Sophomore Josie Levin sits down with Meg Wolitzer, New York Times bestselling author, to talk about feminism, writing, the #metoo movement, empathy, storytelling across generations, and why the study of literature matters now more than ever. Wolitzer’s works include: The Wife, The Ten-Year Nap, The Uncoupling, The Interestings, and The Female Persuasion.

A lot of your work is about feminist issues, do you have a personal definition of what feminism is or what you think feminism should be?

I feel like the word “equality” is really useful and durable. I just think about equality and fairness, those are the qualities that I want to see active in the world.

Do you try to write those into your books? I know you talk a lot about inequality.

No I wouldn’t ever say I try to write anything into my books. I mean if things aren’t organic to the book then it’s going to feel like you’re pushing a point or that the book is a message book and I certainly would never want to write a message book. People say to writers “write what you know” but I think it’s “write what obsesses you” and I’ve been thinking about these issues a lot. I always say to students if there’s something you’re thinking about a lot, it’s going to be interesting in a book.

Do these issues manifest in your books organically?

I think so, sure. They’re things that characters, in The Female Persuasion the characters are struggling with.

The Female Persuasion was released right as the #metoo movement got off its feet. How comfortable are you with where the movement is now? Do you think it needs to catch up, because you’ve been writing about topics like sexual assault for a long time?
Yeah, obviously, I was working on this book for three and a half years before #metoo became this big thing so these are old issues. I mean, I don’t know that #metoo is one thing so it’s hard to say. People are going about it in different ways. Its messy, its early stages, when you think about where we are, how quickly things have moved (and in some cases, stalled), but now there’s been this sudden change that these issues around assault became front and center in a way that they weren’t for a very long time for the way the media covered it. So it’s hard to know, it’s a lot of things.

In relation to that, there’s obviously a big issue with college campuses and sexual assault. Your first novels, Sleepwalking as well as The Female Persuasion, both take place on college campuses. How has the setting changed for you?

It’s not that the campus in The Female Persuasion is political but that [it] wouldn’t even have been a thing that I was dealing with, particularly in Sleepwalking although when I was at Brown, I graduated in ‘81, divestment from South Africa was something that was front and center. And as I came of age in the ‘80s anti-nukes was something—these were things that I saw on the campus. But I don’t think that ideas around sexual assault were front and center. Dealing with the politics of a campus would be something I have to do now that I didn’t think I had to do then.

Is that the politics of a campus as opposed to politics on campus?

I mean politics on a campus, but I also mean because of the way that a campus and a community deals with matters of import and I just didn’t have a sense of a community. I didn’t understand that a college is an organism, is a community, must conduct itself in a certain way. I didn’t understand that, even think about that in the ways I do now.

When did you start understanding that?

As the sexual assault stories started coming in over the years and the ways that colleges could handle it as they saw fit was wild to me. I didn’t understand that all kinds of things could happen. So when I wrote The Female Persuasion and I have a sexual assault on campus and I have the
college dealing with it in a wrist slapping way as I had heard and read about my eyes were opened. I would say in the ‘80s and ‘90s and as time passed.

*How has the world changed, do you think, for female writers since you published* Sleepwalking?

There was a kind of golden era in fiction, I would say. The women’s movement and the civil rights movement sort of shines lights on communities that people hadn’t written about a great deal and you had voices that would have been marginalized [in the past] paid attention to and there was a sense that was part of the public conversation. I think that fell away as fiction has seemed to be a special interest, like a luxury item for a lot of people. To me it’s a necessity because it’s about empathy it’s about understanding how other people live, what it’s like to not be you, what it’s like to be in a community or to be a person living in a certain circumstance that you’ve never really thought about. I think that as the world becomes really anxious people cling to facts a lot but there’s such a truth in fiction—in good fiction—that I can’t imagine trying to understand the world without it.

