

*Growing old disgracefully  
Alice Walker goes to Hollywood  
Lesbians of the Lower Fourth*

*African women ripped off again  
Ten years fighting — London Rape Crisis  
Tribute to Bessie Head*

No.10 SPRING 1987 £1.95

*Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.*

*Trouble and Strife* is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Dena Attar, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Susanne Kappeler, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws and Judy Stevens, with help from Pam Muttram (taping), Sara Scott and Alison (proofreading), Lyn May and Diana Leonard (paste-up). With many thanks to the Women's Reproductive Rights Information Centre and the Women's Health Information Centre for the use of their space and resources.

Although we take collective responsibility for the contents, we do not necessarily agree with every article we print — only that we feel it is interesting. The collective is also responsible for titles and illustrations. Unsolicited articles are welcomed; please enclose a stamped addressed envelope. We do not intend to publish poetry or fiction.

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We apologise for there not being an index for Issues 7—9. It will be in Issue 11.

*Trouble and Strife*, c/o Women's Centre, 50 Bethel Street, Norwich, Norfolk, Britain.

The *Trouble and Strife* collective wish to apologise to Berenice Cleeve, the artist, and to *Nouvelles Questions Feministes*, who hold the copyright, for our mistake in issue 9 of publishing the drawing of Simone de Beauvoir without giving them credit. Copies of a poster of this picture are available from NQF, 34 Passage du Ponceau, 75002 Paris, for £8 (cheque or international money order), or from Sisterwrite, 190 Upper Street, London N1.

**WOMEN RISING IN RESISTANCE**  
Mary Lee Sergeant from the US feminist direct action network will be speaking on *Direct Action and Feminism* at a special meeting to be organised by *Trouble and Strife* in London in June/July 1987. We hope this will be the first of a series of meetings where we can discuss how to implement feminist politics today. Four women outside London would like to contact Mary about speaking in their town, please write to the T&S address. Full details will appear later in *Spare Rib* and elsewhere.

"off our backs is international in scope and focuses on diverse topics dealing with poor women, working class women, minority women, prison, custody, and abortion. It's never been simple minded. It's what I think of as feminism!"  
--Marilyn Frye, author of *The Politics of Reality*

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# LETTERS

\*indicates that a letter has been cut

## What is FINRRAGE?

*We ask that you publish accurate information on FINRRAGE to remedy the misrepresentation in Marge Berer's article in Trouble and Strife 9.*

At the Second International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women in Groningen, the Netherlands, April 1984, a session on the new reproductive technologies entitled 'Death of the Female' led to the creation of the Feminist International Network on the new Reproductive Technologies (FINNRET). FINNRET began with 500 women from 12 countries who agreed to hold an Emergency Conference on the new reproductive technologies in Sweden in July 1985. The network's members have now increased to over 700 and include scientists, health activists, lab technicians, physicians, lawyers, government ministers of health, writers, engineers, journalists, community health workers, ethicists, demographers, sociologists, psychologists, women who have undergone infertility treatment, women who have counselled infertile women, philosophers, librarians and students.

The activities in which the network has engaged, in its short span of existence have been: 1) a panel presentation at the annual US National Women's Studies Conference in Seattle in June 1985; 2) a five-day conference in Sweden called 'The Women's Emergency Conference on the New Reproductive Technologies'; 3) sessions at the United Nations Non-Governmental Organisations Forum 85 at Nairobi, Kenya in July 1985; 4) Feminist Hearings on Reproductive and Genetic Technologies at the European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium, March 6-7, 1986 and National Conferences in England (1984) and Australia (1986). The network is currently in the process of applying to obtain consultative status as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC).

In Sweden, 3-8 July 1985, 74 women from 16 countries participated in a conference to exchange information and plan strategies. Partial financial support for the conference was provided by small grants from the L.J. Skaggs and Mary Skaggs

Foundation, Oakland, California; the Alliance Verte Alternative Au Parlement European, Brussels, Belgium; and the Internationale Solidaritätsfonds der Bundespartei Die Grünen, West Germany. At the conference, national reports were presented from each country participating. Individual papers were given by various participants on the issues. Towards the end of the conference, a resolution was created and passed unanimously and the name of the network was changed to the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE).

Twenty-one women have agreed to act as national contacts for the international network. Each of these contacts will seek to encourage and co-ordinate activities in her own country. The first international co-ordinator was Dr Janice Raymond; the current international co-ordinator is Renate Duelli Klein. The documentation from the Swedish conference (presentations, reports, press releases, etc) is currently being prepared for publication. Four information packages have been compiled and circulated through the national contacts.

Forum 85, the United Nations Non-Governmental Organisations Conference in Nairobi, July 1985, was attended by almost 14,000 women from all parts of the world. FINRRAGE held two workshops on July 12 and 16 providing information on the new reproductive technologies and addressing issues of medical violence against women, women's health, and policy. Women from developing countries saw clearly the potential harm to women from the technologies, while women from the developed world are more likely to be uncertain.

Co-organised by the Women's Bureau of the Green/Alternative Faction of the European Parliament and FINRRAGE, approximately 140 women from EC and other European countries met to exchange information on reproductive and genetic

engineering in their countries, and to liaise with other women. A final resolution and report on the hearings, representing a women-centred rather than a foetus-centred perspective will be presented to other factions at the European Parliament who are currently debating the issue.

## Goals and motivating concerns of FINRRAGE:

- To expose the harmful effects of the new reproductive technologies on women's health and to challenge the lack of information available to women on and lack of research into these effects.
- To reveal the historical continuum between the 'new' reproductive technologies and old reproductive technologies such as DES (diethyl stilboestrol), Depo-Provera and the Dalkon Shield.
- To challenge the foetal-centredness of reproductive technologies which threatens women's control of our bodies and reflects a legal and medical construction of the womb as an unsafe environment and sees the woman and foetus as adversaries.
- To emphasise how reproductive and genetic engineering are part of a much larger movement of bio-technology which threatens to have harmful and irreversible consequences for the world's population and environment.
- To publicise the danger that the use of new reproductive and genetic technologies will accelerate existing programs of population control which have emerged out of a history of racism and imperialism by western countries.
- To reject the use of new reproductive technologies in the service of maintaining patriarchal definitions of women and the family.
- To be critical of how existing social inequalities based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference and able-bodiedness will be reinforced by discriminatory state restrictions on access to reproductive technologies.
- To challenge the common belief that technology is neutral — the it-depends-on-how-you-use-it argument. And to

challenge the scientific and popular definition of progress where the end justifies the means.

## The aims of FINRRAGE:

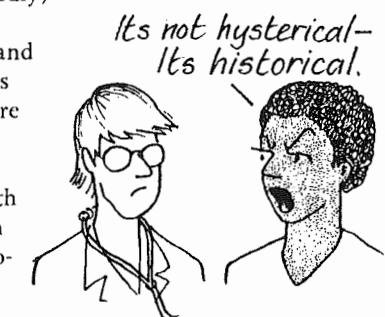
- To monitor international developments in the areas of reproductive and genetic engineering: such as cloning, in vitro techniques, embryo transfer, sex-predetermination, experimentation with human and animal hybrids, and ectogenesis (artificial wombs).
- To assess the implications of these and related practices, such as surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination, and new contraceptive devices, from the point of view of the future socio-economic position and well being of women internationally.
- To provide information on social responses to reproductive and genetic engineering by the media, ethics committees, medical and scientific associations, the military and governments.
- To inform women about feminist resistance. This includes bringing together members of FINRRAGE periodically to share information and plan local, regional, national and international strategies.
- To continue to develop an international network of women who share a feminist perspective on the new reproductive technologies and genetic engineering.

FINRRAGE  
PO Box 583  
London NW3 1RQ

## Facts, not fantasy visions

\*I write in response to the article (supposedly a book review) you published by Marge Berer, 'Breeding Conspiracies. Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies'. This article attacks a number of women who are my colleagues but also myself, both professionally and personally.

Unfortunately it does not grapple with the debates or the facts themselves within the area of the new reproductive technologies. It does not deal with the issues but resorts to snide dismissal.



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The author attacks feminist writers who have written warning against the new reproductive technologies by saying that we "do not examine the technology for what it is, but can dismiss it for what it might become". Surely the role of feminist activists and theoreticians is to create a vision of what feminism is and what the future should be. Berer's analysis conveniently ignores the historical precedence for the abuse of women and our bodies through medicine. Some of the predictions about which we write are in fact based on visions of the future within scientific papers. For example John Postgate, a British scientist, has written in *New Scientist* of the future he sees if sex selection becomes available. His vision includes the gradual elimination of women, with the few remaining women being fought over by an ever increasing body of men. The mind of masculine science knows and shows no restraint and we should not shackle our own. What I have analysed as the 'softening up' phase before *in vitro* fertilisation and its associated technologies were introduced, is now happening with discussions in both the medical, ethical and popular literature on the possibility of transsexual mothers. It is a nice political point that one of the doctors involved in an IVF team in Australia also heads the transsexual conversion clinic associated with that university. If feminists are too afraid to look at the possibilities of the abuse of women in the future through these technologies, we will take no action and will suffer for that inaction.

Berer seems unable to escape a naivety with respect to the political context in which women live out our lives. Technology she sees as neutral. But technology does not take place outside of a social context. This context is male dominated. Science and technology have also developed within a capitalist framework and the new commercialisation of these technologies reminds us of this. Women are used as experimental subjects, pay for the privilege of doing so, and the resulting information is sold by scientists on the world market. These are not fantasy visions, these are facts. Comfortable and smug middle-class women should

not be selfish enough to believe that their own sense of personal control in their world is automatically a control exercised by all women. It is painful to think that women who call themselves feminists still have to be reminded that, important though it is, the personal is not enough in a social analysis of women's oppression.

