better parents than we would otherwise be. That is not where my book lands. It does not encourage *worse* parenting, but it changes the question so that superiority and inferiority become less about comparison

and more about the size of this role within a person's identity. My novel reclaims the truth that we are more than our roles of any sort—whether that is a parent or any other role.

Princess Leia was on to something, I realize. Not only has this broken heart of mine been turned into the art that is a novel, but the writing of it has also helped me in the art of living with my broken heart. I am less of a mother than I hoped I might be. And I am learning to be okay with that.

About the author

Susan Fish is a writer and editor living in Waterloo, Ontario, with her husband, dogs, and sometimes young adult children. She has a Masters of Theological Studies (2022) from Conrad Grebel University College. Her third novel, *Renaissance*, recently published by Paraclete Press, was the book she was writing during the events she describes in this essay.