

Women's Review *of Books*

Volume 26, Issue 1
January / February 2009

“Hope and heart, family and community”

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Djohong, Cameroon, 2001

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LETTERS

We Agree

I am grateful to Diana Postlethwaite for her thoughtful review of my new memoir, *To Love What Is: A Marriage Transformed* (WRB November/December 2008). It's rare that a review delivers such a serious retrospective, placing the author's new book in the context of her other works over a long writing career. And what writer wouldn't treasure the suggestion that four of her books be issued together in a boxed set? Many thanks!

I must, however, offer one correction. Throughout the review, my 1969 article "A Marriage Agreement," which proposed that women and men share housework and childcare equally, is referred to as "A Marriage Contract." For nearly forty years I have been waging a (losing) campaign to quash the erroneous word *contract* (used initially by opponents of the idea of domestic equality) in favor of the correct title. To me the difference between the two words *agreement* and *contract* is crucial. *Agreement* conveys a spirit of cooperation, whereas *contract* sounds legalistic and adversarial.

Here's to agreements between the sexes and to reviewers like Postlethwaite who are willing to put in the extra time and work to see an author whole.

Alix Kates Shulman
New York, NY

Rape and Holocaust Denial

I take strong exception to a comment made by Jody Raphael in her review "Rape Culture" (WRB, November/December 2008). Raphael writes, "The current practice of denying rape statistics and rape reports must become as unacceptable as Holocaust denial." No it must not. Only cranks deny the Holocaust; reasonable and well-intentioned scholars, criminologists, and journalists can and do disagree on rates of rape and incidence of false accusations. Raphael seeks to silence dissent in a highly contested area of research. The sad truth is that her intolerant attitude has taken hold on many campuses. A modern day witch hunt took place at Duke University in 2006 when three members of the lacrosse team were falsely accused of rape. Almost no one came forward to quell the hysteria. How could that have happened? One needs only to take note of Professor Raphael's intemperate mindset to find the answer.

Christina Hoff Sommers
Washington, DC

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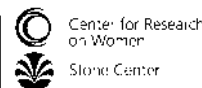
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Where are the Women?



Women for President: Media Bias in Eight Campaigns

By Erika Falk

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 171 pp., \$19.95, paperback

Reviewed by Ruth Rosen

Why hasn't the United States elected a female president? Why has our society been so resistant to female leadership when countries as various as Turkey, Ireland, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Canada, France, and England have embraced women presidents and prime ministers? In *Women for President*, Erika Falk raises this important question. Is there something so uniquely misogynist about our political culture that even Hillary Clinton, arguably the most competent woman ever to run for national office, still incited such distaste among both women and men?

Women for President begins with Victoria Woodhull's campaign in 1872 and ends with that of Carol Moseley Braun in 2004. In between, Erika Falk examines how newspapers covered the campaigns of Victoria Woodhull (1872), Belva Bennett Lockwood (1884), Margaret Chase Smith (1974), Shirley St. Hill Chisholm (1972), Patricia Scott Schroeder (1987), Lenora Branch Fulani (1988), and Elizabeth Dole (2000). Falk's basic argument is that in each case, the media ignored or distorted female candidates' personalities and positions. "By ignoring women candidates," she writes, and "painting them in stereotypical ways, the press may amplify the impression that women do not belong in the political sphere and it may minimize the potential effects of women as role models."

Certainly the media have stood in the way of every woman who ever ran for president—or any other office, for that matter—but for different reasons. The flamboyant and countercultural Victoria Woodhull, the candidate of the radical Equal Rights Party in 1872, would not be acceptable to mainstream US voters even today. A century later, in 1972, Shirley Chisholm, the first woman presidential candidate of a major party, was unacceptable not only to the press but also to her own Democratic party, which was not yet ready to nominate an African American woman.

Furthermore, some of these candidates never officially announced their runs for president, while others ran on third-party tickets. Even today, a candidate of any gender who never officially announced his or her candidacy, or who ran on a third-party ticket, would be unlikely to get much media attention—even with strategic use of the Internet. Such campaigns aren't comparable to those of mainstream candidates.

Although Falk analyzes eight campaigns by women, over a 130-year span of American history, her book cannot explain why the US has never elected a female president. The problem lies in her research methodology—content analysis of the media. She discovers through her analysis that the media focus on a woman's appearance rather than on the substance of her policies and her vision; that they distort or trivialize her words; and that they

“Many Americans perceive their presidents exclusively in military terms, as commanders-in-chief, rather than as protectors of citizens' economic security, health, and education.”

force her to prove her “maternal” experience as well as her ability to command the armed forces. None of this is news. Falk fails to provide the historical or cultural context that would enable readers to understand the different kinds of resistance women candidates have encountered.

To bring Falk's book up to date, consider the candidacy of Hillary Clinton. Of course the media displayed a revolting amount of sexism in their analysis of her appearance. Of course pundits ridiculed her laugh, her voice, and her pantsuits. However, although her critics may have carped about her appearance, none accused her of being a frivolous presidential choice. Despite media sexism, Clinton found a way to display her brilliance and competence. It wasn't the press that defeated her. Rather, her campaign was often at war with itself, and even more importantly, she had to contend with the baggage of her husband Bill, the former president, who inspires both great admiration and considerable anxiety among voters.

Contrast the media's treatment of Hillary Clinton with that of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. First, they turned her into a glamorous and charismatic celebrity. When her astonishing lack of knowledge began to embarrass conservative intellectuals, the media echoed their disappointment. By the end of the election cycle, studies show, negative stories about Palin far outweighed positive ones.

“By the end of the election cycle, studies show, negative stories about Sarah Palin far outweighed positive ones. Was this because of sexism? No, it was because Palin was a token woman, not a competent one.”

Was this because of sexism? No, it was because Palin was—as the brilliant Rachel Maddow pointed out on MSNBC—a token woman, not a competent one.

But let's return to Falk's original question: why hasn't the US yet elected a women president? The media is not exclusively responsible for this failure, although its trivializing of women candidates is certainly part of the problem. But the media mostly reflects our political culture and traditions. It is to these that we must look for answers.

Throughout most of US history, people have expected men to be strong and protective, and women to be nurturing caretakers of their husbands, their homes, and their children. Our political culture is deeply gendered. Unlike in Europe, we have a weak sense of class. Historian Kathryn Sklar notes that in American politics, gender plays the role that class does elsewhere. Rather than address the problem of poverty in general, the US welfare system focuses on poor women almost exclusively. And, at the other end of the spectrum, US women politicians do not benefit

greatly from upper-class privilege or as members of dynastic political families.

We even “code” male candidates in gendered terms. In 1988, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis lost credibility as the Democratic presidential candidate when he dressed up in a too-big helmet and ended up looking ridiculous popping out of a military tank. During the same election season, *Newsweek* magazine called his opponent, the senior George Bush, a “wimp” in a famous cover story. His son vowed never to let the media cast him as anything but a swaggering Texan as he pursued his cowboy foreign policies.

Sklar notes that this kind of “masculine mystique” hurts female candidates, because many Americans perceive their presidents exclusively in military terms, as commanders-in-chief, rather than as protectors of citizens' economic security, health, and education.

During the primaries of 2008, however, the historic battle between a woman and an African American gave rise to a fascinating gender reversal. I was hardly the only one to notice Clinton's increasingly aggressive tone, as she tried to prove

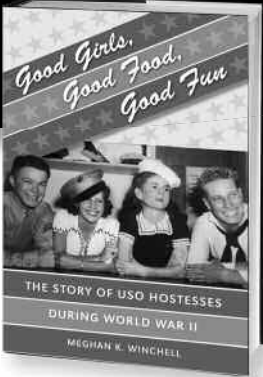
that even though she was a woman, she could be a strong commander-in-chief. At the same time, Barack Obama became more conciliatory and restrained, to reassure whites that he was not an angry, threatening black man.

It is the deeply gendered and racialized nature of US political culture that is missing from Falk's book. Since the Reagan administration, American governments have held an unquestioned, fundamentalist-like belief in the ability of markets to solve all problems and have created an imperial political culture that values dominance over cooperation. Dissenters found themselves vilified as promoters of a “nanny state” or discredited as too soft to be national leaders.


I don't have all the answers to Falk's question, but the media are only part of the reason why the US has not yet elected a woman president. The media reflect culture, even as they shape it. The value of *Women for President* is that Falk has raised an important question and created a serious research agenda for others to pursue. ☺

Ruth Rosen, professor emerita of history at the University of California Davis, teaches at the University of California Berkeley and is the author, most recently, of *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (2007). She is a regular contributor to Talking Points Memo (www.talkingpointsmemo.com).

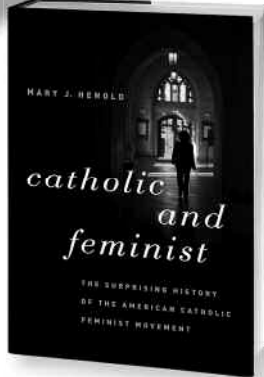
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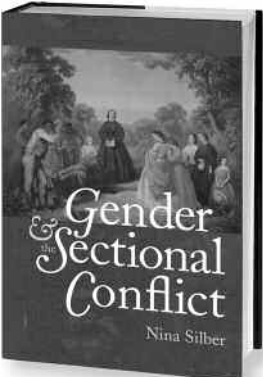
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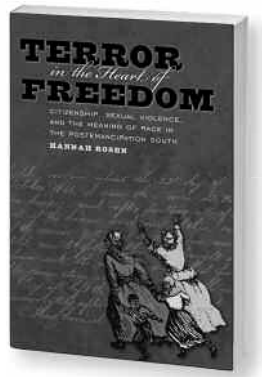
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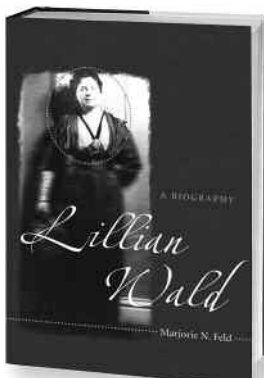
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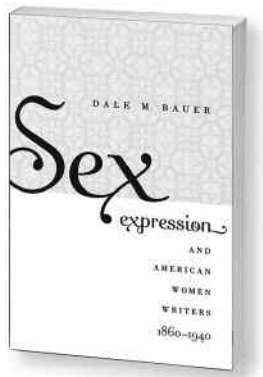
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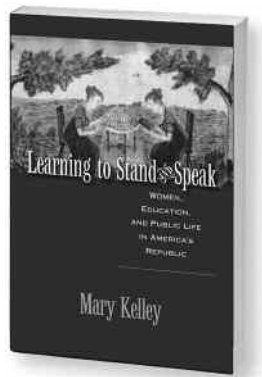
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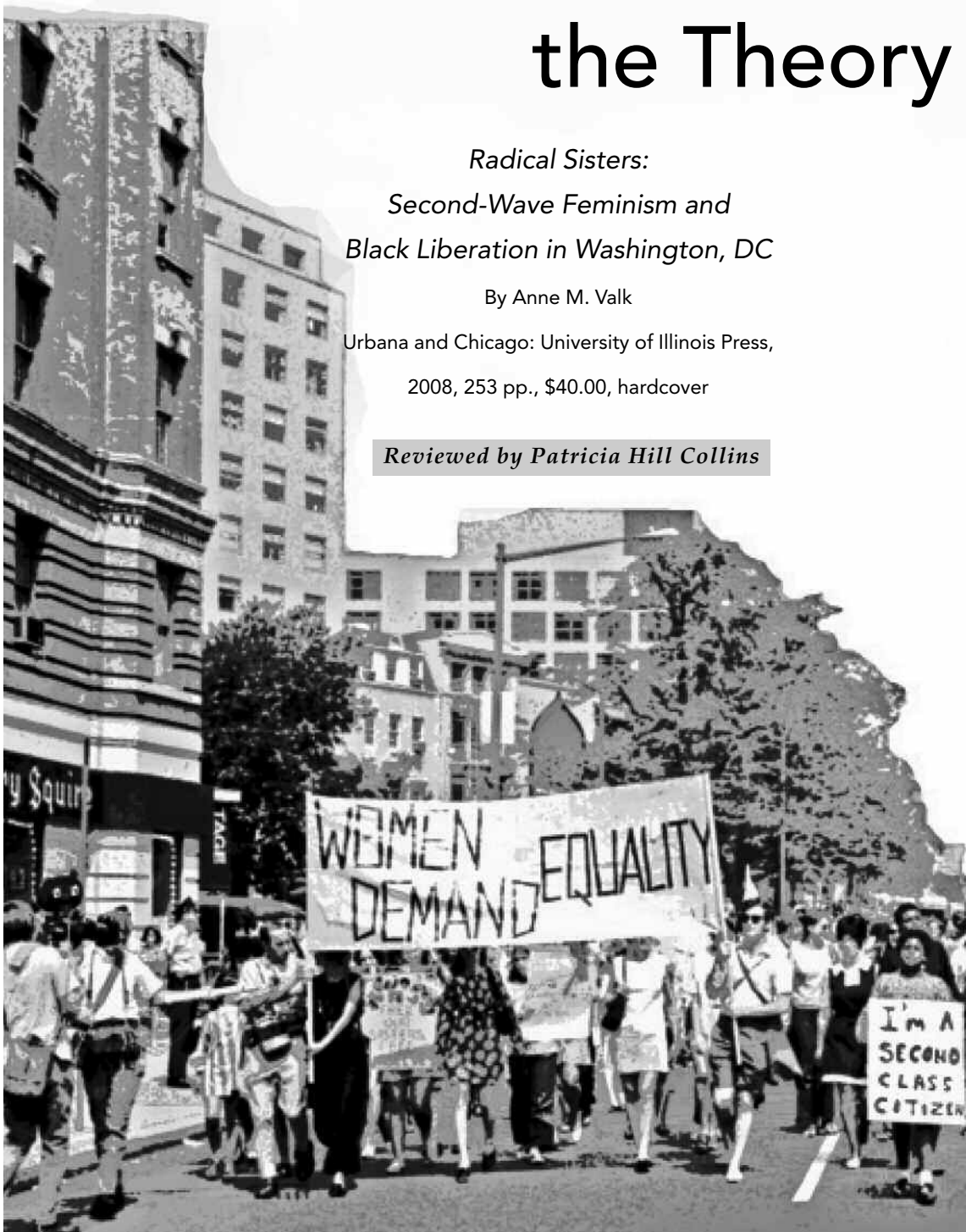
*Radical Sisters:
Second-Wave Feminism and
Black Liberation in Washington, DC*

By Anne M. Valk

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

2008, 253 pp., \$40.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Patricia Hill Collins



Anne M. Valk's *Radical Sisters* just may make radicalism popular again. During a time when many second-wave feminists look back nostalgically on the 1960s as a time when feminists had the right answers and took to the streets to combat patriarchy, Valk's definition of "radical" is instructive. According to her, women who prioritized grassroots issues, who sought to transform rather than reform society, and whose activism connected to the broader demands articulated by the New Left, constituted the radicals. Eschewing pristine ideological positions, the women Valk chronicles in *Radical Sisters* were not brought together by any common, predetermined political agenda beyond their commitment to a particular social issue. They radicalized one another in the context of these issue-based struggles, their differences giving them new angles of vision on their own efforts and those of others.

Through meticulous historical exploration of women's political activism in Washington, DC, Valk

provides a nuanced analysis of how the synergistic relationships among multiple social movements and the women who moved among them produced radical feminist politics. She examines the various paths women followed to political activism generally and looks at how political activism framed their understandings of feminist politics in particular. Chapters on welfare rights, reproductive control, black liberation, lesbian feminism, and sexual violence illustrate the overlapping and crosscutting constituencies for each issue. Eventually, a broad movement was stitched together through the willingness of diverse groups of women to build coalitions. This women's movement was not organized around the familiar liberal, socialist, and radical feminist positions of Women's Studies 101. Rather, it was, in Valk's portrayal, a living entity, with intentionality and opportunity, happenstance and hard-edged grassroots organizing, luck and lobbying all vying for space.

Several themes in *Radical Sisters* stand out. First, Valk's definition of radical enables her to cast a wide net around feminist politics, one that includes black and poor women, who often are defined out of feminism, as important political actors. She examines how the class and racial composition of grassroots organizations—particularly significant in Washington, DC, which was seventy percent African American in the 1960s—shaped subsequent understandings of gender. In a detailed chapter on the actions of the local branch of National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), Valk examines the political organizing of poor black women, whose activism is routinely categorized as "economic" rather than "feminist." As mothers, these women became involved in political organizations because they wanted to fight for tangible benefits for themselves and their children, not because they were committed to feminist ideologies. *Radical Sisters* shows how debates within the NWRO about women, families, privacy, work, reproductive rights, and the role of the state resulted in a race-, class-, and gender-inclusive political framework. Although mainstream feminism now routinely claims to embrace this kind of inclusiveness, the NWRO's struggles predate those of women's liberation's founding activists. The maternal politics that were a starting point for poor black women's political activism foreshadow the social-issues agenda of contemporary global feminism.

Second, *Radical Sisters* sheds light on the layered, dynamic, and coalitional nature of mass-movement politics. The women's movement was stitched together by grassroots organizations whose politics were based in particular experiences—it was not "owned" by any one group of feminists. For example, the converging campaigns to secure black liberation and end economic oppression inspired activist black women, including those who didn't belong to feminist organizations, to support feminist demands. Activist black women came to realize that their efforts to empower and secure economic security for African American women required a gender analysis. Valk eschews versions of feminism in which women organize around a particular ideology, and then act. Instead, as she sees it, the issue for women's movement participants was to build a coalitional social movement in which different groups could support one another and develop a discourse that explained why they all needed one another.

A third noteworthy theme in *Radical Sisters* concerns how the women's movement's agenda evolved in a context of coalition building. Some issues, such as sexual violence, lent themselves to coalition work better than others, such as reproductive control. Valk details the diverse ideological and strategic approaches women from welfare rights, black liberation, and women's liberation campaigns brought to the issue of reproductive control. Because the very different social actors involved held disparate views concerning childbearing, access to safe and affordable healthcare, contraception, and abortion, they had difficulty reaching an agreed-upon agenda. In contrast, disparate organizations with overlapping or even competing agendas were able to coalesce around the issue of sexual violence. Everyone had to compromise to some degree. Reformist groups advocated pushing for changes in police practices, the courts, and healthcare institutions. Lesbian-separatist groups, such as the


Furies, and black nationalist women insisted that patriarchy and racism were the sources of women's oppression, and that sexual violence was a major enforcement mechanism of domination, and they rejected reformist initiatives. All however, worked to together to plan and participate in major demonstrations that raised the issue of sexual violence for the general public.

Valk's analysis of how competing agendas facilitated or hindered coalition building leads to another noteworthy theme: the relationship between theory and practice. According to her, feminist theory was not the exclusive domain of educated women or scholars. Instead, women in campaigns for sexual, economic, and racial justice developed explanations for their conditions and analyses of their oppression, in order to formulate short-term political strategies and long-term visions. They had to struggle to find ways to reconcile contradictory agendas. No single group could develop an overarching theory and then hand it out to the others. Theories emerged as group members addressed social issues that affected all women, albeit differently, depending on race, class, sexuality,

and other factors. Valk shows that feminism was a living, breathing entity, which arose from a recursive relationship between theory and action, as coalitions defined issues and developed strategies.