Berer's accusation that we use conspiracy theories and a 'victimisation' perspective shows that she has little understanding of the nature of patriarchy itself, an oppressive system of structures which acts to subordinate women as a social group. I quote Rebecca Albury on this who puts it succinctly:

Male domination doesn't necessarily require a majority of men... "male control" doesn't necessarily mean control by individual men, it means control which benefits men more than women most of the time. Far from each man exercising personal authority, things are much more complex. We live in a network of power relations that both defines "masculinity" and ensures the success of individuals and activities that reinforce that definition.

No value lies in neglecting the basic statistics concerning *in vitro* fertilisation itself. In a number of papers I have written I have outlined these in detail. Basically, however, I must mention here that doctors do not in fact know the side effects of the large doses of fertility drugs they are administering to these women. The experiences of the women themselves on IVF programs which are just being documented but are available for readers, outline the indignity, the emotional stress, the lack of communication between doctor and patient, and the neglect of any side effects which they report, which are characteristic of the relationship between male dominated medicine and women patients. Berer would do well to acknowledge the facts of the matter here.

I come now to the claim by Berer that I, accompanied by Renate Duelli Klein, "spoke at a press conference in London organised by anti-abortion MPs, in support of a Bill that would have banned research on human embryos and placed strangling restrictions on the practice of *in vitro* fertilisation in British clinics". This is not an accurate description of the event. Some of the organisers may well have been

anti-abortion. But they were not MPs, and it was not solely a press conference. I was invited to address a mixed meeting of both the House of Lords and of MPs to discuss reproductive technology in general. This event took place before the Enoch Powell Bill was released and before anybody knew what was in that Bill. I specifically said at that talk that I would not discuss the unseen Bill and that I did not support anything which threatened abortion rights for women. I felt that it was very important that MPs heard that there was a feminist position on the new reproductive technologies.

I have been called as a witness to many government committees in Australia and feel that it is important that feminists are recorded as having spoken out against this new abuse of women. We have a similar Bill going through our Parliament at the moment in Australia and I have been called as a witness to this committee. This Bill, like the Powell Bill, is a bad Bill, and threatens abortion rights. But so does embryo experimentation which I oppose vehemently. Most opposition to embryo experimentation has come from an embryo-centered forum. But I oppose it because I ask the question: "Where do the embryos come from?" They come from eggs. And where do the eggs come from? They come from women. But which women? IVF women are loathe to give up their embryos for experimentation now that they can be frozen and implanted at a later date. So doctors are looking for women who go into hospitals for all manner of surgery around the pelvis to be super-ovulated and donate eggs. The potential for exploitation is obvious.

I resist the accusation that our position on the new reproductive technologies is inconsistent with abortion rights. It is not. With abortion we claimed the right to choose, but we really meant the right to control our bodies and our lives. We have to then ask — do the new reproductive technologies give women greater control over our lives? I have argued in the papers that I am writing that they do not, and I have evidence to support that position, which is too long to detail here. The so-called advance of reproductive technology is a greater threat

to abortion rights. As soon as embryos are able to be flushed from a woman's body there will be a strong push on women who seek abortions to donate their embryos 'in utero'. This is in line with the increasing personalisation of the foetus coming through the medical literature and is extremely dangerous for women. These who uncritically support the new reproductive technologies should bear this in mind.

I was interested to see that Berer sings the praises of the book by Peter Singer and Deane Wells. Singer finds no problems with the new reproductive technologies as long as they are regulated. He even advocates a State Surrogacy Board which would regulate surrogate mothers, with the possibility of imposing fines on women if they did not relinquish their children. This book in no way takes a woman-centered perspective and does not deal with the concerns of feminists.

There are many complexities in the feminist debates on the new reproductive technologies. These complexities need to be worked through with feminist theory as our base and feminist activism as our goal. The debates are not served by misleading information and generalised statements. I can only encourage readers to read the literature itself and to write to any of us who are working in this field for copies of work which they may analyse themselves. They will find there a great deal of documented evidence and fact to support our contention that the new reproductive technologies serve as a threat to the well being and survival of women as a social group, regardless of the individual desires of some women for children.

Yours sincerely  
Dr Robyn Rowland  
Victoria, Australia

## A plurality of opinions

The article by Marge Berer, (T&S 9), in which she attacks certain feminists and feminist critiques of reproductive technologies, can be criticised on many points; one of these is the personal, defamatory



CARTOONS BY WENDY KERRISON

1. John Postgate "Bat's Chance in Hell", *New Scientist*, 1973, 5, 11-16.
2. Rebecca Albury, "Reproductive Technology and Feminism", *Australian Left Review*, no. 89, 1984, Spring, 45-55.

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remarks against Gena Corea, Helen Holmes, and other women portraying them as hysterical ring-leaders of the international feminist network FINRRAGE. These are simply false. However, I would particularly like to address a related point: Berer's disregard for the many women who take part in the FINRRAGE network, including those she mentions by name.

Berer makes it sound as if the hundreds of women who interact via the FINRRAGE networks are duped, blindly following a fantastic conspiracy theory constructed by a few women. This is insulting to all the women involved — many of whom have been criticising reproductive and genetic technologies since the late 1970s, and all of whom are part of the whole, many-faceted FINRRAGE story.

I myself began looking into the area of reproductive technology only a few years ago, before I knew of other women's strong views. I have worked as a biochemist for 12 years and am familiar with the literature and the modus operandi of research medical science. Yet, I was horrified to see exactly what was going on in the areas of human embryology and human genetics. I was grateful to find women who saw it the way I did.

FINRRAGE was formed out of the women's movement; we are growing and we enjoy a plurality of opinions on the matter of reproductive and genetic technologies. Our resistance is based on our assessment of what these technologies mean for all people, particularly women. Perhaps a helpful analogy is how we resist nuclear technology despite the apparent benefits (jobs, energy). Would not a better feminist tactic be to listen to each other, not castigate?

Pat Spallone  
York

## Criticising criticism

Over the last few years I have done a considerable amount of research on reviews. Initially this work was prompted by my recognition that over the centuries the

media have been controlled by men and that women have received such a consistently 'bad press' that it amounts to a distortion of women's reality and knowledge. But my investigation of the practice of *Gatekeeping* led me to an area that I had not anticipated; I soon encountered some of the women who had been on the receiving end of the 'bad press' and who had been left raw by the experience.

When I wrote to all the women whose work I had summarised in *For the Record* — to ask them whether they felt their views had been fairly represented for I had no desire to be a 'gatekeeper' of their work or to distort their meanings — I was very disturbed by some of the responses that were returned to me. For without exception the authors recounted such horrific stories about being reviewed that they even entertained the idea of abandoning their writing on the grounds that it was not worth the risk of such repudiation — which not only took so long to deal with, but which also took its toll the next time they took up their pens.

What I learnt from these women has had a strong influence on my own politics. For one of my primary reasons for being a feminist is to publicly (as well as privately) give my support to women. Which is why I have always said that there is no point in using a public stage to undermine, repudiate or castigate other women. When so many social forces are used to discredit women then part of my identity as a feminist depends upon my resistance to such pressure. This is my political position and I have never found it restrictive. This does not mean that I endorse the ideas/analyses of all women or that I am never critical. But I have recognised the sincerity and commitment of many women whose ideas have been forged from their own personal circumstances — which are different from mine — and I have always found it possible to have a dialogue with those with whom I might never agree.

This was why I found it extremely distressing to read such a personal and sometimes vituperative 'review' of the women (and their writing) in the reproductive tech-

nology area in the latest edition of *Trouble and Strife*. Not just because I know most of the women (who, without checking and with no right of reply before publication) stand condemned, nor because I can personally vouch for their hard work, integrity and concern; but because this attack was almost alongside an article on Phyllis Chesler — taken from *For the Record* — on 'Women and Madness'. Phyllis Chesler herself is among those who have suffered from personally swingeing reviews and it was her contention that women must find more supportive ways of evaluating each other's work if women are to cease to have a bad press . . . and even if women and their work are to survive.

This is my stand as well. For unless we find new ways to comment, review — exchange ideas and views — there will be no necessity for patriarchy to oppress women; we will destroy each other.

I deplore all attacks on women. I welcome the sharing and enlarging of experience and understandings . . . which can often come from those with whom I disagree.

Dale Spender  
London, SW3

## Hands that can't be trusted

\*How can we say a particular new technology is *good* or *bad*, without looking very carefully at: how that technology came about, how it is used, what for, by whom?

I don't feel it's good enough to analyse the technology in itself and extract what we see that can be of use to women in particular, and to people in general in isolation.

First, various questions must be asked: who will it benefit, how and why, at what price, at whose expense, who will it not benefit, how and why?

This issue must be put in the wider context of the world we are all living in today and how the different peoples in it are living our lives (or not).

Whilst I don't think that it is a good idea to be so suspicious of everything that we are

immobilised and can do nothing about anything, to look at new technologies in a vacuum is not wise or realistic. Why has it been a priority in the world of science (as opposed to many other thousands of things that threaten people's welfare and well being), and *who* has been and is in a position to decide? Science for science's sake doesn't appeal to me. It depends largely on *who* is doing it and what their interests and beliefs are.

The people who are in the most powerful positions, and who decide what is a priority and what isn't and how the money and resources should be used, have proved themselves to be untrustworthy, to put it mildly, and dangerous to the majority of people in the planet. The events of the past with all its examples of death and destruction; the lengths to which they have gone in order to be on top and remain there for whatever sickening reasons (the analysis of which we all may share, agree or differ over) speak for themselves and I don't think that we can ignore them and survive. It has reached the extent whereby the very existence of the planet is in their hands. Hands that cannot be trusted.

When I hear noises that sound like isolating 'issues' and analysing them in their own right, it feels as if, somehow, that *can* be done outside the reality of world context, or that it is acceptable to do so. It reminds me of past discussions and arguments way back, about the 'goodness or badness' of nuclear power. I clearly remember feminists and socialists who defended the existence of *it* in *itself* with arguments such as "... it is not the fact of nuclear power, it's how it is used". These are people whose opinions on other matters I respected. It took some time before they realised that the rulers could not be trusted with that 'power' in their hands. I feel that some parallels can be drawn from this example.