*In the foreword for the version of Sleepwalking I read, which I believe is the most recent published version, you talked a lot about how on its initial release, it was put in the YA [Young Adult] section and it had a cover that you really didn’t like. What do you think is the difference between Sleepwalking and YA books that you’ve written [since then]?

All things being equal, books would be available to all people. A lot of adults read YA; these are categories that help people find books and help publishers and bookstores bring readers to kinds of books that they think they want. When I wrote this book, *Belzhar*, there’s almost more of an immediacy to it, like the character is very in her own contained world and she has to get the story out and there’s a sense of it spilling out. I think *Sleepwalking* is more discursive and takes its time—which isn’t to say that young readers don’t want to take their time—but it was just my instinct to write that way for my teenage self.

Sleepwalking *you wrote for your teenage self?*
No, Belzhar. Sleepwalking I was a senior in college when I sold it. I was reading adult novels. I hate saying adult fiction, it sounds like I’m talking about porn.

A little bit, yes.

I know, right? I was an English major and I was steeped in literature classes and I was reading Wuthering Heights and I was reading Middlemarch and I was thinking about what I wanted a novel to be. In a sense, I’d rather focus on what they have in common. It’s easier for me to articulate.

Yeah, of course.

With my YA, with my middle grade, with my adult books it’s about who are these people, why are they telling this story, why are we in their world? Who are they? If they don’t stand out, if I don’t remember them, I don’t know that the book has been successful in the way I want it to be.

So that’s an overarching theme for all of your books?

Yes, I think that characters become a vessel, not for messages but for ways of thinking about the world. And just to go back, I’m not sure I answered your politics on campus question articulately.

Oh, go ahead.

I was going to say when I think about the ways I didn’t really think about what a college campus should be, of course [in] the ‘60s, I certainly had that in mind too. It’s not like I’m an idiot about what a campus could do and could be, but I guess I would say that I was very much in my own writing world at the time. What I really did when I was in college was write a lot, and my interior life probably dominated my college experience more than I wish it had. There was politics going on on campus, less at Smith [College], although feminism was interestingly happening, it was the late ‘70s, and I saw that an all-women’s college is an interesting environment for that. But it’s really only later that I saw that campuses could be really political. I don’t think I was aware of it in the same way. I think that campuses as a testing ground and enactment
of political ideas is certainly an exciting thing. I started to see that over
time, but for me [in college] I was writing, I wasn’t engaging that way.

Going back to when you talked about characters being vessels for
viewpoints, you write a lot in multiple perspectives. Do you write that
way to explain different perspectives?

My novel *The Wife* was written in first person and it’s kind of an angry
screed, but it’s funny and angry. My yardstick for how to figure that out
[is], first of all, its connection to voice. Is there a singular voice that is
the only voice that could tell this story? If the answer’s no, then I’m not
sure why you would do it in first person. Either you haven’t figured out
who that voice is or it shouldn’t be in first person. Also, third person does
allow you that kind of wide, telescopic, panoramic view. You can sort of
go anywhere and the freedom of that is, to me, not to be God but to be
kind of a lesser god that knows some people, but not every person. That
is a powerful thing to me. I like to use it. For instance in [*The Female
Persuasion*] we would have had Greer’s story if it was in first person but
not Faith’s back story. People wouldn’t feel fleshed out to me. Because I’m
not trying to damn my characters—they are imperfect, of course—but I
think my big mantra is, “what is it like, what is it like for these people?”
So I’m trying to show what it’s been like as much as I can.

Do you feel like the story’s incomplete if you don’t have all these different
viewpoints?

No, but it’s a different story. Every novel is really different depending
on the choices, of the way the writer goes about it. Like if [*The Female
Persuasion*] had been in first person from Faith Frank’s point of view, we
would have been looking at Greer. It could have felt completely different.
That’s why people have played with a novel from the point of view of the
wife of a famous person as opposed to the famous person, whatever it is.

When you’re writing a novel, how does the idea come to you? Do you
think of it in broad terms? Do you have specific scenes that come to your
mind first?

