



# Women in Libraries

Volume 27, Number 1

*The Feminist Task Force—25 Years*

Winter 1997

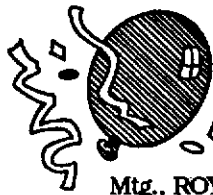
## ALA Midwinter to convene in New Orleans: Meeting Schedule

### ALA Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (COSWL):

- Saturday, 1/10, 11:30 a.m.—12:30 p.m. Mtg., NOCC 54
- Sunday, 1/11, 8:00 p.m.—10:00 p.m. Discussion/agenda building; MAR MardiGras F
- Tuesday, 1/13, 8:00 a.m.—9:00 a.m. Mtg., NOCC 54

### SRRT Action Council

- Saturday, 1/10, 8:00 a.m.—11:00 a.m. All Task Force Mtg./Action Council I, Royal Sonesta North Ballroom (Note: All Task Force is 8 a.m.—9:30 a.m., Action Council I, 9:30 a.m.—11 a.m.)
- Monday, 1/12, 2:00 p.m.—4:00 p.m. Action Council II, Royal Sonesta South Ballroom



### ALA SRRT FTF (Feminist Task Force):

- Saturday, 1/10, 8:00 a.m.—9:30 a.m. Mtg., ROY North Ballroom
- Monday, 1/12, 8:00 a.m.—9:00 a.m. Mtg., NOCC 89



### ALA Council

*(support your Councillors!)*

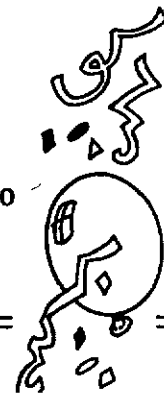
- Monday, 1/12, 9:00 a.m.—10:15 a.m. NOCC BR 2
- Tuesday, 1/13, 9:00 a.m.—12:00 p.m. NOCC BR 2
- Wednesday, 1/14, 9:00 a.m.—12:00 p.m. NOCC BR 2

### ACRL Women's Studies Section

- Sunday, 1/11, 9:30 a.m.—12:30 p.m. All Committee Mtg., MAR MardiGras D
- Monday, 1/12, 9:30 a.m.—11:00 a.m. Discussion Mtg., WST Exec Rm
- Sunday, 1/11, 4:30 p.m.—5:30 p.m. General Membership Mtg., NOCC 85

### LAMA Women Administrators' Discussion Group

- Sunday, 1/11, 11:30 a.m.—12:30 p.m. HIL Marlborough B

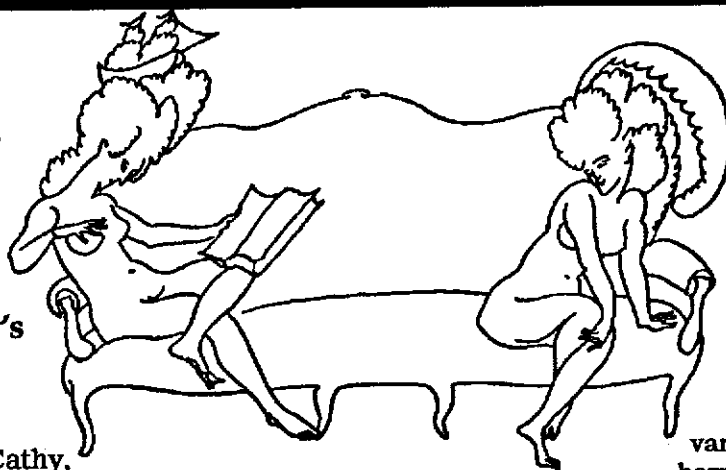


### *In this issue:*

- Midwinter conference calendar, page 1
- Book review section: *Sex!*, beginning on page 2  
*Feminists look at self-image, fat, food, pain, pleasure, and poetry*

## Sex!

Everybody's  
"how to"  
guide



Winks, Cathy, and Anne Semans. *The New Good Vibrations Guide to Sex Tips and Techniques from America's Favorite Sex Toy Store*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997. Paper, ISBN 1-57344-069-8, \$21.95.

At last a practical, warm, positive sex manual with a touch of humor, one that encourages if you feel like exploring, reassures if you feel inadequate, and overall says it's OK to enjoy sex alone or with a willing adult all sorts of ways. Filled with practical advice and anecdotes of personal experience, the *Guide* covers masturbation, including early memories; sexual self-image; anatomy; lubrication, i.e., how it works or doesn't and options; oral sex; CD-ROMs and sex on-line; fantasies; S/M; erotica in print and nonprint forms; and different kinds of toys, including dildos, anal toys, and, of course, vibrators.

In addition to a chapter on safe sex, throughout the book the editors advise us about when and how to use condoms and other means of avoiding infection, and how to maximize pleasure without putting your or your partner's health in danger. For example, anal beads and porous rubber toys should be covered with condoms if you plan to use them more than once.

