# The Madigans

*A Spirited Novel of Sisters, Rivalry, and Growing Up in a Boisterous American Family*

**by Miriam Michelson**

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*The Madigans*

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# Preface
# Message to the Reader

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# Introduction

ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD CECILIA MADIGAN SITS DOWN on the first of April and writes herself a legal document. She is of sound mind, she declares, and she promises to be good for a month. The list has ten articles, and she signs it with her full name. The family she lives with, in a house on a Nevada mountainside, has other plans for her. The Madigans is a collection of ten stories about a household of sisters in the silver-mining town of Virginia City, and it begins with a child whose best intentions are under attack before breakfast.

The book is funny in a sharp, unsentimental way. Its children are not sweet. They fight, scheme, form alliances, and hold grudges with the seriousness of generals. The grown-ups who surround them are just as vivid, and just as stubborn.

## The Girls On The Hillside

Part of the pleasure is how fresh this kind of family portrait still feels. Many books about girls growing up from the nineteenth century lean toward gentleness and moral lessons. Miriam Michelson looks at the same subject with a sly eye. Her Madigans consider tender displays of affection a kind of affectation, and they settle quarrels with the full force of their tempers. Readers who love Little Women or the Anne books will recognize the crowded house and the sisterly rivalries, but the temperature here runs hotter and the humor drier.

Michelson knew this world. She was born in 1866 and grew up in Nevada, in the mining country of the Comstock, where Virginia City had boomed on the silver of the Comstock Lode. She worked as a newspaper reporter in San Francisco before turning to fiction and to books of her own. Her brother Albert Michelson, the physicist, won the Nobel Prize in 1907, though that is a different corner of the family story. Miriam herself was known for newspaper work and for books such as A Yellow Journalist, and she was also active in the cause of women's suffrage.

The mining town matters to these stories. It is a place of sudden fortunes and sudden losses, where a house can sit high on a hillside above everyone else and a schoolroom can run on credits and competition. A father can be, as the opening pages put it, an irascible man who has not succeeded. That setting gives the family both its scrappiness and its odd independence from the polite world below.

## A Household At War

The premise is simple. Sissy Madigan, the third of several daughters, is a girl of strong feeling and fierce pride who wants, this once, to be good. Around her are sisters, an aunt, a father who wanted sons, and a school full of rivals. Can anyone keep a vow in a house where everyone else is keeping score?

The stories that follow widen from Sissy to the rest of the family. There are ten pieces in all, each a self-contained episode, so the book can be taken one story at a time. The opening story, Cecilia the Pharisee, sets the tone: brisk, observant, and full of comic exaggeration. Michelson likes a grand comparison. Her comparisons borrow the language of diplomacy, labor disputes, and shipwreck, giving a child's grievances the scale that the child believes they deserve.

The names come quickly, and several sisters have nicknames that differ from their given ones, but the family sorts itself out within a few pages. Period details such as corset waists, credit marks at school, and a Chinese servant at the dinner table place the household in a historical American West, presented with the matter-of-fact familiarity of a child's everyday surroundings.

## What To Look For

Start with Sissy's code of honor. She holds principles with enormous seriousness, yet the world keeps testing them in absurd ways. Where does a child's sense of justice end and her love of a grand gesture begin?

Notice, too, how the family treats feeling. The Madigans mock tenderness, but the stories keep hinting that it lives somewhere underneath. Does a family that scorns soft words have any other way to show it cares?

And watch how the book moves beyond its first heroine. Michelson wrote in the years when Virginia City was still a lively mining town, and that memory gives each story the same close, local feel, so the book reads like a set of vivid family recollections. Which of these Madigans will turn out to be the one whose voice stays longest in the ear?

# Cecilia the Pharisee

I, CECILIA Morgan Madigan, being of sound mind and in perfect physical health, and residing in Virginia City, Nevada, do solemnly promise on this first day of April:

1. That I will be Number 1 at school this coming month.

2. That I will be patient with Papa and try to put up with him.

3. That I will set Bep—and Fom too, even if she is Irene's partner—a good example.

4. That I will not pinch Aunt Anne's sensitive plant even once this coming month—no matter what she does to me.

5. That I will dust the piano's back legs even when Mrs. Pemberton isn't expected.

6. That I will help Kate control her temper and not mock or provoke her when she sulks.

7. That I will be a little mother to Frank and teach her to grow up and be a credit to the family.

8. That I will not steal candy from Kate's pocket—without first begging her very hard to give me some.

9. That I will practice The Gazelle faithfully every solitary day, and give up reading on the sly while I play 5-finger exercises.

