

“Sex Wars” a novel by Marge Piercy, is set in post–Civil War New York and stars a cast of real characters that include Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for the U.S. presidency; passionate suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony; the aged Cornelius Vanderbilt, who sits atop a \$100-million fortune as he tries to make contact with his dead mother; and Anthony Comstock, a crusading moralist who dedicates his life to outlawing pornography (including medical books with nudity), and dispensing of birth control information.

Piercy captures the early feminists' zeal, the hardships of immigrants, and the hypocritical sexual mores of the times. She offers a wealth of period detail, including tips on using an outdoor latrine when living in a fifth-floor walk-up and the cost to bathe (fully dressed, no soap) in the East River.

Most memorable among the invented characters is Freydeh Leibowitz, a young Russian-Jewish widow, who makes a living for herself and her adopted children, penny by penny, as a manufacturer of reliable condoms. Ironically, Freydeh, the only main character that is fictional, is the most realistic and sympathetic character in the book. The reader is immersed in her life, and struggles with her to overcome tragedies and hardships to lift her and her family out of poverty.

The dialogue and descriptions of Stanton, Woodall, Comstock and Vanderbilt are somewhat stilted and give only a skeletal picture of them. Nevertheless, for those interested in history, the descriptions of the living conditions and social struggles of that period make it worth reading the book.