In the back are a resource guide, listing stores where the reader can purchase accessories, books and videos, plus other information sources, organizations, hot-lines, and workshops; an annotated bibliography categorized by topic, age group, and more; an annotated videography, also sorted; a CD-ROM discography; and a thorough index.

Overall, the editors' art of giving advice through shared experience makes the *Guide* friendly and noncensorious. The discussion of lubricants, for example, is reassuring:

A lot of people have been led to believe that their own bodies should generate enough lubrication to keep any sexual situation slippery, and they take the suggestion that this might not be the case as an insult to their sexual prowess...In fact, vaginal lubrication doesn't automatically follow sexual arousal and doesn't automatically indicate sexual arousal.

## Feminists write on pleasure and body image

The authors go on to name a variety of environmental, chemical, and hormonal changes that can influence vaginal lubrication.

Because of the casual style and thorough index, reading the *Guide* is like having a conversation with a very knowledgeable sexual mentor. If you want to learn more about your or your partner's body, open lines of communication, experiment with toys, get more information, or even make an already satisfying sex life a little richer, the *Guide* should be at your bedside.

—M. Tainton



## Women in Libraries

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~holman/FTF/>

*Women in Libraries*, the Newsletter of the American Library Association's Feminist Task Force, is published four times a year. To subscribe, inquire about your subscription, or to change your address, write to Diedre Conkling, Publisher, Women in Libraries, c/o ALA, SRRT, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611. Subscriptions are \$5 for individuals, \$8 for institutions (prepaid), or \$10 for invoiced subscriptions. Personnel: Madeleine Tainton, Editor, West Texas A&M University; Diedre Conkling, Publisher, Lincoln County, Oregon, Library District; Theresa Tobin, Listserv Administrator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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## Bye-bye to my old self

Ransom, Jane. *Bye-Bye*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. Cloth, ISBN 0-8147-7490-3, \$17.95.

You know how sometimes you wish you could just start another life, change everything you know, right down to your collections of friends, family and furniture? Well, in *Bye-Bye*, our heroine, Rosie, does just that. She recreates herself, dyes her hair, and moves to a new place, leaving everything behind. She covers her tracks, she says: "After conceptualizing Rosie, but before turning into her, I told all my friends I was moving to Paris."

Sexually voracious, Rosie shares her erotic daydreams and activities. Dumped by a husband because she can't be faithful, she explores sex with women and men she designates with descriptive but impersonal names. There are the Bartender, Personal Ad, and My Lover, for example.

Only trouble is, things don't work out quite the way she plans. She describes her first encounter with Personal Ad,

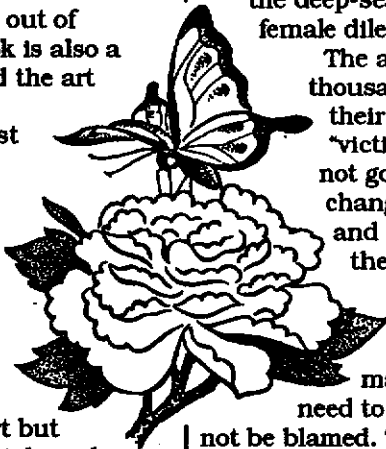
She could not have known that I wanted (didn't I?) her to take hold of me, lift me up, toss me onto her bed, pull my vest off without unbuttoning it, yank away my sandals and pants, then turn her full attention to me. I wanted her to zoom in on me the way she had in conversation, impersonal and brutally personal. I wanted her to pin me down, nailing me to the kite-frame cross but with my legs open, a willing sacrifice—helpless and pure as a martyr, but free as a heathen.

This quirky, bizarre story, told in the first person, rushes headlong, seemingly as out of control as the characters in it. The book is also a delightful send-up of '90's fashions and the art world.

You can't really change yourself just by taking a new name, hairstyle, and apartment. Rosie discovers this early, discovering that, "like some cat that's been abandoned along the road but instinctively finds its way home, my depression had rediscovered me and moved back in." In the end, she must turn back to reexplore her beginnings.

Ransom won the New York University Press Prize for Fiction for this short but poetic novel, and it is no wonder. Her style and concepts reminded me of Heinrich Böll's *Billiards at half-past nine*, where the protagonist deliberately creates an image, though for a different purpose. She also has a gift for words and a mind for the bizarre.

—M. Tainton



## Are women still giving too much?

Hyman, Jane Wegscheider and Esther R. Rome. *Sacrificing Ourselves For Love: Why Women Compromise Health and Self-Esteem... And How to Stop*. Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1996. Paper, ISBN: 0-89594-743-9, \$18.95.

In cooperation with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, who produced *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the self-help bible for women, *Sacrificing ourselves* discusses many of the topics that women today are becoming more and more aware of through personal experience, magazine articles, television documentaries, made-for-TV movies, and personal experience.