Radical Sisters's unique approach makes several contributions to contemporary feminism. For one, because Valk focuses on the historical texture of women's political activism as understood by the women themselves, she avoids sterile debates over what counts as feminism. The women in this book were too busy trying to change women's lives and empower them to spend much time on definitions. For another, because *Radical Sisters* examines the diverse strands of women's political action, Valk avoids misreading one strand of the women's movement as universal; or worse yet, anointing one version of feminism as more radical than others. Finally, *Radical Sisters* provides a robust view of the dynamic nature of feminist action, in contrast to static, academic attempts to parse the features of various theories. Valk illustrates how the line between so-called radicals and liberals blurred, especially as the

decade progressed. This may account for the success of the movement of those times: insider strategies for reform coupled with outsider demands for transformation, and the blurring of distinctions between them.

Because *Radical Sisters* does not shy away from exposing real conflicts of interest, it provides a refreshing look at second-wave feminism. It suggests that the dominant narratives of second-wave feminism actually flatten the dynamic way its theory developed and thus fail to show that second-wave feminism's trajectory was not inevitable. The benefit of Valk's historical, local approach is that it reveals the synergy between practice and theory that shaped feminism during this period. Indeed, Valk's second look at second-wave feminism invites us to rethink what it means to be radical today. 

Patricia Hill Collins is Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is author of *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (2006).

Bridging the Chasm

The Bishop's Daughter: A Memoir

By Honor Moore

New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 352 pp., \$25.95, paperback

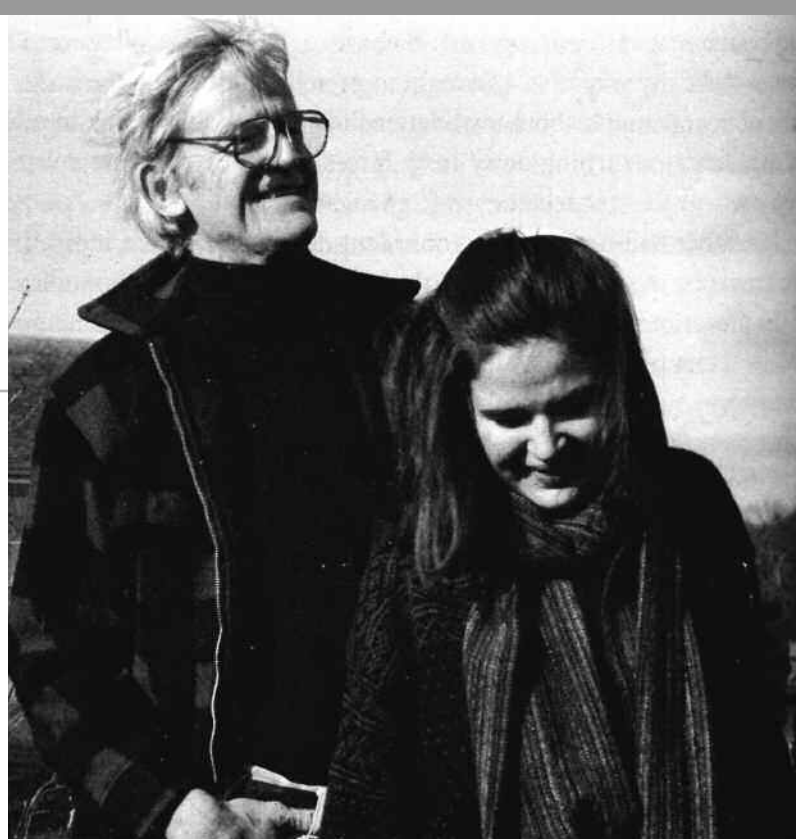
Reviewed by Catherine Mooney

My father always wanted me to write about him," says Honor Moore, explaining that as soon as she set down these words on the page, "he came into view... I had turned away from [him], but he had never turned entirely away from me, and now, as the past opened, I was turning back to him." As her book's very title suggests, Moore, the "bishop's daughter," cannot fully understand herself apart from her famous father. The Episcopal Bishop of New York City from 1972 to 1989, Paul Moore is the magnetic center of her memoir. As much biography as autobiography, it sidelines to a significant extent Honor Moore's own noteworthy accomplishments as a poet, playwright, and biographer whose work is often transparently personal.

Paul Moore's path through progressive causes from the 1950s until his death in 2003 was so eye-catching and public that many people thought they knew exactly who he was—until now. As it turns out, he was erotically attracted to men and engaged in repeated affairs with them despite the fact that during much of his (very married) life, he preached that sex outside the bounds of marriage and adultery were morally wrong. *The Bishop's Daughter* invites the reader on a trip with a man who traveled in parallel universes.

Honor Moore learned of her father's double life in 1990, when she was about 45 years old (she is now 63). To write this book, she culled information from public-domain sources such as newspapers, magazines, historical works, three autobiographical books by her father and yet another by her mother, Jenny McKean Moore, as well as from plentiful private sources, including family letters, diaries, scrapbooks, and numerous conversations with people close to her father. However, all this was not for the purpose of conventional biography. Honor Moore writes to resolve the conundrum her father's sexual life posed for her personally.

Outspoken when it came to societal injustices perpetrated against others, Paul Moore was acutely ambivalent about his own homosexuality. He called it an "addiction" and buried it in secrecy and deception. A "chasm of silence," Honor Moore writes, separated



“Outspoken when it came to societal injustices perpetrated against others, Paul Moore was acutely ambivalent about his own homosexuality. He called it an “addiction” and buried it in secrecy and deception.”

her from her father. Even after he was “outed” to his children by his second wife, he was loathe to share with them the details of his gay life. Honor Moore's bridge across what she calls the “brokenness of the past” is this book. It emerged in inchoate form just before he died: their tentative attempts to speak truthfully to one another about the past allowed her to conjure images and dreams about their life together. But clarity came only after he was gone.

At the most transparent level, *The Bishop's Daughter* is worth reading to learn more about Paul Moore and, to a greater extent than the book's title suggests, Jenny McKean Moore as well. Scion of wealthy patrician parents, Paul Moore attended the elite St. Paul's boarding school and then Yale. Pulsating beneath an otherwise predictable narrative of privilege, however, is a second story that enlivens the account—that of Paul's religious awakening and interior spiritual journey. "Pulsating" might seem too graphic a term to describe religion, but Paul found something primally vital there and flew toward it like a moth seeking light. He believed that religious and sexual feelings derived from the "same mysterious, undifferentiated source."

At St. Paul's he experienced an intense conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, a strain of religious expression within the Episcopal Church that is more visibly liturgical, sacramental, and even mystical than its "low church" cousins. "Smells and bells" is the colloquial description for this sensually lavish and doctrinally conservative style of Christianity. Moore was already thinking of becoming a priest when he interrupted his studies at Yale in 1941 to join the marines. Combat in Guadalcanal, where he won a Silver Star for valor, launched his public career: the military sent him to give speeches and interviews stateside to rally support for the war. But he was already breaking molds. Still a soldier, he had to leave anonymous an essay he published on the spiritual dimensions of the "violent shame" that accompanied his wartime killing.

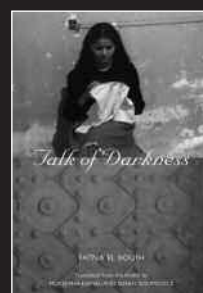
Marriage, priesthood, and nine children followed. Paul and Jenny Moore moved to the left, politically and theologically, during Paul's seminary training in New York City, where they were influenced by intellectuals and activists including Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Jacques Barzun, and Dorothy Day. They put their social-gospel interpretation of Christianity into action in an inner-city parish in Jersey City, New Jersey, advocating for "parishioners evicted, jailed, or excluded from illegally segregated federal housing projects."

It is worth stating explicitly what Honor Moore intimates subtly—that not only hard work but also affluence facilitated this admirable trajectory. Paul and Jenny Moore funded their idealistic ministries through appeals to "well-heeled friends and relatives" and thanks to a "small foundation" created from Paul's inherited wealth. Honor's parents spent their weekly days off at a family-owned Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking Central Park in New York City. Leaving their children in the care of a nanny, each visited a psychiatrist, "my mother for her 'frigidity,' my father to come to terms with, if not change, his sexual nature"—information Honor learned decades later.

Paul Moore went on to become dean of the wealthy cathedral parish in Indianapolis, Indiana, and then assistant bishop in Washington, DC. During a dozen-plus years, he gained prominence for his social activism, especially for his antiracist work and writing. In the 1960s, he marched with Martin Luther King. He met personally with President Lyndon Johnson about the turmoil in Selma, Alabama, after police disrupted King's 1965 voting rights march there. In 1970, he was photographed fleeing teargas in Saigon. Jenny Moore was equally busy. Already a mother of nine in 1963, she campaigned for her friend Eugene McCarthy in 1968 and was herself gassed at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that summer. Her memoir about the family's life in Jersey City garnered a photo spread in *Life* magazine and a personal appearance on the *Today* show. When Paul Moore became diocesan bishop of New York in 1972, *Newsweek* put him in full episcopal regalia on its cover with the headline, "An Activist Bishop Faces Life."

Interwoven throughout these heady doings is Honor Moore's own story, which seems essentially to be her search for herself and for connection with each of her parents. She occasionally calibrates her plaintive tone with insight. Recalling enraged battles with her mother over "my body, the hair in my face, my 'messy' room," she retrospectively comments that the "real complaint went unidentified.... It was a mother I missed. When would I ever have her to myself?" Bingo. Her relationship with her mother is fraught with contradictions, but those with her siblings are utterly consistent. Aside from their births, duly acknowledged at the appropriate chronological moment, they are most notable by their absence. Commenting on the nine-strong size of the Moore brood, Honor asks three times of her parents in the space of two pages, "What on earth were they thinking?" Of life in Jersey City, she writes: "How could [mother] admit that every time she had a new baby, her eldest child suffered? I don't think it occurred to her."

Sexuality rather than neglect drives the father-daughter narrative. For years Moore had attributed her father's distance from her to his priesthood. "He had supernatural powers" and "was in touch with something that couldn't be seen but which was also real." The "bishop's daughter" yearned instead to be his "true daughter," which meant to "speak with real intimacy." In 1990, when she found out about his gay affairs, it dawned on her that it was her father's "own nature,



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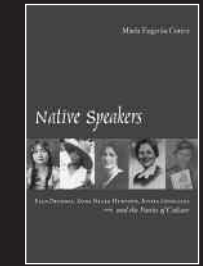
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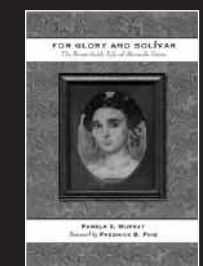
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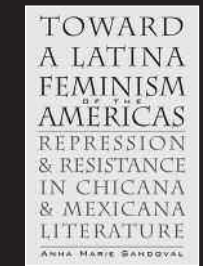
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“Pulsating” might seem too graphic a term to describe religion, but Paul found something primally vital there and flew toward it like a moth seeking light. He believed that religious and sexual feelings derived from the “same mysterious, undifferentiated source.”

not his relation to God, that kept our relationship unsatisfactory.” Moore charts her own sexual search in near-compulsive detail—childhood crushes, adolescent boyfriends, a dizzying list of short-term lovers, and a few of longer duration. Until she was in her early thirties, her partners were all male. Then, for about fifteen years, she switched to women before returning, definitively she says, to men.

The revelation of her father’s bisexuality brought a wall tumbling down: “I was suddenly thinking, I had inherited [it] from him.” But even discovering this commonality did not bring a full rapprochement during his lifetime, although heartfelt expressions of love marked his final days. Honor Moore faults her father for deceiving two wives and his children, but above all, for his inability—or refusal—to speak to her about his

sexual life. “He wanted forgiveness, but offering forgiveness would be something for nothing.”

The most provocative and unsatisfactorily explained feature of this book, to my mind, is the curative power Honor Moore attributes to “breaking the silence about my father’s hidden life.” Although he and others explicitly insisted to her that she keep his sexual life private, she counters that “telling the story of my father and myself was necessary to understanding him, to altering the pattern of sexual unhappiness that I had inherited.” Apparently also necessary, although inexplicable, is Moore’s inclusion of intimate details she discovered about her parents’ sexual life from reading their love letters.

Moore’s scrutiny of thousands of pages of family papers and numerous conversations led her to conclude, poignantly, some two years after her father’s death, that he had made the only choice he could: “what had always seemed to me a pragmatic choice with terrible consequences now seemed instead a bargain with the circumstance of the time in which my father entered his ministry.” This comment crystallized something for me: the book foregrounds personal, family relationships at the expense of exploring the historical dynamics at play in the choices a gay man in Paul Moore’s generation might make.


This is a consequential book and its reception has been noisy. Days after a splashy teaser excerpt from the book appeared in *The New Yorker* (March 3, 2008), Mark Sisk, the Episcopal Bishop of New

York, wrote a public letter expressing his “sadness” and “shock” at Paul Moore’s marital infidelities, betrayals of trust, and exploitation of the vulnerable. This last point regards, in part, a gay university student, pseudonymously identified by Honor Moore as Andrew Verver, who went to Bishop Moore seeking spiritual counsel. Verver, seduced by Roman Catholic priests as a teenager, was struggling with his anger at the church. Moore first advised, then befriended, and finally bedded the young man. Was it consensual? Years later Honor Moore asked Verver if he felt “pushed” by her father. Verver answered, “Yes, I did, but, you know, I’m a strong person.... Your father was a hard man to say no to,” and—no surprise here—Verver didn’t really want to say no. Their almost thirty-year relationship appears to have been gratifying for both men. It began, notably, the same year Paul Moore married his second wife, Brenda Hughes Eagle, who later discovered one of his homosexual affairs and revealed it to his children.

Too bad Bishop Sisk failed to draw the obvious pastoral connection between the damaging closetedness of Paul Moore’s life and the silencing religious regime that helped generate it in the first place. It would have been a timely—but perhaps for Sisk too costly—contribution to the Episcopal Church’s and Anglican Communion’s current acrimonious debate about same-sex blessing ceremonies and the ordination of openly homosexual clergy.

Two weeks after *The New Yorker* piece, two of Honor Moore’s siblings lamented with far greater nuance the appearance of their sister’s book. Speaking of their father in a letter to the editor, they wrote:

Some of us dreamed that he would “come out” and finally find peace within himself; we ourselves hoped that if he reconciled his two worlds the emotional wreckage caused by his deception would somehow fall away. Our father chose not to. We may judge him for that; we may wish that our father had revealed his own struggles to help others who are similarly trapped, but that was not his chosen battle.... Doesn’t it matter, even when someone is dead, that his most fervently held private life, and the unnecessarily explicit details of his marriage, are exposed against his wishes?

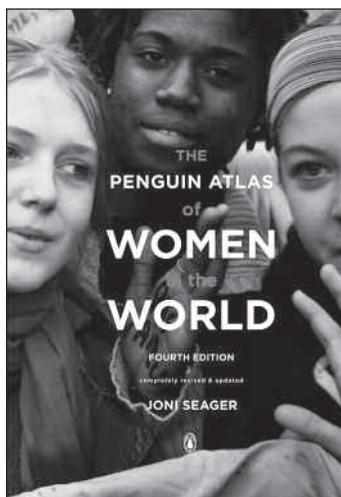
Honor Moore concludes her book recalling the moment her father’s coffin was being slid into the hearse. “I fly down the steps... and I touch the wood, alone there I touch the coffin, at the same time seeing myself in black, a woman bending toward a coffin, her hand reaching.” She understood, she says, that this was “the end of my father.” However, if we listen to Honor Moore the author, who says, “Because I was a writer, understanding meant telling,” we could conclude that the end of her father is really this book. Or perhaps not. In that final funeral scene the daughter’s hand is still reaching. 

Catherine M. Mooney teaches the history of Christianity at the Boston College School of Ministry and Theology in Brighton, Massachusetts. She is author of *Philippine Duchesne: A Woman With the Poor* (1990; 2007), editor of *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (1999), and is currently writing a book on Clare of Assisi.

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The Haunted Room

By Carole DeSanti



“Give her another hundred years, ... a room of her own and five hundred a year,” wrote Virginia Woolf in 1929, of the woman novelist. “[L]et her speak her mind... and she will write a better book one of these days.” In her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf looked forward to a time when women writers would not find themselves so utterly circumscribed, “at strife” with themselves, and fighting conditions hostile to the creative process.

She knew very well that creative and intellectual freedom depend on material resources, and that “women have always been poor,” as she wrote. But even though her famous “five hundred pounds” are central to the essay, she barely pauses at the site of connection between writers and their main source of financial support, the commercial publishing industry. (She saw the popular women’s writing of the time as part of the problem of the less-than-“better” book, and sidestepped the issue to some extent by publishing her own work with Hogarth Press, the small publishing company that she ran with her husband, Leonard.) Woolf’s references, in terms of the battles to be fought and foundations laid, were to the beadle-patrolled lawns of Oxford and Cambridge, the measuring sticks of critics and professors, and the almost exclusively male preserve of the literary world, and the remedy she proposed was the complete reconstruction of literary knowledge and imagination along egalitarian lines. By bringing attention to the conditions under which creative effort occurred, she provided for women writers a compelling metaphor, a vote of confidence, and a blueprint.

Indeed, in the three generations since Woolf wrote her famous essay, women’s expressive efforts have been unprecedented, in terms of contracts written, ink spilled, and volumes sold. Many women have turned full force to the market, rather than to the still-contested terrain of the literary establishment, to underwrite their “rooms,” transforming themselves from bluestockings to blue chip. With a mass audience responsive to distinctive content and genuinely interested in a diversity of voices, and new ways to promote and sell, women writers have been able to shrug off the continuing paucity of traditional literary opportunity. If Shakespeare’s long-suffering sisters can produce the right sorts of novels, promote them, and not allow too much time to elapse between books, they can stake out a gold mine.

So, are our “rooms” amenities solidly established? Do we now enter at will, abide and create freely? Are women writers inspired, productive, reasonably happy, and able to engage fruitfully with their work’s deepest challenges? Do they write with the confidence that they will be heard? Do they have “enough” to share, can they afford to be generous? Have women writers, on the whole, engaged with, and dwelled within, what Woolf called the “incandescent mind”?

“Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances, and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.” ”

When I was a young editor just starting out in the publishing industry twenty-some years ago, I learned that publishers thought about books this way: on the one hand, there was critically acclaimed, prize-winning, “beautiful writing that doesn’t sell.” On the other, audience-oriented popular work, often written to formula, published to meet a well-understood demand. This opposition was called “the literary vs. the commercial,” and the careers of both authors and editors had generally been directed along these separate and unequal tracks. The literary set donned tuxes for awards dinners while the commercial gang paid the bills that kept the lights on and the copiers running—and each side wanted what the other seemed to have. By the early 1990s, though, a sea change was occurring. In the new era, every book was to pay its own way. “You can’t eat literary awards,” one publisher cautioned a group of us editors, after yet another round of conglomeration and downsizing. The numbers, and the numbers alone, were to be our measuring sticks.

The writing I wanted to publish didn’t fall neatly onto one side or the other of the literary-commercial divide, anyway. I believed, as did some others in the industry, that diverse, content-responsive audiences could be found. More importantly, as a feminist who admired the work of Carolyn Heilbrun, Carol Gilligan, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, and others, I wanted to direct publishing’s resources to a diverse field of women, across the lines of race, class, experience, and sexuality—to those who wanted to breathe new life into the stale old categories. The writers I most admired had not made their careers by way of awards or privilege—nor by abandoning their literary values. So I put “the literary vs. the commercial” to one side and got to work.