A decade and a half on, can we really talk about contraception without putting it into a world context? Yet, we still do. Even if some of us feel that, say the pill, is not worth the risk to a woman's health; or if it breaks our heart to imagine what all those



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hormones are doing inside a lot of the young women we know and don't know, even though we know damn well there aren't any real alternatives. We still forget, too often, that long before north-western women could 'enjoy' the 'benefits' of the pill, it had been tried and experimented on women from the so-called "Third World". The effect this has had and still has in their lives and bodies is still unknown. Similar things can be said about many other drugs. It's all technology though, . . . isn't it?

I would like to know how reproductive technology has become a priority over the survival of people; or people's right over their own land; survival rights of people who are literally dying, being wiped out as a consequence of European colonialism and imperialism.

Can we really say: this technology is here to stay, so we might as well accept it and see how we can benefit from it . . . even if the benefit is minimum compared to the cost and the benefit that same input could have elsewhere? Shouldn't we be campaigning and pressing for a shift of priorities in the first place?

I agree that anti-abortionists have used the confusion around the issues (on our part as feminists, as well as the general public) to get their 'pro-life-anti-women' philosophy furthered. I also agree that our untogetherness around the issue has benefited them a lot, and on that count we've only ourselves to blame (and a very cleverly and complicatedly worded bill). This brings to my mind one of the many things we've always reproached the anti-abortionists with; ". . . protect the lives of the living", or as some US women put it ". . . they call themselves pro-life, but they'd rather see you dead than allow you an abortion". By the same ruling, how dare we bring about more sophisticated ways of bringing more children into the world when we *are not* managing or even trying to manage to keep our living ones alive, children or not?

I agree that we have to sort ourselves out, bring everything onto the table and work out what it is that we think about it all and what course of action we are going

to take. Motherhood has to be thrashed out by *us* and soon.

Prioritising must be done, not just by those in power to decide . . . We have to also prioritise, and take responsibility for our choices and for their consequences.

I don't know about a male conspiracy to get rid of women. I know men fear women; that the oppressor has a deep fear of whom he (or she) oppresses, like the fear white people have of Black people. I also know we *are not* in control. Technology has offered many positive things to humans; it has also been used to get rid of many and to suppress many more. They are in control and I don't trust them, would not turn my back to them.

I know I haven't provided any clear answers, but I have provided some questions which I feel need asking and I hope that this debate will grow and develop so that we can sort ourselves and come up with some answers we can use as fighting tools for our liberation on the backs of nobody. It's up to us all to do it. I keep on saying to myself, my friends and now you that, yes, we can blame the oppressors for all the wrong they do to us and others, but *we cannot blame them for what we don't do*.

Isabel Ros Lopez  
London

## Personal attacks

\*As founder, and past, members of the *Trouble and Strife* Collective we are saddened by the political tone in Issue No.9, Summer 1986. We believe *Trouble and Strife* to be an important contributor to radical feminist theory and ideas, but the current issue shows a marked turn to reactionary politics.

Of course radical feminists are not a homogenous group. We have a variety of ideas and interests to secure. In doing so we must endeavour to recognise, even if we disagree, the integrity of women who write and organise in areas which affect our lives. Rather than set out to deliberately hoodwink women, feminists are trying to expose

the harsh realities of men's control over our lives.

For example, you print a cartoon on page 4 which reduces a major political action by radical feminists in the US, (challenging state support for the legalisation of pornography, and degrading visual representation of women) to a cheap joke. Reducing serious campaigns and actions to cartoons is a form of abuse reserved for the main enemy. Historically the cartoon has always been an excellent way to transmit reactionary ideas. The fascists did, and do, use cartoons to propagandise their contempt and hatred for their designated enemies. Your cartoon names Andrea Dworkin as the enemy, implying that she allows men to get off the hook for crimes against women. In the cartoon, without Andrea Dworkin, pornography would not be a political issue. What kind of radical feminist politics is this?

One strand of radical feminism appears to be based on liberal assumptions that some ideologies and some practices are not inherently political. Therefore women can be attacked for making politics out of oppression. These politics are present in Marge Berer's article, 'Breeding Conspiracies: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies'. This is a straightforward attack on radical political theory expressed in the form of a brutal critique on the writings of individual feminists. Illustrating this point, on page 31, she says: "The writers do not examine the technology for what it is, but for what it might become." It seems that Marge's liberal political theory believes technology is neutral and that all consumers have real choices. The majority of feminists, however, have no problem with the concept that the wolf comes in sheep's clothing when discussing the state and its apparatus.

To develop an understanding of a system of oppression of all women from wherever it originates, we need to weave together consistent themes threaded throughout women's experience. Feminists do this by exploring lived reality which varies depending upon our cultural and social history. For example, it is the German

women who raise the eugenic (master race theory) implications of the new technologies most strongly. Not only do we need to describe what we see but we must also analyse what we feel. For example, the patronising way in which Madhu Kishwar's work is dealt with is no less than disgusting. On page 35: "Madhu Kishwar's piece in *Man-Made Woman* deserves to be in a better book." How dare you presume that Madhu Kishwar did not positively choose to publish her work in a book which she believes is dealing with issues hitherto ignored by white western women who think that there might be something in it for them!

Marge Berer criticises *Man-Made Women* for the repetitiveness of the arguments. This book is a collection of papers written for an international conference in the Netherlands. As with all conferences, particularly international ones, only the women who can afford to attend such meetings have the privilege to hear the papers presented. The FINRRAGE network is committed to publishing papers, with little editing from the original work, in order that other women may read them, and form their own opinions.

Marge Berer is basically confused about technology. It is not whether it is high or low technology that creates a problem. It is the political uses to which technology can be, and is, put that is at question. We find it deeply offensive that she dismisses the genocide of the Jews as irrelevant to a discussion of eugenic implications of the new technologies on the grounds that the technology used on that occasion was "no more complicated than the running of a car in a closed garage". Nor can the genocide of North American Indians be dismissed as irrelevant to a discussion of eugenics simply because the technological forms used were different. Genocide is political whatever the level and type of technology used. The ideas informing that politics is what is being questioned and gives rise to comparisons.

The concluding sentence on p.35 implies that making one's views, experience, feelings, known to other women is wrong. "If we accept as feminists

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that women have to define our own needs and interests, then even — or should I say particularly — other feminists should not presume to do it for us." Radical feminist activists and writers are wholly committed to sharing knowledge and experiences with all other women. Feminist ideas and theories are the result of exchange, debate, knowledge and our own realities. By definition we can only define our own ideas and knowledge. If these lead to a conclusion that women are in danger, it would be outrageous not to say so.

It is left to the *Trouble and Strife* Collective, however, to drive the politics of liberalism home. On the Contents Page, the article is headed: "Breeding Conspiracies: FINRRAGE reviewed". You move the critique from individual women to a radical feminist women's organisation. When *Trouble and Strife* began we agreed there would be no personal attacks on women or feminist activities. Sisters, you have really shown a radical change of politics.

In sisterhood  
Jalna Hanmer and Sheila Saunders  
Leeds

**Knowledge is power**

I'm glad *Trouble and Strife* published Marge Berer's article on how feminists are tackling the issues brought up by new (and old) reproductive technologies. I've been sorry to see FINRRAGE, the most visible feminist organisation interested in reproductive technology, focusing so exclusively on the scariness of technology. Telling women to be afraid of technology feeds right into what men keep trying to tell women — technology is not a woman's business.

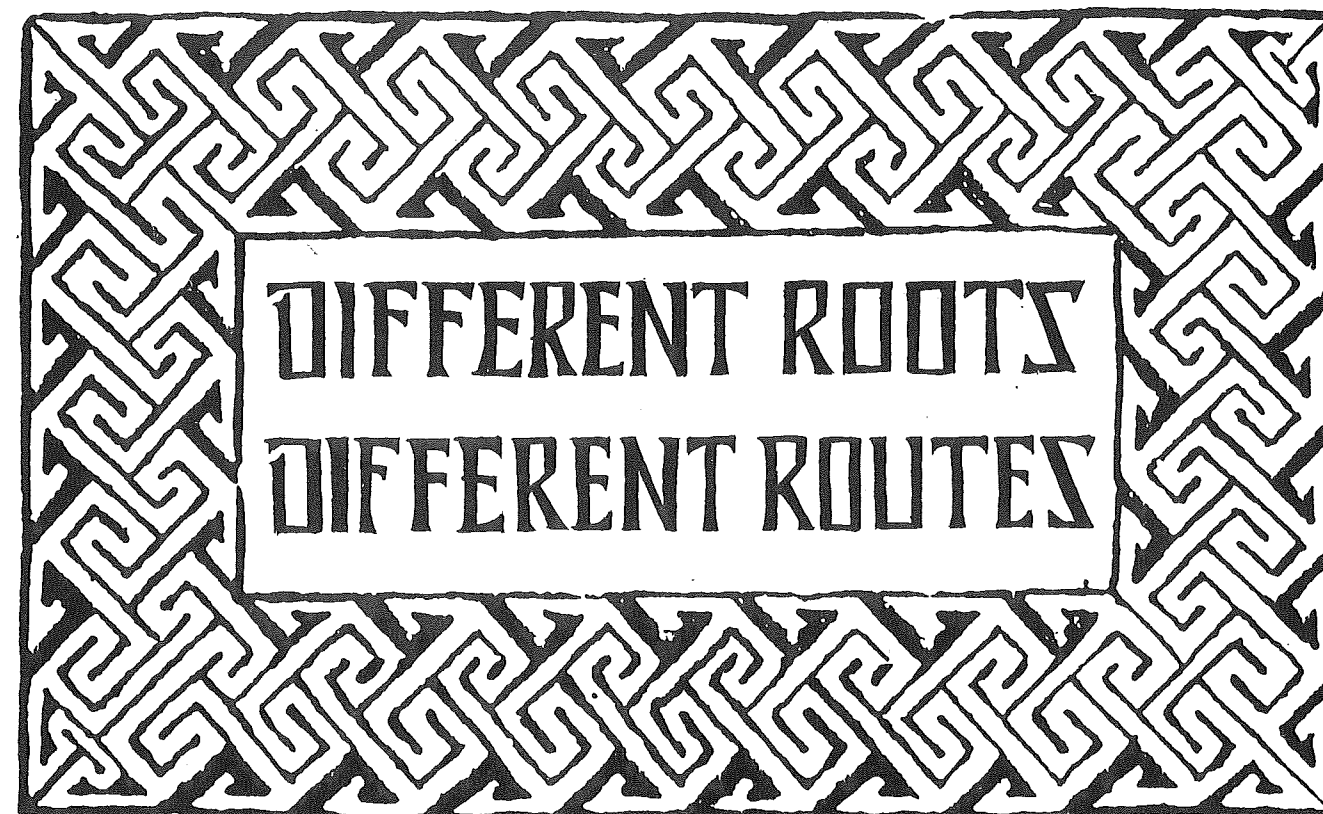
I had my nose rubbed in the politics of in vitro fertilisation, ovum harvesting, and other high cost gynaecological medical procedures when I worked at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. At that time (around 1980) Hopkins had decided against