I like to think about an idea that I want to, not solve, but work on. In the
case of [*The Female Persuasion*] it was a couple of things. It was about
making meaning and also the person you might meet when you’re young who sees something in you. So once I have that, characters almost come up out of the primordial ooze and say “I can handle that.”

*With that mentor/mentee and also the subsequent disillusionment of that in The Female Persuasion, do you think that is cyclical? Do you think that successive generations are always going to find fault in their predecessors?*

Well certainly we’ve seen that happen quite a bit. To a certain extent, the media likes to play up cat fights between generations, but of course there are real tensions because one of the things that I realized was that people grew up in a different world, so their sense of the world is different based on the world they saw when they were young. Yeah, I think it’s a part of sticking your place in the world, but there are real legitimate criticisms.

*You write a lot of characters who walk the line between sympathetic and unsympathetic, how you keep [the line] so fine?*

I guess I do it because that’s not the way I see it when I’m writing them. I’m not thinking “now they need to be unsympathetic because I’ve been too sympathetic.” I’m just trying to understand who they are and if I really let that happen then you will see these signs. I don’t even think it’s about walking a fine line. I think it’s about being honest about “who are these people?” If you really could write who these people are and let us see moments that—even moments that they’re not proud of—moments where they are vulnerable. Whatever it is, let [readers] see important moments. You will get to see a more complete picture than you generally get to see when you don’t know [the characters].

*Your novels are a creative form of fiction but you also write essays and some historical [writings]. I see a lot of that kind of writing in your [novel] writing. How do these different mediums interact for you?*

Well, I should say that I really prefer writing fiction to anything else. I’m better at it. I still have a part of me that feels like she’s writing a book report when I’m writing other things. I always say to people, “where are you freest? Where are you freest to explore? That’s maybe the medium
you should look at.” But some writers are very free in several, in all [forms]. There’s a line in an essay by Zady Smith called “Fail Better,” she says something like ‘I’m trying to express my way of being in the world.” So I guess that you might have an overarching feeling of what feels just and what you care about, and that can go into all your work—in terms of what you choose to write about, not just your opinions. You know, [if] somebody offers you a book review assignment and it doesn’t speak to the things you really care about, you might not do it. But if it does, you might. Or if it doesn’t, you might be open to that. I like that, actually, about reviewing, because it’s not a book that I’ve chosen. Somebody’s said “do you want to read that?” And I do not prejudge it, but take it on its own terms, which is in a sense a kind of fairness.

*When you’re writing, do you ever feel like there’s a story that you have to tell or there’s a story that you should be telling, or do you feel that freedom?*

I feel free, I feel freedom. I think people go to the writers they love for the writer’s freedom, for the surprise of what the writer will do. I hope so.

*In your novels you write a lot over decades, is that another freeing thing for you?*

Yeah, I think one of the things a novel can do is deal with time. Time can go back and forth, it can be compressed. [In] my novel *The Interestings,* I really jump forth back in time and it was something that critics talked about a lot which I realized, yeah okay, that makes sense, but I wasn’t thinking of it as a tricky way to do it. It was just the most right way to do it because there was this experience that the characters had, when they were young teenagers and how their lives spooled out but they always pulled back to that moment, too, so I would do that freely, I would use it as a kind of touchstone and go back and forth, back and forth. I love the way the novel can deal with time; the great novel To the Lighthouse certainly does that. You have Mrs. Ramsey dead and time passing and it’s so shocking. That’s right, that’s what it’s like. That’s what time is like.

*Do you see expressions of yourself in your writing? In your characters?*

Yeah, sure. I mean they’re not piped in like Muzak. They really do come
from you, even though you’re not them. I mean, you might be them. I don’t ever like to write autobiographically. It’s not interesting to me. I like the challenge of inhabiting these worlds and these people. But yes, absolutely, there are observations that I’ve made or someone in my family might have made. You know, you use what you can. Again, I don’t mean autobiographically. Were just sort of marinating in everything and then, once in awhile, you’re like “oh right, that’s something that would work well in this book.”