Twenty years later, I’m battling mightily, as editors always have, to mediate between competing needs—author and publisher, art and commerce, time and money—and get the work, mostly fiction, mostly by women, delivered, edited, scheduled, and out into the world. But despite huge changes in the industry—distribution over the Internet, the rise of book groups and websites, and an enormous emphasis on that new juggernaut, the “women’s audience”—my job seems harder than ever. As usual, some authors don’t meet their deadlines, but where I was once able to give six-month extensions, now I can offer only two weeks. Others deliver final manuscripts that read more like drafts. Troublingly, some of the most promising authors with whom I work have become “stuck” or “blocked,” and are unable to write for long periods. Meanwhile, the industry demands frequent publication, on-time delivery, and an end to “monkey business”—a professional approach with little latitude for the mysteries, serendipities, and chaos of the creative process. With stacks of manuscripts that should be better than they are, authors frozen “between books,” and agents on the phone pleading that their brand-new clients “just need an editor,” I find myself with many headaches, and even more questions. The discipline of the market, while tonic in many ways, does not cure every ill.

What do women writers need to build successful careers these days? Why do their needs seem greater than ever? Has some formerly available resource run dry? It’s not talent, or determination, or opportunity—or audiences, or even money—that is lacking, but something else. Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.” And then there is the nagging question of “what will sell,” and how to reconcile that with what one genuinely wants to write.

Pragmatically speaking, there are gaps in the infrastructure. First of all, where are the early readers, amanuenses, advisors, and general factotums who have always guarded the literati—today’s equivalents of Dorothy Wordsworth,

Sophia Hawthorne, Sofia Tolstaya, and Cynthia Thoreau; Leonard Woolf, Alice Toklas, Elizabeth Fowles, and Gabrielle Kerouac? Where are those who used to read drafts, shore up doubts, shush children, cook meals, endure writerly tantrums, encourage the wild experiment, agree to move abroad, hold salons, point out plot glitches, and bring the writer back to her heart's desire? What about those editors who (even in my own day) would drop everything to get on a plane, and then sleep on their authors' couches until the book was done, the hangover wore off, or the divorce proceedings were finished?

As far as I can see, women writers need, want, and deserve everything that writers have ever had, but those who can provide it are in short supply. All the gift-labor and the literary ghost-work has dried up or gone elsewhere. Perhaps this accounts for the silence from which some authors suffer, the sense of being haunted by a sort of negative presence—the lurking, terrible knowledge that the work to which both they and I are devoting our lives is lacking some unattainable, yet necessary ingredient.

A few years ago one of my authors, exhausted after the publication of her second novel, commented,

I provide everything for myself. The income that purchased my home and my studio was generated from my work. When I needed a writing space, I designed it, paid for it to be built, painted and outfitted [it]. I have it heated, cleaned and repaired.

Her husband didn't read her work, do research, handle correspondence, hide negative reviews, manage her website, or accompany her at appearances: he was busy with his own work, which she deeply supported. And while she had experimented with hiring people to provide necessary services, for her, a sense of personal connection was lacking in these arrangements. Tasks might get done, but she still felt essentially alone in her effort. Describing her creative life rather ruefully, she said, "I am the vessel and its passenger, and I am the one keeping it afloat."

"When is her next novel coming?" one of our marketing directors recently asked, with a wistfulness not uncommon at publishing conference tables these days. It had, we all knew, been far too long since her craft sent a signal.

Those of us who work with writers have accepted that in corporate publishing, relationships are not as personal as they once were. The business is less intimate and dramatic; less "fun" than in the good old days, but more democratic. It's healthier—isn't it?—for a spouse not to sacrifice his or her own creative life to that of a partner, and for an editor not to eat, sleep, breathe, and vacation in the shadow of her writers. And counting things—copies sold, dollars earned, time spent, books returned—can be a path not only to profitability but also to fairness.

Still, some form of essential nourishment that once came from the publishing life, which editors poured into books and the lives of their authors, is missing, and its replacement has not yet been found. Some try to make the case that books can be produced, and certainly consumed, without such nourishment, but for women writers and readers, this kind of literary monocropping has led to pretty thin gruel. In terms of content, it's resulted in a succession of novels and memoirs appealing to a generic feminine audience, a dull march through the supposed life-stages of chick-lit, mommy-lit, divorce-lit, and their permutations (breast-cancer lit, looking-for-love-at-the-assisted-living-facility lit...). Women writers have been all too ready to meet the demand, mining the intimate material of their lives for commercial fodder. The internalized voices of "write this, think that" are now based on assumptions about the marketplace. But the fast-paced commerce in tales of love, sex, relationships, and women's private lives obscures a real issue: the building of the kinds of work, relationships, and organizational structures that will provide foundations, windows, doors, and walls for women's creative "rooms."

Audiences are onto it, too. Inevitably, at the end of a reading by a woman author, a hand shoots up—and the question is not about the content of the presentation. It's "How do you write; when do you write; what allows you to write?"

One successful novelist (who had managed the uncommon, enviable feat of both pleasing influential critics and rising on the bestseller list) answered the question frankly. She reported that she worked, at first, at coffee shops and cafes. Then, "manna fell from heaven," she said. She received a fellowship from a major university. "There," she explained,

I had an office, air conditioning, interesting companions for lunch, a computer. I dropped off the kids at school, went to the office, picked them



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up at the end of the day. *Heaven*. When that year ended, I cried. I asked my husband, "What am I going to do?" And he said, "Shut up—because nobody even gets what you did."

She continued,

But he can go into his office at home, and shut the door and work. I can't do that. Even when he's taking care of the kids, they call and need something, and I go to them. I can't *not* do that.


When I looked at my notes from that evening, those words, "Shut up," seemed more vividly dramatic than the scene from the novel she had just read.

Where are we, then, in terms of Woolf's "room?"

Women writers, over the past eighty years, have done an extraordinary job, often under adverse conditions. In terms of literary architecture, they've sited, designed, laid foundations, and put roofing over vast, unsheltered areas; they've refurbished old structures and put up whole new wings. It's largely because of women writers that "the literary *vs.* the commercial" is no longer the reigning paradigm—although sometimes it seems that we've either replaced it with "boy *vs.* girl," or that we are wobbling without any governing structure at all.

"Publishing" is, in so many ways, storytelling about storytelling. Marketing a book amounts to, "what kind of story do you tell about this story?" What is

important about it, and to whom will it appeal? I believe we are at a tipping point, one where these stories-about-stories could very well change. And so we must ask: Have the voices we have allowed ourselves (and have been allowed), the stories we have told, the lives from within which we create, been sufficient to our own needs and to the needs of our readers? On the business side of our lives—both as writers and as publishers—have we invested in supporting and sustaining that for which we have the greatest passion? Have we found relationships that nourish our work and create a sense of connection, that allow us to feel loved? In what ways do we still behave as renters, temporary tenants rather than owners of our creative, working lives?

The commercial era of women's writing has provided many lessons, and opportunities to negotiate new relationships with the industry, the culture, and the audience. Many of these have been fruitful; some are deeply compromised. I'd like to think that all of this has been a step along the way to what Woolf called "the better book." But to get it written and successfully launched into the world, I propose that we all have to look closely at the areas in our "rooms" that need repair—and at the stories we are telling ourselves. 

Carole DeSanti is vice president and editor at large at Viking, a member of the Penguin Group.



An Unbalanced and Impossible Relationship

White Heat:

The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson

By Brenda Wineapple

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 388 pp., hardcover, \$27.95

Reviewed by Mary Loeffelholz

As perhaps the most famous recluse in American literary history, Emily Dickinson might seem an unlikely candidate for the currently vogueish genre of collective biography. "On a Columnar Self— / How ample to rely..." she wrote around 1863, at the height of her productivity, when she was composing and copying out, on average, very nearly a poem a day. "Suffice Us—for a Crowd— / Ourselves—and Rectitude..." she concluded.

Surprisingly, though, some of the best work done on Dickinson in the last half-century has been in the vein of collective biography. Richard Sewall's magnificent *Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) approached its subject through separate chapters on the major figures populating Dickinson's life: her family, her possible beloveds, and her friends in the literary world. Sewall surrounded Dickinson's columnar self with so many adjuncts because he resisted ascribing a singular narrative to Dickinson's mysterious, outwardly uneventful life. The group portrait seemed to him "the truest way of presenting a figure upon whose biography no narrative structure can be imposed that is not to a degree arbitrary or

fictitious." At the other extreme of confidence in finding a mastering pattern in Dickinson's literary remains, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart's influential 1998 *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* looked at Dickinson through the lens of her intense, long-lived, mutual bond with her sister-in-law.

Like Smith and Hart, Brenda Wineapple, in *White Heat*, pairs the poet with a single adjunct figure from the crowded Dickinson mausoleum: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the *Atlantic Monthly* essayist to whom she wrote in April 1862 to ask whether her verse was "alive." Higginson would become a lifeline for Dickinson, first as a genial correspondent and ultimately as one of the most influential of her posthumous champions. He saw the first volumes of her poetry into print, read her works aloud to assemblies of Cambridge literati, and defended the formal unorthodoxy of her writing in a bold essay for the middlebrow *Christian Union*: "When a thought takes one's breath away," he asked, "who cares to count the syllables?"

As Wineapple observes, Dickinson often credited Higginson with saving her life: "To



“Higginson’s stalwart abolitionism, Civil War military service, and postwar advocacy for women’s and freedpeople’s rights anchors Dickinson’s life to national history; his stolidly professional career as a writer and editor in the lower rungs of the Northeastern literary establishment anchors her to the history of American letters.”



neglect this friendship,” she argues, “reduces Dickinson to the frail recluse of Amherst, extraordinary but helpless and victimized by a bourgeois literary establishment best represented by Higginson” himself. By bringing the lifework of Dickinson and Higginson into a common focus, Wineapple hopes to illuminate “how this recluse and this activist bear a fraught, collaborative, unbalanced, and impossible relation to each other.” Further, this “unbalanced and impossible relation” echoes, Wineapple believes, a fundamental division in the self-conception of the United States, between its fantasies of lofty exceptionalism and those of saving the world: “The fantasy of isolation, the

fantasy of intervention: they create recluses and activists, sometimes both, in us all,” she says.

White Heat is most convincing when it honors Wineapple’s insight into the unbalanced, impossible, even “partially cracked” (as Higginson once wrote of Dickinson) nature of the relationship between Dickinson and Higginson. It is less convincing when Wineapple forces her material into tidily balanced antinomies, such as the recluse versus the activist. And it is least persuasive of all when, against Wineapple’s own best instincts, it tries to cast this unbalanced, impossible intimacy into the stereotypical forms of a disappointed romance plot—the last thing in the world that Dickinson scholarship has failed to supply to popular curiosity, and the last thing it needs.

The most disabling antinomy in *White Heat* is the one that assigns Dickinson to the pole of timelessness and Higginson to the pole of history. To her credit, Wineapple herself articulates the problems this antinomy creates for her in an important but brief transitional chapter treating Dickinson’s poetry:

Emily Dickinson stops my narrative. For as the woman in white, *savante*, and reclusive, shorn of context, place, and reference, she seems to exist outside of time, untouched by it. And that’s unnerving. No wonder we make up stories about her: about her loves, if any, or how many or why she turned her back on ordinary life and when she knew of the enormity of her own gift (of course she knew) and how she combined words in ways we never imagined and wished we could.

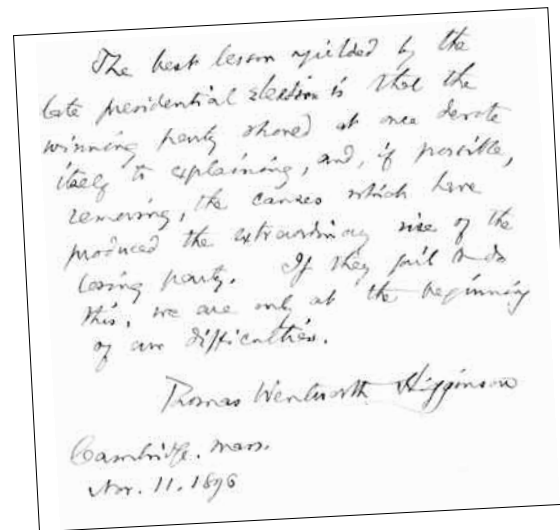
And when we turn to her poems, we find that they, too, like her life, stop the narrative.

If Dickinson herself arrests narrative, what is a biographer to do except look elsewhere for some plot? Grafting her life onto Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s supplies *White Heat* with the narrative Wineapple despairs of finding, or exults in missing, in Dickinson. Higginson’s stalwart abolitionism, Civil War military service, and postwar advocacy for women’s and freedpeople’s rights anchors Dickinson’s life to national history; his stolidly professional career as a writer and editor in the lower rungs of the Northeastern literary establishment anchors her to the history of American letters.

The same graft also anchors Dickinson in a predictable romantic plot: as every reader knows, the apparently static woman, the woman out of time, the woman in white, is really a woman in waiting for the kiss that will wake her up. Wineapple breathlessly leaves her readers with the plot hanging in the close of her previous chapter:

His quiet eloquence heeded by the coruscating poet of inner life—his quiet eloquence touching her—she reached out.

“My size felt small—to me—,” Emily



Dickinson told him; “I read your Chapters in the Atlantic—and experienced honor for you.” She knew who this man was.

The romance plot understands Dickinson’s overture to Higginson as the gesture of a maiden in a tower reaching out to her white knight, and this plot can only end in a fantasy of perfect, instantaneous recognition: “She knew who this man was.” Sleeping Beauty awakens into time, kisses the prince, and falls out of time again whispering the beloved’s name (Wineapple frequently describes Dickinson as writing to “Wentworth,” Higginson’s name among his intimates and a familiarity by which Dickinson never, ever addressed him). *White Heat*’s romantic focus on Higginson as white knight diminishes the many other relationships in Dickinson’s life in 1862 and after, including those with friends and editors—Susan Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland—who were already helping her to publish her work or with whom she was exploring that possibility.

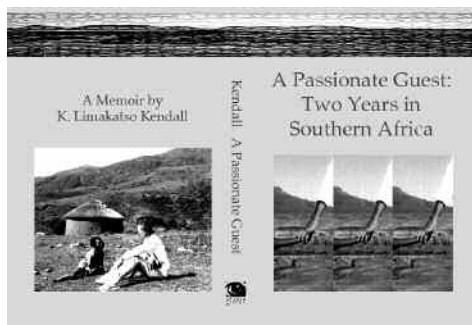
Elsewhere in *White Heat*, Wineapple does a better job of exploring how the deep bond between Dickinson and Higginson developed—over time rather than in a romantic instant, in history rather than out of it, and with ambivalence on both sides. Flattering and flirtatious, Dickinson also managed to be courteously adamant in rejecting Higginson’s writerly advice; Higginson, for his part, apparently (most of his side of the correspondence is lost) managed to push the virtues of positive thinking without sounding dismissive of Dickinson’s troubles.

Wineapple presents a balanced, appreciative account of Higginson’s role in bringing Dickinson’s writings into print after her death. Higginson, in her persuasive judgment, ultimately did less to bowdlerize Dickinson’s writings for nineteenth-century genteel tastes, and more to preserve their distinctive character, than he is usually given credit for. Wineapple’s summary of Higginson’s and Dickinson’s writerly relationship is tart, succinct, and just:

Accused by the cadres of scholars who wish she had contacted a more prescient correspondent, like one of them, Higginson was a vigorous, liberal advocate of women writing, women voting, women educated and free, self-respecting and strong. Of this Dickinson had been amply aware for a very long time. She took what she needed and discarded the rest.

A reader of *White Heat* might be advised to do the same. Wineapple’s portrait of Thomas Wentworth Higginson reinvents for our time a figure who has not been treated by a full biography since the 1960s.

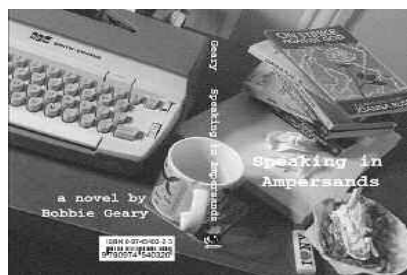
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Smuggling guns into Kansas to resist the extension of slavery; watching the men of his first Civil War regiment square-dancing with one another, “their long arms looping in huge arcs, half the men marking themselves as women by tying a handkerchief to their arm”; recruiting the first regiment of freed slaves to serve in the Union Army, battling school segregation in the North after the war—and in the midst of this, somehow finding time to correspond with a brilliantly eccentric woman whom he would not meet until they had been exchanging letters for eight years—Wineapple’s Higginson is abundantly worthy of our attention.

Wineapple’s portrait of Emily Dickinson, on the

other hand, adds little to the existing biographical accounts on which she draws. Its lingering attachment to the figure of the poetess in white, untouched by history, marks a retreat from a great swath of contemporary Dickinson scholarship that explores the impact of the Civil War on her poetry, the changing modes of her writing over her lifespan, and her efforts to attach her writing to its situations of address rather than floating lyrically free of them. We are not bound to keep reproducing the dated critical story in which Dickinson stops all our clocks. More interesting is the Dickinson who almost emerges in Wineapple’s pages—the writer who learned to survive absolutisms, even her own,

even those asserted by a high romantic ideal of poetic vocation; who probably learned, along with some of Jane Austen’s heroines, that “the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people”; above all, the writer who modulated the poetry of her columnar self into a responsive art of living. 

Mary Loeffelholz is professor of English and vice provost for academic affairs at Northeastern University, and the author of *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (2004).

A Radical Activist, Rediscovered

Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones

By Carole Boyce Davies

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 311 pp., \$22.95, paperback

Reviewed by Kate Weigand



Claudia Jones

feminism, transnational feminism, and the history of Communism. “Claudia Jones,” Davies explains,

lived and organized at the intersection of a variety of positionalities (anti-imperialism and decolonization struggles, activism for workers’ rights, the critique of the appropriation of black women’s labor, and the challenge to domestic and international racisms and their links to colonialism) and was therefore able to articulate them earlier than many of her contemporaries.

Jones’s pioneering political writing, speaking, and activism makes her, in Davies’s estimation, one of the leading radical black female activists and intellectuals of the twentieth century. The internment of her ashes in an obscure plot to the left of Karl Marx’s grave in London’s Highgate Cemetery, Davies’s title suggests, is a metaphor for her little-known but groundbreaking approaches to political activism and theory, which incorporated gender, race, migration, and culture and, in the process, radicalized traditional Marxism-Leninism.

As someone who has long been interested in the life and work of Claudia Jones, whose class- and race-conscious feminism I examined in my own book on the gender politics of American Communism after World War II (*Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation*, 2001), I know firsthand the frustration that comes from trying to understand a subject about whom there are very few sources. In the 1990s, when I was a graduate student with limited research funds looking for information about Jones’s life, almost all the details I could locate came from publications of various kinds, and none of those contained anything beyond the basic outlines of her existence. Carole Boyce Davies, a professor of Africana Studies and English at Cornell University, writes that it was this paucity of material that led her to begin searching systematically for more information about Jones. *Left of Karl Marx* is the result of her effort to reconstruct the details of Jones’s life and to restore her work to the discourse on black feminism, Communism, and the African diaspora.

After my own stymied efforts to locate archival material on Jones, I was very excited to hear about Davies’s book. Although she specifies that the book is “not a biography,” it traces the contours of Jones’s life from her birth as Claude Vera Cumberbatch in Belmont, Trinidad, in 1915, through her family’s arrival in New York City in 1924, her growing involvement in Communist Party politics and leadership in the 1930s through the early 1950s, her arrest and imprisonment by the US government for violating the anti-Communist McCarran and Smith Acts, her deportation to London in 1955, and her

new activist life in London’s Caribbean community. In her introduction, Davies tells the story of her determined effort to identify and track Jones’s social and political networks, as she hoped that each new contact might point her toward an unknown cache of material. That search—which culminated in the discovery of a collection of Jones’s papers and their placement in the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—and Davies’s interviews with many of Jones’s friends and political comrades paid off. She answers many of my lingering questions about Jones’s family, her training as a journalist, her political struggles, and her personal relationships. Using this new information, Davies presents Jones as a living, breathing human being:

She was a helpful, sensitive person who could cook potatoes in five minutes. She liked having a nice coat, having her hair done, and looking good. She moved with a black, New York City style and tempo in the more formal London... She was serious, intuitive, and nice without arrogance. She liked a good time. She was a human being who wanted to do what she could for black people, but she was not antiwhite.