heavily investing in an in vitro fertilisation program, and the head of obstetrics and gynaecology was giving lectures to the doctors about the risks of doing unnecessary hysterectomies. Not that everyone was pushing for more resources going to public health and preventative medicine. Some doctors were making their names by publishing research on how their method of reversing female sterilisation was the most effective and cheapest and writing grant proposals to set up reversal clinics in third world countries. Reversing sterilisation is *not* a nasty thing to do to a woman who has been sterilised against her will — the problem is that even the cheapest operation costs at least £3,000 worth of hospital resources, and can actually reverse only 20 per cent of the unwanted sterilisations. The crime was that little money was being spent on preventing sterilisation abuse, by informing women about what sterilisation means.

Reproductive technologies typically are prone to this sort of abuse. Doctors were making reputations and money off of operations that use expensive equipment. Political battles were taking place within the medical profession, and between government and the health care establishment about where money should be invested. Marge's article drove home the idea that the power structure is the problem, that it's no use conjuring up stories a la Frankenstein's monster and claiming that reality of reproductive technology is more frightening than fiction.

I hope Marge's article provokes women to consider the idea that technology, like all knowledge, gives the person who understands it additional power — that is, ability to do things. Of course women have to participate in controlling how technology is communicated and used, as well as actually being technologists — that's what women's liberation is about.

Alice Henry  
London N16



*Zehra, a Turkish lesbian, has compiled this article from interviews with lesbians from a wide variety of different backgrounds. They describe struggles with heterosexism and racism, and the insecurity of being an immigrant or a refugee. They discuss the wealth of differences concealed by terms like 'ethnic minorities', as well as the need for political solidarity.*

The article which follows is based on a research project in which, through interviews, the common and different experiences of Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Immigrant, Refugee, Irish, Jewish or other 'ethnic minority' lesbians were explored. It came out of my experience as an immigrant lesbian in London who found it very difficult to break into lesbian networks here, and meet lesbians like myself.

There is little or no information available about our lives. While this situation continues we will remain 'invisible' and denied basic human rights such as a safe place to live in the world, housing, independent immigration status, the right to a

social and sexual lifestyle of our own choice, and to our children. Whilst this article draws on only a few of the interviews, a collective of women who contributed to the research is working to produce a book which will do justice to the extent and richness of the material.

This is only a beginning. In using the words of the women themselves I hope to start to raise many of the issues which are important to all of us.

**We exist**

The first point to come out of this research is that as Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Irish,



Jewish, Immigrant, Refugee and other 'ethnic minority' lesbians, *we exist*. The lesbians from such diverse backgrounds who contributed against all odds and in spite of all difficulties are proof of this. Zetta, who is Greek, says:

'This project you are doing now, it made me feel so good about myself you just can't imagine . . . because I thought, oh I said, that's me you know. Any kind of lesbian thing you read just does not mention you anywhere, it is like you don't exist. And you end up identifying with as so called lesbian and a lot of your interests and things you find you are just assumed to be the same like English women, for example, and they're not. They are different.'

Many other women talked about the ways in which they and their communities are different from the society at large in which they were brought up, or came to live.

'The Jewish culture within my family came out in various ways. My mum's relatives — some speaking in Yiddish, particularly the older members of the family, singing. We had foods that other children didn't have, and although I didn't know the significance of that until later, there were lots of everyday things that sound quite small in themselves, but which differentiate us from the people around. I can remember feeling those differences being reinforced by what went on in primary school. Anyone who wasn't baptised in the Church of England couldn't go into the assembly, you had to wait outside. It was never explained to me why.'

Rachael, a Jewish lesbian born and brought up in this country continues . . .

'I often don't feel English. I associate English or British with quite middle-class people who have a lot of confidence that their ways of doing things are *the* ways to do it, that there aren't any others, and if there are, they don't matter.'

Kath, an Irish woman, describes her separateness from the English working class community in which she grew up.

'Growing up I felt different, looking back to a London where the dominant culture was English working class, where the common oppression of poverty and life as a day to day struggle united us, but only to a point. When one of us kids broke a neighbour's window with a ball . . . we were the 'mad Irish family' that no kid would play with and adults would avoid. All the insults were related to our Irishness — we were 'paddies' or 'candles' (Catholics), different and therefore to be treated with suspicion and/or contempt.'

As I grew older 'passing' as English, or neutral or Anglicised at times was more or less necessary and attractive. This was always

with a sense of disloyalty and self-consciousness. It was possible outwardly but never comfortable and always, the wheel came full circle. Passing is not belonging, it is denying. Although since childhood other 'differences' have emerged or been chosen, the 'difference' or 'otherness' of my childhood was being Irish.'

### *Being Black does not mean we are all the same*

Nur, a Turkish Cypriot, identifies as a Black woman and stresses the importance of holding on to various parts of her identity.

'I describe myself as a Black Turkish Cypriot. My mum identifies as coloured. She would see Black as negative — the dark family, not Black. Within the Turkish community there is racism because we are all different. But it isn't only skin colour. My great-grandmother was an African by birth. If I hadn't been told that, I'd have nothing to relate to . . .

I don't practice being a Moslem but I still cannot deny I am a Moslem. There is so much more than religion — there is a whole culture, my way of being. Especially here, I need to identify with my whole upbringing which makes me what I am. Negative or not, if I deny that, I deny a lot. It is like denying my blackness — it gives the white society something to use for their negative beliefs and helps to sabotage the culture I have.'

Asha, an Asian lesbian, describes how she differs from white lesbians as:

'Simply not being white.'

There are factors that bind us together as Rachael expresses through saying she has:

'Something in common with other women who've had an experience of being different.'

But, it is also

'important to have a kind of solidarity in opposing the definitions of you as the 'other'.'

Blacks, whether they are from Africa or the Caribbean or elsewhere, are also different from each other. Sonya:

' . . . but like I grew up in a white community between the ages of 8 and 18. And I had a very hard time. And I never fitted in. I never felt that I fitted in. That had lots of repercussions and when I came to London at 18, I thought very much that I wanted to fit into the Black culture . . . And a lot of Black people saw me as being very English. Kinda like speaking with this accent. Where do you think you are? And that was really difficult. And finally I realised that it was about being Guyanese as well. A lot of the community was Jamaican so we weren't seeing eye to eye.'

Linda, another Afro-Caribbean lesbian:

'As Black women, we have our differences

and diversities. Defining ourselves as Black has not meant and can never mean we are the same. We may be from Pakistan, Nigeria, Jamaica or St Lucia, and as the Black lesbian movement grows, those differences will have a greater chance to develop which, to my mind, is a source of strength to us. By defining as Black we arm ourselves to fight the racism we collectively and individually experience, but we must also give each other space to explore the cultural differences between us.'

Another important point to emerge from the research is the need, whatever the differences, for the ethnic group to stay together and be uniform in the face of a hostile environment because it is much more painful to be rejected by one's own people, whose support one desperately needs for survival against overt and subtle racism.

Lee, who is Afro-Caribbean, says:

'I find it easier I think to handle homophobia in white society from white people, you know, because I think they are trash anyway, right, and I just tell them to fuck off. I find it more difficult with my Black brothers and sisters because I need them and I don't want there to be a split, I do want us to be together you know, and I want us to each accept each other as we are and recognise our common aims and recognise our common differences and common oppression.'

### *Racism affects all of us*

Overt and covert racism is mentioned by different lesbians and not just Afro-Caribbean lesbians. Lina, an Arab lesbian says:

'The first year I had been here, I met this Arab lesbian who was born here . . . and she had a black eye and she had been kicked at a women's bar by some white lesbians who called her a wog and kicked her out. She still has a deaf ear after that and her spine is still not functioning.'

Rachael describes learning about racism as a very young child.

'When I was little, just learning to write, I didn't know many words but I was learning how to do the alphabet. I came home and found something written on our front door and I was very interested in this and took quite a long time copying down this writing. Eventually I showed it to my mum and her reaction was very, very shocking. She screamed and slapped me round the face. I discovered afterwards that what I had written down was "filthy Jews go back to Israel". When she explained it to me, I didn't understand. I didn't know what Israel was, we had never lived there so how could we go back there? But I think I understood that there were people who hated us.'