Using personal anecdotes, quotes from victims of spouse abuse, rape, and other trauma, the authors make a case for empowering women to resist societal, cultural and family pressures to follow the general trends of changing body image by dieting, plastic surgery, and eating disorders and to deal with other life threatening situations such as domestic violence and incest. The information is factual for the most part, but in some instances evokes an emotional response, rather than suggesting methods of changing behaviors or getting out of unhealthy relationships. All of the problems that women face in dealing with the stresses of relationships and society's expectations cannot be fixed in a few short chapters; these are all issues that require much more. The book is easy to read, not scholarly or didactic, but is too superficial in its treatment of the deep-seated causes and ramifications of female dilemmas.

The authors are not able to change thousands of years of society, of course, so their initial attempts at education for the "victims" is laudable. However, they do not go far enough. Their suggestions for change are for the most part proactive and militant—they do not suggest therapy for victims but letter writing and lobbying to change laws, community and social assistance rather than individual help. They make a strong statement that abusers need to be punished and that victims should not be blamed. This much is valid, but there is no clear rationale for spouse abuse nor a simple solution for breaking the cycle of violence and suppression across generations.

*Sacrificing ourselves* is a good beginning, but, in addressing these issues, we need to look at the whole spectrum of solutions. The burden of change cannot be placed on one group—all of society will need to change before these problems go away.

—L. Meyers

# Book Review Section

## Why are we fat?

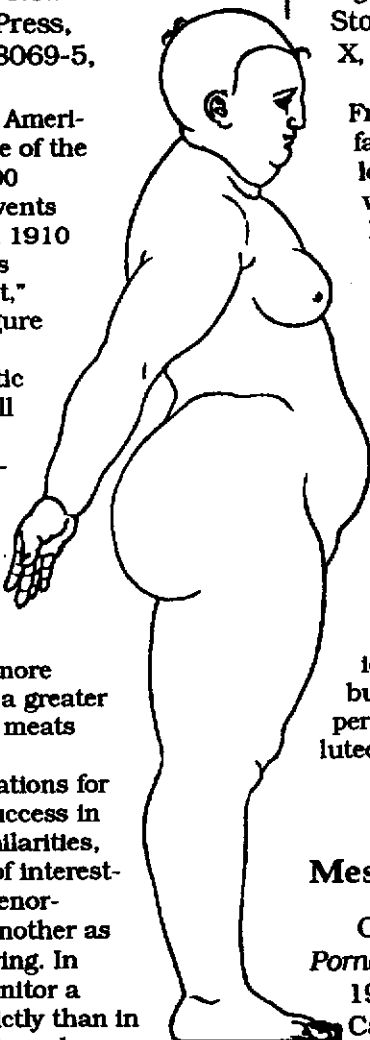
Stearns, Peter N. *Fat History, Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. Cloth, ISBN 0-8147-8069-5, \$25.95.

Stearns traces changes in American attitudes toward the shape of the human body over a span of 100 years and contrasts parallel events in France. "Between 1890 and 1910 middle class America began its ongoing battle against body fat," he writes. Several elements figure into this anti-fat campaign— aesthetic, religious, and athletic objections, for example, as well as a more sedentary lifestyle due to industrialization, labor-saving devices at home, and invention of the automobile. Many of the same cultural changes took place in France at the same time. Stearns points out that "France, like the United States, developed more sedentary work patterns plus a greater abundance of foods including meats rich in fat."

Attempting to give explanations for the French people's greater success in weight control despite the similarities, Stearns brings up a number of interesting points. Portion sizes vary enormously from one country to another as do attitudes toward child rearing. In France, the tendency is to monitor a child's eating habits more strictly than in the United States. Three meals and a snack are advised, with an emphasis on regimented meal times, sitting down for meals, chewing slowly, with only water between meals. Stearns compares this with American on-the-go meals, irregular dinner times, and a greater tendency of American parents to use food as a comfort device to make up for real or imagined parental flaws.

The problem of obesity in this country has been attacked in many ways, but seldom has a researcher expended so much effort on illuminating changes in our views over time. Certainly there are lessons we can learn from the French on a deeper level than just the latest fad served up in "women's magazines." Whether it will assist dieters in their quest to lose weight remains to be seen, but for health care professionals this book will be an invaluable aid to understanding the problem of obesity in this country.

—P. Crossland



## The story of obesity: one woman's life

Saillant, Francine. *Interior Passages: Obesity and Transformation*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1996. Paper, ISBN 0-929005-04-X, \$16.95.

This is not a "how-to" book for losing weight. Francine Saillant explores her successes and failures over a lifetime of yo-yo dieting before losing 130 pounds. "I immersed myself in writing as a way to come to terms with what I lived through," says Saillant. She believes that in the avalanche of advice to obese women, the self-help books, the diet manuals, the voice of the obese woman is seldom heard. As she points out, the goal of losing weight is to gain health and an acceptable image: "They say an obese woman as they say a blind, mad, or menopausal woman. In all cases she is reduced to a single one of her characteristics, namely the one that identifies her with the stigmatized group." Saillant's journey is complicated and at times convoluted. Her success appears to be based on the Canadian Food Guide, budwig creme (which is never fully identified), and her struggle with her identity as a fat woman first and later as a bulimic and newly slender woman. This intensely personal account is at times excessively convoluted, though still thought provoking.