In addition to expanding our understanding of Jones as a person, Davies’s discussions of Jones’s journalism, political writing, and poetry make an insightful and well-documented case for Jones’s status as a significant intellectual leader within Caribbean intellectual traditions, black US



“Jones’s pioneering political writing, speaking, and activism makes her, in Davies’s estimation, one of the leading radical black female activists and intellectuals of the twentieth century.”

Karl Marx reveals the details of Jones’s day-to-day relationships and activities in London. She founded the *West Indian Gazette*, launched London’s first Carnival, and organized Caribbean concerts, talent shows, and beauty contests—all of which solidified the Caribbean community in England and mobilized support for Caribbean independence and anti-imperialist struggles more generally. Davies is at her best demonstrating how Jones’s work in England—most of which took place outside the domain of the British Communist Party—expanded and deepened her intellectual and political significance rather than limiting it.

Thus, the book’s strengths stem from Davies’s impressive search for and integration of new biographical material, and her ability to contextualize Claudia Jones and her work. Its weakness, in my view, lies in its emphasis on Jones as an exceptional individual (although she certainly was one). Davies doesn’t provide enough context to explain either Jones’s rise to prominence in the world of radical New York in the 1930s and 1940s or her unfortunate position as a political target in the anti-Communist 1950s. Although she pays lip service to Communism as a central influence on Jones during her New York years, Davies does not fully appreciate the degree to which the Communist Party shaped the lives and ideas of its members and leaders. I was surprised, for example, that in her discussion of Jones’s intellectual achievements Davies did not mention the party’s commitment to training promising working-class men and women to speak and write. It served as an educational institution for people like Jones who did not have the resources to attend college.

Even more important, Davies doesn’t explain the genesis of Jones’s feminist politics, leaving the reader to assume that they arose organically from her experiences as a black woman. She writes that Jones “brought an explicitly women’s-rights orientation to the politics of the Communist Party USA and its organizations,” implying that it was Jones who brought feminist ideas to the attention of American Communists. In fact, she was only one of

many black and white women who struggled, before and after World War II, to make race and gender central categories of Communist analysis.

In part because of Davies’s lack of familiarity with the world of American Communism, she overemphasizes change in her discussion of Jones’s post-1955 political work in England. Citing Jones’s difficult relationship with the Communist Party of Great Britain, which did not welcome her with open arms, Davies writes that Jones’s immersion in the Caribbean community took her political work in a new direction, which embraced the transformative potential of cultural activities. Rather, I would argue that Jones brought American Communist sensibilities about political culture to her work in England. Her commitment to organizing Carnival and other Caribbean cultural events in London mirrored American Communists’ efforts to create alternative cultural activities and institutions that could nourish, politicize, and empower communities of oppressed people.

In the end, however, the strengths of *Left of Karl Marx* outweigh its problems. Readers interested in black feminism, the left, the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, and transnationalism will benefit a great deal from Davies’s efforts to tell Claudia Jones’s story and restore her activist and intellectual contributions to those discourses. Davies ends her book by writing, “As always, as one comes to the end of a project as formidable as this one, there are always new revelations to be made, additional information to be factored. I see this project as reopening even as it closes.” With any luck, this book’s revival of Claudia Jones’s life and its illustration of her importance will bring even more sources to light and finally make possible a full biography of this important thinker and organizer. ☺

Kate Weigand is an independent historian living and working in Western Massachusetts. She is the author of *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (2001).

Finally, *Left of Karl Marx* restores Jones’s political work in England to the historical record. The material on Jones’s deportation and her immersion in London’s Caribbean community, from her arrival in December 1955 until her death almost exactly nine years later, covers new ground by providing both information about her activities and theoretical insights about their significance. Davies suggests that Jones’s rejection of deportation to Trinidad and her arrangement instead of a “voluntary departure” to England illustrates her decision to “step out of the dominant discourse surrounding her and into her own discourse.” In London, she established a new life and identity that asserted her status as an African American, emphasized her participation in the Caribbean diaspora, and embraced pan-Africanism and internationalism. Whereas other writing about Jones (my own included) concludes with her departure from the United States, *Left of*



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Defamiliarize Yourself

The Halo Rule

By Teresa Leo

Denver, CO: Elixir Press,

2008, 70 pp.,

\$16.00, paperback

Sister

By Nickole Brown

Los Angeles: Red Hen Press,

2007, 111 pp.,

\$18.95, paperback

Ordinary Beans

By Gwyn McVay

San Antonio, TX: Pecan

Grove Press, 71pp.,

\$15.00, paperback

Bonneville

By Jenny Mueller

Denver, CO: Elixir Press,

2007, 60 pp.,

\$16.00, paperback

The Gravity

Soundtrack

By Erin Keane

Laporte, IN: WordFarm, 2007,

88 pp., \$12.00, paperback

Reviewed by Wendy Vardaman

The poetic voices emerging out of the collapsed dualism of deliberately obscure Modernism and deliberately transparent, but often plain and unadorned verse demonstrate a dynamic fluidity of thought. Oppositions—such as narrative and lyric, transcendent and transient, poetry and fiction, formal and free, personal and impersonal, human and nonhuman—coexist, inform each other, and often make for a far more gratifying reading experience than the poet-centered verse of the recent past. No matter how personal, on the one hand, or resistant to narrative and coherence, on the other, each of the five first collections of poetry considered here puts story at its center. And each tells its story in lines that reach for lyrical heights, embracing beauty and artful language and rhetoric, even when—or perhaps especially when—the story is anything but beautiful. All five also make interesting use of genre—chick lit, melodrama, science fiction, romance, memoir, adolescent and children’s lit, and pop song—and despite the authors’ formidable academic credentials, all are clearly written with the reader in mind, though they don’t mind challenging those readers either.

Both *The Halo Rule*, by Teresa Leo, and *Sister*, by Nickole Brown, tell a single, unified story through individual poems, one about the breakup of a relationship, the other about a devastating childhood and its consequences. These two books resemble memoir, with dashes of melodrama and chick lit, and both, especially Brown’s, also resemble the increasingly popular “verse novels” for adolescents in their focus on a life problem and in their use of plot, although to say that is to be reductive with respect to their language and lyricism.

The Halo Rule zigzags between carefully crafted free verse and free formalism, incorporating rhyme and rhythm in unexpected places. (There is even the occasional sonnet.) “Suite for the Possessed,” for example, a free-verse poem about a kiss, ends with a heavily alliterated and dramatically effective line of metered verse:

When the doors open at 16, he pulls back (*mal occhio*),
the bright heart a passage (*jettatura*),

then dread. I know the lateral and play it,
that hand:
first felony, last flight, no fold, this floor.

“Engagement Sonnet,” an unmetred, unrhymed, and thus rule-breaking poem whose metaphors reference love and sports (as frequently happens in this collection) likewise moves between the supposedly opposite goals of “free” and “formal” verse. Throughout this collection, Leo’s imagery erupts with the brutality of love and of conflict. In the powerful poem, “Storm Door,” the lover “throws drinks at the wall / the way Ali threw punches, hard, without warning, // roped dopes and blinding jabs. / With us, it’s always more rock than paper.” She reinvents Narcissus as a sociopath bent on sexual conquest in a series of persona poems that break up but inform the main narrative.

The last half of the collection becomes more predictable than the first, as it excavates the narrator’s past with sexual coming-of-age poems and poems about ethnic and class identity. One of the final poems, “Love at the End of the 20th Century,” uses the language of combat against itself, and suggests that *The Halo Rule* itself isn’t, finally, about romance, but rather about the way the language of romance positions us to encounter each other and the world:

I loved like an army,
at the brink of war—all battle plans,
camouflage,
shoot-to-kill, seizures. The romance,
first tear gas, then morphine, nights
of white heat, sutures, slash-and-burn, shock.
But then, right at the end of the 20th century,
in the year of the hostage, as if dropped by
chopper,
a bomb that didn’t explode—you,
conscientious objector, accident, rapture,
and me, auto aim and rapid fire.
Then the words I’ll carry to the other side
changed:
mercy, surrender, standdown, light.

Like *The Halo Rule*, Brown’s *Sister* straddles the poetry/memoir/fiction fence. Brown’s website calls the book a “novel-in-poems,” though the term “novel” appears nowhere in the book itself. It’s hard to know whether this story about sexual abuse, violence, and the possibility of redemption would be more difficult to accept as



truth or as fiction. Interestingly, the problem of authenticity that has made splashy headlines in the world of fiction and memoir has not yet publicly arrived in the poetry world, although poets ponder it among themselves.

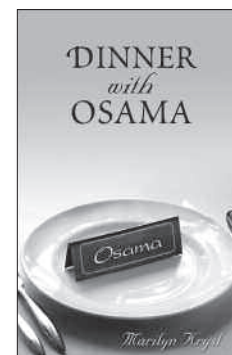
Regardless of its classification, however, *Sister* tells a powerful female coming-of-age story with many familiar autobiographical elements—class, sexuality, powerlessness, and a growing command of language that finally frees the narrator, at least to the extent that any of us is free. Less familiar is the

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subject matter of pedophilia, especially treated poetically, and the attempt to humanize the pedophile. But sexual abuse is only part of the story in these often densely beautiful poems addressed to the narrator's younger sister. The narrator feels she has sinned against her sister by not speaking out, by not offering protection, by leaving and, worst of all, by not loving her. Confessing those sins as she simultaneously exposes her stepfather's crimes, the narrator attempts to understand the brutality in each of us, which begins with acts of not caring for the helpless.

As with Leo, violent imagery abounds in many of Brown's poems, which explore ugliness in language that often defies that ugliness, lifts off, then collapses back on itself—as in these lines from "What I Did, V":

When you were five, I took a
thing that was yours, a jar
of fireflies you spent all night
plucking from the gloam, and while
you hollered from the locked side
of my bedroom, music and smoke curling
under the door at your feet,

I set the bugs loose in the dark...

Against the plot's brutality runs a traditional chronicle of the narrator's growing command of language, as in the poem "Speak & Spell," in which she instructs her sister how to spell pedophile: "Who knew there was a word for it, much less a right way to write it down? / Pick up that crayon again, show me what you've learned, / make this into a word, make it a note left behind."

Although *Sister* seems aimed at female readers, anyone would appreciate the beautiful and carefully chosen language Brown uses to tell her story, particularly as it contrasts with the harshness of its events and enacts a choice between ugliness

and beauty, as in this passage from "How She Conceived," in which the narrator imagines her own conception:

Count nine months back.

Find *June*,

find the foxfire summer,
find mama's fifteenth year,
a dark undergrowth
of fern and fertile knots of water
moccasin down at the creek,
high, green, and indifferent

to the trying of her new
softness in a concrete slick
basement where cave crickets
fiddled in the moldy dark,
or on a rooftop where shingles
gripped her, black grit catch
on her tender bare—

Although the remaining collections do not have unified narratives, they are still very much interested in stories, readers, and fictional devices. Gwyn McVay's *Ordinary Beans*, the most deliberately detached of these books, is also the least troubled and most gentle. It often veers humorously into fantasy and spiritualism. The opening poem, "The Demoness," is a surreal account of an adventure-loving female devil's advice to the poet. "Her Superpowers" tells about a superhero-in-training who needs a little coaxing to believe in herself:

"I think you're ready," the guide said. "You know you're off-balance. Pull up your mittens, kitten. Listen: blood-red cherries."

She straightened her neck. "Blood-red cherries," she repeated. This was the signal at which she must act to become no longer a slave.

McVay doesn't limit her persona poems to

human or even fantasy characters; others include "Song of the Pretty Sweater," "Gorilla Face in Crumpled Underwear," "The Grievs of Private Objects," and "Bulletin from Fantasy," in which Decay is considered:

Herself, the Right Grand Corvidess,
First Feather of the Second Arrow,
Significant Watcher at the Concrete Gate,
picks trash.

Not all of McVay's poems involve coherent stories; some gather a collage of quasi-narrative events that don't really add up: In "Eyebright and Toolshed," fragments of images push the reader in a narrative direction but resist narrative itself as they veer instead toward nonsense:

My whole eyebright was sunspot-red algae,
the old customary corn cob throbbled,
I saw daredeviltry,
as through an unwholesome golem gloaming.

I lay all day on my bêche-de-mer,
I chairmanned through the night,
learning to flip
at the flasher of the mastodon.

Outside, the summer squash railroad,
a Simon Legree of rosin and rendition
feldspar in pints.

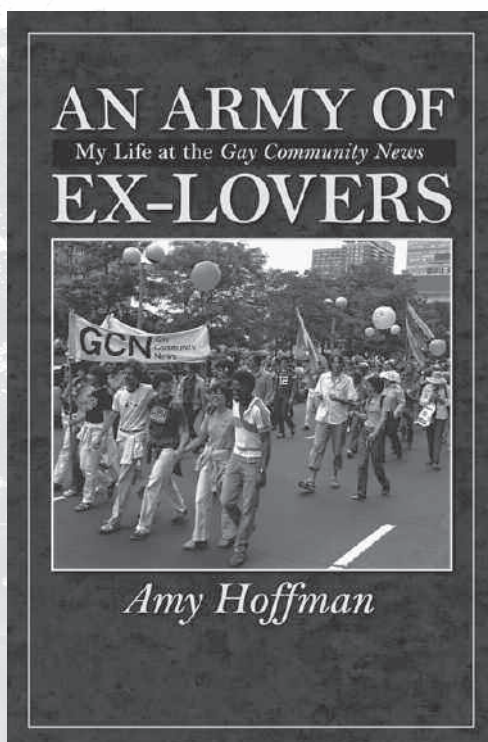
Even new lieutenantancy is fugal.

None of this makes for easy sense: what is a *customary corn cob*, a *golem gloaming*, a *bêche-de-mer*? The syntax likewise jars, but there's humor here, a lack of seriousness in "the old customary corn cob throbbled," "the summer squash railroad," and even the "bêche-de-mer," which turns out to mean prepared sea cucumber, an aphrodisiac—all of which invite the reader to laugh rather than to try solve the puzzle.

Finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Women's Memoir/Biography

Finalist for the Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction

Boston's weekly *Gay Community News* was "the center of the universe" during the late 1970s, writes Amy Hoffman in this memoir of gay liberation before AIDS, before gay weddings, and before *The L Word*. Provocative, informative, inspiring, and absurd, with a small circulation but a huge influence, *Gay Community News* produced a generation of leaders, writers, and friends. In addition to capturing the heady atmosphere of the times—the victories, controversies, and tragedies—Hoffman's memoir is also her personal story, written with wit and insight, of growing up in a political movement; of her deepening relationships with charismatic, talented, and sometimes utterly weird coworkers; and of trying to explain it all to her large Jewish family.



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"An Army of Ex-Lovers is Amy Hoffman's witty, nuanced, personal history of Gay Community News, Boston's gay weekly newspaper in the 1970s and '80s. I expected as much from this fine writer. What is delightfully unexpected is that it is also the love story between a gay man and a lesbian. Political, cranky, fully committed, loyal, and loud. It's big love. It's the untold story of those early years of gay liberation."

—Kate Clinton, author of *Don't Get Me Started*

"Amy Hoffman's memoir is one woman's account of the furious and fierce gay and lesbian activism in Boston during the 1970s, a time of social upheaval and political trailblazing. An Army of Ex-Lovers is an essential narrative of queer history, a document that defies erasure and loss, and an expression of love to an era and its people"

—Judy Grahn Award citation

Although McVay's poetry is often lighthearted, it is serious, too, and interested in nothing so much as a good-humored and inclusive spirituality that embraces the human and the nonhuman, gods and demons, the planned and the mistaken, the East and the West. Her poems include a demoness who bursts into flames, astonishing the poet, and mythical/religious characters such as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, Sisyphus, and Shiva. "The Enola Gaia Museum" best illustrates this fusion of the jokey and the serious, combining in its playful title a reference to the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and Gaia, the goddess of earth, or of war and peace: "I am Shiva, destroyer of worlds / says Gaia, I created my own bomb."

Like McVay, Jenny Mueller also tends toward the referential, the interrupted, the impersonal, the fragmentary, and the less narratively whole. Her poems, too, employ narrative, character, and other fictional devices. Just as McVay mixes the transcendent and the transient for a humorous though serious purpose, Mueller combines the old and the new; and just as spirituality forms the spine of McVay's poetry, nature serves that function in *Bonneville*. The collection is neo-Romantic, its lyrical poems rooted, like those of the nineteenth-century Romantics, in nature, but with the difference that those images have become disjointed, unfamiliar, and distinctly disconcerting.

Consider, for example, "Peninsula," which mixes images of landscape with those from film, so that the experience of nature is not firsthand but rather mediated by the camera:

The water
played in a tape loop. Behind, the park hissed
like the park in *Blow-Up*, a tape
hiss—the pines started ringing
like glass. We'll want
to return here: we'll want
to play back. In the chilly hotel,
to have *breakfast in fur*.

Darling the campgrounds
are sodden abandoned, their sites
bitten in and the paths
steeped in cold,
chemical soak.
An etching, a darkroom
developing. We come in and flick on
a switch, find ourselves
in a circle of Technicolor mosses.

Likewise, the poem "Sundowning" takes the standard romantic/lyric devices of attributing human characteristics and transcendent power to Nature, and makes something creepy and menacing, rather than sentimental or safe, from them:

The crickets start praying to the porch lights.
Their chant overtakes the god.
Where, my darling, are your eyes?

Called back
into the grass,
your eyes at first sent down as spies.

Many of Mueller's poems work this way, but with slight variations: "The Donna Party," the title a play on the infamously cannibalistic Donner Party expedition, mixes the natural with the disturbed; "Northumbria" flows in and out of panicked fragments about getting a trapped bat out of the

house and references to the Venerable Bede; and "Memorandum" describes a glass high-tech workplace on the Edens expressway: "The lobby holds a tortoise / a lion a horse and a lamb, / and a white stag roams unmolested." In an interesting bit of commentary on her own enterprise, "Lyric," addressed to that mode itself, asks what it has left for poets:

To look at the sky and beg wine,
to barter the cardinal's neck
for cocaine, this is a human's
animal hell, and from what can I sing to you
there?
Better a false song about you?
What will the world be
when you give me nothing to say?

Erin Keane's *The Gravity Soundtrack* is, paradoxically, the most irreverent of the books considered here, as well as the most concerned with spirituality. Simultaneously playful and careful, her poems move, like Mueller's and Leo's, among free verse, form, and the appearance of form, with stanzas of the same number of lines, occasional syllabics ("Where the Wild Things Are"), numerous unrhymed sonnets, and a terrific, barely recognizable villanelle, "Science Fiction." As with the other authors, there's cross-pollination among Keane's poetry and other genres, most notably science fiction, children's lit, and popular music. The dominant mode of the collection, however, is the persona poem. *The Gravity Soundtrack* is peopled by Johnny Cash, Orpheus, Aphrodite, Aunt Molly, and a legion of characters from children's books.