10. That I will try to bear with Irene. That I will do all I can not to fight with her—but she is a selfish devil who is always in the wrong.

And all this I solemnly promise myself, without being coerced in any way, of my own free will, without hindrance, because I want to be good.

Cecilia Morgan Madigan (called Sissy), age 11 on her last birthday.

P.S. And I feel sure I can do it all, God helping me, except Number 10—which is the hardest.

Sissy, who had been sitting and writing only half dressed, folded the paper reverently, kissed it for lack of a seal, and then buttoned it securely inside her corset waist.

She already felt so virtuous that carrying out her intentions seemed truly supererogatory. When she went to Irene to have her button her dress in the back, she felt so holy, so conscious of having a forbearing, pure, and gentle spirit, that her sister's malicious pretense of ignoring her seemed nothing less than sacrilege.

"Aren't you going to button me, Split?" she demanded, indignant that her enemy, whom she was going to treat with Christlike charity, should test her temper so successfully before the ink was dry on her own promise to keep the peace.

"Ask me nicely," grinned Split, whose nickname honored a gymnastic feat that no other Madigan, however athletic, could perform half as successfully as the second. "Say 'please.'"

"I won't do anything of the sort. You know you have to do it, and you can't expect me to say 'please' every time. You don't do it yourself, you hateful thing!"

"Why don't you cry?"

"Because I won't for you—because you can't make me—because—"

"Because you're crying in spite of yourself! Because anybody can make you cry, crybaby!"

Sissy's hands flew to her chest. It was a familiar gesture, as if she were physically holding herself together in the final moment before her temperamental outburst.

Split cautiously retreated, clearing the deck for action herself.

But no first shot was fired in that skirmish. The crackle of the document tucked over the spot where she thought her heart

was sounded like a warning to Sissy. She struggled against it for a moment; then her hands fell. Meekly she turned her back on her tormentor and said in a voice of such exquisite holiness it was almost unearthly:

"Split dear, will you please button me?"

A look of outraged astonishment at this unheard-of endearment came over Irene's face. The Madigans considered demonstrative affection pure affectation at best; at worst, it was little short of indecent.

"'Split dear?'" Irene mocked when she recovered. "Yes, dear. Turn around, dear. Stand straight, dear. Wait a minute, dear—"

Sissy stood silently, biting her tongue so she wouldn't speak. She was so intent on keeping Number 10 of her pact with herself that she didn't notice how long Irene took to actually begin buttoning her dress. She did notice that Irene started at the bottom, a method Split seemed to fancy simply because it drove her younger sister nearly frantic. She buttoned with maddening slowness up to the middle, then capriciously abandoned that point and started again at the top.

Sissy followed the process in her mind. It was almost complete when Split deftly slipped a providentially flattened piece of ice from the windowsill through the little gap she had deliberately left open. She gave her victim a little shake, sending the ice sliding smoothly down her squirming body, then escaped before Sissy could turn and tear into her.

"That settles Number 10," Sissy said grimly to herself as she danced with discomfort. "I'll kill her if I get the chance—that's what I'll do. I'll get even, or my name isn't Sis Madigan."

She hurried back into the room she shared with the twins and stood in damp martyrdom while Bessie's clumsy fingers crept up and down with miserable slowness. She suffered so from Bessie's ineptness that, despite the demands of Number 3 in her code, she tore herself away from her and turned imploringly to Florence. But Fom was Split's partisan, and Madigan warfare's code of

ethics forbade aiding and comforting the enemy. When Sissy, chastened, returned to Bep's ministrations, the blonde twin was so hurt and offended by the implication that she was clumsy—a point on which she was as vulnerable as she was sensitive—that Sissy slapped them both before finally seeking relief from Aunt Anne.

This was fatal, as she knew it would be.