—P. Crossland

## Message for an x-centric generation

Cole, Susan G. *Power Surge: Sex, Violence & Pornography*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995. Paper, ISBN 0929005-78-3, \$15.95 Canada, \$14.95 U. S.

Susan Cole begins the introduction to this group of twenty essays by stating: "Long time feminists are in a serious funk." She cites concern that the "x-centric generation" has become "desensitized cyber-freaks" and are no longer interested in activism. Cole does not share that concern, but rather says that young women of the '90's are not facing the same barriers as did their predecessors and are, therefore, perhaps, less activist in nature. These essays, published from 1978 to 1989 in *NOW Magazine* of Toronto and *Broadside*, a feminist monthly review, provide those generation-Xers with a sense of the issues and arguments that have been at the heart of feminism.

Cole discusses sexuality in the 1987 essay, "Making Sense of Madonna," the issue of confronting pornography in a series of five essays that range from a discussion of child pornography to the commonalities feminists have with right-wingers, the issue of media representation of the "Gay Nineties," and an analysis of abuse in the domestic setting.

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Cole provides updates for some of the older essays, indicating changes in legislation, enforcement, and public opinion. She demonstrates the ability to empathize with prostitutes and sex workers, while pointing out the abuses of the patriarchal system which created and sustains this practice.

The title of the collection of essays best captures Cole's optimism. *Power Surge*, in Cole's eyes, "is built on the principle that sex is political" but that women of today can empower themselves. Whether or not you agree with Cole, reading her careful, sound analyses of these issues provides an increased awareness of how sex and violence have become intertwined in our everyday lives.

—Trudy L. Hanson

## Transgendered lesbian: her own story

Spry, Jennifer. *Orlando's Sleep: An Autobiography of Gender*. Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1997. Paper, ISBN 0-934678-80-4, \$12.95.

Australian Jennifer Spry, born in 1946 into a male body and named John by her parents, grew up with the conviction that she was a girl, despite her anatomy. Here she tells the story of living outwardly as a boy and then a man—partying and drinking to render her masculinity unquestionable. But she lives another life simultaneously, dressing as a girl in private from a young age. As she comes of age in the 1960s and beyond, she struggles with the confusion of living as a young woman in a man's body, and with crossdressing in an effort to clothe the person she perceived within her own body. Given her lack of education regarding sex and sexuality, the lack of information about transgenderism, the lack of understanding of transgendered persons in the mental health community, and the fact that Jennifer was not only transgendered, but lesbian transgendered, it is a tribute to her perseverance and her need to be truthful about who she is that she came eventually to self-understanding and self-acceptance. In time she begins to live openly in the United States as a woman, transitioning from a man's body to the woman's body she belonged in. She chooses to have sex reassignment surgery, and finally returns to the land of her birth to create the life she had always hoped for. She draws the reader through this process, through her missteps and triumphs alike, providing an honest account of one male-to-female transgendered woman's life.

—K. H. Gerhard

## Who you gonna call?

Alman, Isadora. *Sex information, may I help you?* Burlingame, CA: Down There Press, 1992. Paper, ISBN 0-940208-14-8, \$9.95.

Isadora Alman worked several years answering the phones at San Francisco Sex Information. In this book, she shares her experiences and her knowledge. The importance of her book lies in her frank discussion of formerly taboo sexual activities; she gives us a no-holds-barred description of questions Alman often heard on the information line.

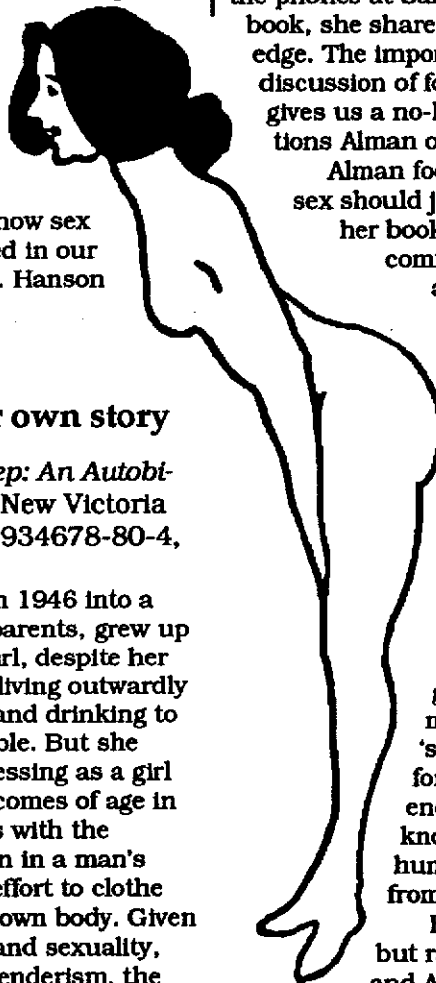
Alman focuses on removing the stigma that sex should just be done, not discussed, and her book is designed to make people more comfortable with and knowledgeable about sex.

