

MAD LIT

ELIZABETH MERRICK

The *This is Not Chick Lit* editor is up on her Faulkner and Morrison, but what work really keeps her inspired? (Hint: It's not chick lit.)

By Ling Ma · Photo by Joan Beard



Tori Amos

Piece by Piece



A Portrait of the Artist
and Her Thoughts on Conversation

TORI AMOS AND ANN POWERS

Here are a couple of reasons why you want to get to know Elizabeth Merrick. For one, she once stayed up late at night in a crackpot attempt to help me decipher the Condé Nast e-mail code. The point? For a bona-fide novelist, she's still slumming it like the rest of us. For another, she's one of the most ardent champions for women writers of literary prose, whether that means directing the self-founded Grace Reading Series and Book Club, reporting the stats on the underrepresentation of female writers, or editing and releasing the much-discussed fiction anthology *This Is Not Chick Lit* (Random House).

As the anthology's editor, Merrick has rounded up a collection of original stories by some of the most compelling female writers today (or most compelling writers, period), which include Aimee Bender, Francine Prose, and Samantha Hunt. With all due respect to Bridget Jones, the anthology attempts to broaden the narrow representation of what women writers are capable of, beyond genre novels starring Cosmopolitan-swilling, yoyo-dieting, boyfriend-chasing protagonists that now dominate the market.

What keeps this literary jack-of-all-trades fighting the good fight? Books, of course. Merrick shares one recent work that has kept her inspired.

1) **The book I choose is:** *Piece by Piece* by Tori Amos and Ann Powers.

2) **In one sentence, this book is about:** very precise information from Tori on how she exploded the scope of her creativity, her spirituality, her sensuality, her business, her very own little world that she tours around with — and it is very funny, very dense, very helpful.

3) **I chose this title because:** whether you are an artist or not, this book lets you in on your womanhood. It feels risky to pick this book. My favorite novels are dense, a little difficult: Alan Moore, Toni Morrison, William Faulkner. A few literary folks I'm friends with, New York types, would scoff because they think of Tori as a teenage girl — black eyeliner and fairy wings. Which couldn't be more ludicrous.

This book shows a way forward as a woman and an artist that is truly precious information. She marries the ancient power of archetype and story to the specifics of how to hold your own as a woman artist today.

4) **The first time I read it, it was:** the very instant it came out. I stayed up until 3 a.m.

5) **I've read it:** several times. It's one of the books I go to when I need to get below the surface of my e-mail day or my free-floating anxiety. I dip in when I'm looking for a reminder of the big forces that aren't necessarily apparent in the workday. Tori views her life through the lens of myth and archetype, and this is a very powerful way to tune back in to what you really want, what you really are.

6) **One free-associative personal memory I have of this book is:** that randomly enough, back in 1994, I subletted a room in a San Francisco share from the now-husband of Ann Powers, the eminent music critic who is the co-author of this book. This guy's CD of Tori's album, *Under the Pink*, grabbed me by the throat then — I hadn't listened to her much when she first came out in 1991 because I was dating a jazz musician and sort of turned away from the grunge stuff going on on MTV at the time. I got myself a little writing studio-shack down at the beach in

Pescadero and started writing my novel, *Girly*. I'd play that CD over and over in the car on the way down there.

7) **My favorite line is:** "The thought form that 'if one woman succeeds in the music business then one must fail' had become nails across my face, and I wanted to purge that idea from the ladies' room at the Grammys. It was as if we were all part of some modern harem, competing with each other to go down on that microphone."

8) **If I ever met the author, I would:** take her on a walk in my neighborhood in Brooklyn because I think she would really love it. Complete with shoe shopping and some lovely wine lists and a stop at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

9) **After reading it, this book caused me to:** book an appointment with the amazing Joseph Campbell-trained Jungian astrologer, Wendy Ashley, whom Tori mentions in chapter four.

10) **One unresolved question I wondered about was:** OK, I feel a little naughty here but I'll admit it. I wanted more exact info on how Tori pulled herself out of the torturous/irritating relationships with men of the *Boys For Pele* era and let herself find true love with Husband. Inquiring minds want to know.

11) **Music to listen to when reading this:** I think something a little lighter than Tori's music but with similar elements. Nouvelle Vague, who are lovely French women re-voicing gorgeous '80s songs by men, would be good. Or Morcheeba. Something soothing and not distracting. And in between chapters I'd listen to Nina Simone.

12) **You should read it when:** you are desperately trying to ignore that little voice in your head that wants you to quit your job or tell someone who is stepping on your toes to fuck off or spill your guts to the guy and tell him you are in love with him. Because this book makes what is under the surface fascinating rather than terrifying and will help you see your path clearly.