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13 QUESTIONS WITH MOLLY WIZENBERG

hoopla digital: In addition to all the details you've revealed about yourself in your excellent memoirs, what's something—serious or silly—that our readers don't know about you or your work?

Molly Wizenberg: I've never had a calzone. (Take as much time as you need; I know that's a lot to absorb.)

hd: You met Nora, your fateful jury-duty crush, in 2015, setting off a journey of self-discovery. When did you know you wanted to craft these revelations into a book? Is there anything you'd change now about the book if you could, knowing what you do in this moment?

MW: I started writing the thing that became this book in mid-2017. I'd been divorced for only two months when I began, so much of the story was still very raw. It would be another year-plus before I could begin to see our divorce with anything approaching perspective. But the earlier parts of the story, jury-duty and the Nora storyline, felt more securely behind me—enough that I could revisit them through language with more curiosity than discomfort. Actually, I felt almost electrified by the thought of going back to those scenes and interrogating them. So that's where I started.

Now that the book is out, I feel mostly relief. Of course there are things I'd change, and a lot of tightening I could do on the sentence level. But it was the best I could do then.

hd: We loved the astronomy metaphor that carries through the book. Can you talk some about how you landed on that? Also, how did you settle on the title?

MW: After my divorce, I became the person to take the dog out at bedtime. I remember standing outside that fall and winter especially, in the cold and dark, looking up at the night sky. Orion was one of only two or three constellations that I could (and can) reliably spot. And Orion also meant something new to me then, because Nora had a series of three freckles on her collarbone, aligned just like Orion's Belt. I knew constellations would be an important part of the narrative. Bit by bit, guided by conversations with a geeky writer friend, I began to teach myself more about astronomy, and to find connections between astronomy and the thematic questions I was exploring. Facts and metaphors started to gel in ways I hadn't expected. It was pretty thrilling.

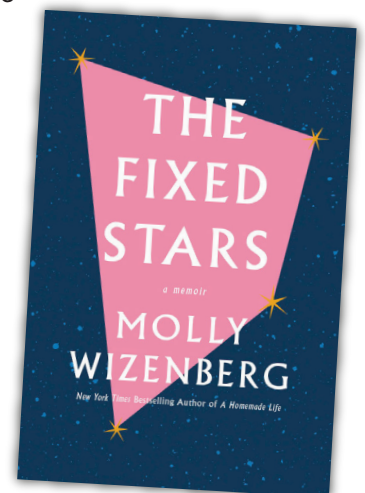
Now, all that said, I can take no credit for the title. It was that same writer friend, Matthew Amster-Burton, who first told me about the concept of the fixed stars, and he also suggested the title.

hd: How did you put this book together—did you anticipate a particular direction or format when you started? How did it shift during the process?

MW: I knew early on that it would be a book of fragments, as opposed to conventional chapters. There were so many small moments, details, and ideas in the narrative that needed to stand on their own. I didn't want to make connections where they didn't reasonably occur, to force moments and scenes to link up into broader chapters. I wrote the manuscript in Scrivener, a word processing program designed especially for writers, and I can't imagine having done it otherwise. Scrivener allowed me to take what could have been a chaotic heap of fragments and build (and then rebuild as needed) a logical structure for it.

hd: On a similar note, you seem to recall what some may view as ordinary, everyday moments with astounding clarity, making them all feel very real and poignant. How do you do that so well? Do you journal?

MW: Thank you for saying that. I started out as a food writer, writing personal essays about the intersection of home cooking and everyday life, and I think



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writing about food trained my eye and ear to notice and hold onto detail. Food writing is inherently specific, concrete writing. It isn't often talked about as literature, but good food writing taught me to write, and what I learned from it informs all my work, whether it's about queerness or motherhood or spaghetti.

As for journaling, I wish I were more disciplined about it. I did keep a journal for many months of 2016 and 2017, and it laid a foundation for the book, without a doubt. I really should get back to it.

hd: This book is very much about self-discovery and acceptance. Did you write it when you felt that way and wanted to share, or did the actual writing of the book propel you there?

MW: Both. I wrote because I had so many questions, because I wanted to understand what had happened to me. For some of the questions, I had rudimentary answers, but for the most part, I wrote my way to understanding. I can't imagine having had the stamina to write the book if I already knew all the answers.

hd: It's likely that reading a kind of coming-of-age story written by a woman in her mid-thirties will feel relatable—and refreshing—to many of our book club readers. How do you think your experience coming out and starting a new chapter at this point in life differs from someone having a similar journey earlier on?

MW: Starting over in life isn't easy at any age. My experience was particularly tricky because I was a mother, and because I was married. I couldn't change my life without very directly changing other people's lives too.

hd: Is there any advice you can give to those struggling with identity- or sexuality-based questions, regardless of their age or family structure?

MW: Consider therapy! Not because you need "help," but because we all need a champion.

hd: We imagine memoir writing can be tricky business since all the characters exist in real life and may well be people the author will continue interacting with post-publication. How do you navigate this? How do you decide how much to share?

MW: It's not simple, and there's no way around that. You can change characters' names and identifying features, but that only goes so far. Beyond that, it's the responsibility of the writer, wherever possible, to seek to do no harm. It's my responsibility to try never to make assumptions of my characters, and to represent only myself and no one else. It's my responsibility to get as close as I can to a truth—through research (where applicable), through contemplation, and through therapy. (Can you tell I feel strongly about therapy?)

I read an interview once with Kiese Laymon about memoirs and the problem of truth, and I loved this idea he expressed, that the best you can do is make an honest attempt—that writing memoir is about "honestly attempting to reckon, honestly attempting to remember, honestly attempting to render."

hd: In the book, you often mention where you were in a moment and then circle back to June's related location. She's clearly a fixed star in your life. Do you hope she reads this book someday?

MW: Yes, very much so. But not for many years.



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hd: In the book, we read that you sometimes struggled to feel at home in the LGBTQ+ community, though you do feel at home in queer love. Can you talk some about navigating a new community, and how you and Ash have built your new life? Is there anything you hope readers take away from the book on this topic?

MW: I wish I had known sooner that there are many of us, so many, whose sexual identity is a fluid and evolving thing. People know and even expect that we humans will change in lots of ways over time, but when we think about sexual orientation, or sexual identity, we still expect to stay the same, set from birth. That's just not true for many of us. But I felt terribly alone through many of the years that this book covers, and feeling alone kept me quiet and ashamed, and staying quiet about who I was kept me feeling alone. I wish there were more talk about sexual fluidity, and active acceptance of it, within the LGBTQIA+ community. I think that's changing among younger generations, but I wish it would change faster.

hd: From restaurant life to personal life, your writing is a joy to read. Any insight into what's next for you—writing-wise or otherwise?

MW: I tend to need a bit of time between books. I'm not doing much writing right now, to be honest, and most days, that feels okay. I'm teaching a lot, which I love to do, and continuing to make Spilled Milk (a podcast I co-host with the aforementioned Matthew Amster-Burton), and just trying to live day-to-day through this garbage-y pandemic and political nightmare we're in. That alone is a lot.

hd: If you could pose a question for book clubs to discuss in relation to *The Fixed Stars*, what would it be?

MW: How do you navigate personal change when you're in a relationship? Or, here's another one: have you and your partner (of any gender) ever discussed how you will divide up your family's domestic and emotional labor, and how you value these types of work?