"I'll tell your father about Irene," her aunt said, looking up from the coffee she was sipping as she lay in bed reading a French book. "But it's just as well, because I told you yesterday that dress was too dirty to wear another day. Change it now—"

"Oh, Aunt Anne, it's already late—"

"You'll change that dress, Sissy, or you won't go to school."

"I won't! It's too late. I'll be late. That means one credit off, and this month I'm going to—" Sissy suddenly remembered her lofty intentions. The whole world seemed bent on forcing her to break her promise.

"Cecilia!" Miss Madigan commanded.

Sissy stiffened.

"You've interrupted my reading enough this morning. If you say another word, I'll—"

"Oh, Aunt Anne—"

"Go over to the wall, Cecilia, and stand with your back to me for five minutes."

With a fiendish gleam in her eye—a look of such desperate satisfaction that it suggested someone glad to be driven to commit the unforgivable— Sissy moved toward the sensitive plant in the window.

"Not there! That poor plant seems to suffer along with your bad behavior. Stand over by the bureau."

Sissy obeyed. Her fury at being made ridiculous, her outrage that a perfectionist like herself should be punished, and her awareness of how quickly time passed on school mornings left her speechless. But she clutched the paper to her breast as a drowning

man might clutch a spar from a wreck. At least Number 4 remained intact. She had been mercifully spared breaking one of her self-made commandments.

She stood with her nose pressed firmly against the green wallpaper, her back split open as if by surgery, and a towel her aunt had forced into the opening to dry it dangling behind her, when Kate, passing the door on her way to breakfast, glanced in.

Kate's sputtering, quickly stifled screech of laughter sent Sissy spinning around like a bull when a banderilla is planted in its quivering flesh. She looked toward the doorway; it was empty, but she heard hurried footsteps outside. Kate was on her way to tell the others.

She looked at Aunt Anne. The stern lady had dropped her book and, caught by the same contagion, was shaking with silent laughter.

Sissy said nothing. Her look of disgust—disgust that a grown-up could be silly enough to find something funny in absolutely nothing, disgust that her aunt could so undermine the effect of her own discipline—along with the green smudge rubbed from the wallpaper onto her nose, finished Miss Madigan. She no longer tried to hide the disgraceful fact that she was laughing. She gave an audible gurgle and began wiping tears of delight from her eyes.

In that moment, the iron entered Sissy Madigan's soul. She turned back to the wall and, taking a pin that had fastened the ribbon at her throat, slowly but relentlessly pricked this inscription into the loose wallpaper:

Aunt Anne—pig

After that she felt relieved, and when the five minutes were up, she left the room with such uncompromising hauteur—still green-smeared on the nose, still split open down the back, with the towel's fringe dangling regally behind her—that her aunt burst out laughing again.

The fact that she had irretrievably lost one credit for being late set Sissy's lips in a determined line. She would guard every one of the ninety-nine that remained.

At recess, she stayed at her desk studying geography with such intensity that her rivals' hearts trembled. She sat at the teacher's desk, raised to this almost regal height by his fondness for her petulance and by the leadership that made Sissy her classmates' spokeswoman. She had the privilege of using the teacher's pencils, sharpened so finely that neatness became a pleasure rather than a chore. Of course, she had invented the decorative style of arithmetic paper then in fashion, with each problem penned inside a little enclosure fenced by alternating vertical and horizontal double hyphens.

But a strange, conscientious sense of the responsibilities that came with power and position tempered Sissy's ecstatic delight, so she held on to it despite the class's fierce jealousy, bred by a strict credit system, by the competitive spirit encouraged in the rarified atmosphere of the little mining town, and by a young teacher fresh out of college who regarded teaching as a temporary adventure, much as a Japanese gentleman regards domestic service.

In her role as class representative, Sissy had been consulted by the teacher about what limits to observe in the coming public oral examination in geography. She had explained what would be considered quite "fair." She entered into this agreement with the seriousness of an ambassador to a hostile power negotiating a settlement to a disputed question. In her eyes, the agreement was so sacred that when the teacher broke it that afternoon, it struck her like a blow.

"Cecilia Madigan," the teacher asked, "what is the highest mountain in the world?"

Sissy stood. The imposing array of visitors at the school disappeared from view. All she could see were her classmates' eyes turned on her in accusing horror. They suspected her of

betraying them, of using her elevated position to pass along unreliable information.

