

‘This book kept me alive’

Margie Orford has long been one of South Africa’s top crime writers. But after five novels, suffering from suicidal thoughts and writer’s block, she stopped writing completely. Then she wrote a memoir, *Love and Fury*. We asked her what it was like to write about her own life and the powerful realisations that came with it.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

Margie Orford needs little introduction. The internationally acclaimed writer and award-winning journalist earned

the title of the queen of South African crime thrillers with her gripping Clare Hart series – about a journalist and profiler navigating the complexities of crime and justice in Cape Town. Readers worldwide fell in love with her flawed yet

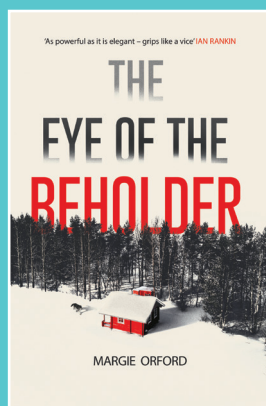
relatable heroine – her novels have been translated into 10 languages.

But Margie is not just about crime fiction. She’s also a prolific non-fiction writer, contributing thought-provoking essays and articles to international publications. Her work dives deep into themes like violence, human rights

and trauma, a reflection of her commitment to social justice. With degrees in literature and philosophy, plus prestigious fellowships and teaching stints at various universities, Margie’s academic prowess is just as impressive as her storytelling skills.

For a while, she stepped away from the dark alleys of crime to write her memoir, *Love and Fury*. Born in London in 1964 and raised in Namibia and South Africa, Margie structured her memoir around the places where she has lived: London, Namibia, Cape Town, New York and back to London, where she now lives.

Love and Fury opens in the autumn of 2018, in a flat above a Dickensian house in London where Margie spent months contemplating a suicide note... only to write this memoir instead. ‘This book kept me alive; I will give it that,’ she says.



Margie gave her heroine Clare Hart a break to write *The Eye of the Beholder*, a crime thriller, and *Love and Fury: A Memoir*.



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Margie was born in London to South African parents, but grew up in Namibia and South Africa. After graduating from the University of Cape Town she returned to London, where she met her first husband, Aidan, and had her first daughter, Rose.



you know what you are asking me?' and though you reply yes, you write in your memoir that you did not, in fact, know. After having written your story and having to relive some of the darkest moments in your life, how would you respond to Ellen now?

D *What made you want to write a memoir?*

I hadn't particularly thought about writing a memoir. As a fiction writer, I've spent my career observing the world and then writing it down into stories. But in 2018, an editor at Jonathan Ball and my agent suggested I write a memoir. Looking back, if I had known how complex it would be, I doubt I would have agreed.

What truly motivated me was the feeling of being in midlife and finding myself at an impasse. It felt like a breakdown or a breakup, and writing and thinking, thinking and writing, was a way for me to examine what was there and create

a new narrative, a new story of how to be a person and understand what had gone wrong. This terrible sort of despair that I'd reached, and things that meant a lot to me, like a very long marriage that was disintegrating and then falling apart, along with my feelings about my career and not being able to write those violent books anymore. So I just had to puzzle it out, I guess.

D *In your 'Namibia' chapter, you discuss your work with New Namibia Books and talk about your friend Ellen Namhila. You urge her to write about her life fleeing the country (after the village in which she lived with her family was attacked by the South African Defence Force) and the Cassinga Massacre. It's what led to her writing The Price of Freedom. At the time, Ellen asks you, 'Do*

Ellen was 15 years old at Cassinga, and it was an absolutely horrific massacre. In some ways, the naïvety of my question was useful to her. She really went through an unbelievably difficult time because, as she told me, the memories of being in that SADF attack and seeing all those people killed around her and bodies scattered, she had dissociated from it completely. At the time when I asked, I didn't know much about it. But as an editor I knew I was right. I had to get what it felt like in the body.