Racism threatens our lives to the extent that quite a few of us have to decide on our priorities. Almost always, when we are faced with a choice of deciding whether we have to fight against heterosexism and homophobia or racism, it is racism we organise against first and foremost. On the other hand, some of us do not believe that one can only fight one oppression at a time. We feel we cannot and will not live in a fragmented way where all our pieces never come together. We are, eg Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, Irish, Jewish lesbians and we are working class or middle class, employed or unemployed, as well as being able bodied or disabled, also mothers, all at the same time. Kath:

'It is interesting how both my Irish sisters and my English sisters have wanted to deny me my ethnicity. I do not have an Irish accent and therefore cannot be Irish, when the entire pattern and events of my life have been as a result of Irish racism in Britain. Would they so readily deny my lesbianism when I live with a woman lover or my disability when I'm seen in my wheelchair? Do oppressions have to be visible to be acceptable to and accepted by my 'sisters'? Is there a hierarchy of oppressions in the Women's Liberation Movement where my Irishness features on the bottom rung and my disability in the higher echelons? Just as I need recognition and consideration of my needs as a woman with a disability, I also require recognition as a lesbian, as a mother, as a working-class woman and as an Irish woman. Are multiple oppressions too much for my sisters to take on board, or is it a case of triple oppression equals double the freak? Or are there just too many guilt buttons being pressed?'

Havva, a Turkish Cypriot lesbian says:

'I want to be free to be who I am.'

### *Being a lesbian*

Being a lesbian, particularly Black and 'ethnic minority' lesbian, is seen as leading to a political awareness of oppression that is unique. Barbara, an Afro-Caribbean lesbian, puts it in the following words,

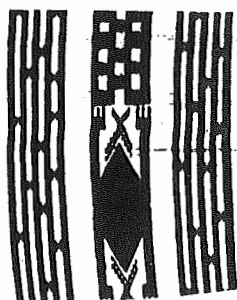
'I think that I am so aware of so many different things now, that if I was straight and white and middle class, I would just have these blinkers on, and going along these straight little railway tracks and I wouldn't think of anything else . . .'

But there were many criticisms of the lack of support and racism found amongst the white English lesbian community.

Zetta, a Greek lesbian:

'To get certain things that English lesbians take for granted, I had to really struggle for and had a lot of conflict about — for them





it was nothing. You've got to have the confidence to do things, but you don't have it if they are not acknowledging your existence.'

Rachael:

'At first I thought it was me, other people had this social ease. But I realised that there were codes going on — very strict things, ways you had to dress, things you had to say, food you had to eat.'

Zetta again:

'English, white lesbians have different power, naturally — you are in their country, you speak their language, you can be kicked out at any time. If you want a relationship rather than 'power over', then it's a lot of hard work.'

### Political refugees

For immigrant and refugee lesbians, there are additional issues to deal with. On top of the agenda is the insecurity of one's 'leave to remain in the UK'. There are no provisions made for political refugees who were themselves torture victims or witnessed their loved ones being tortured. A lesbian who is also a political refugee says she was strip searched upon arrival at Heathrow airport. No help is given to immigrants and refugees to make it easier for them to come to grips with the British system. A Chilean lesbian, who is a political refugee in this country says:

'It is a human right that we are entitled to some kind of assistance . . . We are the consequences of political conflict which this country, as well as other industrialised countries, has benefitted from.'

Language teaching provision is inadequate in that it does not quickly equip one to be able to communicate with people. Employment is a very shady area for those who have no work experience in this country, particularly for those with a language difficulty. The qualifications immigrants and refugees have acquired in their own countries are not recognised. On top of all this, especially if you are a political refugee, you are asked to sign a piece of paper saying you are not going to get involved in politics. Immigrants, for fear of being deported, are also reluctant to get involved with politics. Zetta puts this in a nutshell:

'All the time, all the time . . . everyday I lived under the fear of being kicked out of this country even if I as much as breathed. You have to behave a certain way, watch every single movement, not breathe, not engage in any political activity because in case you get arrested, you will be deported. You might

be a bloody doctor in your own country and you come here and you have to be a road sweeper. So what does that do to your personality, your self-esteem and your confidence? You get crushed completely. Then you are being treated like an imbecile because you don't speak their fucking language. Your stay here is totally precarious all the time . . . day to day survival level, your reality is totally different, dictated by very different forces that they take for granted. I realised that I am not even entitled to vote in this fucking country. And I have been here for 14 years . . .'

Lesbians are not recognised as couples when it comes to immigration rules. You might have been lovers with a British lesbian for ten years. As far as the Home Office is concerned, that does not give you the right to live with your lover in this country. Now, were you both different sexes, it would have been a different story. You could get married and that would legitimise your togetherness for the Home Office to consider your case. When it comes to the definition of what constitutes a political refugee, lesbians who are persecuted, and at times killed, on account of their sexuality do not get any recognition.

### Common concerns

There are also concerns that Black and "ethnic minority" lesbians have in common with white, gentile, indigenous lesbians. The recognition of lesbians as couples is not just necessary for immigration purposes but for all aspects of life from hospital visiting rights to bereavement, inheritance, housing etc. Some of the lesbians interviewed wanted to see lesbians projected more positively in the media, and lesbianism and lesbian works to be a part of school curriculum. Lee says:

'I am not one of those statistics that jumped out of the window.'

This is another way of saying how much of a difficult time we all have in order to be what we are.

A lot of the women were very concerned about custody cases and children. Some expressed a need for more information to be available on artificial insemination. Quite a few of the lesbians would also like to adopt and foster children. Fatima, an Arab lesbian:

'I have a very large family and have always taken pleasure in looking after young children. I don't think that I will have children myself, but I would like to adopt, which is a problem . . .'

Kath:

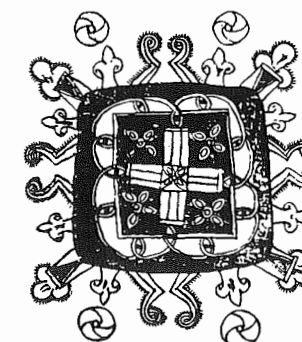
'The hardest battle of them all was lesbianism, versus my children. The mixture of catholic guilt about sexuality, of deserted, motherless children, the shame brought upon my family and no comfort from a religion which regarded me as an abomination — drove me to the very edge of despair . . . I expected never to be able to take my children home to see Eire, and meet their family. However, my family were, with the passage of time, much more accepting than I had anticipated. I have taken my children home three years running and we have been made very welcome, a sense of belonging has returned. My children are growing with a sense of 'otherness', but in a positive knowledge of their roots.'

### Recognising our needs

The following points emerge from all the issues raised so far:

- \* It should be acknowledged that we exist.
- \* It should also be acknowledged that we are different from white, gentile, indigenous lesbians and some of our needs are different from theirs.
- \* It should be borne in mind that we not only suffer from heterosexism, homophobia, sexism, phobias around people with disabilities and ageism but from racism as well.
- \* The fact that there are differences stemming from our different roots should also be taken into consideration.
- \* We should be given the space and the opportunity to be what we are: from our own centres, telephone lines to our own projects.
- \* Immigrant lesbians should be allowed to stay with their lovers on the strength of their relationships.
- \* Lesbians who are suffering from persecution in their country on account of their gender and sexuality should be given asylum.
- \* Our sexuality should not be a factor in decisions around custody of our children.
- \* Lesbian couples should be recognised in so far as housing needs, inheritance and hospital visits are concerned.
- \* Lesbians should be allowed to adopt and foster children.
- \* There should be adequate information on artificial insemination.
- \* More lesbian venues should be run by Black and 'ethnic minority' lesbians.

This article, so far, has tried to present some of the experiences, feelings and needs



of lesbians who come from very diverse ethnic backgrounds. I would like to now celebrate the fact that we exist and that all these brave women came forward to share their worlds with us so that we would no longer be invisible. I would like to welcome our differences from each other and from white, gentile, indigenous lesbians while rejoicing in our common experiences that bind us together.

We also acknowledge the help and support received from our white, gentile, indigenous lesbian friends at different times in our lives. We need to be nourished and supported by our own communities. We have to fight against racism and state powers that threaten our very existence, individually and together. The joy we derive from being what we are gives us the strength, resilience and determination to do this. Because we have been the 'other' as lesbians and as women coming from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, we are politically and emotionally aware of all sorts of oppressions. We struggle against these oppressions in different ways. We do not give up . . . we do not go under. We grow through all difficulties and become more loving. I celebrate our energy, vigour, our humour . . . tenderness. I celebrate our different roots/routes. □

The lesbians who contributed to this project were the ones I met through contacts or those who responded to a letter. To date, 39 lesbians have contributed to the research. Some circulated in the feminist press and through women's organisations chose to write about their experience while others were interviewed on tape. Some of them used their own names, some chose other names to be identified by and others preferred to remain nameless.

Out of the 39 lesbians interviewed, seven are Afro-Caribbean, five Jewish, two half-Jewish/half-Irish (although according to Jewish law they would both be Jewish since their mothers are), two Asian, three Turkish Cypriot, two Greek, two Arab, two Spanish, four Irish, one Iranian, three Chinese, one Gibraltarian, one Russian, one American, one Latin American, one mixed race and one Italian. The ages ranged from 17 to early 60s.

The thrust of the research was dealing with unprivileged lesbians who were on the receiving end of overt and covert racism and who experienced multifold oppressions. Hence, white Australians, Canadians, Americans, West/Northern Europeans were not the study of this project.

The research was funded by the Ethnic Minorities Unit of the Greater London Council through the Migrant Services Unit of the London Voluntary Services Council.

# Fit for what?

*What are the implications of the new craze for weight-training? Are bulging biceps a recipe for revolution? Anna Wilson reviews Jeanette Winterson's "Fit for the Future".*

I suspect that weight-training may be popular among lesbians because it allows us to revive, to revel in, the pursuit of a rather older butch ideal under the guise of fashionable obsession with the body beautiful. For the lesbian it is a rare treat to have her disreputable preferences indulged by fashion. When I was weight-training my satisfaction with the new muscle that appeared in my abdomen, along my arms, spoke to an unresolved imperative that I carry with me, one that still equates masculinity and its attributes with power. I no longer want (it seems reasonable to assume I speak for lesbians in general on this) to be a man, since alternative, less destructive routes to independence and self-respect have opened up. Nevertheless, I continue to covet the old trappings that seek to make concrete our freedom from the submission that femininity implies. This understanding of my own ambivalence leads me to think of weight-training as an undesirable, potentially reactionary activity. In *Fit for the Future* Jeanette Winterson presents it as the opposite, as a means towards revolution. On examination, her 'revolution' is not feminist, nor even liberal; it is the old self-help capitalist doctrine in new clothes.

