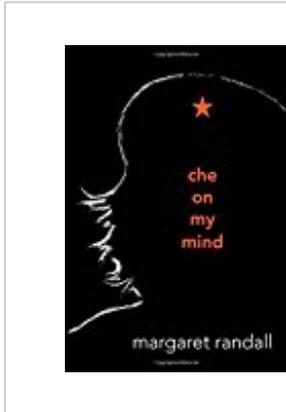


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## A Healthy Distrust of Reality: The Revolutionary Margaret Randall



Margaret Randall is a writer, poet, photographer, feminist, and political activist. She lived much of her early adult life in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua and has written over eighty books including collections of poetry, oral histories, memoirs, essays, translations, and photography books. Born into a white, middle-class, assimilated Jewish family in 1936, she grew up in New Mexico. A young poet, she moved to New York City in the late 1950s where she lived and worked among the abstract expressionists, and decided to have a child on her own.

In the early '60s, she moved to Mexico City with her young son, married a Mexican poet, co-founded and ran the bilingual literary journal *El Corno Emplumado* (The Plumed Horn) for eight years, and had two daughters. Unable to have dual citizenship at the time, she became Mexican so that she could live and work hassle free. She divorced the Mexican and married an American poet with whom she had a daughter. After taking a prominent role in the Mexican student movement in 1968, she was persecuted by the Mexican government and forced to flee the country, first to Prague, then to Cuba where she spent the next eleven years. Later she would describe this period in *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba* (2009).

In an effort to understand what a socialist revolution could mean for women, she collected oral histories published in *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (1974). In 1980, she moved to Sandinista Nicaragua where she interviewed women about their role in the revolution, resulting in *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (1981) and *Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua* (1994). She wrote an account of her own disillusionment with women's involvement and treatment in radical social movements in her book *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (1992).

She moved back to the U.S in 1984. The following year, under the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, based on some of her writings she was accused of being "against the good order and happiness of the United States"; her deportation was ordered. After a five-year legal battle, she finally won her case at the Washington-based Board

of Immigration Appeals in a split decision in 1989. Ruth Bader Ginsberg wrote the opinion giving her victory. *Coming Home: Peace Without Complacency* (1990) describes the ordeal. During this period, she came out as a lesbian.

This autumn, Randall, now seventy-seven, published two more books. *Che on My Mind* is a 160-page tour-de-force in which, with her poetic and visual sensibility, she considers Che Guevara's life and legacy. The slim tome is also a meditation on how her own beliefs on revolution have changed, a prose poem on the vicissitudes of protest, courage, and the tricks of time. The other book, *More Than Things*, is a collection of essays meandering through her extraordinary life, using things -- objects, people, places, poems -- as points of departure for exploring ideas, dreams, memories and the ever-shifting meanings of what it is to be alive.

Randall's first essay "Shaping My Words" sets the wistful, bleak, yet ultimately uplifting tone of her entire collection. It is both an homage to Haydée Santamaría and a personal consideration of suicide. Santamaría was a member of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee and the president of Cuba's cultural institution Casa de las Américas. She took her own life in 1980 not long before Randall moved away. She is the author of one of the Cuban Revolution's "most moving and iconic texts," *Haydée habla del Moncada*, in which she describes being one of two women who participated in the 1953 attack on Moncada Barracks, a crucial battle in the Cuban Revolution. Randall writes of her: "This was a woman who embodies all that was promising about the revolution: its uniquely Cuban roots and risk, its brilliance, creativity, and passion, a genuine appreciation of difference, and the authority to journey where others didn't know enough or didn't have the courage to go."

Though one can never know why someone decides to end her life, in reflecting on Haydée's political disenchantment then, and on her own now with U.S. policy, Randall asks, "What do we do, what can we do, when faced with such weighty evidence that those who would destroy life as we know it are winning on every side?" In her apocalyptic vision of our future her solution to the impending social, political, cultural, and environmental doom is not to end her own life but to "whisper or shout, shaping my words into ever new configurations of a dignity that documents and empowers" -- in other words, to write.

Other essays include meditations on gifts: a wooden apple given to her by her good friend the artist Elaine de Kooning; an ancient tool from the small Uruguayan community of Kiyú; a small clay head given to her by the archaeologist Laurette Séjourné. Writing about a metronome from her family home, she describes her early family life: "My childhood home, like many, broadcast one story line while juggling or running away from others." She writes of her dinner table, her clothes, the cars and bicycles she's owned along the way. Another essay includes her translations of poems by "one of the great Latin American poets of my generation," the El Salvadorian Roque Dalton García. An intrepid traveller, she takes us with her to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and Tunisia just after the 2011 revolution that inspired the Arab Spring.

Randall writes eloquently about naming her children; the experience of memory loss; and how "Gender has so much to do with the ways men and women experience authority." In "Lord Power" she examines the Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Nafissatou Diallo case to discuss the

politics of rape, pointing out that it wasn't until June 2008 that the United Nations declared rape to be a war crime, that an estimated 20,000 rapes were committed in the war in Bosnia, yet resulted in only twenty-seven convictions; 64,000 rapes in Sierra Leone yielded six convictions; and 500,000 rapes in Rwanda, eight convictions. And she observes that "the era of 'your skirt must have been too short' is not entirely behind us."

In "There's Plenty of Time for That Later," she writes of her greatest disappointment in revolutionary movements: that despite the rigorous participation of women they are inevitably marginalized after the initial upheaval. "In the long run no revolution will succeed if it won't share power with half the human race."

"I believe forgiveness has gotten out of hand," she writes in "Forgiver's Dilemma." Forgiveness has become "a catchall for every time we lack the courage to take a principled stand." She demonstrates how as a society "we have been coerced into forgiving and forgetting. Not the slightest move was made to hold Bush and his associates accountable for the crimes they committed. International bankers, who oversaw criminal schemes of gigantic proportions, also got away with what they'd done. The most powerful corporations were deemed 'too big to fail' and saved by taxpayer money. Public attention was riveted on the occasional Bernie Madoff, who became the scapegoat for an entire culture of criminality." Elsewhere she points out that every crime committed by Richard Nixon costing him the presidency is legal today: "The Patriot Act has legitimized those crimes and given tacit permission to the justifications behind them, once anathema to American ideals."

In a particularly beautiful and provocative essay entitled "The Courage It Takes," Randall explores "that intangible we call courage." Often called "courageous" for many of her life choices (single motherhood, an American living in Cuba, coming out at age fifty), she doesn't feel particularly courageous. Instead, she feels she was blessed from a young age with "a healthy mistrust of reality" and an ability to "make connections." Being courageous she says is simply the capacity "at each point along our journey, to access and use reliable information, to understand the world and our place in it."

In her final essay "Not for Myself" she takes to task the platitude other writers often use to justify their vocation: "I write for myself." She acknowledges that no writer would write unless, like eating or breathing, they were compelled: "It is hard work -- a job without security, cost of living raises, even much in the way of honor. There is that painful filling up and then enduring enormous pressure as the body turns itself inside out: raw flesh, muscle, and bone all shivering in icy cold as they are exposed to the vitiated air of twisted values and polluted oxygen." But writing "is also, and powerfully, communication. So no, not for myself. For you."

This reader is grateful.

*Jenny McPhee's novels include [A Man of No Moon](#), [No Ordinary Matter](#), and [The Center of Things](#). She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She lives in London but mostly she resides at [www.jennymcphree.com](http://www.jennymcphree.com).*