Funny and dark, Keane takes on some of the same subject matter as the other authors, such as the brutality of childhood, which she captures especially well in the sequence "Never-Ending Stories." These poems reinvent the histories of the main characters in classic children's books, a method familiar from feminist poetry and fiction, where it is used to show how traditional narratives exploit women. Keane cleverly turns the method toward children, whose narrative oppression is less familiar. Each of her virtuous heroes or heroines becomes a broken and exploited creature, and the narrator's persona through the sequence is cynical about belief and virtues—as are the characters themselves and the inscribed reader. Thus, at the end of "The Secret Garden," "it is Easter, but as we all know, / there's no big miracle, no empty tomb, only / your shovel, your mud, your marbles, your worms." "Little Women" imagines a Beth who has sex with Laurie when she knows Amy will see, then runs off to New Orleans. "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" is written from the point of view of a "bad kid" who mocks Charlie and the virtues he represents. There's humor here and pathos, as well as variety; the poems entertain while raising serious questions about the exploitation of children who, like the children's-book character Madeline, lack good parental care.

Although the other three parts of *The Gravity Soundtrack* do not cohere as tightly as this sequence, they possess a similar sensibility and return with biting humor to recurrent questions about the transcendent and the transient. The titles of each of Keane's sections imply that contradictory sensibility—"Eternal Playback," "The Express Line to Heaven," "Never-Ending Stories," and

"Something Like Prayer"—in a poetic landscape where pop songs provide the liturgical music, a record store clerk is both a miracle worker and a bum, and technology will be the means through which we're brought to judgment, our sins displayed on electronic billboards in "The Jumbotron Nightmare." "The Laff Box" likewise posits an unlikely relationship between technology and spirituality, both of which come under attack in this funny but pointed poem:

Bury me
with my Laff Box, so I can keep on chuckling
right into the Afterlife—an endless marathon
of reruns, my classic episodes, the "Applause"
sign always lit, seasoned with just the right
timbre of giggle to encourage my decomposing
audience and the voracious, easily pleased
worms.

It's the back and forth between these jarringly different registers that makes *The Gravity Soundtrack* unsettling and entertaining, intense and light-weight, all at the same time. As the title poem says, writing of a rise that suggests rebirth but isn't:

We were

scared, fatherless kids who couldn't
name the men we loved.... We wanted to
see how long we could hold our breath,
waiting, waiting, for spots in our eyes,
the burn in our bellies, for the slow
false rise from the floor, the lifting,
the dizziness that felt like floating.

Ultimately Keane's poems try to jolt us out of seeing God as something tidy and suburban. Think of him instead as "A Divine Infestation": "We're not even supposed to be talking about / him. We are afraid of betraying nonbeliefs. Still, / he dazzles."

Sometimes it's just hard to get out of your own sensibility—Hindu or Catholic, narrative or lyric, formal or free verse, academic or pop, East or West, human or nonhuman. As Keane's poem "Science Fiction" suggests: "How carbon-based we are, / hair, some bone, mostly water." These five poets work hard to create both a de-familiarization in our thinking and a realignment along more tolerant and sustainable lines, eclectically mixing the modes available to them, dwelling less on themselves than on the significance of their subjects, recognizing the reader's presence and challenging her to respond. ♪

Wendy Vardaman holds a Ph.D. in English from University of Pennsylvania. Her poems, reviews, and interviews have appeared in a variety of anthologies and journals; a poetry collection, *Obstructed View* is forthcoming in 2009.

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Fly Me to the Moon

Take me to zero gravity,
the weightlessness of space.
Would I be myself, gone orbital?
Low Earth, high Earth, geosynchronous:
I'd drift there in a bubble
all air-locked, walking on air—
escaped from this terrestrial sphere,
surging toward the outer reaches,
I might discover more rings of Saturn,
moons of Jupiter, a new planet or star—

*Don't ask about the blast-off,
the view through the window
when headed sixty-two miles up:
the howl of maneuvering thrusters
getting the right path through and out,
abrupt changes in momentum, temperature,
random pieces of equipment
breaking down, away—*

Lacking a force of attraction
exerted in reverse proportion
to each action or gesture,
I'd float free. No friction, either:
the energy of two bodies sliding
back and forth against each other—
left instead to pull myself along
by handles attached to walls.
How to sleep: fastened to a smooth surface,
or cradled in a swing of straps
like a hammock between trees?

*Prolonged exposure could cause harm:
motion sickness, fluid shift, loss of equilibrium
in the inner ear; weakened muscles,
shrinking bones; an outright failure
of nerves and heart—*

I'd have to learn how to carry
my home on my back: a pure state
of balance where appropriate pressure
and climate, a suitable composition
of air would be maintained—
continuous supply of oxygen...is...
essential...for...respiration.

*What would happen
if a foot came loose
from the restraints, if
a security line came untethered
uncoiling into space?*

The decision to come back, or not—
endure the shock of re-entry:
enough heat there to melt, crush,
vaporize without a thick outer skin
of thermal shields; the right aerodynamic
roll angle; the right alpha and gamma;
deceleration from hypersonic velocity
many times the speed of sound—

A soft landing, maybe.
Recovery vehicles racing
to pull me out.

Heights and Depths

The air was all salt fog, cool for July.
We locked our bikes to a split rail fence,
then set out on foot—a half mile along
the breakwater to Wood End Light.
We passed several others climbing
up and down the rocks: a few families,
two middle-aged women, even
an elderly man alone. Suddenly

you remembered you'd been there before,
a few years back. A memory block, clearly:
as the boulders grew more slippery
and steep, the crevices between them
wider and deeper, you grew more tentative,
then queasy. You legs palsied. Your feet froze.
My big, brave girl. My risk-taker.
My beloved scientist.

Your brain struggled to conquer
the panic your stomach swore:
*out-of-control lurch,
helpless plummet,
splintered bones protruding
through gashed, bloody skin—*
I kept suggesting we turn back,
but you were too stubborn,

determined to make it
to the other side.
On the return trip, we went
by way of the beach:
double the distance, half the time.

*

A year later, you're obsessed with sailing—
possess a bewildering desire
for undulation, the pitch of the deck
on a brisk tack across the lake,
capricious wind stretching the sheets.

Thing is, I hate being on the water—
have always coped by *staying away*.
Until now, that is, the challenge everywhere:
nautical books stacked by the bed;
extra gear hauled from dock to truck,
attic, shed; boat key dangling
from a hook by the kitchen door;
your persistent need for a first mate.

Even the view from my study window
has changed, it seems: I could swear
all I see now are whitecaps,
treetops swaying and bowing
through the endless gusts.

—Linda A. Roach

Linda Roach holds an MFA in poetry from New England College. Her poems have appeared in *Woman of Power Magazine*, *Starfish*, *Diner* and *Queer Collection 2007*, and have been named finalists in several contests, most recently the Arktoi Books manuscript competition. Born and raised in Massachusetts, she currently lives in the Twin Tiers region of Pennsylvania.

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The Benefits of Hindsight

By Trish Crapo

Telex from Cuba

By Rachel Kushner

New York: Scribner, 2008, 322 pp., \$25.00, hardcover

The Size of the World

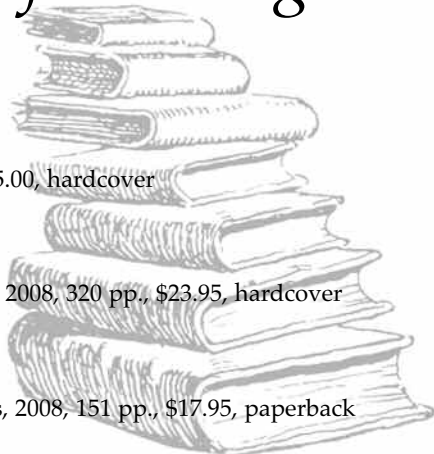
By Joan Silber

New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 320 pp., \$23.95, hardcover

Our Lady of the Artichokes

By Katherine Vaz

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008, 151 pp., \$17.95, paperback



Fourteen-year-old K.C. Stites, the son of a United Fruit Company executive, wakes up early one morning in January 1958 to find that the sugar cane fields on the Oriente Province plantation his daddy oversees are on fire. Familiar with Cuba's dramatic tropical storms, K.C. "loved the feeling of waking up to some drastic change, knowing that when I went downstairs the servants would be rushing around, taking the patio furniture inside and nailing boards over the windows." But this fire marks a more drastic change than he or, for that matter anyone on the island—Cuban or American—could have anticipated.

K.C. is just one of several characters who narrates Rachel Kushner's first novel, *Telex from Cuba*. The book also includes the perspectives of Everly Lederer, the young daughter of a nickel plant manager; an exotic dancer named (somewhat disconcertingly, given the author's name) Rachel K.; a French arms dealer named Christian de La Mazière; as well as several American wives. Through these shifting lenses, Kushner tells the story of the last enclave of Americans to live in Cuba before Fidel Castro took power in January 1959.

Looking back from a distance of nearly fifty years, K.C. has the benefit of hindsight as he tells of the lives of the upper management of United Fruit Company, their utter assurance of their superiority, their tawdry affairs and foolish cocktail parties. In contrast, Everly Lederer, nearly the same age as K.C., narrates from the perspective of the 1950s, observing the changes in Cuba through her unschooled eyes. Down at the docks, she sees "heavy-looking bags of something" being unloaded and notices the "funny, blocky writing on the ship's side, an unreadable alphabet that looked like barbed wire. The workers were shouting in a language that was all consonants crushed together." The reader knows the language is Russian and understands its historical significance and magnitude before any of the characters do—part of what makes Kushner's book so compelling.

Indeed, many of the adult Americans are as naive as their children. Very few of them question their cultural superiority or their right to profit from Cuban land. They have transplanted their American culture intact, to both comic and tragic affect. At one party, Everly's mother observes that, "The Cuban wives were gaudy to a degree that seemed like deliberate satire," shoring up her own smug confidence in her custom-tailored clothes. Another American wife, Mrs. Mackey, thinks of a brochure that listed difficult questions Americans might encounter in "uncivilized countries," such as, "If you are a democracy, why do whites and blacks eat at separate lunch counters?" Her husband assured her it was "a trick question, and that all you had to say was that democracy had to do with separate branches of government, checks and balances and voting." Del, K.C.'s older brother, who runs off into the mountains to fight with the rebels, might be one of the few who take the time to assess the true nature of America's relationship to Cuba—or perhaps he's motivated simply by youthful idealism and a lust for adventure.

With cameo appearances from both Castro brothers, Hemingway, Batista, and the niece of Desi Arnaz, *Telex from Cuba* depicts a critical period in both Cuban and American history. Kushner brings to life a complex time with urgency and believability.

Though *The Size of the World*, Joan Silber's sixth book, proclaims itself a novel, it is really a series of linked stories, tied together by characters and locales and, more importantly, by concerns of foreignness and ethics. Silber's characters grapple with the problem of place with more self-awareness than Kushner's. They struggle to adapt to a new, strange country, but in doing so, they are also struggling with who they are. Finding themselves in unknown

"Another American wife, Mrs. Mackey, thinks of a brochure that listed difficult questions Americans might encounter in "uncivilized countries," such as, "If you are a democracy, why do whites and blacks eat at separate lunch counters?"

territory brings them up against themselves in ways that are both uncomfortable and enlightening. In fact, it's the discomfort, the discrepancy between what they expect and what they find, that leads to self-awareness.

Silber's stories begin in Saigon during the Vietnam War years but span both time and geography, covering vast ground, from Siam in the 1920s, to Sicily during Mussolini's rule, to contemporary New Jersey. Toby, whose story opens the book, is an engineer, sent to Vietnam in 1968 to determine why American planes keep flying off course. When a bomb detonates in a nearby hotel lobby, Toby is shocked to find that the bellhop at his own hotel, a man named Can, was responsible.

"I knew that lobby, with its mosaic floor. It was a nicer hotel than ours, where visiting brass sometimes stayed. I'd been there for drinks. Can might have killed me, he wanted to kill people like me. My Can."

Similarly, Kit, a divorced mother who travels with her young daughter, Phoebe, to Mexico in the 1970s, discovers with surprise the hatred a local policeman has toward her:

I had not thought that I was in a place where I was hated. Poor people had reason to hate us, in our well-fed idleness, but the cop was not poor. All the same, I had outraged him. In my *huipil* with its bodice of embroidered flowers I was like Marie Antoinette in her shepherdess costume to him. I was oozing money and his country was a hobby to me.

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“Love never comes again in the same way, and often it never comes again at all. And even when the gift of it is there, in your arms, something in love cannot resist leaning toward your ear to whisper. It whispers that it’s a temporary blessing.”

Years later, Phoebe laughingly accuses her mother of avoiding her feelings about a former lover by “thinking of all the poor starving millions who’re so busy being fucked over they’d be grateful for just a single spare moment to boo-hoo over being jilted by some asshole.” Kit thinks, “A person might not think that occasionally bothering to remember how fucked up the world was would serve anyone as any sort of comfort. But it did. It made me less stupid, which was really very precious.”

And, being less stupid, some of Silber’s characters come to love the countries to which they’ve been transplanted. In the 1920s, after the death of her parents, Corinna travels to Thailand, then known as Siam, to live with her brother Owen, a tin prospector. Owen at first tries to dissuade her, writing, “Are you sure? It is rough here, and there aren’t many other people from America or Europe... Corinna, try to think clearly. It’s not so easy to go back once you’ve come.”

Owen’s warning proves to be less practical than deeply emotional. Corinna falls for her brother’s servant, Zain, her love for Siam translated into a love for a single person, as if one person could ever embody the complexity of an entire country—its geography and customs, the rhythms of its daily life. Though Corinna marries an English schoolteacher she meets in Siam and moves to Key West, she finds herself giving lectures on Siam at local schools and longing for it for the rest of her life. When Thailand is invaded within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Corinna listens to the radio broadcasts with strong emotion, thinking, “I saw that I had planned every second to go back. I was so homesick now, hearing the place names over and over on the radio, that the rest of my life seemed like smoke.”

Silber doesn’t try overly hard to connect the separate stories—a strength—although the mystery of the errant planes surfaces, satisfyingly, again. The threads that weave the stories are thin but strong. That’s the way life is, Silber asserts. We meet someone, connect, never meet again. Or a chance meeting results in an alliance that changes lives forever. Each of Silber’s characters is so well understood and his or her story so well told, that I would gladly read an entire novel about any of them, a desire I’m almost sure Silber won’t fulfill but which speaks to her mastery as a storyteller.

The characters in Katherine Vaz’s *Our Lady of the Artichokes* are, for the most part, unambiguously grounded in their heritage. They know their culture inside and out—it’s their souls they strive to know better.

In one of the most memorable stories, Mary Smith, a grieving mother, has her picture taken every year standing in front of the Devils Postpile in Mammoth Lakes, California, the spot where her high school-aged daughter, Delilah, was discovered buried under the snow seventeen years before. Aptly titled “My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours,” the story chronicles Mary’s quiet, tortured progress through loss, and along the way, through unexpected love. Delilah had synesthesia—the involuntary mingling of senses. It showed up when she was in the third grade and told her mother that she saw colors when people spoke. The blurring of boundaries caused by Delilah’s condition is evoked throughout the story, more accurately describing her mother’s emotions than anything Mary can find to say about herself.

Much of the story revolves around missing charms from a bracelet Delilah was wearing when she died, which are returned to Mary over the years by people responding to her offer of a one-thousand dollar reward for each. The return of one charm enables Mary to decipher the mystery of Delilah’s disappearance though, of course, it can never repair her loss.

In “The Man Who Was Made of Netting,” a father embezzles ten thousand dollars to buy his daughter an elaborate cape to wear in the Portuguese Holy Ghost Festival, hoping she will be noticed by a Hollywood agent. The cape is gorgeous: “On the whole sweep of it sequined doves held ribbons attached to fishes in a sea that was a froth of lace.” Sunlight on the fabric “changed it from white to red, then white to rust, as if it were a living thing, and the fishes’ eyes sparkled and so did the eyes of the birds that were meant to be the Holy Ghost.” Manny suffers with hope for his daughter—and guilt at his transgression—through the entire festival.

When things don’t work out the way he planned, he finds himself remembering a woman with whom he had an affair years ago. He feels the dual crush of love and loss:

The truth, he knew, is that love never comes again in the same way, and often it never comes again at all. And even when the gift of it is there, in your arms, something in love cannot resist leaning toward your ear to whisper. It whispers that it’s a temporary blessing, it always is, and soon it will be—not gone, not that, that would be more of a relief—it will be dissolving into the very air around you, the air that becomes a labor to breathe.

The air in Vaz’s stories is often suffused with unbearable love. Her writing is fluid, deeply poetic. “The moon tossed a disc of itself onto the floor,” one character observes, “as if a child had cut it out of tissue. Below my feet the moon-tissue sprang alive, into a manta ray, pinned down but fluttering in one place.”

But as tender as some of her language is, Vaz is also capable of using humor to cut right to the quick: “We need to invent us a virgin,” Tia Connie, a character in the title story, says. Wielding a pastry torch, Tia Connie burns the image of the Virgin Mary onto the garden wall behind her artichokes, hoping to trick the landlord into not raising the rent. Her “miracle” yields some unintended consequences including—in true Vaz fashion—love, laughter, and death. One of her characters says that there are two kinds of people, “ones who’ve been spit out the other side of violence and understand what it means to say *Never let me go*, and those who never think about the need to look for grace.” Vaz’s characters are always looking for grace. Invariably, unexpectedly, fleetingly, they find it. ☺

Trish Crapo is a writer and photographer who lives in Leyden, Massachusetts.



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In the Tradition of Women Redefining the World:

Notes on *Al Sol*, photographs from Mexico, Cameroon, and Nicaragua by Stella Johnson

By Magdalen Pierrakos

If it can be said that a good story continues off the page then a photograph can extend beyond the frame.

But if it is also true that humans transpose interior landscape for exterior, then the act of looking at a photograph is a rereading of the photographer's subjectivity through one's own subjectivity.

It starts with who is behind the camera, when and why she clicks the shutter. In *Al Sol*, the photographer is an investigator, a detective in search of evidence—not of crime but of possibility in the largest sense, possibility (or its opposite) magnified. Except in the case of Stella Johnson, the magnifying glass is a camera.

The camera is the medium through which the detective transacts her investigation. She begins by inquiring delicately if she may photograph. This takes time. Time allows familiarity, familiarity begets intimacy, intimacy begets trust, trust begets friendship. Gradually she is absorbed into household, community.

What right does a white woman from Massachusetts have to travel to Mexico, Nicaragua, Cameroon, to photograph people who live without running water or electricity? Every right, if respect and recording of the tiniest fragments of daily life are the motives.

Johnson's 2004 collaboration with an anthropologist (Dr. Lourdes Arizpe of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) on the project *Intangible Heritage in Mexico* exploited the photographer's methodology in service of documenting noninstitutional culture.

At a time when indigenous culture has eroded to the degree that intangible cultural heritage is safeguarded by Unesco, Johnson has simultaneously arrived at a practice in which intent matches need.

Let us not generalize about personal sacrifice or lack thereof, about capturing the moment, about camps of photography, about first and third world. Stella Johnson has, in a tradition of women redefining the world for themselves, found a way to comment on fragments of daily life that points in a direction of possibility. And let that deceptively understated achievement reveal its own magnitude and self respect. ©

Stella Johnson teaches at the Art Institute of Boston, Lesley University, and Boston University. Her work can be seen in the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts; the Hallmark Museum of Contemporary Photography in Turners Falls, Massachusetts; the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas; the University of Maine Museum of Art in Bangor, Maine, and in private collections. Johnson received her first Fulbright Scholarship to Mexico in 2003-2004 to photograph. Additional grants have enabled her to return to Mexico and South American several times since then to photograph and teach. She has worked extensively in the US and overseas with commissions from foundations and journals. For more information about Johnson's monograph, *Al Sol: Photographs from Mexico, Cameroon, and Nicaragua* (2008), visit www.alsolbook.com.