Among Alman's primary concerns is the lack of communication before, during, and after sex. As she points out, people just generally feel uncomfortable when the subject of sex is brought up; throughout *Sex Information* she encourages the use of communication to improve sexual experience.

The book has a great deal in common with some talk shows; you feel as though Dr. Ruth has gone prime time. At times, the book may also be compared to Penthouse's letters to the editor. Alman informs us about the sexual experiences of others while increasing our knowledge of the subject; her wit, humor, and intelligence keep the book from becoming pornographic.

Her discussion is not limited to sex but ranges from oral caress to abortion, and Alman closes with a phone call from a woman looking for Prince Charming.

Alman's approach is unique in that she balances serious information with humor about the wonderful world of sex. The focus of the text is communication, and without it, we often sell ourselves short. The topics get touchy, but the information is valuable. Though we may be shocked at the beginning, we finish the last page with understanding. —A. Justus



# Book Review Section

## To be sex-positive: there's the rub!



Queen, Carol. *Exhibitionism for the Shy: Show off, dress up and talk hot*. San Francisco: Down There Press, 1995. Paper, ISBN 0-940208-16-4, \$12.50.

— *Real Live Nude Girl:*

*Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture*.

Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1997. Paper, ISBN 1-57344-073-6, \$14.95

Carol Queen advises in her earlier *Exhibitionism for the shy*, to "show off, dress up and talk hot." She carefully leads her readers down the lane from shy, repressed, sexually undernourished waif to bold, no-holds-barred hedonist. According to the philosophy she dubs "sex-positive," the only important thing is to know what you want sexually, or imagine you want, and do everything in your power to get it. She does give the occasional whispered aside cautioning safe sex, as well as warning fellow sex adventurers to beware of the laws of their particular community and of nosy neighbors who just might document your fun and drag you into court. "Sad to say," she says, "some of the people around us don't agree that sexual exploration and pleasure are good. Remember, they have the problem, not you."

Queen liberally spreads advice on stripping, acting out fantasies, and autoerotic talk on her exhibitionism floor show. As to finding partners, she suggests first looking among the folks you know from whatever social organizations you belong to, thumbing through the classifieds for a likely partner, or perhaps posting your own ad. You could "start a sex salon, if you're not sure how else to attract interesting, sex-positive people into your life." Unfortunately Queen never entertains the possibility that not everyone invited to a sex salon will necessarily be "sex-positive" nor the painful consequences that might follow such an experiment.

In *Real Live Nude Girl*, she chronicles her experiences as a sex worker ranging from peep show queen to the bottom of S/M encounters. In an attempt to legitimize her viewpoint she deems herself a sexologist. Her biography states she is working on her Ph.D. in sexology at an unspecified institution. There are few, if any, sexual experiences Queen has not claimed to have experienced first hand, all of it rollicking good fun.

Queen's writing makes fine erotic fantasy but lousy reality. In her never-ending sexual adventures in wonderland no one ever gets hurt, is infected with STD's, has an unwanted pregnancy, or even hurts someone else's feelings. There is no rape, no incest, no violation of law or trust. There are no unpleasant consequences to life if only one has the courage to cast off the repressive overcoat of sexual oppression your parents and the world have buttoned you into.

It appears that Queen has led a very charmed life in spite of being taunted as "Queer Queen" as a

child. Freedom to gather as much sexual experience of every variety is all important to her, and, by association, her readers. A more restrained life is just not optional in her theology of healthy "sex-positive" living. The implication is that anyone who does not subscribe to her all or nothing approach to sex must be "sex negative." Sadly, instead of being the trail-blazing, free-spirited Amazon she believes herself to be, she ends up as narrow minded as the world she claims to be rebelling against, merely on the other end of the spectrum. —P. Crossland

## Short short fiction

Johnstone, James C., and Karen X. Tulchinsky, eds. *Queer view mirror: lesbian and gay short fiction*. Vancouver, B. C.: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995. Paper, ISBN 1-55152-026-5, \$17.95.



*Queer view mirror* is an anthology of short short stories, that is, stories of 1000 words or less. Johnstone and Tulchinsky collaborated previously on an article in *Sister and brother: lesbians and gay men write about their lives together*, edited by Joan Nestle and John Preston, and *Queer view mirror* uses the same approach, combining writings by lesbians and gay men. The result is a collection of 100 short shorts, representing 13 countries (mostly Canada and the United States), and addressing such topics as first love, cruising, AIDS, family relationships, gay bashing, sex, and lesbian bars in Tokyo, to name just a few.

The styles range from flirtatious to narrative to surreal and everything in between. The stories will make you laugh, cry, get angry, and sometimes even get bored. In addition to being entertaining, the collection is also educational, as it crosses the divide between lesbians and gay men; I would like to have seen more stories specifically addressed relationships between these last two. One particular standout that dealt with gay/lesbian relationships was Nisa Donnelly's "Epitaph Undone," a powerfully honest story about the impact of AIDS on the dynamics between a gay man and a lesbian. "You dykes, you're always pissed off about something," the gay man says, to which the female narrator responds, "now, you are angry too." Other standouts were "Just between us," by Robert Thomas, where the parents send their gay son a card saying, "Please don't call us anymore, we don't want to hear from you," and "Sole Brothers," by Jackie Haywood, about a man, waiting in the doctor's office, who connects briefly and carefully with another man who also has AIDS.