"Please, Mr. Garvan," she said in a tone more sorrowful than angry, deftly showing that she knew the answer while denying that he had a right to ask it, "that question isn't on the map of Africa."

A flush of irritation crept up the young teacher's forehead. From the corner of her eye, Sissy saw the preliminary twitch at the corners of his lips that served as a danger signal to the class.

"What is the highest mountain, Cecilia?" he repeated sternly.

Sissy stood for a moment, looking at him. Everything she could not say—her contempt for those who broke their promises, her shocked hero worship now forever ended, her wounded schoolgirl affection—she sent straight at the teacher through her angry eyes.

Then she sat down.

"I don't know," she said.

He looked up from his book, incredulous. Ten credits out of a hundred gone all at once—ten of Sissy Madigan's credits, which she had fought so gallantly for and guarded so jealously once she had them.

"I—don't—know," Sissy repeated disdainfully.

The teacher passed the question on. But as he put it to the next girl, Sissy silently asked that same girl another question with her eyes.

"Are you a scab?" her steady gaze challenged. "Are you going to benefit from what a classmate suffers for the sake of principle? Are you a coward who doesn't dare stand up for your class? And—do you know what you'll get from me if you are?"

"I—don't—know," the girl stammered.

Triumph blazed across Sissy's face. It spread like a sunrise from peak to peak across a mountain range of stubbornness. "I don't know"—"I don't know"—"I don't know"—the strikers' rallying cry

went down the line. The teacher was publicly humiliated by the star pupils of his school. He writhed, but steadily put the question to every girl until he reached Irene, last in line.

"What is the highest mountain in the world?" he asked, now going through the motions.

But, to his amazement, she stood and looked out the window at the mountain whose lower slopes the town clung to. Then she answered:

"Mount Davidson."

Sissy's fierce joy came so quickly after her horror at her own sister's defection that the end of school left her trembling with emotion. In the dressing room, as the girls put on their hats, she marched up to Irene, followed by her furious supporters, feeling like an avenging Brutus.

"You're a sneak, Split Madigan! You're a coward, and—and a stupid coward. You don't know enough to betray your class and benefit from it, but you'd rather be mean than earn credits, anyway. Nobody can count on you. Changeable Silk—that's what you are, always changing color, never standing firm! I hate you! Changeable Silk! Changeable Silk!"

"Changeable Silk! Changeable Silk!" her followers chanted.

The little dressing room rang with the mob's cry. The tone made it so full of meaning that Irene paled and shrank back.

But only for a moment. The Madigans never stayed timid for long. The fierce family feuds waged by the clan in their old house high on the hillside made a Madigan quick and resolute.

"You're the stupid one, Sissy! My answer made him madder than your refusing to answer."

Sissy searched her face. "But—did you—" she faltered.

"Of course I did! Who's stupid now? Do you suppose I didn't know it was—"

"What? What?" Sissy repeated as her sister hesitated.

Irene turned up her nose insultingly. "I don't—know," she mocked, and made a successful escape.

Francis Madigan dined in a long room, the only man at a table with seven women ranging in age from four to forty-four. The accumulation of girls in his family was such an outrageous insult to his wishes that he almost rejoiced in how complete the affliction was, as an undeniable grievance.

He needed a grievance as a shield against which other people's grievances could be shattered. When he had no more tangible one, he pointed to his house overrun with daughters. It was at dinner that he always seemed to grasp the full extent of his disaster. As he took his place at the head of the table, his angry gaze swept from Frances in her high chair, up the line, past the twins, through Cecilia, Irene, and Kate, until it landed on Miss Madigan's good-humored, placid face. His sister's placidity was a constant offense to the father of the Madigans—the most irascible of unsuccessful men—and the snort with which he ended his inspection and picked up the carving knife had become a classic in Madigan history long before Sissy, at the age of eight, brought down the house one evening by imitating it in his absence.

But that evening Sissy showed her parent the most painful, conspicuous respect. She stood conspicuously still while the others scrambled into their chairs and Wong, the Chinese servant, hurried around, putting everything on the table at once, waiting for her father to sit down.

She was still waiting politely when his gaze fell on her. "Sit down, Cecilia!" he roared. "What're you standing there gaping for?"