Magdalen Pierrakos is a visual artist and writer who lives in New York City and Athens, Greece. She is currently preparing for an exhibition of her paintings in Mexico.



Orinoco, Nicaragua, 2003



Kakabila, Nicaragua, 2003

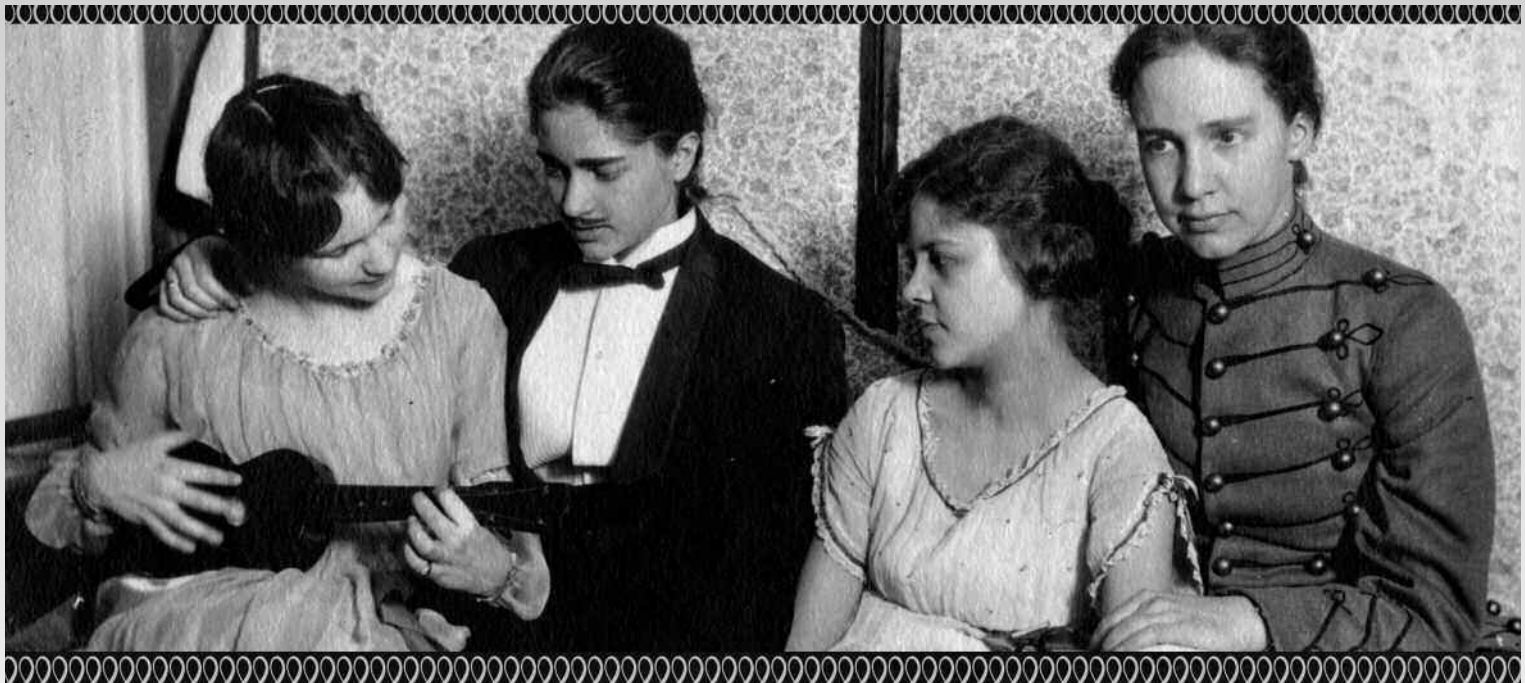


Orinoco, Nicaragua, 2003



Amilcingo, Morelos, Mexico, 2004

Of Her Time and Ahead of It



Sex Variant Woman: The Life of Jeannette Howard Foster

By Joanne Passet

Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 2008, 368 pp., \$27.50, hardcover

For bookish lesbians of a certain age, librarian Jeannette Foster's pioneering work, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), was our first, wonderful introduction to the literary portrayal of women who loved women. It is thorough, judicious, and witty. Knowing that most plots featured "inbred hysteria" or similar psychological problems, Foster peppered her précis with sardonic comments about how so many authors "bow to orthodox standards by ending tragically," sending their lesbian characters to mental institutions or untimely deaths. She starts one discussion of boarding school novels by noting, "There is at first the usual period of honeymoon ecstasy between the two housemates."

Many of us read the book at the height of the militant phase of the women's movement. It was reprinted by Diana Press in 1975 and again by Naiad in 1985, both times with an afterword by the activist and bibliophile Barbara Grier, who had made her own contributions to the recovery of lesbian literature in a series of essays in the lesbian publication *The Ladder* that were later published as *The Lesbian in Literature*. In those days, the quality of the literature mattered less than the fact that it existed at all, for it made an important political statement—"we are everywhere in literature," even if perennially hysterical or immature.

In its time, however, Foster's research was utterly without public recognition, on a topic that was considered suitable only for those trained in medicine or abnormal psychology. She spent a lifetime researching a forgotten past, only to have to resort to publishing her work with a vanity press. Her lesbian friends clearly supported her project, but didn't quite understand it. They were not invested in learning about their culture, or perhaps in acknowledging its importance.

Reviewed by Martha Vicinus

Psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality dominated all discussions, academic or popular, and Foster's work inevitably affirms this dominant paradigm. Still, her book proved to be a valuable breakthrough because it showed that sexuality had a history and could be studied from an entirely different perspective. Even as Foster conceded the overwhelming number of negative portrayals of those whom she called sex-variant women, she herself was always positive. She insisted that her subject was important and worthy of study, setting a precedent for feminists when they began to write about women's lives.

Jeannette Howard Foster (1895-1981) was clearly an exceptional woman, although her life, like that of most academics, was not filled with major events but rather with major ideas. At an early age she knew she would never marry, and her father strongly encouraged her to seek higher education and training in an occupation. After earning a Ph.D. in library science, she spent most of her working life in academic libraries and was an active, published member of the American Library Association. While she seems never to have found the perfect job or the ideal mate, she was never unemployed and rarely without a close companion and a circle of like-minded women friends, including well-known lesbians such as Janet Flanner and May Sarton. She spent many summers in New York City, socializing with members of the Greenwich Village avant garde.

Probably Foster's most disappointing career move was to accept Alfred Kinsey's offer to serve as librarian of his growing collection of materials about sex and sexuality. She arrived at his Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University 1948, in the midst of

"Mock Prom, Rockford College, January 19, 1918. Jeannette's sister Anna (at right) wore duck trousers and a dress uniform coat. According to her diary entry for the evening, she enjoyed a "very nice dance" and a table party with Clara Louise Thompson, Louise Hannum, Florence Bleecker, and Jeannette.

the international uproar over the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey explicitly forbade her to come out publicly, as he did not want any additional notoriety. A micromanager who insisted that Foster catalogue books according to his idiosyncratic method, he treated her as "hired help" rather than as an expert and colleague. Feeling cut off from Kinsey's team of interviewers, unable to work as a professional librarian or scholar, and having fallen in love with a classics teacher at the university, Foster resigned in 1952. She left with many duplicate copies of books on lesbians that she bought from Kinsey, as well as a broad understanding of sexuality studies that doubtless fortified her humanistic approach to the subject.

Although Foster had retired when the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s arose, she quickly made numerous friends among the new, out-of-the-closet lesbians. Until she became too ill, she kept up a remarkable correspondence with multiple generations of acquaintances. She was not a joiner—how could she be, after a lifetime of discreet openness? But she deeply appreciated the daring and confidence of the young women she met, and she took advantage of their offers to publish some of her stories and poems.

Joanne Passet tackles the life of this remarkable academic with aplomb and perseverance. Although Foster's papers are now scattered among many different collections, Passet has read carefully a long life's worth of writings. She has

also interviewed surviving friends and associates, focusing on the crucial four years at the Kinsey Institute and on the 1970s, when Foster's work was rediscovered.

Her study of Foster raises interesting issues for the twenty-first century biographer, including how we understand heroines of the past whose lives resemble our own in some ways and yet in others are quite different. Perhaps we need to reconsider familiar categories. Despite the fact that Foster led a remarkably full and successful life, Passet squeezes her narrative into the old paradigm of the isolated, outcast lesbian. While I am sure Foster often did feel isolated as a person and misunderstood as a scholar, to what degree this was owing to her lesbianism and sex-variant subject matter, and to what degree it was pervasive sexism and the ingrained conservatism of academia, remains an unanswered question.

I admire Passet's thorough research, but I wish she had taken a step back to focus on the ways in which Foster's life was both exceptional and representative of the generation of lesbians between the new women of the 1920s and the gay liberationists of the 1970s. Foster was modern in many ways, traveling, working, cataloguing pornography, and teasing young women about their beautiful legs. But as Passet notes, her erotic imagination was formed during the era of romantic friendships. Did she and her friends differ from the previous generation of academic women who were largely confined to single-sex institutions? I am struck by the degree to which many of Foster's deepest friendships closely resemble those of that earlier generation. The small women's colleges where she often worked encouraged close relations between students and teachers; these continued




Jeannette Howard Foster, circa 1918, the year she graduated from Rockford College.

long after graduation.

Were Foster and her friends bound by middle-class norms of respectability? At times Passet insists that they were, yet at others, she reassures us that Foster was especially open-minded. Respectability, of course, is a slippery concept, and the definition of proper behavior changed radically over Foster's

lifetime. We need to know more about the changing mores of middle-class, educated lesbians during Foster's eighty-plus years. I don't think it would diminish her if we also knew more about her attitudes about race and class, since much of her working life was spent in the South at white women's colleges. From the very few comments included, Foster seems to have inhabited comfortably the prejudices of her time, except in regard to sexuality. She was not alone in this, of course: many pioneering feminists were surprisingly narrow-minded about the needs of other oppressed groups.

Passet's strongest chapters are those on the 1970s, when she was able to take advantage of so many living informants as well as the rich trove of feminist publications from this period. She avoids the temptation of recounting all the interesting but irrelevant stories that she dug up, although I am sure many readers would have liked to hear more about the mixed successes of shoe-string feminist presses. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* remains in print, but Foster's dearest desire—to be published by an academic press—was never achieved. Passet's book will remain an important source of information when future historians come to write about the extraordinary literary efflorescence of the second women's movement. But we need to rethink how we frame our stories, for the past is surely much more complicated and contradictory than any single paradigm permits. 

Martha Vicinus, Eliza M. Mosher Distinguished University Professor at the University of Michigan, is the author of *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (2004). She has published extensively on the history of lesbians.

Founding Mothers

*Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson's
Early American Women*

By Marion Rust

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008,

311 pp., \$24.95, paperback

*The Muse of the Revolution: The
Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and
the Founding of a Nation*

By Nancy Rubin Stuart

Boston: Beacon Press, 2008,

320 pp., \$27.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Martha Saxton

The fundamental question that historians of women ask about the American Revolution is, did it leave women better off or worse? Marion Rust's biographical study of the author and educator, Susanna Rowson, responds to this query directly, and Nancy Stuart's biography of the playwright and historian Mercy Otis Warren offers an implicit reply. Over the past three decades, a few historians have argued that the Revolution unleashed and encouraged significant feminist activity, and Rust's study falls into this

category. Another small group has argued that the Revolution actually set women back, because comparing their postrevolutionary experience with that of men shows that for the first time, they were explicitly written out of the Enlightenment's new formulation of human rights. The majority, however, agree that the Revolution promoted women's autonomy indirectly through education, in the name of creating virtuous "Republican mothers" capable of raising the moral citizens who were needed to keep the new, fragile republic safe

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“Between about 1800 and 1840, the Second Great Awakening created a common Protestant culture of shared habits of sexual and social repression, and female deference to male authority. While adherence to these values all but guaranteed white women entry and de facto leadership of the respectable regions of American culture, the price was self-denial and cramped horizons.”

from the degeneracy that corrupted earlier republics. Stuart’s life of Mercy Otis Warren describes an extremely well-educated woman trying hard to raise moral sons. Her life in many ways anticipates Republican mothering.

For myself, I find that merely asking the question about women’s relationship to the Revolution starts a tape of the Declaration of Independence running in my head, and this has a distressing effect on my assessment of women’s situation, since they emerged from the conflict without the rights enumerated for men. Until now, I have seen the Revolution mobilizing some women, but afterwards silencing the whole generation through the widespread religious revivals of Second Great Awakening. This wave of evangelical fervor set a conservative course for most American women, who absorbed their morality from religion more regularly and more intimately than from political discourse. Between about 1800 and 1840, the Second Great Awakening created a common Protestant culture of shared habits of sexual and social repression, and female deference to male authority. While adherence to these values all but guaranteed white women entry and de facto leadership of the respectable regions of American culture, the price was self-denial and cramped horizons. However, these two works, particularly Rust’s, convince me that a first generation of educated women readers directly linked the Revolution’s ideals with the emergence of feminism in the 1840s.



Mercy Otis Warren

Marion Rust, a scholar of literature, views Rowson’s life and work as a challenge to the status quo. Rust analyzes Rowson’s novels, plays, and poems in tandem with her life: her unhappy marriage, financial struggles, embrace of conservative Federalist ideology, and career as an educator of young women. She argues persuasively that Rowson’s most important legacy was the

creation of a charter generation of female readers connected by common texts and a commitment to rational investigation. These women incubated and nourished ideas that resisted the oppressive atmosphere of the early republic.

Stuart, unlike Rust, has written a biography that tracks the ambiguities of a lived life, not a work that makes an explicit argument. She regards Mercy Warren as an underappreciated Founding Mother and invites us to admire her satirical plays, which had the power to fuse audiences of Massachusetts Whigs into political unity. She is less focused on Warren’s location on the spectrum of Revolutionary feminist mobilization than on conveying to the reader a sense of her multiple and sometimes contradictory commitments to women’s traditional pursuits and relationships as well as to the more unusual pursuit of being the critic and historian of the new republic. The responsibilities of family life and her own desire for male approval made her feminism episodic. Indeed, Warren did not respond to Abigail Adams’s challenge to petition formally for women’s rights and advised a young acolyte to be content to feel her superior while paying rhetorical deference to men.

A central difference between these two women, which contributes importantly to their contrasting lives, is that Warren was content with a husband and five children, and the accompanying loss of individualism that entailed, while Rowson regretted marrying a drunken spendthrift, had no children, and lived by cultivating her independence and survival skills. The two authors’ differing purposes and disciplines also account for the contrast between Rowson’s committed feminism and Warren’s uncertainty about women’s rights. Rust, a literary scholar, uses Rowson’s imaginative writings as an important part of her case. While interesting and persuasive, her evidence by its nature cannot be conclusive. Stuart, instead, bases her biography on extensive personal documentation that shows Warren in multiple guises and moments throughout a life in which feminism was sometimes irrelevant to her and other times a burning cause.

Stuart sketches Warren’s life from her childhood intimacy with her brother, James, his insistence that she share his privileged education and his early radicalism in challenging British colonial policy after the Seven Years’ War. With James’s rapid

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Who will remember you in the end?
—Helen Knickerbocker, 1888-1962

1. The Moment
Difficult to see, when the response
Matters to the future of the world.

2. A Moment
Difficult to see, when the response
Matters to the future of the world.

Finding Afghanistan

A Book of Bad Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan
by Helen Knickerbocker

New York: New York, 2011, 144 pp., \$15.00, paperback

Reviewed by Jennie Duvall

In 1979, eleven-year-old Helen Knickerbocker was

in a process of being a child in a world that was

changing. It was a time of great change and

uncertainty. It was a time when the world was

being shaped by the hands of men and women

who were trying to make sense of a world that

was changing so rapidly. It was a time when

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hands of men and women who were trying

to make sense of a world that was changing

Essay Pulp and Circumstance



published the volume during World War II. The new paper
was a response to the need for a more affordable and
accessible form of entertainment. It was a time when
the world was being shaped by the hands of men and
women who were trying to make sense of a world
that was changing so rapidly. It was a time when
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sense of a world that was changing so rapidly.

collapse into mental illness, his sister Mercy felt called to carry on his work. Because respectable women did not speak in public, Mercy wrote anonymous satirical plays about British corruption and colonial virtue. Her husband, James Warren, a sympathetic man who admired his wife's abilities and shared her political views, enabled her to use her writer's talent, encouraging her when her nerve failed her or her spirits flagged. James and Mercy became friends and political allies of John and Abigail Adams, who were very enthusiastic about Mercy's work. John's influence was crucial in motivating Mercy years later to write her ambitious and controversial history of the Revolution.

Mercy squeezed her work to fit her family obligations. A tender but needy wife and a concerned but somewhat hectoring mother to five sons, Mercy wrote when she wasn't tending to her children or following her husband, whose participation in the build-up and early years of the Revolution kept him away for significant periods of time. Both to collect material for her work on the Revolution and to keep close to the man on whom she was emotionally dependent, Mercy spent much time away from home. She hated James's absences and successfully pressured James not to join the Continental Army, the Massachusetts militia, and most of the other institutions to which he was appointed or elected. Stuart notes that this was strange behavior for a woman who explicitly embraced the republican value of self-sacrifice for the public good, but she does not attempt to explain it beyond noting that it was a consequence of Mercy's dependence on her husband. She does show that Abigail Adams was stronger, that she shared her husband more willingly with the new republic, and that she occasionally grew impatient with Mercy's complaints about her loneliness.

Mercy's capacity for work fluctuated with her state of mind: she suffered from the demons of anxiety, self-doubt, migraines, and periods of ill-defined illness. Her writing silences seem to have derived from her emotional vulnerabilities, similar to those that afflicted her brother and later, two of her sons.

Stuart situates Warren's magnum opus, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, in the volatile post-Revolutionary conflict between the Federalists and the anti-Federalists and later the Jeffersonian Democrats. Warren, an anti-Federalist, feared that the concentration of power would menace individual liberties. She was opposed to policies like many of John Adams's, which strengthened the national government and the executive at the expense of the people. Stuart guides us through Adams's and Warren's exchanges over her unflattering portrait of her former mentor, exchanges that still smoke with fury. She points to the excesses of both; yet Warren's attacks seem fueled, in places, by personal disappointment in the friendship and—somewhat unfairly—are made possible by the intimate knowledge she had of Adams. In Stuart's touching account of Warren's reconciliation with the Adamses, we see all three chastened by many personal losses and moved by gratitude toward one another for re-establishing the deep friendship they had nearly sacrificed to ideological differences and skins worn thin from old age and political friction.