There is something in this book for everyone, and the format of the pieces allows the reader to peruse the collection at her or his own pace. Recommended for queers and straights of all kinds both for reading pleasure and education. —M. Frances

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## Rage of the radicals

Harne, Lynne, and Elaine Miller, eds. *All the Rage: Reasserting Radical Lesbian Feminism*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. Cloth, ISBN 0-8077-6285-7, \$42.00; paper, ISBN 0-8077-6284-9, \$16.95.

Lynne Harne, co-editor of *Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, and Elaine Miller, editor of *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840—1985*, have joined forces to compile a thorough, thought-provoking selection of essays on radical lesbian feminism. If you've forgotten the radical politics behind the early days of the women's and gay liberation movements, this volume will remind you: *All the rage* provides a late-1990s response to queer theory, post-feminism, and lipstick lesbians.

According to Maggie Humm's *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Ohio State University Press, 1995), lesbian feminism is "a belief that women-identified women, committed together for political, sexual and economic support, provide an alternative model to male/female relations which lesbians see as oppressive...[L]esbian feminism involves both a sexual preference and a political choice because it rejects male definitions of women's lives." The writers in this volume reflect a fairly radical reading of this definition—if you're pro-bisexuality or S/M, be warned! *All the rage* contains essays that are quite critical of different types of sexual expression.

Even those who disagree with the politics of *All the rage* will appreciate the book's scope and learn from its contents. Harne and Miller have assembled sixteen essays, all well-written and -researched, most with useful lists of further sources for reading. The essays are arranged into five sections: "Individualism," "Identity and the New Lesbian and Gay Conservatism," "Lesbian Sexuality and Sexual Practice," "Representations of Lesbians in the Media and Popular Culture," "Lesbian Feminism and Academia," and "Moving Forward." Most of the essays in *All the rage* are new works written for this volume. Only two are reprints; four are updated pieces based on the authors' earlier writings. The contributors include some well-known names in

lesbian feminism: Sheila Jeffreys, Celia Kitzinger, Jill Radford. (Inexplicably, the "Contributors Notes" section at the end of the book omits mention of the most prominent contributor, the late Audre Lorde.)

Much of *All the rage* reflects a British focus. Nicola Humberstone's "Lesbians Framed" discusses representations of lesbians on British television series and soap operas. Carole Reeves and Rachel Wingfield's "Serious Porn, Serious Protest" describes how lesbian feminists in London boycotted the London Lesbian and Gay Centre because the Centre agreed to let an S/M group meet there. Still, many of the issues raised in this volume are broad and apply to the U.S. as well as other

countries; the local focus is not at all limiting.

*All the rage* is indispensable for those seeking a provocative, fiery discussion of the political and personal issues of lesbian feminism. It is a must-purchase for libraries that collect queer theory, women's studies, and lesbian studies.—W. Thomas

## An ex-prostitute's letters

Pinzer, Maimie. *The Maimie Papers: Letters from an Ex-Prostitute*. New York: Feminist Press, 1997. Paper, ISBN 1-55861-143-6, \$19.95.

During the early part of this century, Maimie Pinzer wrote often and with an open heart to her benefactor, Fanny Quincy Howe. She candidly described her life, the small daily struggles which often seemed insurmountable by their sheer frequency, as well as her triumphs over larger obstacles on her journey to leave prostitution behind and become "respectable." This bundle of letters was carefully preserved, and Pinzer's herstory became a part of Howe's legacy to her daughter, Helen. Helen Howe donated the letters to the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in 1971.

"Maimie, the product of a broken and quarrelsome Jewish family, spent much of her youth learning to survive through prostitution. Intent on self-improvement, Maimie wished to live as a 'lady.'" Although Maimie Pinzer received aid from a Philadelphia social worker, Herbert Welch, this is no Hollywood-Eliza-Doolittle makeover. Pinzer had both emotional support and financial help from Welch and Howe, but in the main it was through her own efforts that she overcame the loss of her father early in life, her mother's false accusations against her, and subsequent fall into prostitution. Fanny Howe's letters to Pinzer have not been found. She describes their importance to her: "I consciously made them a live friend, and we, the letters and I, were in league against all these ugly conditions and the letters were the only things I discussed my hatred to of things." Nourished by Howe's understanding and caring correspondence, Pinzer confides, "I did not eat lunch today to write this, but to write you is like a good meal, especially when I get fat letters—they make me so happy, and are so satisfying." Soul food indeed.

Pinzer's blunt, skillful writing displays her courage as well as her flaws in this collection of 140 letters to her combination surrogate mother, sister, and friend. Pinzer shows us a part of history seldom directly addressed; prostitutes are usually presented historically as footnotes to the men they serviced. The small, tedious details of her struggle to exist in an unsympathetic world reveal her life more poignantly than the headlines of the daily papers. Her story is certainly worth passing down to the next generation.

