

What We Carry



Maya Shanbhag Lang



A BOOK CLUB GUIDE

A Conversation with Maya Shanbhag Lang

When did your relationship with writing begin? How did you decide to become a writer?

I've been a writer ever since I can remember. When I was eight or nine years old, I wrote a collection of poems and was so proud of myself, so taken with the feeling of discovery. As I recount in *What We Carry*, when my father found the poems, he was furious. An engineer, he viewed writing as a waste of time. "What do you think you are?" he sneered, ripping them up. "A writer?" I remember sitting up and thinking, *Yes!* He intended to insult me, but really he opened a door.

I was terrified of pursuing writing as a career, so I spent many years trying to be anyone else. When my daughter was born, I realized that I had to stop running from my dreams—that I couldn't expect her to go after hers if I didn't go after mine.

I wrote my first novel when she was a newborn. I was exhausted and not at my best, but I was motivated. For the first time, I understood that when women prioritize ourselves, we teach our daughters how to do the same.

What led you to write *What We Carry*?

I was in the middle of working on my second novel when my mother needed emergency care. A geriatric psychiatrist, she was an expert at masking the symptoms of her Alzheimer's—until she couldn't. I brought her home with me because I couldn't bear the thought of hospitalizing her.

Overnight, my life changed. I was caring for my young daughter at the time. I didn't have help. I was overwhelmed. To cope, I started writing posts on social media. It was my way of letting steam out of the pressure cooker that had become my life. An editor happened to see the posts and contacted my agent to ask if I would be interested in writing a memoir. I politely declined and said that I couldn't possibly write about my life. That night, I wrote over fifty pages. I had no idea how much I needed to write this book until I started doing it. The most necessary stories, I think, are the ones we think we can't tell.

The idea of storytelling is a theme in *What We Carry*. What led you to think about how stories shape us?

My mother's dementia caused her to forget her old stories, the carefully curated ones that made her into a superhero. Her costume fell away. An illness like Alzheimer's is said to rob us of our loved ones, but it also gives us a fuller picture of them. In a certain way, my mother was no longer herself, yet I also saw her clearly for the first time.

Here was this no-nonsense scientist who had been spinning

tales her whole life. I was supposed to be the writer. It turned out she was also a storyteller. This made me realize we all tell stories. We do it constantly. Stories are not a distraction from life. They *are* life.

Ultimately, I see families as a battleground of competing narratives (“He’s the smart one” or, “She’s the artsy one”). This is why it’s so liberating when we go off to college or leave home for the first time: We finally get to present ourselves as we wish. Now, what’s funny is that we don’t necessarily get it right. We misperceive ourselves all the time. But in some ways, it doesn’t matter. Whether the stories we tell are true or false, what matters is that they are ours.

How would you describe the differences between fiction and memoir?

I think that every memoir contains elements of fiction, just as every novel contains elements of memoir. We conceal and reveal ourselves. We just aren’t always aware of when we’re doing it.

From a writing point of view, the experience is profoundly different. When drafting fiction, I always feel as though I’m listening. I hold my ear close to the characters and try to tune into their world. It’s like trying to hear something broadcast on a distant radio station. With memoir, I have to turn inward, which can be unsettling. Fiction is like listening to the human heart through a stethoscope, while memoir is like performing surgery and holding the heart in your hands.

Were certain passages in this book difficult to write?

The scenes with my father were by far the hardest for me. In early drafts, I didn’t talk about him. My editor insisted we

needed a scene with him, but every time I tried to write one, I felt shaky and agitated to the point of breaking out into hives. This will sound strange, but I noticed that the hives concentrated around my feet. I remember thinking, “It’s like my feet are trying to tell me something.” And then the driveway scene came flooding back.

I hadn’t remembered that scene until that moment. As children, we repress trauma in order to cope. But our bodies remember.

In recounting your path to becoming a weightlifter, you discuss several metaphors from the gym—the idea, for example, that “too much strength can be its own weakness.” Can you elaborate on this?

For years, I was scared to lift weights because I had terrible lower back issues, from sciatica to herniated discs. I was convinced my lower back was weak. I learned that my lower back was actually strong. It was overcompensating for the areas around it.

I’ve since come to view the lower back as the mom of the body: doing too much, feeling overstrained, not getting enough support. As women, we often misperceive ourselves as weak, but we have it all wrong. It’s not that we are weak. We’re strong; we’re just spread too thin. The answer isn’t to do more, but to stop and do less. The most straightforward way to do this is with boundaries. When we say no, we begin to reclaim ourselves.

Can you say more about the emotional labor women face as mothers and caregivers?

Much of the work women do is invisible. We tend to the needs of those around us, and often we do so without giving it any

thought. We are on-demand coaches and therapists and tutors and nurses and maids and cooks and cheerleaders. At the end of a long day caring for my daughter and my mother, I remember feeling depleted—and frustrated, because I couldn't point to an achievement, some project I had completed. There is no salary for that work, no gold medal or recognition, yet it is vital. This is why, in the mythical story of the woman in the river, she feels so alone. This, I think, is the loneliest emotion, when we feel unseen.

What does it mean for you as a woman to claim your own strength?

I was taught as a girl to blend in and be cooperative. I was careful when I voiced my opinions, for example, because I wanted to strike the right note: strong without being abrasive, smart without being a know-it-all, confident without being arrogant. That tightrope walk is exhausting. Claiming my strength as a woman has meant tossing those concerns out the window. It has meant caring less about how I seem and more about who I am. My daughter is such a gift because she enables me to do this. I don't want her to be weighed down by constant self-criticism. When women hop off the tightrope and plant ourselves on the ground, we model that choice for our daughters.

Now that *What We Carry* has come out in several countries, including India, what has its reception been like?