Stuart avoids making large claims about Warren's developing political views, her writing, or



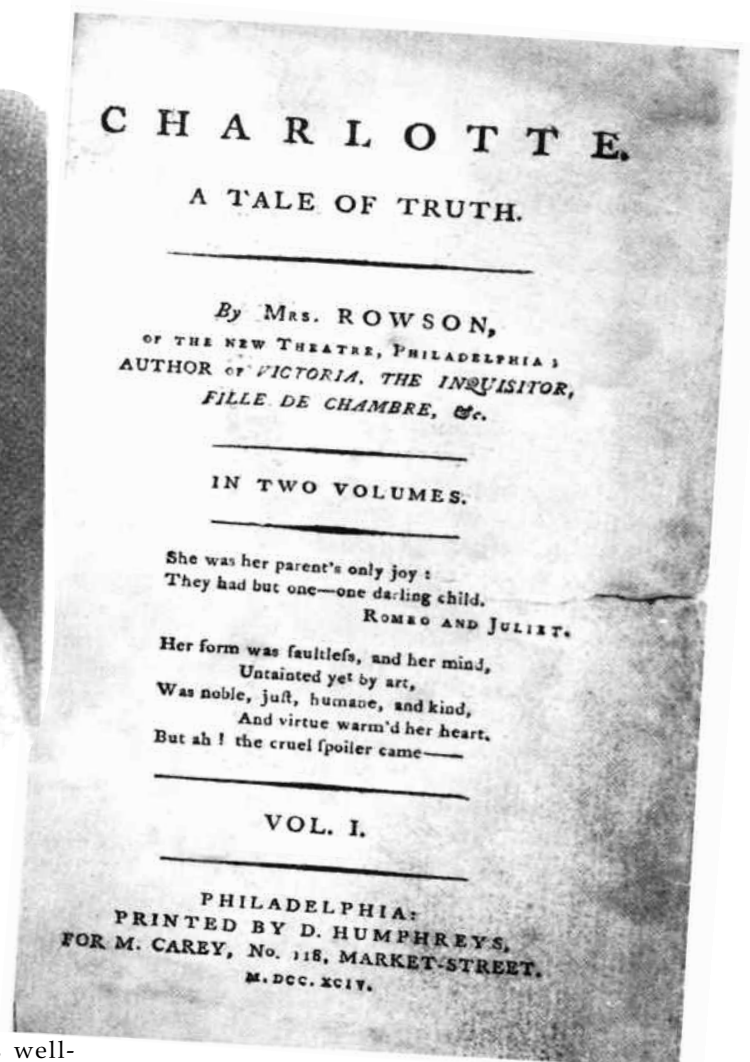
Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* was the nation's first bestseller.

her feminism. While the biography is well-researched, it might have benefitted from a more obvious interpretive thread to illuminate more brightly the significance of Warren's achievements and the possible causes of her ambiguous behavior.

In contrast to Stuart's portrait of a woman strongly influenced by and influencing a circle of men, Rust sees Rowson as an autonomous woman whose connections to men were largely disappointing. Rust opens her study with a new and persuasive reading of *Charlotte Temple*, the nation's first bestseller and the novel that people who know Rowson's work are most likely to have read. Usually read as a moral tale about a girl whose passion betrays her, Rust argues convincingly that *Charlotte Temple* is about a character who is not enough of a person to experience passion. She is an unformed girl whose lack of a sense of self-worth and absence of trusted social connections betray her.

Rust uses Rowson's later plays and poems to make the case that through an array of diverse heroines, Rowson drove home the importance of flexibility, sound judgment, and a cultivated demeanor for girls who would find their way through the fluid society of young America. Rowson, born in Britain and naturalized in the US, appreciated the open ranks of the new world, where education could give a girl opportunities to rise socially through marriage. According to Rust, Rowson's work counseled young women to submit to authority, but to evaluate with great care the authority to whom they would submit. However paradoxical it seems, Rowson believed that *choosing* to submit was an American woman's unique freedom.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rowson founded a girls' academy, where she lived as an exemplar of rational investigation and judgment. Her school was a kind of utopian environment for girls, created to promote their intellectual and moral



The character Charlotte Temple (illustrated above) is an unformed girl whose lack of a sense of self-worth and absence of trusted social connections betray her.

flourishing. She emerges as a passionate educator who encouraged critical discussion and thought even if they challenged her views.


While Rust's biographical material is persuasive, she unfortunately often obscures her literary analysis in opaque prose. "But what," she writes,

if we rethink our emphasis on the forced and fetishized tear, so long the primary synecdoche of American sentimentalism? ...what if we stop demanding that the tear represent a clear lens between mind and "face" or page, a transparent rendering of a uniform mental state? Instead, might the tear not embody the overdetermined nature of sentiment itself? Moreover, if tears express mental states that are themselves indeterminate, then their use as rhetorical devices becomes less of an issue.

Despite these abstruse excursions, Rust creates a convincing link between the women readers that Rowson (and one could add, Mercy Otis Warren) reached and the women activists of 1848. While “Republican motherhood” has never really seemed like an advance to me, a growing circle of female readers learning to think critically about the relationships and disabilities that affected their lives does seem like feminists laying groundwork. As Rust points out, schools for girls were not about learning to be mothers. True, girls were encouraged to obey and to bow to male religious and domestic authority, but reading, writing, and thinking can

subvert inherited ideas and create restless minds and hearts. This kind of education was rare and did not suddenly galvanize an entire generation; it affected a few white, educated girls.

But then, the women’s rights movement of the next generation, growing out of abolition, was largely led by a few white, educated women. They did not concern themselves with issues of mothering, Republican or otherwise, but with problems of extending their small realms of autonomy, such as being able to keep the property they inherited, the wages they earned, and the children they bore, as well as being permitted to

increase their educational opportunities. They, too, could not help but hear the words and cadences of Thomas Jefferson in their minds as they drew up their first manifesto at Seneca Falls in 1848, the Declaration of Sentiments. 

Martha Saxton teaches in the History and Women’s and Gender Studies Departments at Amherst College. She is the author of *Being Good: Women’s Moral Values in Early America* and is working on a biography of Mary Ball Washington, the Founding Father’s mother.

Short and Frisky

Dinner with Osama

By Marilyn Krysl

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press,
2008, 194 pp., \$20.00, paperback

Downriver: Short Stories

By Jeanne M. Leiby

Durham, NC: Caroline Wren Press,
2008, 161 pp., \$14.95, paperback

Remember Love

By Jody Lisberger

Louisville, KY: Fleur-de-Lis Press,
2008, 195 pp., \$13.00, paperback

The short story, that frisky thing, manages to accommodate all manner of sensibilities. It can emote with rage, as Marilyn Krysl’s stories do in *Dinner with Osama*. Or it can lull the reader into a sense of false security, the better with which to snatch our hearts, as Joy Lisberger’s stories do in *Remember Love*. Or, it can simply say, “Watch me!” as Jeanne M. Leiby’s stories do in her debut collection, *Downriver*, leaving the reader open-mouthed in astonishment at the author’s sheer verve and *chutzpah*.

Reading these three new collections affords the great pleasure of discovering just how varied are the approaches to this most malleable of literary genres. It is sometimes lamented, mostly by publishers, that short stories are not accorded the same respect as novels. Ah, but the short story, when well done, is a marvel of voice, pitch, syntax. Like a magician or a ventriloquist, the short story writer must create his or her effects quickly and vigorously. There can be no wavering, or the sleight of hand falls flat. A short story must not call attention to the bells and whistles of the trick. Short story readers, unlike the seekers who read novels, are brutally impatient and once their attention has been diverted, they rarely return.

What, then, can one make of Marilyn Krysl, whose stories announce their intentions, and whose narratives frequently break off to allow intrusions of the authorial voice? Krysl’s voice is nervy and sharp, full of acerbic observations:

I’m on the Boulder mall half an hour before my herbal wrap appointment, shopping for an eyeliner not tested on rabbits, when I get the idea: Why not ask Bin Laden over for a glass of Chardonnay and something light but upscale?

Reviewed by Marianne Villanueva



“Like a magician or a ventriloquist, the short story writer must create his or her effects quickly and vigorously. There can be no wavering, or the sleight of hand falls flat. A short story must not call attention to the bells and whistles of the trick.”

Hers is a voice that winks and snarls, that even, on occasion, stamps its feet: “Here comes the media, wattage and footage.” When read in the proper frame of mind, such a voice charms. In a marvelous story called “Cherry Garcia, Pistachio Cream,” Krysl lures the reader onward with a sense of ever-mounting anxiety by inserting sentences like the following at regular intervals: “Things are peachy keen, and I know what you’re thinking. It’s not a story unless something goes dramatically wrong.” But she also runs the risk of annoying the reader with blunt declarations such as, “No one would suspect a suicide bomber here because Council’s declared Boulder a compassionate city.” In “Are We Dwelling Deep Yet?”, the narrative voice strays dangerously close to essay:

Laptops Google, imagining their finely tuned comfort will simply go on. It won’t, but men aren’t the problem. We need them to keep the birthing going, to appear with roses on Valentine’s Day, and to surprise us with outbursts of tenderness that erase the lists of their shortcomings we’d started.

Most of the time, however, Krysl pulls off the seemingly impossible, getting us to empathize with characters who are simply too unhappy or idealistic to be much fun.

She takes risks with structure, too. A story called “Belly” is subdivided into sections with headings such as “Operatic Belly” (“How it advances even as it is stationary”); “Uh Oh Belly”; “Demolition Belly”; “Great Mother Belly”; and even (my personal favorite) “Executive Committee for the International Year of the Belly.” At times such devices appear too precious by half, but if you allow yourself to be pulled along by the narrative voice, you are rewarded with sentences such as the following, in which Krysl’s narrator describes a class in Prenatal

Water Aerobics: "It's like sitting in a field of giant boulders engaged in deep breathing."

The two novellas that come at the end of the collection, "Mitosis" and "Welcome to the Torture Center, Love" both set in the Sudan, are stunners. In "Mitosis," Krysl engages in a daring act of ventriloquism, assuming the point of view of a young Sudanese woman. Here, her prose loses its archness. Passages such as the following, with its tone of barely repressed grief, are shattering:

Three years the *raau* fields had languished in drought. The first bad year men traveled north to Khartoum to work, and women ate next year's seed grain and slaughtered a cow. The second year the cows were too thin to stand up by themselves. The women gathered wild grain and fed their children every other day. Now it was the third year. They'd picked leaves. They'd torn away branches and pounded these in a mortar and cooked them. They'd cut up their leather skirts and boiled the bits in water.

When Krysl writes about America, skewering its foibles and eccentricities with her ironic voice and frequent authorial asides, the effect borders on stridency. Not so in her writings about Africa. Perhaps the African condition is simply too large or too tragic. Whatever the reason, Africa seems to have elicited from Krysl a language that is as stark and elemental as the landscape itself. The novellas are beautiful evocations of the Sudanese tragedy, from many sides: the suffering Africans themselves, the aid workers whose efforts are rendered irrelevant by the sheer size of the catastrophe. "Welcome to the Torture Center, Love," a novella that portrays the relationship between a young American woman and a British-schooled African doctor, is particularly heartbreaking. The book and the story end with an admonition: "Get on this now, Big Talker!" It is a line that embodies all of Krysl's enormous and overpowering rage.

The narrators in Jeanne M. Leiby's debut collection, *Downriver*, never stray far from a particular landscape. Unlike Krysl's intellectuals and idealists, these are people whose aspirations never rise much farther than "Good food ... A decent bottle of red table wine." They have children, sometimes even lots of them. They may occasionally bump up against the realization of happier lives, as in the story "A Place Alone," in which the young narrator finds himself in a rich woman's living room "that seemed the largest room he'd ever been in. The furniture was unnaturally bloated."

Material or spiritual want is at the heart of most of these stories. Also, silence—of the kind that muffles emotion. Pleasures are hard won and often, there is a numbing sense of loss, tied in with the slow erosion of the childhood landscape:

Once upon a time, his family owned a farm that stretched from Telegraph Road to the horizon, as far as the eye could see. Now a Ford dealership bellied up to a McDonald's which shared a parking lot with what used to be a Pizza Hut but was now a Beanie Baby outlet store and pawn shop. Before she died, his mother said, Remember, Albert. The land is all that lasts. But he sold anyway because the few remaining old-time farmers bordering Telegraph Road were selling.

There is, in Leiby's writing, an almost ferocious attachment to reality. Not for one moment is the reader allowed to escape into sentimentality or nostalgia. In the story "Vinegar Tasting," a woman having an affair with a married man describes their leave-taking:

We sip our coffee in silence. Deep in the middle of the night, we stand together at my front door. In the pinkish light of the hall, the man pecks my cheek, pats my shoulder, thanks me for the meal. Dark circles cup his eyes; midnight shadows stretch across his chin. He weaves away, hand combing through hair as rumpled as his dress shirt and paisley tie.

The mothers in this collection are rarely motherly, and the fathers, too, leave much to be desired. In "Days of Renovation," a child narrator witnesses the dissolution of her parents' marriage through a series of sharply observed details: "Mom and I stood next to each other at the kitchen counter making sandwiches and chopping vegetables for the church picnic in Bishop Park. Dad refused to come with us."

Leiby's characters assuage their hurt and confusion in ways that, for all their self-destructiveness, manage to be both inventive and unpredictable. Her humorous passages are true gut-busters, as in the story "Living with a Gun Runner," where a woman thinks of what she would like to do to her ex-husband:

I could topple Jonah easily. More than once I've dreamed about trapping his thin arm behind his back, pushing it up toward the nape of his neck until the bones crack. Or I creep up behind him while he shaves, catch his head between my hands, and twist his neck until it pops. He falls to the cold linoleum; I take a long, hot shower and use his body as a bathmat.

Sex and oblivion are frequent sources of consolation: In "Days of Renovation" the child turns for solace to a friend: "When Ivy said, 'He's a cute boy, Gracie. You should kiss him,' I did. When Ivy handed me a bottle and said, 'Drink this,' I did. When she placed pills on my tongue and said, 'Swallow,' I did without hesitation." Clear-eyed and unflinching, this collection marks a stunning debut.

Of the three writers, Lisberger is the slyest. Her stories begin evenly, with perfectly phrased interior monologues. We are inside the head of a woman watching her daughter perform in a school play, or of a mother trying to reason with her rebellious teenage son. The reader may be forgiven for assuming that these stories are about conventional women. Even the title of Lisberger's collection, *Remember Love*, teases with its romantic associations. But each story builds to a ratcheting tension, carefully nurtured through the accretion of small details.

In the story "Flower Sunday," a woman waits for her husband by the front door of their house: the couple are about to attend Sunday mass. She


notices she's forgotten her lipstick. She undoes the pearl button tab on her little white satin purse—it used to be her mother's—takes out her red gloss, and glides it over her

lips, pressing them together like she and they share a secret. When she puts the gloss back in her bag, she thinks how she loves having a purse that opens and closes without a sound.

Yes, you think, how calm, how comforting it is to be a woman with lipstick, purse, and husband. But Lisberger allows you no comfort in these conventional accoutrements. The decorous woman in this story is starting to have secret, lurking thoughts about leaving her husband. The story's sense of building alarm is entirely in the head of the reader, though, for the woman herself is matter of fact, passive: "But of course, things change as you get older," she says to herself, gazing at the scarlet roses."

The mother in the first story of the collection, who is watching her daughter perform in the play "The Crucible," has just been caught in an infidelity by her husband of many years. And the mother talking to her teenaged son in "Bush Beating" is monstrously passive, fiercely guarding her composure, even at the cost of her son's happiness. After you've read several of Lisberger's stories, you can't regard the American family with equanimity: any relationship, in Lisberger's sleight-of-hand, has the potential to become as pitted with dangers as a minefield. Her suburban landscapes, which at first impression seem comfortingly familiar, disguise rebellious and altogether unruly emotions.

What do these three collections have to say about the state of the short story in America, at this point in the twenty-first century? Only that the pleasure of reading a good short story remains as seductive as ever. As the reader nears the end of a good story, she should want to cry out, "No, not yet! I must know, I want to know. What is going to happen to this house, this child, this couple, this lover, and"—in the case of Marilyn Krysl's two novellas—"this country?"

Lisberger's regretful heroines, Krysl's frustrated humanitarians, and Leiby's fractured characters limp through their various crises and somehow endure. Each story takes the reader by surprise and shows us life, in all its strangeness. Each writer, exercising with great concentration and skill her wholly unique imagination, succeeds in enlarging, if not transforming, the scope of the reader's world. 

Marianne Villanueva is the author of the short story collections *Ginseng and Other Tales from Manila* and *Mayor of the Roses: Stories* and the co-editor of the Filipino women's anthology *Going Home to a Landscape*. She lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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A Dialogue of the Sources

Women Poets on Mentorship: Efforts and Affections

Edited by Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008, 330 pp., \$24.95, paperback

Reviewed by Sandra Yannone

In Joanna Russ's slim but classic treatise *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1973), the feminist science fiction writer identified the overt and covert ways American women writers had internalized the dominant culture's messages about why they could not or should not write. When Russ wrote her book, awareness alone was a triumph; but in 2008, a woman wants options. *Women Poets on Mentorship*, edited by poets Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker, is a survival manual, a hybrid of personal essay, contemporary women's poetry anthology, teacher's guide, and tribute. One of its essays tucked into the pages of a literary journal might raise an eyebrow; all of them housed in one volume create a landmark.

Greenberg and Zucker are mindful of Alicia Ostriker's observation two decades ago in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*: "The house of poetry has many mansions, and among the attractions of the women's poetry movement is its encouragement of diversity." They construct a sturdy house of essays about women's efforts to break through the tyranny of suppression. Most hinge on the moment when the writer declares, "Yes, I'm going to be a poet." Crucial to her ability to define herself is the presence of a seasoned woman poet. As Muriel Rukeyser writes, in *The Life of Poetry*, "[I]n great poetry, you feel a source speaking to another source." Greenberg and Zucker dramatize that intimate exchange by placing the work of poets born after 1960 side-by-side with their chosen counterparts from previous generations.

However a women writer identifies, she should be able to find herself in these essays, in which women with a range of voices, experiences, and poetic styles grapple with the process of becoming poets. And all readers, regardless of gender, should be able to reach a deeper understanding of why women's writing matters: women have something to teach everyone about motherhood, abuse, sexuality, and identity. Crafted by poets, these essays share one of the defining qualities of poetry: the ability to transcend its particulars and reach toward, and touch, universal meaning.

Greenberg and Zucker wisely decided not to impose a rigid definition of mentor on their writers, allowing the essays to create a fluid, expansive

definition that runs organically through the book. The opening essay, "Jenny Factor on Marilyn Hacker," depicts the vulnerability of the emerging poet who seeks the counsel of an accomplished

one. Factor, a young mother in the throes of discovering her lesbian identity, discovers in Hacker's biography and work "my life's sound track, her voice my intimate conspirator." Factor then chronicles their history, including the charming story of their first meeting, when a bookstore employee accuses the crushed-out Factor of trying to steal a stack of Hacker's books after a reading. Hacker comes to Factor's rescue. The rest of the essay prepares us to consider the roles and responsibilities inherent in the complex dynamics between mentor and student over time: "When mentoring works, it meets some primary needs of both parties.... explorers together, [the poets] are ultimately more interested in the varied terrain than in one another."

Thus, Jennifer Moxley declares, "I was not mentored by Susan Howe, but *I was* mentored by her writing." Other writers like Joy Katz (on Sharon Olds) and Valerie Martinez (on Joy Harjo) offer variations on the experience of being mentored by a poet's work. Miranda Field employs a close reading of Fanny Howe's poetry to illustrate her influence: "In Howe's poems, the motherhood of the speaking 'I' is given as a fundamental, personal, and *a priori* condition ... She reminds me to listen past the perfect cadence—to interrupt beauty, like turning off the music to hear the child crying in the other room, the jackhammer outside."

In "Kirsten Kashock on Being Nonmentored," Kashock pulls us to the other end of the mentoring spectrum. She explains her hesitation to connect with a mentor and uses her craft to imagine the relationship she might have if she "were more receptive to living authority." Kashock's essay highlights the fact that each piece here is a front door into one of Ostriker's mansions. Some of the poets burst giddily into their own surprise parties; others tentatively cross the threshold; and still others, like Kashock, stand outside, questioning whether to enter at all.