—P. Crossland



# Book Review Section

## Headful of poetry

Wilson, Sheri-D. *Girl's Guide to Giving Head*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp, 1996. Paper, ISBN 1-55152-031-1, \$14.95 Canada, \$12.95 U.S.

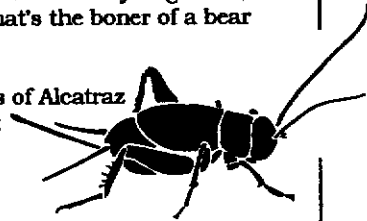
The poet Marianne Moore said of poetry:

"I, too, dislike it. Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine."

I didn't approach Sheri-D Wilson's poetry with a perfect contempt, but I admit I was skeptical and less than comfortable with the title: *Girl's Guide to Giving Head*, an eyebrow-raiser if ever there was one. What I found this book of poems to be is a genuine and compelling trip through some of the most public and intimate experiences of the poet.

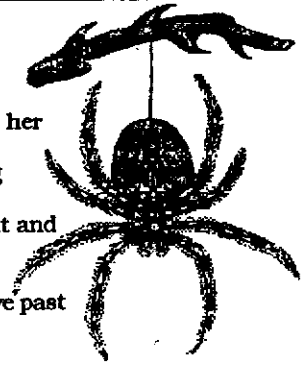
As Wilson states, the book is meant to be read out loud, in keeping with the oral tradition of poetry. I obliged and found myself Bo-De-O-ing and MEN-MIN-MING-MANGING through some of the most fast-paced and rhythmic poetry I've read. Wilson crafts carefully structured poems, heavy on the alliteration, to propell you through pieces such as "Airplane Paula or All The Telephones At The San Francisco Airport Have Video Screens," presenting us with images of the contemporary that take us beyond the stereotypical:

Airplane Paula waves a fan dance plume  
Her nine inch nails dig a Cleopatra tomb  
Disco user friendly with a belly pierced for love  
Biohazard blonde, forty thousand feet above  
Supersonic post-bionic aerosolly hair  
She's the lip stream dreamstress  
Where Jackals only dare  
She stirs her shadow drink in a shifty flagrant flare  
With a petrified swizzle that's the boner of a bear  
Out there, out there  
Make you razz-ma-tazz  
She'd melt the steely bars of Alcatraz  
She's a G-force vulva volt  
Join the dots space jolt  
Mythy-astro-disiac  
Mass created maniac



Anyone else would see a gaudily dressed blonde with Big Hair and press-on nails, but this is life through Wilson's eyes. Her eyes see Doggie de Sades, who pierce their tales with spikes and tell each other to sit, in "Some Kinda Soho Bow-Wow Story", and Snow White dressed as Cinderella running for a bus in "P3: Bunsen Burner Break-down." Her world is colorful, and through her artful use of imagery, we see it too. She calls on all the senses, so that we hear her heart beat, smell her sex, and feel her emotions. In one of the most poignant poems in the collection, "Journal Entry 1: The Maze Incident," Wilson tells of a spider she kept alive through the winter by feeding it crickets she'd bought at the pet shop, throwing them into the web with chopsticks:

She'd hang out behind me  
where I'd read  
And she'd catch my dreams in her  
open net...  
She stayed alive for the Spring  
Equinox...  
People would come over to visit and  
they'd say:...  
It isn't right  
It's unnatural to keep things alive past  
their time...  
You should unplug her...



But I didn't have to  
'Cause the next morning when I rose from my bed  
She was hanging there, hanging there  
Hanging there, dead...

I cut her down and I placed her in the corner on a  
stone  
And I watched her body dissolve into dust  
And then, I wrote down this poem...  
For her.

Wilson ends this poem with the question: "When a being dies in your presence, does their spirit enter yours?" She asks us to ponder and imagine many things in this book, from the marriage of a woman simulating a man simulating a woman simulating Priscilla Presley marrying an Elvis impersonator in "The Day I Married Elvis," to a night of unbound sex with the devil in "Wild Hearses Couldn't Keep Me Away." But Wilson does not just present us with outrageous images and situations, she tells stories and conveys to us the genuine living of her life, such as her struggle to write in "P2: From Bun-Head to Bard," and Christmas dinner with her family in "Egg Bank: A True Story," which starts with the question posed to Wilson, "Are you ever going to have a child?" She responds:

When I'm eighty or so  
Living in a rest home  
Watching my ears and nose grow  
What I'll do is  
I'll have my eggs re-inserted...

I can see it now  
I'm eighty years old  
In some rest home screaming:  
Remove my dentures  
My water just broke

Her poems range from the mystical "My Beloved Tofino" to the raw, explicit "I pray" to the simple "KL":

I'd walk a million miles  
to skip a single stone  
Bottom line, she has range. As Marianne Moore

said:

Not till the poets among us can be "literalists of the imagination"-above insouciance and triviality and can present for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," shall we have it.