_On the subject of family, your mother, Hilma, is also a writer. Do you read her books?_

Oh, sure.

_Do you ever find any similarities that you don’t expect between the two of you?_

Yeah, I think the thing, we’ve both been interested in different ways of humor, which I think is important because there’s this notion that there’s serious fiction and ‘funny’ fiction. Of course, what’s funny can be absolutely devastating and important and I think she’s really captured humor and I’ve gotten quite a bit of that from her.

_As a Jewish person, I see a lot of Jewishness in the background of your novels—is that a reflection of the way you grew up with it?_

Yeah, it probably is. I haven’t explored the Jewishness front and center in any of my characters particularly. I may someday if it feels right for that character but yeah, absolutely, my background affects the things I’ve become preoccupied with. Hearing stories from my grandparents and my parents—it’s all part of who I am.

_Do you think the generational nature of that is important, that stories are passed down?_

Oh absolutely. I loved hearing my parents’ stories. My mother’s stories of growing up in Brooklyn in this warm house of lots of people and being Jewish was part of that, for sure. _Do you feel Judaism more as a culture than a religion?_
Yeah, it’s more secular, more of secular humanism, absolutely. That’s my own experience, sure.

*Do you have any advice for writers, here or anywhere, of the future?*

I think that there’s a couple of things I would say. Obviously reading good things, but if you’re in school you’re probably reading good things, but the idea of having some time, like a bracketed four-year period where you’re allowed to read and think and write and learn is tremendous. I think reading or even seeking out those things when you’re not in school—that’s an important thing because people leave school and enter the job market (if they’re lucky). [And then] there’s less time for [reading], of course, and it can take a lower priority. But I feel that, when I don’t have a good book going, I feel a loss of a connection to something that is free from the world of the madness that we’re living in right now. I mean I’d rather go into another madness of the world of that book or whatever it contains as a reminder that these books are there.

I edited *The Best American Short Stories of 2017* and I wrote the introduction right after the 2016 presidential election, and I was looking around at my office filled with these stories, and I was thinking “how could these things matter?” We’re in this swirling time, this time when the country’s completely divided and what’s the relationship of reading to the sort of chaos that’s going on? And I realized you have to think back to the reading experiences of the past to imagine the reading experiences in the future.

Reading offers solace, knowledge, depth of thought—so many things that we need, just to live in the world and understand our world now. So I would say, even when you come out of school, try to have something wonderful to read. Even if it’s just a paragraph before bed.

Another piece of advice, I’d say—and this is really more for writers who already are writing: when you get stuck (and this, of course, happens), I think that people shouldn’t beat up on themselves, which they do, or sometimes they force themselves to stay with the book, story, poem, whatever it is they’re working on. Give yourself a little break from it. But one thing you could do is find a passage in a work that you love,
where you feel the writer was excited when he or she wrote it, because there’s something about it. Beginning writing is sort of like falling in love, there’s a grandiosity and a sense of “oh this could go anywhere, I’m going to do so much with this.” Of course, that starts to fall away and you think “oh, wait, I don’t know what I’m doing.” But try to find a passage where the writer was really going full steam and you feel how exciting it must have been to write that poem or that story. And just read that passage a little bit because, even if you didn’t write it, a connection to something that is exciting will help you connect to your own excitement.

I think there’s a connection between those two pieces of advice: they’re [about] connect[ing] yourself to other writing experiences. You’re not alone. There are a lot of people out there doing it, it’s a long haul.

*Do you think reading or writing is more fundamental? Or do you think they go hand in hand?*

Definitely go hand in hand. I don’t know any writers who have not been readers, whereas most readers are not writers. But I think they go hand-in-hand because you’re part of a tradition, you want to be a writer because of your reading experiences, often. You think about books you’ve loved and sometimes, you’re riffing on them. They’re in you, in a way. You see the influence of x on x. You see that in other writers too or when they break out of that. I think they have a very special connection.