It has been deeply gratifying to hear from readers. I've heard from women who didn't realize that they were like the woman in the river, ready to drown themselves for their families. I've heard from second-generation immigrants who talk about family secrets and the legacy of silence, people who had controlling

fathers. I've heard from people who have suffered from depression and other mental illnesses. And of course I've heard from caregivers.

Before the book came out, I remember my editor asking me what I hoped readers would take away. It was an overwhelming question; I didn't know how to answer. But now I do. I hope readers will feel less alone. I hope they will feel witnessed.

What did the process of caring for your mother teach you?

I learned that caregiving is a form of atonement, an emotional do-over. My mother was never there for me in certain profound ways. I had never processed this until I took care of her. When it is our turn to step up and care for our parents, to observe their frailty and their mortality, when we put ourselves in that juncture of responsibility, that is when we feel the past and the future upon us.

I also learned a great deal about sitting with uncertainty. There are the challenges we choose in life and then there are the ones that get foisted upon us. It's the latter that shape us and show us our resilience, but they feel terrible in the moment. If you were to interview an oyster while it's making a pearl, it would be wildly uncomfortable and unhappy in that moment. To anyone who is struggling, I would say that the discomfort you feel is normal—that we don't reach that evolved place of luminous beauty without it.

What are you working on next?

I've been thinking a lot about the concept of joy. I used to imagine joy as something we stumble upon if lucky, like finding a twenty-dollar bill on the street. But I'm beginning to understand that joy is a choice—or, more precisely, a series of choices

that can be terrifying. Joy involves embracing risk and prioritizing our needs. Human beings tend to crave safety. Women in particular have been taught to put the needs of others first. So, pursuing joy can run contrary to everything we've been told. We think, "Who am I to leave this safe situation, this not-bad relationship, this okay job? Who am I to want more?" But who are you *not* to? When we take that running leap, we find ourselves on the other side. That reunion with the self is joyous. Joy is the audacity of self-love

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. When we first encounter the story of the woman in the river, Lang expects it to be about maternal sacrifice. She is surprised when her mother says, “We must not judge. That is the real lesson of the story. Whatever a woman decides, it is not easy.” How do Maya’s judgments of herself and her mother change over the course of the book? Have you ever found yourself judging yourself or someone else differently over time?
2. Returning home from the hospital after giving birth, Maya is overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood. When she asks her mother how she handled these demands, her mom answers, “I don’t know. . . . I just did.” Maya has no idea that

this response is an obfuscation of the truth. Do you think this answer helps or harms her?

3. Maya's mother describes depression as "a broken bone no one can see." How do you interpret this metaphor? Do you think the general public views depression this way?
4. When she experiences suicidal thoughts, Maya asks her mother to visit. Her mother replies that if she were to get on a plane, she would "die of exhaustion." Why do you think Maya's mother responds this way? How would you feel if you were in Maya's shoes? Maya eventually begins to feel angry, but it takes awhile for the anger to arrive. When it does, it feels to her like a "small red balloon." How do you think it helps Maya to think of her anger as something inside of, but separate from, her own being?
5. As she settles into motherhood, Maya begins writing a novel. This is her form of self-care. "Only in my writing am I able to let go," she writes. "Perhaps this is what we should give new moms: A laptop and a cup of coffee. A notebook and a pen. Permission to dream." What messages do you think our culture sends to mothers about the value of caring for themselves? What methods of self-care are condoned or disparaged? What feels like true self-care to you?
6. "There is a certain dark point at which self-sufficiency becomes a dare," Lang writes. "Why ask for help when you can pretend not to need it?" Why is asking for help difficult? How do you feel when you ask for help?

7. *If my mom could do it, so can I.* Maya repeats this to herself as a mantra. Do you have a mantra that you use to motivate yourself? What does it come from?

8. When Maya realizes that her mother is exhibiting signs of dementia, she understands the distance that grew between them over the preceding months. “She wanted a false story from me,” Lang writes. “Without realizing it, I wanted one from her. We’ve been hiding from each other.” When do we present false stories to others, and when do we expect false stories from them in return? What do those false stories offer us?

9. As Maya struggles to understand the idea of home, Zoe tells her, “Home is the place that’s always open.” Maya realizes that her mother made her feel most at home in the world. How would you define home? Is there someone or something that helps you feel like you have a place in the world?

10. “We shouldn’t ask so much of any one part,” Louis tells Maya. “Too much strength can be its own weakness, you know.” Maya is stunned. Why do you think this means so much to her in that moment? Do you have examples from your life when you or someone around you has exhibited too much strength?

11. Why do you think Maya’s mother neglects to share that she received help as a mother? What is the legacy of that omission? What long-term effects does this have on Maya and the choices she makes?

12. Of caregiving, Lang writes, “I want to separate the myth from reality, to reconcile the mom I always imagined with the more complicated person I’m just starting to know.” What myths does she set down, and what realities does she learn? Can you think of an instance in your life when you put someone on a pedestal? What enabled you to see the person differently?

13. “Maybe at our most maternal, we aren’t mothers at all,” Lang writes. “We’re daughters, reaching back in time for the mothers we wish we’d had and then finding ourselves.” What does she mean by this? Can you think of examples—from your own life or someone else’s—that show how this is true?

14. “She didn’t always know how to care for me the way I wanted,” Lang says of her mother. “She cared for me the way she knew how.” How do you think Maya’s mother expressed her love for her children? What do you think of this type of caregiving?

15. Toward the end of *What We Carry*, Lang revisits the story of the woman in the river. “The woman chooses herself,” she reflects. “Once she makes that choice, everything follows.” Lang finds this idea empowering and uplifting. Why? What does it mean for a woman to choose herself?

16. How do you think the idea of mythology plays out in the book? What myths inspire you? How do the stories we tell—about ourselves and others—shape us?