Sissy sat down. She was so saintly that she did not openly resent Irene's low, delighted giggle. She began paying polite attention to Dusie, her father's pet canary, though she loathed the spoiled little thing as it hopped around the table helping itself.

In his rare moments of introspection, Madigan had a way of telling himself that the tenderness he might have lavished on

a son he bestowed on the male offspring of species luckier than humankind. The big Newfoundland dog and the great cat came to meals regularly. They shared Madigan's affection with the birds, whose cage, as big as a doghouse, he had nailed up against the wall himself. The birds broke into a maddening din of song, stirred up by the rival clatter of the young Madigans at dinner.

Shielded by this shrill symphony from the sound of his daughters' voices, Madigan fed his dog, his cat, and his favorite canary. With his head resting on one hand, a sign of his enduring disgust with the human, daughter-filled world, he ate quickly with the other.

This posture was the signal that freed the Madigan women's tongues. Usually they all started talking at once; but that evening, some agreement seemed to keep them silent until Irene spoke.

"I'm glad to see you being so patient with Papa, Sissy," she said gently.

His third daughter glanced nervously at Madigan. But her father had withdrawn into his shell, and nothing short of a catastrophe could reach him there.

"Why—" she said, puzzled. "Why—I—"

"Promise me you'll try to put up with him," urged Split, gleefully.

"And that you'll help me control my temper, and not mock me and provoke me when I sulk," chanted Kate.

Sissy dropped her knife and fork, and her hands flew to her chest, not in anger but in terror. The crinkling testament was gone!

"Split! You—"

"Try to put up with me, won't you, Sis, even if I am a devil?" Split grinned.

"And set us a good example, Sissy," piped the twins.

Sissy gasped.

"Be a wittle muvver to Fwank," lisped the baby, prompted by a big sister.

"And don't steal candy from my pocket, will you, Cecilia Morgan?" begged her oldest sister.

"And—"

Sissy sprang into the air, as if the taunts of these ungrateful beneficiaries of her good intentions had physically lifted her.

"Sit down, you ox!" thundered the voice from the head of the table.

When someone was called an ox among the Madigans, the culprit invariably subsided, even if the insult made her sisters rejoice. But Sissy had endured too much that day—always remembering the perfect holiness with which she had begun it.

With an inarticulate explanation that was at once a sob, a complaint, and a trembling act of defiance, she pushed back her chair and fled to her room. There she sobbed freely and at length, until tears became a luxury she could produce only by a conscious effort of will. It had always grieved Sissy that she could never cry enough. Split, now, could weep loudly for hours, but Sissy's own wells of sorrow ran dry all too soon.

Yet tears had always had a sobering effect on the third Madigan. In time she got up, washed her face, combed her hair back, and braided it into a tight plait that stuck out at an aggressive angle from the side of her head; on her own, she could never get it to hang properly from the middle. This gave her a heightened feeling of utter peace, of remorse washed clean, and raised her spirits enough to face the world calmly, though bitter experience had taught her how long a joke could last among the Madigans.

At last she knelt beside her bed. No Madigan of her generation had been taught to pray. Their father's aggressive skepticism—a reaction against his own excessive youthful religiosity—had made him an outspoken opponent of religious practice. But now Sissy's emotional, self-conscious soul felt an urgent need to pray in words.

"O Lord," she pleaded aloud, "help me keep them all—even Number 10—in spite of Split and the devil. Help—"

She heard the door open behind her.

With a leap she was in bed, still fully dressed; pulling the covers tight up to her neck, she waited, looking for all the world fast asleep.

"You little fool!" said Madigan, a hint of laughter in his heavy voice as he laid a not ungentle hand on her flushed cheeks. "Do you think I care if you want to kneel and bow down like other idiots? If that's your nature—and I suppose it is, being a woman—pray and be blessed!"

It was the closest thing to a fatherly blessing Sissy had ever received, but she was too wary a little actress to let it move her from her role. Nor did her father wait to see how his words affected her. His heavy footsteps passed through her room and into his own, and the door slammed between them.

A moment later Sissy was up; another moment, and she had taken off her clothes, blown out her candle, and jumped back into bed. She was nearly asleep when the twins came in, but pretended to be in the deepest slumber as Bessie slid a crackling piece of paper under her pillow. Her fingers closed greedily around it as soon as the room was quiet again.