Winterson's message is simple: put yourself through my programme and change your life. This is familiar enough; we've been reading it in the magazines since we were teenagers — and Winterson knows this as well as anyone. So she is at pains to point out the absurdities of standards of beauty imposed on women in the past and to assure us that her programme is different. It is different because it is about "creating yourself in your own image".

This statement is, no doubt, intended to inspire us with happy visions of some

pure, quintessentially female ideal, untainted by male-constructed definitions of femininity. But it means nothing. Without a theory through which we can learn to escape from existing male ideology about the female image, "our own image" can only be a product of the same forces that give us a desire to have a wasp waist; it can only be another version of constructed femininity. And Winterson signally omits to give us any such theory.

## *Let them eat pasta*

Having set up the muscular woman as this absolute, untainted ideal, (somehow) different from those ideals that have gone before because (somehow) free from social pressures, *Fit for the Future* sets out to tell us how to get there. As with all these regimes, sacrifice is required, mainly in this case financial. We are told that we can afford the annual membership of the gym if we really want to. It's a question of really wanting to. (Winterson doesn't actually mention figures, but the one she goes to costs more than £200 a year.) Then there are the indulgences; we must learn to give ourselves treats, after the manner of the middle-classes in the '80s. *Fit for the Future* suggests that we lay off the cheap wine and give ourselves a quick fling with champagne and fresh pasta instead; that we give ourselves a little holiday from care: "you deserve a light supper, some fine wine and a few free hours under the duvet". What happens to the baby in this weird Sunday supplement existence? Do we put a pillow over its head for the duration? And if we've spent the week's food money on champagne, will baked beans for the rest of the week keep us fit?

Perhaps we're not supposed to care that *Fit for the Future* ignores the realities of

poverty, ageing, disability (so what's new?). Perhaps we're not supposed to care that this year's yuppies\* are going to be rippling their trapeziuses with erotic intent and indulging in dubious sexual practices ("living well sexually involves pushing yourself to strange heights of pleasure and danger"; SM meets the sexual revolution). Perhaps it doesn't matter, either, that Winterson wilfully confuses fitness with the results of weight-training. For, although she makes the distinction, buried deep in the middle of the book, between the strength and muscle that weight-training can provide and the increased heart/lung capacity that can only be achieved from aerobic activities such as swimming or running, Winterson uses 'fit' throughout to refer to the effects of working-out in a gym. It would be easy to conclude from the book that weights will, for instance, improve your breathing or lower your pulse rate. They won't; they'll simply make you look what we currently define as fit.

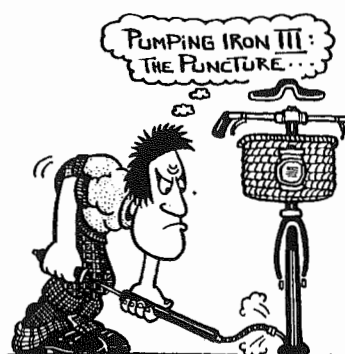
Winterson goes to great lengths to be upfront about her advocacy of narcissism. She presents this as the most outrageous thing she has to say, the main aspect of her creed that will have feminists wringing their hands in horror. But this self-indulgence is, in fact, neither here nor there; what does matter is the way this book masquerades as something other than it is, and in so doing reinforces an oppressive message. "You need a revolution", she tells us. I agree. But so, I contend, does the rest of the world. Winterson goes on: "As you give yourself over to living well, you find . . . resources

that allow you to drop the bullshit where it belongs". This is not even the language of the growth movement; revolution reduced to individual solutions. Here even the mind is secondary; we need only concern ourselves with the body. All you need, it seems, is willpower. I pump my intercostals and bring the social security system to its knees.

Although submerged in the middle of *Fit for the Future* are some worthwhile insights into the ways in which women's strengths are devalued in the male hierarchy of sport, Winterson lays no claim to being a feminist. She apparently only aspires to yuppie-hood; and *Fit for the Future* is for those women who want to be yuppies too. I can live with that. What is immoral is her use of the language of liberation to perpetuate our bondage and her apparent conviction that it is really only our own stupid fault if we are not glowing, muscular and professional.

Oh and yes, I tried weight-training for the three months that Winterson suggests, and, as I said, it did indeed produce a muscled torso. I admit to rather enjoying looking at this in the mirror. Thus far, so good. As I was celibate during this period I am unable to say whether it really does affect one's sexual performance. I cannot claim that women flocked about me in droves in the shower room. As for revolution, personal or otherwise, it seems as distant as ever. And once you stop lifting weights, your new muscle turns to fat. Hee hee. □

\*"Yuppie", noun, meaning "young, upwardly-mobile, professional person".



Jeanette Winterson *Fit for the Future* (Pandora 1986).



CATH JACKSON

# A Whiter Shade of Purple

'E.T.', 'Gremlins' and now 'The Color Purple'. Dorothy Francis watches Steven Spielberg transform Alice Walker's revolutionary novel into a tear-jerking soap opera, fit for all the family.

As a Black woman whose perspective on life was significantly altered and enriched by the publication of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, I was naturally apprehensive when the news broke that Steven Spielberg was to adapt the novel for the screen. I was curious to know how he, as a white, middle-class man intended to treat the book. I didn't expect it to be faithfully translated onto film, but I certainly did not anticipate the travesty which resulted.

To give it credit, one has to admit that from a technical point of view, it is a 'good' film. It is well directed, beautifully photographed and, for the most part, extremely well acted. This is, however, where praise ends.

There is a trend in America at present towards the popular mass marketing of Black culture aimed at the ever-hungry white majority. What was once dismissed as being crude and vulgar is now seen as 'sweet' and 'quaint'. White America is lining up to taste the culture of the people whom they have systematically rejected and humiliated over the past 500 years. What is more, it is the white population not the Black who are gaining financially from this trend. Spielberg is to be found guilty of jumping onto this particular band-wagon as well as cashing in on the current popularity of women's writings. His selection of *The Color Purple* for his latest film was based on an entrepreneurial impulse. I do not believe that he at any time intended to sympathetically portray Black people or women — if he did, then he failed miserably.

## Sweet little aliens

I had the overwhelming impression that after *E.T.* and *Gremlins*, he cast about and thought to himself "What sweet little aliens

can I portray next?". It wasn't necessary this time to venture into outer space to find his aliens — just to the south of America. The portrayal of Black people in *The Color Purple* is remarkably similar to the depiction of the sweet little creatures in *E.T.* and *Gremlins*, ie they are a funny colour, have big eyes, are helpless and totally dependant on outside forces for protection — children in *E.T.* and *Gremlins*, white people in *The Color Purple*.

However cuddly and appealing they might appear, one thing is certain, these 'aliens' are definitely not part of 'our' world. Spielberg reduces Black people to non-humans, creatures to be petted, cared for and wept over, but not admitted to society. They belong, like *E.T.*, to another galaxy.

The film is far removed from the everyday realities of Black people, it glamourises and glosses over the situation of most American Blacks. My argument lies not with the fact that living conditions were shown to be comfortable and affluent, but with the assumption that all Black people lived like this.

Incest, rape and child abuse are dealt with at great length — weighting the film in a way that I found emotionally unsound, towards the seedier and more sensational side of life. The treatment of these subjects is also problematic, as insensitive as a tabloid newspaper, and in the same way. It presents violence to women as sensational interludes, tearjerkers, without the political and historical context of 500 years of slavery and racism. Certainly without the power of Walker's analysis.

## Bonds between women

The uniting element in the novel is the love

of women (sometimes sexual, most times not) for each other. The bond of sisterhood, which has held Black women together over the years and continues to do so, is a strong narrative thread in the original story. Squeak raises Sophia's children as if they were her own. Nettie and Celie love each other unseen for many years; their love endures separation of time and distance. Yet in the film, the love between women is trivialised or completely dismissed, and this is what I find most distressing of all.

The strength of Alice Walker's novel has its source in the strength of the female characters. They, and their love for each other, are the foundations upon which the novel is built. The portrayal of women in the film completely contradicts this. Instead of being strong and resolute, women are seen as insecure, child-like figures who are constantly trying to gain the acceptance of men; for example, Shug's desperate attempts to get her preacher father to accept her and forgive her 'sin' of having had two children out of wedlock. This culminates in the final vaudeville/Black and white minstrel-like church scene where Shug is down on her knees, in tears, begging her father for forgiveness. When it is offered, we are led to believe that Shug finally becomes a complete woman! This scene was not in the original story and can only be seen as the filmmaker's attempt to raise men from the secondary role they have in the novel into a more central position, thereby distorting the focus and effect of the work.

The love between Celie and Shug is reduced to a chaste peck on the cheek, to the sound of violins — no talk of clitoris "buttons" here! This marginalisation makes it hard to understand the overwhelming love and increase in self respect and strength which Shug brings into Celie's life.

## Tears

Celie's other passion, for her sister Nettie, keeps her surviving for most of her life, is the mainspring of her hope which eventually even replaces her love of god. This is also reduced to sentimentality and even comedy on the screen. The powerful scene where the sisters are physically wrenched apart by "Mr" evoked laughter in the audience I viewed the film with, instead of tears.

And why did Spielberg feel compelled to stick to racist, stereotypical depictions of Africa? His completely out of context use of a 'barbaric' African scarring ceremony emphasised savagery and violence.

This film leaves me with many more questions. Why did the music, at times, threaten to drown the dialogue with its weeping emotionalism? Why so many long, soulful shots of gently diffused light falling onto Black faces? Why so much slapstick comedy which undermined the seriousness of the film? Maybe if some of these questions had been addressed before the film was made it would have gone down in history as a classic Black film. As it stands, however, it is sadly lacking. Many of the audience, including myself, left with tears in their eyes, but mine were of anger and sadness. I wept with disappointment for what could have been a brilliant and important film. □

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, The Women's Press, new edn. 1986.