Writing is a completely ruthless activity. It has to work for the reader. My friend Ellen, when she went through that, had a very loving relationship, and she received the psychological care that she needed. But she wrote what she needed to write to make a book



Left: Margie with her eldest daughter Rose
Above: Margie married fellow author Gavin Evans in 2022.

work. In my own writing, there were a couple of experiences where I was hesitant to write fully. A friend of mine, who's a very good reader and editor, said to me, 'Margie, you must either put it in as it was, or you must leave it out. You can't be coy and sort of in-between and hint. You have to say it if you can say it.' I think it's one of the reasons my book has resonated with so many women who've had children. Mothers, or people attached to women who have children, can see that I went in and found what it felt like. It's chaotic, wild, ambiguous and contradictory.

Tell us about the title, *Love and Fury*. *Love is deeply intertwined with femininity, yet female fury is often something that is feared or suppressed.*

Love is the greatest trap for women – romantic love, the love for and of our children. But there are all sorts

of things we're meant to not love, like our ambition, our abilities, our talents, our place in the world. I'm very wary of love. Romantic love for women is dangerous. Men will say because I loved her so much, I had to kill her. The bonds of love are the things that hold you together and chain you.

When it comes to fury, our patriarchal culture requires women to put their rage and their outrage to one side. That we get paid so much less, that it's not safe for us inside the home or outside... We're not meant to be outraged by that. But there are certain areas where fury is allowed – as a mother, you are meant to defend your children like a tiger – but it's always on behalf of others, not yourself.

In some ways, I suppose the title is about two different emotions and a kind of drive. It's easy for me to feel fury on behalf of others. It was almost impossible for me to feel it on behalf of myself. But fury is also a very powerful and clarifying emotion. I like those big feelings.

You said that writing your memoir was 'complex'. What do you think you've learnt about yourself since you started writing it?

I learnt that my years as a journalist have truly paid off. I've maintained a tenacious attachment to truth, both for myself and for the other people who have had the cultural misfortune to be part of my life. Writing a memoir felt like opening up the house of myself for others

to enter. In a way, I was writing for others, extending a welcome. I approached it with the mindset of bringing others in and allowing them, under the laws of hospitality, to be with me and leave this house of myself sustained or transformed.

What I have found very moving is this sort of rapprochement with myself with the aspects that I had previously split off because I couldn't bear to tolerate them. It got rid of that feeling of shame of having to be the kind of woman who can survive everything. Yet one of the greatest gifts and sadnesses was the many years when I really loved my first husband and the pleasure that we had in each other. When a relationship ends, for whatever reasons, it's easy to forget the happiness amidst the layers of unhappiness. Recognising that neither of us had necessarily done anything wrong – we just walked along our path together as long as we could and then we couldn't go that way together anymore – and I found that deeply sad. I only truly faced the end of it while writing because my defences were down; writing demands openness to oneself and others.

What would you say was the most challenging part of writing your memoir?

My beloved sister passed away just as I finished the manuscript, and after that I couldn't bring myself to revisit it. For a year-and-a-half I couldn't even open the file. The first time I tried, I was physically sick. So I suppose the toughest part was trying to piece together my life, shattered by her death. She was the one I imagined ending my life with – we'd joke about retiring together by the sea, smoking cigarettes, sipping gin and gossiping. When she died, the reality was that it *was* my plan.

But the hardest was finishing the book. Every word written about my sister, Melle, suddenly felt so ordinary. People are at their best when they're just ordinary. But by finishing it, I realised that I would never write about her in such an ordinary way again. Everything I wrote from then on would be 'in memoriam'. That was hard. Had I known, perhaps I wouldn't have finished. It was like her death became this real thing, because if you write about a person you love, who's dead, it has a different valence. When they're alive, they're there and you love them, and they're annoying, and they get in the way. The ordinariness is now lost to me.

How have women (and men) reacted to *Love and Fury*?

I've been taken aback by the number of men reaching out to me. It's quite unusual for what's labelled a 'women's book' to attract male readers, let alone prompt them to write to me. They're not even writing to correct my grammar, though I had one who did that.