With the doors of English departments cracking open to women writers, it is not surprising that a number of these essays focus on student/teacher relationships. The book champions feminist pedagogy and illustrates its impact on the field of teaching writing. It offers a trove of best practices

for teaching poetry and other genres and is a guide for teachers who strive to place their students' learning before their own egos. Mendi Lewis Obidike shows how powerful a woman professor's wisdom can be for a student: "I have learned from [Toi] Derricotte not only *that* we can be silent and invisible but also how to recognize and give voice to that silence and invisibility and how to change our relationships to those moments." And I myself particularly resonated with Tracy K. Smith's recollection of her first workshops with Lucie Brock-Broido at Harvard, Brock-Broido's voice "papery, low, her enunciation precise, as if Many of Her Words began with Majuscules"—extra-big capital letters. Years later, I, too, can still hear Lucie, during a balmy, summer-evening workshop, urging me to "go scare yourself." I spent the next week shaking as I wrote "Worship," my first-ever conscious poem about loving another woman.

Today's women poets live in a house of poetry that others before them built. Beth Ann Fennelly, in her homage to Denise Duhamel, is mindful of this when she says, "[N]ow that the generation of women poets before my own have established their seriousness, we're free to establish our playfulness. Now we can investigate the full range of human emotions." However, Danielle Pafunda warns, "If [Emily] Dickinson, [Gertrude] Stein, [Marianne] Moore, and others are read as anomalies rather than as a source of lineage, their echoes may go unnoticed in the work of women poets today." In telling their stories about the value of mentorship, these poets honor the lineage and announce themselves as available to the next generation as mentors.


Occasionally, the emerging poet's work gets lost in the vast shadow cast by her mentor. For instance, try to imagine any poem residing next to Sharon Olds's "Satan Says": "Say shit, say death, say fuck the father, / Satan says down my ear. / The pain of the locked past buzzes / in the child's box on her bureau..." Fortunately, more often proximity brings out the strengths in both writers' work. Cin Salah and Maureen Seaton go even further through collaboration. Each line of the couplets in their "evolution" series inspires a line from the other: "And this is what you prayed for / It is // while in you a small voice broke / like a thousand wine glasses, singing." (The alternation between bold and roman type represents the alternating voices.) This series reinforces a central theme in all of these

essays: honoring the writing process by building community instead of creating competition.

While not all of the poets here write about a mentor they encountered in school, all but one have received or are currently pursuing graduate degrees. They have had the privilege of access to a community, or at least they know how to find one. But how can women writers not associated with degree programs find mentors? How true is the editors' claim that "the true cost of going it alone is

hard for young American women writing today to fathom"? I hope that this book will give new writers a plausible road map to finding their mentors.

In their introduction, Greenberg and Zucker share their hopes that "this anthology, while being the first of its kind, will not be the last, and that future such projects will provide plenty of room for more exploration of the ideas we have begun to document." Inviting their peers to document lineages in women's poetry, they've crafted a mansion of

teachings and art that tells us the truths about women as they continue to steal the language and redistribute the wealth. Like the editors, I look forward to sequels. 

Sandra Yannone is a poet and directs the writing center at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Her mentors include Sue Standing, Marie Howe, Hilda Raz, Robin Becker, and Elizabeth Bishop.



The Second-Best Bed and Other Conundrums

Shakespeare's Wife

By Germaine Greer

New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 416 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Marilyn Yalom

In the 1960s, seventies, and eighties, feminist writers attacked many false assumptions that were deeply embedded in Western history. They questioned the age-old depiction of women as "weaker vessels," inconstant, devious, mindless, uncreative, and constitutionally incapable of civic leadership. When re-examined by second-wave feminists, these traits were exposed as mere stereotypes intended to limit women's options and keep them under male control. Among writers committed to setting the record straight, Germaine Greer emerged as a controversial star. Her 1970 book, *The Female Eunuch*, deconstructed myths of women's sexuality and became a shocking bestseller.

Four decades and eighteen books later, Greer still shocks and unsettles. In *Shakespeare's Wife*, her target is the unflattering portrait of Ann Hathaway Shakespeare constructed by literary critics and historians over the centuries. The ascertainable facts are these: at the end of 1582, William Shakespeare,

aged eighteen, married Ann Hathaway, eight years his senior. Already pregnant at the time of their marriage, Ann gave birth to a daughter, Susannah, in May 1583, and less than two years later, to twins, Judith and Hamnet. Some time thereafter, Shakespeare left Stratford for London, where he made his fame as a playwright. Little else is known about their marriage, other than that, notoriously, he left his "second-best bed" to his wife in his will.

On the basis of this skeletal framework, misogyny has dressed Ann in the garb of an illiterate, aging spinster, who seduced a local boy and forced him to marry her when she became pregnant. Presumably, she had little in common with her gifted spouse, reason enough for him to abandon her in favor of the London stage, where he could fulfill his destiny. Since there are no records of his comings and goings between London and Stratford, the assumption has been that Will stayed away from his hometown and his unloved wife

until his return in 1611, when he moved into the house he had bought in Stratford on Avon in 1597, New Place. While it is known that Will was on familiar terms with the local gentry during his last years, almost nothing is known of his relationship with his wife Ann and his surviving children, Susannah Hall and Judith Quiney—which has not prevented biographers from proclaiming that Shakespeare kept his distance from the conjugal household out of what Stephen Greenblatt, in *Will in the World* (2004), called an "ineradicable distaste" for Ann. Greenblatt and other critics see further proof of Shakespeare's disaffection in his will: only the "second-best bed" and nothing more for his one-and-only wife and the mother of his children? Even the epitaph inscribed on Shakespeare's monument in the Holy Trinity Church where he was buried in 1616 has been interpreted to prove that the bard wanted to keep his remains separate from those of his wife for all eternity:

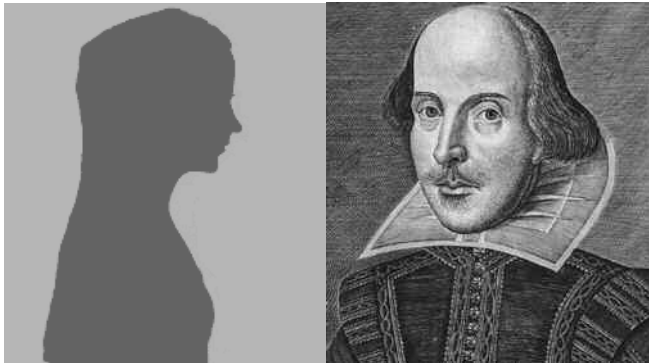
Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones.
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

Nonetheless, when Ann Hathaway Shakespeare died in 1623, she was buried beneath her husband's monument, an act that some have interpreted as her revenge.

Greer has gone to great lengths to disprove this one-sided interpretation of Ann's place in the Shakespeare saga. An assiduous scholar, she has combed a plethora of documents in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, the Cambridge University Library, and the British Library, and carried out her research with the assurance of a professor well-versed in early modern literature. The resulting picture of Ann Hathaway looks appreciably different from the earlier one.

To begin with, Greer points out that 26 was not considered "old" for an unmarried woman in Elizabethan England. The average age for brides was 24, and ten to twenty percent of women did not marry at all. The issue of Shakespeare's age as a groom is more problematic. The average age for men to marry was 27. As a minor of eighteen, Shakespeare was obliged to have his parents' consent. Despite the difference in age between Ann and Will, Greer makes a case for a union acceptable to the Shakespeare family, based on her reading of the relevant marriage documents and her knowledge of the social context.

The Shakespeare and Hathaway parents had known each other long before the birth of their children. Ann's father was a successful husbandman, while Will's father had been a prosperous glove-maker, property owner, and public official before



“Why not picture Ann Shakespeare as an independent, energetic, competent businesswoman, housekeeper, and mother, rather than an unloved, unattractive, scorned spouse? There is at least as much evidence for the former as the latter.”

suffering great financial losses in the 1570s. In Greer's words: "Landholders were of higher status than glove-makers, especially glove-makers who were broke and had lost their land." By the time Will was courting Ann, the Shakespeare family may have felt relieved to see their propertyless eldest son attaching himself to a mature woman with some means.


Regarding Ann's pregnancy, Greer points out that it was not uncommon for women of her class to arrive at the altar "with child." It has been estimated that between twenty to thirty percent of brides did just that. As I documented in *A History of the Wife* (2001), rural communities tended to be tolerant of premarital sexual activity as long as the couples wed before the baby's birth. To ensure that the Shakespeare-Hathaway marriage took place in time, the couple procured a special license that allowed them to wed with a single calling of the church banns, rather than the three that were usually required.

And why, Greer asks, should we assume that Ann Hathaway was illiterate? Once Henry VIII renounced Catholicism and became head of the Church of England, Protestant books began to proliferate: the Geneva Bible, the new Prayer Book of 1552, and conduct manuals giving advice on marriage and house-keeping. These were intended for women as well as men, and although the incidence of literacy was indeed higher among men than among women, and especially among men of the upper classes, we simply do not know for sure whether Ann could or could not read. Greer asserts that Ann's daughter, "ten-year-old Susannah could both read and write," which raises the question of whether she was taught by her mother.

As for the years Shakespeare spent away from Stratford, the lack of written records does not mean he was never in touch with his family. Once again, we simply do not know. Did he return for the burial of his son Hamnet or for his father's funeral? Was Ann solely dependent on her own resources, even after her husband became successful on the London stage? Based on Greer's tireless investigation into wills and inventories, she speculates that Ann was a malt-maker and money-lender—occupations that sustained many other women in her community. Why not picture Ann Shakespeare as an independent, energetic, competent businesswoman, housekeeper, and mother, rather than an unloved, unattractive, scorned spouse? There is at least as much evidence for the former as the latter.

Greer's gloss on the "second-best" bed attempts to refute the assumption that the bequest was the "hostile gesture" characterized by Greenblatt. She reminds us that beds were costly items, some "worth as much as a small house." But Greer's major speculation is that Ann Shakespeare had become, through her own efforts, "financially independent" and thus was content to stand aside and see her daughters inherit from Shakespeare. The inheritance was decidedly lopsided: Susannah, the elder daughter, received New Place, whereas Judith was granted only 150 pounds. The most common resources for English widows were the customary one-third portion of the estate, as well as lodgings within the home of a child. So far, it is impossible to determine whether Ann benefitted from either of these resources.

If this book is to be faulted, it is for the surfeit of examples that sometimes read like tedious lists. At best, they form a composite picture of Ann's contemporaries that shore up Greer's speculations. At worst, they stop the narrative flow and give the reader pause. The judicious use of an appendix might have solved the problem.

Shakespeare's Wife brings together every scrap of documentation about Ann Hathaway, her family, Shakespeare's parental family, their circle of acquaintances, and more. In addition, Greer wanders freely into the bard's plays and poems, citing passages concerning love, courtship, and marriage that might have had some relevance to Will and Ann. Even if the links are only speculative, they enrich our understanding of Shakespeare's world. While we still do not know what transpired between husband and wife—what drew them together, what separated them—we have a fuller picture of the context in which their marriage took place. Shakespeare scholars now have one more essential book to contend with. 

Marilyn Yalom is a senior scholar at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University. She is the author of *Maternity, Mortality, and the Literature of Madness* (1985); *Blood Sisters: The French Revolution in Women's Memory* (1993); *A History of the Breast* (1997); *A History of the Wife* (2002); *Birth of the Chess Queen* (2004); and *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History through our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (2008).

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Woman's Best Friend

The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics

Edited by Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams

New York: Columbia University Press, 2007,
392 pp., \$24.50, paperback

When Species Meet

By Donna J. Haraway

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
2008, 423 pp., \$24.95, paperback

Reviewed by Kathy Rudy

In the last five years or so, American public opinion has undergone a sea change in relation to animals and the environment. Individuals are starting to worry about where their food comes from, whether wild tigers and great apes will become extinct in their lifetimes, whether the oceans will soon be fished out, and what they can do to solve these problems. While feminists can boast that our movement has a history of taking interest in such matters, in fact, in last few decades, it has paid them little attention. These two books could change that. Each puts animals and nature at the center of feminist inquiry, forcing us to face hard and interesting questions.

The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics contains some material from the now out-of-print *Beyond Animal Rights* (1996), but adds significantly to it. The best articles challenge previous arguments in favor of animal rights as too rationalistic; reason is only part of the issue, the authors say. Attributes traditionally associated with women, such as caring, are also part of the picture. In this sense, the essays participate in the cultural-feminist challenge to the West's prioritization of reason over emotion. They place men, Man, and reason on one side of a divide, and women, animals, and emotion on the other—and the male side can never fully express or liberate the female. As the editors write:

In general the feminist care ethic has rejected abstract, rule-based principles in favor of situational, contextual ethics, allowing for a narrative understanding of the particulars of a situation or an issue. As with feminism in general, care theory resists hierarchical dominative dualisms, which establish the powerful (humans, men, whites) over the subordinate (animals, women, people of color). Some ecofeminist writers have in fact regarded as definitional to patriarchy men's control over women, animals, and nature.



Most of the authors here use care theory to think their way into a philosophy of animal advocacy and liberation that is not based on reason or the dualistic separation of mind and body. Care theory stems from the work of Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and others, who argue that women use a different moral system from men's: while men seek justice and protection for individuals, women seek to work out moral dilemmas through empathy, emotional connection, and interdependence. Thus, where "animal rights" extends justice and protection to animals, care theory strives to create harmony between humans and nature. As Marti Kheel puts it in her essay "The Liberation of Nature," "In place of dualistic thinking feminists have posited a holistic vision of reality in which everything is integrally interconnected and thus part of a larger whole."

The goal of this volume, then, is to infuse the contemporary animal rights movement with a radical-feminist agenda. While the authors mostly agree with the ideas of the animal rights movement (for example, that animals are not ours to use for food, clothing, entertainment, or science), they do not arrive at them via a theory of rights. Instead, they insist, we can resist and overturn patriarchal domination of both women and animals through sustained empathy with other species: humans are free, and animals should be free as well. Although the essays in this volume value the connections between humans and nonhumans, such connections can really flower only after the animals have been liberated. We cannot rightly care for animals if we are dominating them.

Donna Haraway shares some of these convictions. She eschews abstraction and is invested instead in the real lives of animals. However, while she doesn't want rights to dominate her thinking, she also seems skeptical about categories such as "care" and even "women"; she prefers to let her Australian shepherd dog Cayenne lead the way. Through rich descriptions of her relationship with Cayenne, Haraway wishes to reset not only the terms of the debate, but also the ways in which humans experience reality. When Haraway is working with Cayenne on agility training, the entire world is made right. In this passage she calls what she's attempting "honesty," but truthfully, to me, it seems to be much more:

I learn such basic things about honesty in this game [of agility], things I should have learned as a child (or before tenure in academia) but never did, things about the actual consequences of fudging on fundamentals. I become less showy and more honest in this game than in any other part of my life. It's bracing, if not always fun. Meanwhile, my over-the-top love for Cayenne has required my body to build a bigger heart with more depths and tones for tenderness. Maybe that is what makes me need to be honest; maybe this kind of love makes one need to see what is really happening because the loved one deserves it.

Haraway travels down many roads, and her insights cannot be summarized with a principle such as care. Rather, it's the feel of the story that makes change for the reader. For example, Haraway links

Foucault's notion of biopower—the ways the state regulates our bodies and realities by shaping customs, habits, health, medicine, etc.—to the history of purebred dog breeding, and then links that back to recent understandings of human biology. In each case, she sheds light on the ways the power is both oppressive and useful, both limiting and productive. Each discourse casts a deep shadow on the next, and helps her make the point that the world is very messy, but also endlessly interesting. Haraway admits, "No chapter has a bottom line, but they all have barely contained traffic between the lines and between the foretext and endnotes in an attempt to engage in cosmopolitan conversation."

Reading these two books together is like watching two movies with the same general plot but with different characters, directors, and landscapes. Whereas the essays in *The Feminist Care Tradition* tell readers how to act in the world to help animals, it's not at all clear what we should do after reading Haraway's book. Put more starkly, for people who refuse to eat meat or use animal products, who stand on picket lines against fur, who work in shelters walking and feeding homeless dogs, or who break into labs to rescue research animals, doing agility training with your dog doesn't look much like politics.

I suspect Haraway knows this, and would respond that her goal is exactly that of challenging "politics." Her world is ever spinning, with few firm foundations. The effect of her work is to reveal not a new political paradigm but a new way of seeing how human power functions in relation to animals, and how animals themselves have a certain kind of power. Indeed, one of the central concerns of her work is to recognize that animals meet us as subjects, with needs and desires and wills of their own. They can choose to relate to us, and to some degree define the terms of that connection. They can also choose to opt out of


relating, to be recalcitrant and difficult, to kill their young or die themselves. This recognition of animal subjectivity places humans and animals on similar ground; according to Haraway, we cohabit this complicated world together.

Haraway is not interested in whether it is right or wrong to kill animals. Instead, she is invested in exploring the mechanisms that render certain animals "killable." She is not engaged in the ethical debates about animal use, but has stepped back, or better, underneath, to examine the ways that these debates came into being. The goal of her story is not to stop all killing of nonhumans, but rather to figure out what it might mean to "kill well." How is it that, through custom, habit, and health, we kill cows for food but not dogs? What rendered the one a "food animal" and the other a family member? Although she offers few concrete rules about what killing well looks like, her meditation on the subject sheds light not only on the value of animal lives, but on human mortality as well. We are all, everyone of us, going to die someday, and this book is deeply interested in thinking about what living and dying well looks like from many different vantage points for many different subjects.

In keeping with postmodern thought, Haraway believes that no one is "free," but rather that, for better or worse, all living things, human or otherwise, are enmeshed and saturated in systems of power; and further, that power is precisely what gives everything life and makes everything—including connections between humans and nonhumans—meaningful. Power is not simply an oppressive force; rather it's the mechanism that carves up the world and makes it legible. Further, while some manifestations of subjectivity may not be accessible in a given power system, other kinds are, and should be celebrated. Neither women nor animals are powerless: while the law might see animals as property, Haraway argues that they have

agency and jobs and desires and language and relationships. And while humans may use the language of free will and ethics, we are, like all animals, caught in systems of power that hamper us yet make the world possible. Power does not reduce to the oppressive patriarchy that cultural feminism posits; rather, it is both limiting and productive as it gives reality shape and meaning. It enables us to meet at least some animals on their own terms.

According to Haraway, the kind of abolitionism the animal rights movement advocates isn't really possible; humans have been enmeshed with animals for tens of thousands of years, and to walk away from that much history is neither possible nor desirable. Haraway's goal, I think, is to tinker with power to make the human-animal connection deeper, sweeter, and more meaningful.

Bad things happen to animals in this world, and the essays in *The Feminist Care Tradition* trace the links between the plight of animals and that of women. They untangle us from the straightjacket of abstract rights theorization and endorse women's emotional responses as the foundation for a revolution of care. They name oppression "patriarchy" and fight it with political agendas such as vegetarianism. Haraway implies that we can't fight oppression with formulations about patriarchy or even with our current political options. No one theory will correct everything for everyone. Instead, Haraway chooses to meet the alien nature of nonhuman creatures with gusto and intensity; through the revolutionary power of love for and with her dog, new worlds are born. The connection that Haraway has with Cayenne may not count as politics to animal rights activists, but it teaches us that change can—and maybe should—happen in many different registers. 

Kathy Rudy is associate professor of Ethics and Women's Studies at Duke University.

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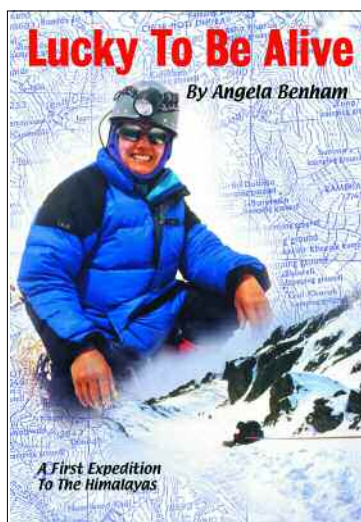
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