JUDY STEVENS

# GROWING OLD DISGRACEFULLY

*Sue Leigh questions attitudes to middle age. What constraints do we inflict on each other? In resisting society's demeaning prescriptions, are we writing new limited parts — The Middle Aged Woman as Survivor, Sage or just Settled Down?*

"A woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs. She finds the houses and streets where her childhood happened. She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next."

Grace Paley, *The Long Distance Runner*, 1974

There is a political dimension to ageism that we are silent about and unless we name it we can't understand it. Ageism is prejudice and prejudice contains within it ideas whose hidden purpose is to keep certain groups in their place. One way of achieving this is that these groups are taught to accept negative images of themselves. Prejudice also carries within it rigid rules of acceptable behaviour for these groups; for example within sexism there are rules about what is considered acceptable feminine behaviour

for women. One way in which dissidents who do not accept these rules of conduct are sanctioned is through ridicule — remember all the attempts to ridicule feminists in the early '70s by calling them 'ugly', 'man-hating', 'lesbians', and how we turned this abuse around. The insults used against older women who do not conform are just as vitriolic — 'mutton dressed as lamb', 'retarded adolescent', 'going through the change therefore hysterical/mad'.

The way in which middle-aged women are undermined is by describing them as useless, because they are past childbearing age, and no longer sexually attractive. Few people have pointed out the social significance of all this. Women in their forties and

fifties are often freed from childraising and may well have fewer responsibilities, and sometimes greater economic independence, making them 'freer' than before and still having many years of active, healthy life. Middle-aged women are therefore a potentially subversive group. They have to be kept in their place economically by making it more difficult for older women to find and change jobs or start a new career, by giving them the job of caring for elderly and infirm relatives. They are kept in their place psychologically by being consistently undervalued by society, and through the way in which women are made to feel inferior throughout their lives so that they have a lifetime of negative images which are then added to with all the adverse impressions they have built up around what it means to be a middle-aged woman.

## 'Being your age'

The shock for me has been the way in which many feminists of my age group have ignored the problems we are all experiencing, and, on a totally personal level the response of these women to me. There seem to be hidden rules of acceptable behaviour for middle-aged women which I missed out on somewhere along the line. I feel I am supposed to have a regular job, permanent housing, and generally have settled down. It's OK to be a lesbian, more than OK to be a feminist, great to be anti-nuke, but in private life style, dress, behaviour, musical/cultural tastes you should definitely have settled down by forty.

I started this article because of recent personal experiences. I had never bothered about ageing and most of my friendships are with younger women. But I felt I needed to talk with other lesbians who had grown up through the same decades as myself: the 40s, 50s and 60s. I began to seek friendships with older women. But, as often happens when you deliberately associate with a particular group with whom you have only one common point of reference, I found that my somewhat nomadic lifestyle didn't fit in with theirs, and that I appeared to be asking uncomfortable questions.

I also had the painful experience of going on the 1985 Gay Pride March with an Older Lesbian Network banner, which was only supported by one other woman, and

being giggled at by quite a few older lesbians on that march — the 'not me, not yet syndrome'? (Very few women turned up to support the banner on the Lesbian Strength March either.)

At the moment I'm living in a small town in Andalucia, with my lover. We are running a vegetarian restaurant in the summer, and are providing B&B accommodation for women who want to come and stay. Our dream is to raise enough cash to get a women's hotel going down here and this is the first step. With one exception all my letters and visitors so far have been women under 40. There was one post card from an older woman which was insulting in its patronage.

The response I get from older feminists is not to overtly insult me, but is based on thinly veiled patronage. The unspoken 'be your age' which I can see in their eyes when they say things like "I think you are very brave to do such and such". These responses contain hidden rules about expected behaviour which mask a great many fears that they are unwilling to talk about in terms of why we are supposed to do certain things at certain times in our lives, and how these ideas on appropriate behaviour for certain age groups are kept alive because they help to keep us in our place. All this led to feelings of insecurity about not having a peer group with which I could identify now, and friends of my age to accompany me into my 50s and 60s.

The response to me by some younger feminists, and they are very much in the minority, is to revere me for my powers of survival and my political history whilst at the same time not really listening to my opinions because they see me as a person of the past not of now.

I was also starting to go through distinct body changes which made me feel that the home I occupy (my body) had become a strange place to me and might become vulnerable to disease and frailty at any time. Needless to say it didn't this time, and I feel I've taken control of my health again, but ageing being the process it is, things could easily change within the next twenty years.

I haven't read anything which attempts to challenge the negative images of middle-age and relate them to the effects they have

on middle-aged women themselves.

Low self image is prevalent in women of all ages, and therapy and feminist groups have not been able to provide a complete panacea for all our insecurities. For example a great deal of feminist work has been done on body image, both in books and within women's groups, but most feminists would still admit to feeling insecure about their physical appearance because we are overwhelmed by the messages of stereotypical good looks which come to us from all directions. In the same way social attitudes to appearance and middle age are difficult to ignore. Wrinkles are not beautiful or



sexy, Tina Turner is. Tina Turner is the living proof that in spite of our age we can (or rather should) be skinny, wrinkle free and have amazing legs especially if we 'look after ourselves', and this is the catch, if we are not skinny and wrinkle free it's OUR fault.

#### *The Gloria Gaynor syndrome*

There is another aspect of Tina Turner which is also used to create a certain image of middle age — she has suffered. Battered by her husband for years she is said to have refused to play the lead in the film of Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* because she said it was too similar to what she herself had had to live through. Edith Piaf, Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith were all middle-aged women whose legends of suffering survived their deaths in such a compelling way that Robyn Archer, the singer, based a whole show around them called *A Star is Torn*. All women have survival stories regardless of age, but there is something slightly voyeuristic about the

way in which the survival stories of middle-aged women are over romanticised, which I shall call the Gloria Gaynor syndrome. My personal survival story is far from romantic because it happened so slowly, and was often based on getting through one day after another and painfully gaining new insights and ideas which helped me to visualise the kind of life I wanted to lead. What I don't want is to be revered for my powers of survival of things which shouldn't have happened to me in the first place. Reverence for survival prevents women from changing the circumstances which women have to survive. Besides, reverence makes me feel uncomfortable. I want validation for the life I am leading now, for the person I am now and for the things I am trying to do.

But what is most distressing is that the women's movement is not providing me with the kind of support needed to counteract the overt ageism which is present in society as a whole. This means having an analysis of what ageism is about, and attempting to assume a more positive approach to middle age. There are few feminist studies on middle age and no analysis of the politics of middle age, nor much information on the physical changes all women experience as they get older. To take the physical changes first; contrast the attention given by feminist health books to the menopause and health care for older women with the vast numbers of books and pamphlets on childbearing and menstruation. Here is a prime example of middle-aged women being made invisible. There has also been hardly any discussion around the social construction of middle age as a distinct period of life, and the way in which this affects attitudes and behaviour towards middle-aged women, and the image we middle-aged women have of ourselves.

By naming ourselves, as much as 'society', as the carriers of ageism I do not mean to put women down so much as prod them into starting a discussion which names the feelings we have about ourselves and each other. This article is an attempt to make sense of all this, and writing it has helped me to feel that I'll just get on with my life as it is "and learn . . . what in the world is coming next". □

## You're a Dyke, Angela!



*Why were schoolgirl stories so popular in the 1920s? What were the sinister forces that later eradicated them from the publishers' lists? Rosemary Auchmuty investigates the mysterious disappearance of the Girls from the Abbey School . . .*

Jen's eager eyes widened in delight when Rhoda returned, followed up the drive by a tall, sunny-faced girl in khaki tunic and breeches and big boots, a shady hat covering her yellow hair, which was tied in a bunch of curls behind. Rena was tanned and healthy and straight, strong with a year's work in the moorland garden at Rocklands, and very pleasant to look at. Her gardening outfit was neat and useful, and suited her, and she looked ready for tramping the heather, digging, mowing, tennis, or morris dancing at a moment's notice.

She touched her hat in a boyish salute, as she came up to the couch. Jen stretched out her hands with an eager cry . . .  
(*Jen of the Abbey School*, 1925, p.92/93)

Friendships have always provided women with vital social, emotional, professional and political support. They are also important in any examination of the construction of sexu-

ality. Tolerated, even encouraged, when perceived to keep women content and not meddling in men's affairs, they become profoundly threatening whenever women seem to be banding together to plot against men's power, either publicly (like the suffragettes) or privately (as lesbians, for instance). Because schoolgirl stories are fundamentally about female strength and bonding, they provide an interesting example of a phenomenon which was at first tolerated and even encouraged, but which came to be seen as a threat of such magnitude it had to be exterminated.

#### *Playing the game*

School stories were a Victorian creation product of the middle class that emerged in

The only attempt I have seen which looks at the histories of women born around the time of the Second World War, and who were therefore teenagers in the '50s, is the oral history book *A Wealth Of Experience* edited by Susan Hemmings. Her introduction is the best account I have read of what it means to have grown up in the '40s. She relates how women of my generation missed out on many opportunities because of the social and economic climate of the first three decades of our lives.

Susan Hemmings (ed) *A Wealth of Experience* (Pandora 1985).

Britain after the Industrial Revolution and rose to cultural domination in the 19th century. The long haul up the social ladder was accomplished by means of education. New public schools like Marlborough and Rugby, set up for middle-class boys, were copied by the pioneers of girls' education, at Cheltenham, St Leonard's, Wycombe Abbey and Roedean. Lacking an alternative model for a genuinely equal girls' schooling, feminists like Emily Davies campaigned for a structure and curriculum identical with boys', garnished with the odd concession to 'feminine accomplishments'. They argued that men would never take women seriously unless they could be seen to succeed in the same system. Middle-class girls' schools thus acquired the familiar characteristics of boys' schools: examinations, compulsory games, school uniforms, prefects, a moral code based on honour, loyalty and playing the game; and, of course, they were single-sex institutions. These ideas were taken over in turn by the girls' high schools and passed on, after the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, to Board School children by ex-students who went into teaching. Hence, although the schoolgirl culture and the books which described it were the privilege of a small proportion of the population, compulsory education created a large new reading public steeped in middle-class ideals and aspirations, who were to become the main market for the schoolgirl story.