She knew what it was—her precious pact with herself, which loyal little Bep had recovered from the enemy. She lay there, soothed by its presence; and slowly, slowly she was dropping off into real sleep when a sharply painful thought, an inescapable mental pinprick, woke her. It was Number 9. She hadn't touched the piano all day.

She reproachfully pulled her fingers away from the insistent reminder of her good intentions, then resolutely turned her back on it and tried to pretend she was asleep. But every broken section of her pact seemed to have a voice, and above them all rang Number 9's reminder that it was not too late yet.

When Sissy finally rose, weary, and draped the Mexican quilt around herself, the house was quiet. All the young Madigans were in bed, and the older ones were safely shut away.

A small Saint Cecilia, with a short, stiff braid sticking out from one side of her head and no musical enthusiasm at all, sat down at the old square piano in the dark. "La Gazelle" was out of the question: she had no lamp, and she still didn't know the trills and runs of her new "piece" by heart. But she could still make some amends by playing the finger exercises and scales she usually ran through carelessly while reading a paper novel by the Duchess, open in front of her music.

With her bare foot on the soft pedal so no one would hear, Sissy played. It was dark and very quiet; the soft, pulsing hush of the mines filled the night and stilled it. At times her heart stopped with fear that she might be discovered; at other times she longed for a dramatic revelation of her late and extraordinary goodness. Her bare foot slipped off the cold pedal, only to hurry back before the keys could jangle aloud.

Sissy never knew how long she practiced, or whether she had made amends to herself and Number 9, because at last she fell asleep over the keys and woke to a hoarse scream and a wild cry of "De debbil! De debbil!"

It was Wong, the Chinese man, who had just one name for anything supernatural. Returning from Chinatown, he was passing the glass door near the piano when he saw a slender figure in trailing white clothing bent over the keys.

Sissy looked up, still groggy with sleep but awake enough to fear the consequences. She flung open the door and hurried after Wong to explain, but her pursuit only confirmed Wong's belief that this was a malicious mission—the work of the devil on earth. A terrified howl burst from him. There was only one being on earth he feared more than the thing he thought he was fleeing from; logically, that being had to be greater than It. Risking his very life, he doubled back, darted past the shivering Thing, rushed through the open door, and made straight for the master's room.

Sissy had no choice but to follow.

"I wanted to be good," she wailed, unnerved, as Aunt Anne held her by the shoulder and questioned her in front of a crowd of excited Madigans in their nightclothes.

But help came from an unexpected quarter. "Leave the child alone, Anne," growled Madigan, adjusting the piece of woolen underwear he wore as a nightcap. Then he scooped Sissy into his arms and carried her off to bed.

"Papa's pet! Papa's baby!" Irene mouthed under her breath, dancing mockingly behind his back.

Sissy, indignant at being carried like a child despite all the dignity of her eleven years, yet impossibly happy to have won her father's favor, looked over his shoulder with a sheepish, smiling, sleepy face and murmured, "Sour grapes, Split, sour grapes!"

Later, encouraged by the darkness and by the strange feeling of being put to bed in her father's arms, Sissy held him beside her for a moment.

"When men make promises on paper that they can't keep, Father," she whispered, "what do they do?"

"Oh, go to sleep, child! They go bankrupt, I suppose."

"And—and what happens to the paper?"

"What do you know or care about such things? Will you go to sleep tonight?"

"If you had any bankrupt's paper," she pleaded, grabbing his hand as he turned to leave, "what would you do with it—please, Father?"

"Why, tear it up, you goose."

Sissy sprang upright in bed, holding up a fluttering, much-folded sheet, incredulous joy in her eager voice.

"Take mine and pretend I went bankrupt—please—oh, please!"

To Madigan, all children—and his own especially—were such unfathomable creatures that one more whim could hardly make his inability to understand them any worse. With a "Tut, tut!" of impatience, he took the paper from her and tore it twice across.

A long sigh of relief escaped Sissy as the pieces fluttered to the floor. "You're such a nice father!" she murmured happily, and fell asleep, a blissful bankrupt instead of a Pharisee.

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