Men of different ages and classes have reached out to me, but the general theme in their messages is a realisation about the women in their lives. In many ways the book delves into masculinity, much like my fiction has done before. Witnessing men connect with and understand the concepts of feminism presented in the book – realising that it's not biologically predetermined but rather shaped by power structures, silencing and violence – has been truly astonishing. It really showed me that we need to talk more.

I had assumed that women would at least be intrigued by the book, so the responses from female readers, while not entirely surprising, have been deeply touching. Particularly the conversations around shame, especially sexual shame, and the notion that one is made into a woman through the lens of a hostile gaze, as well as the complexities of motherhood and the challenges faced by women who are mothers and how to navigate the claustrophobia of traditional roles, the pressure to conform to societal expectations, and the struggle to maintain a sense of self amidst it all. Many women have shared their experiences of feeling like they've lost themselves in the process of trying to meet these expectations, a sentiment I can certainly relate to.

The book is dedicated to your daughters. How did they respond to it?

They've been amazing. Obviously, I sent it to all of them. My oldest daughter is a writer herself, my middle daughter is a sculptor, and my youngest is a scientist and an artist. I think they've seen how the

book, just in my family, has sort of eased and shifted relationships. I come from quite a Waspy family, where things are not spoken about. And I think they've seen that it's given a space to kind of understand how those types of families work.

Actually, the first person I sent it to was my ex-husband, because I didn't want him to be in a position of others knowing things that he didn't know first. Interestingly, it has sort of eased something between us. You can divorce somebody, but you still lived with them for a very long time. They're still part of your life. It kind of brought something back into flow again. So that's been a nice thing. It's been healing.

Where would you say you are now compared to where your memoir opens in autumn 2018, struggling to write your suicide note?

I think all of us have, at some point, had those types of thoughts, and honestly, you live with them all your life. The book tour for *Love and Fury* was very intense; there was a lot going on in between. I was looking after my mom and dad, who are much older now, and trying to work things out because they live in Namibia, which is where my sister used to live. That sort of despair, whatever you call it, comes back all my life, and it comes and goes and comes out. I come back very exhausted, and I can feel it. It's kind of pacing around, wanting my attention.

Those thoughts that say, 'You're not worth it', they return. What I think everyone gets better with is being compassionate, more compassionate with that side of oneself, trying to kind of keep it

in dialogue. I think what I've learnt to understand more about having mental illness is also part of how I'm made up as a human being. I've yet to meet someone who's not 'mad' if you scratch a bit. So that's the territory at the moment.

► *How do you want to be remembered, not just as a writer but also as a person?*

Sounds so final... [laughs]

► *It does, doesn't it? No, what I mean is, what legacy do you want to leave behind one day, in the distant, distant future?*

The thing that has bothered me my whole life, since I was a tiny, tiny girl until now, and will probably continue to bother me until the day I die, is understanding the causes of violence, what they do to people, and alleviating the suffering of people. I just want people to hurt less and laugh more.

One of the most moving things to me is when people write to me about how this book may have helped them find a way to hurt a bit less or to feel that their pain is shared. The reason I want people to hurt less or suffer less is to free up the love in them, the creativity, the capacity. Because for people who are wounded, it's a full-time job being in pain; that's all you can do. In my own life, it's taken years from me where I've just managed to keep myself alive, sort of functioning. But those years are lost. So if you can understand why people suffer, why violence happens, you can (a) understand it, and (b) do something about it. And if I can do that for some people, then I'll be happy.



► *What's next for you?*

I'm finishing my next novel. It's a follow-on from *The Eye of the Beholder*, which came out two years ago. I will be teaching a memoir course here in London. I want to do more non-fiction. One of the first books I wrote was about climate change; I feel myself coming back to it. But I would actually love to stop writing and do something else.

I do feel like I'm in transition. I've been thinking about doing things in public again, public work, you know, like outward-facing work.

"The bonds of love are the things that hold you together and chain you."

For the past 10 years I've been kind of inward-thinking about all sorts of things. So I wouldn't mind doing something public and engaging in more activist work related to women's politics and women's issues.

Maybe I'll launch myself into the world again, or maybe I'll just never write again. Maybe I'm finished now. Who knows? ❖