"It" is poetry and I say, yes, we have it here. —Annmarie B. Boyle





## Sex in space, or, Why does a rocket look like a dildo?

Penley, Constance. *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*. New York: Varick, 1997. Cloth, ISBN 0-86091-405-4, \$80 Canada, \$50.00 U.S., £35.00 U. K.; paper, ISBN 0-86091-617-0, \$25.00 Canada, \$16.00 U.S., £11.00 U. K.

Penley explores the role of women in space in two loosely-linked essays. In the first, "NASA/," she discusses attitudes in popular culture as well as those in NASA's specialized bureaucratic culture. She presents some interesting facts about this closed society where women have just begun making inroads, and casts light on how these women pioneers are regarded. She quotes several jokes about Christa McAuliffe, the female teacher on the Challenger which, she says, indicate "another popular discourse, a story of women's inherent deficiencies, which become glaringly visible—and risible—when-ever she forgets her place." Penley also describes experiences of Helen Sharman, Britain's first female astronaut, and Amelia Earhart.

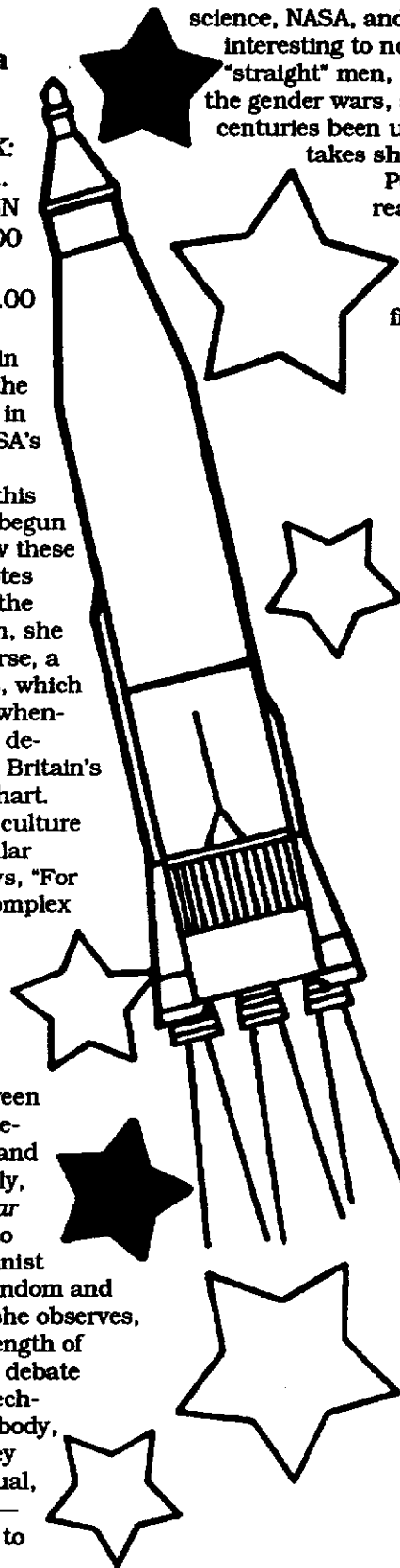
In the second essay, she studies a culture grown up around NASA's "hugely popular fictional twin, *Star Trek*." As Penley says, "For better or for worse, an astonishingly complex popular discourse about civic, social, moral, and political issues is filtered through the idiom and ideas" of the show. She focuses specifically on homoerotic fanzine "slash" or "K/S" stories exploring a sexual relationship between Spock and Kirk. (A slash between the character's initials indicates a same-sex relationship, in the fanzine world, and hence the slash in *NASA/TREK*.) Largely, these stories are written by women. *Star Trek* slash fiction does not, according to Penley, "follow the typical route of feminist utopian fiction," however, "[i]n slash fandom and the writing practice that it supports," she observes, "we find a powerful instance of the strength of the popular wish to think through and debate the issues of women's relation to the technologies of science, the mind, and the body, in both fiction and everyday life." Penley believes that slash fiction, "illicitly sexual, homoerotic, egalitarian, and antiracist—offers the sharpest possible challenge" to NASA.

Penley makes a range of observations backed by a range of factual information plus a basic love for

science, NASA, and *Star Trek*, slash fiction, it's interesting to note, is especially offensive to many "straight" men, and thus a formidable weapon in the gender wars, and pornography has in past centuries been used in such a way. Sometimes it takes shock to make you think.

Penley's essays are scholarly yet readable. Women who enjoy science fiction or wish to envision a role for women in space will here find insight into real as well as fictional prejudices.

—M. Tainton



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*Our thought for the holidays:*

**Absence**  
is one of the most useful ingredients  
of family life,  
and to do it rightly  
is an art like any other.

—*Freya Stark*

*Quoted in There's no place like home for the holidays, Sandra Haldeman Martz, 1997. This book and many others to be reviewed in our next issue, including a special review section of books on aging.*