The credit for writing the first Victorian school story belongs not to Thomas Hughes for his *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), but to Harriet Martineau, whose novel, *The Crofton Boys* appeared in 1841. Girls' school stories were a later development. The real founder of the genre must be Angela Brazil (1869–1947), who published her first school story in 1906 and went on to write nearly 50 more. The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of the formula. Its popularity was enhanced by the evolution of the series, whereby the same characters featured in a number of books as they traversed the path from schooldays through marriage and motherhood to the daughters' schooldays. For the readers who eagerly awaited each new instalment, a real-life drama seemed to unfold.

#### *A world of their own*

The typical successful writer of schoolgirl

stories was female, middle-class and unmarried. Apart from this we know little about her; there are few biographies and critical studies are generally uninterested in such 'inferior' authors. From the information we do have, one significant factor emerges; in real life, as well as in their writing, they devoted their energies to girls and women. Angela Brazil organised parties for local schoolgirls; Elsie Oxenham was an enthusiastic member of the English Folk Dance Society and a Camp Fire Guardian; E.M. Brent-Dyer, as well as teaching girls, was into folk dancing and the Girl Guides; Dorita Fairlie-Bruce was involved in a similar organisation, the Girls' Guildry. To judge by the dedications in their books (dedications are always very revealing), their chief friends were women. Moreover, they all seem to have known each other. Oxenham dedicated a book to Bruce, Brent-Dyer dedicated one to Oxenham and 20 years later Oxenham, possibly running out of dedicatees by then, returned the favour.

Most wrote for a living. Brent-Dyer, it is true, ran a girls' school for ten years, but she gave it up because (her biographer tells us) she found the reality of school life more troublesome than the fantasy<sup>1</sup>. Most were emphatic that they wrote out of love for their subject and their audience, which were, of course, the same: girls and women. In E.J. Oxenham's *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* (1922) Cicely promises Madam and the Pixie that, "Some day, when I have time, I'll write a book and put you in, and tell you just what we think of you". The in-joke is that Cicely is a thinly-veiled Elsie Oxenham and Madam and the Pixie represent the two members of the English Folk Dance Society to which the book is dedicated. The novel, then, is written very directly for the women it is written about. Others are not so self-evidently autobiographical, but the link is there: "I confess I am still an absolute schoolgirl in my sympathies", wrote Angela Brazil in her autobiography, entitled (naturally enough) *My Own Schooldays*.<sup>2</sup>

Implicit in these remarks is a third motive; schoolgirl story writers wrote for themselves. Brent-Dyer's biographer suggests that her imaginative world was in part a kind of wish-fulfilment, depicting the life she would have liked for herself. Several

writers tried to reconstruct their own reality into a more artistic image. A striking number changed their name, not simply for writing purposes. E.M. Brent-Dyer was born Gladys Dyer and went through several changes of nomenclature before she settled on the cumbersome final version. Angela Brazil altered the pronunciation of hers; when all the rest of the family pronounced it like the country, she placed the stress on the first syllable. Schoolgirl story writers were also inclined to alter details of their lives, such as date of birth, and to conceal any information which seemed to them to spoil their image. Just as Enid Blyton in her autobiography omitted to mention a failed first marriage, so Angela Brazil conveniently forgot an errant older brother and E.M. Brent-Dyer the fact that her father had deserted the family when she was a child. This desire to improve upon reality goes beyond simple vanity; it reveals a wish for an image which conforms to that very social ideal that is presented in their novels.

#### *Escape to the Abbey*

Both adult women and girls read schoolgirl stories. Older correspondents to the *Chalet Club Newsletter* were among E.M. Brent-Dyer's most enthusiastic fans, confessing that they read the Chalet School books because they were "more interesting" than anything else, and describing the characters as "almost real — one knows them as friends". More than once the publishers were asked for a prospectus for the school and readers made a pilgrimage to the Austrian lake where it had supposedly originated. These adult readers were often educated women, as Jill Paton Walsh observed: "We have all, I expect, met them; they come forward eagerly to talk to us, bringing their children as excuse and disguise".<sup>3</sup>

Books are supposed to form children's 'character', providing them with role models and explaining their place in the world. Hence their popularity with the less-privileged but newly-educated schoolgirl and her advisors between the wars. This was an era of social unrest and conservative reaction. Then, as now, a return to the old ideals of discipline, family life, hard work and deference to authority was seen as the answer to society's 'ills'. These were all

values promoted by the schoolgirl story. But largely the authors ignored the passing of time and major political and social events. They offered escapism, exotic settings, beautiful and rich characters and improbable, romantic plots, like their cultural contemporary, the movie.

Schoolgirl stories therefore enjoyed conservative support because they represented conventional values. But they were also bought by many whose outlook was progressive, if not feminist. The right to education had been one of the great battles fought by the Victorian women's movement and their victory was still fresh in their beneficiaries' minds. As Sara Burstall, former headmistress of Manchester Girls' High School, wrote in 1933:

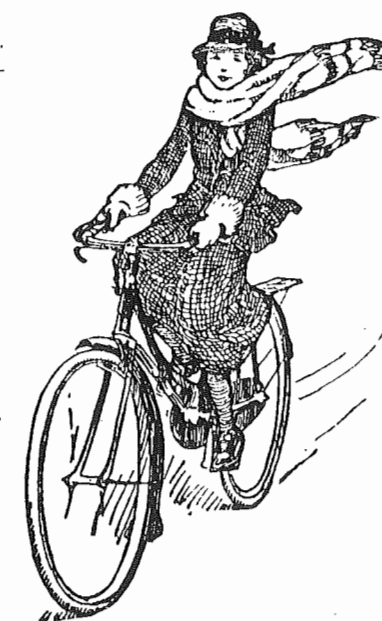
For generations men have felt loyalty and gratitude to their schools; emotion which has found its way into song not only at Eton and Harrow and Clifton. Stirring and beautiful as these songs are, they do not express more than is felt by women who, under the new era, have gained from their schools opportunity, knowledge, discipline, fellowship, and who look back in loyalty and affection to those who taught them.<sup>4</sup>

For such women, many the mothers of young readers, school story ideals were revolutionary, representing women's new-found freedom and dignity.

School stories also offered hope in the face of a strong social reaction against feminism in the years after the first world war. This was a profoundly repressive era for women. The general opinion was that women had become too independent as a result of the political and economic gains of the Victorian and Edwardian women's movement and their war work. They were being forced back into the home, with marriage and motherhood presented to them as the only acceptable female goals. At a time when their outlook was shrinking, the timeless, apolitical, independent nature of school girl stories offered a liberating role. Even in the books where the heroines did grow up and marry, they still managed to preserve an independent spirit and close links with the girlfriends of their schooldays.

#### *The Abbey Girls in Love*

One of the most popular series of schoolgirl stories was Elsie Jeanette Oxenham's Abbey books. To dip into the early volumes of this series is to be transported into a



world where women's love for women is openly and unself-consciously avowed on almost every page. And to follow the rise and fall of these books' popularity gives a fascinating insight into the changing attitudes to women's friendships over the years.

The Abbey books appeared at the rate of about one a year from 1920. While clearly intended for the female juvenile market, they are only loosely linked to the school the girls attended and its customs (in particular, country-dancing and the annual crowning of a May Queen). The



A.B.T.

Frontispiece.

"We've made a mistake about Ros," Joy said.

early books really focus on the relations between the various women characters, even after they have left school. Though individuals fall in love with men and marry, these events are seen in terms of their effect upon their women friends. A necessary lesson the women must learn is that if they really love their friends, they must take second place to male suitors and husbands.

'She's up against a tragedy, if she really hadn't realised that Lady Marchwood's marriage would make a difference. I don't mean necessarily a difference in her feeling for Maidie; it probably won't. But a husband must come first. If Maidie is expecting still to be first with Lady Marchwood, she'll break her heart'.

(*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.142/3)

Friendship is seen in terms of mutual support and selfless giving-way to the 'real thing', heterosexual love and marriage.

A fortnight ago, Joy had not known she loved Andrew Marchwood; now he was her man, and she was ready to go across the world with him. And her friends who had seen her since her engagement knew that restless Joy was satisfied at last; she had found something for want of which her life had till now been incomplete...

(*Queen of the Abbey Girls*, 1929, p.81)

Theoretically the books profess to prioritise heterosexual romance and marriage over mere friendship. But, as the quality and intensity of the writing shows, EJO and her books are far more concerned with women's struggles to relate to each other in a mature, loving and non-possessive way:—

Maidlin: 'Is Ros going to like these girls better than us?'

Joy: 'We shall really keep Ros more closely if she goes, feeling we're backing her up, than if we keep her here unwillingly'.

(*The Abbey Girls on Trial*, 1931, p.185/6)

to come to terms with faults and dissappointments in a beloved:—

Mary: 'I had loved Joy Shirley so, for a year. She had been so good to me. I'd thought her perfect... That night, and for some days afterwards, I felt as if I'd lost her... I found after a while that I was wrong. All I had lost was my picture of her. I still loved the real Joy, although she had faults'.

(*The Abbey Girls in Town*, 1925, p.308)

and to want what was best for her:—

Jen: 'You care more that Joy should love you as you wish than that Joy should be happy and have what is best for herself'.

(*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.145)

In the 1920s EJO considered women's loyalty to other women sufficiently important and socially acceptable to lavish

page after agonising page upon it.

Mary: 'I ought to be thinking about Jen. I've been sorry for her all through, and I've wanted to help her; but I've been thinking about myself, what I wanted, how I felt. Ann forgot all about herself, and thought only of helping Jen. But almost from the first I was thinking how I'd failed her and how awful it was; and it made me still less able to help... I was hardly any use; I just collapsed like a baby — and it was because I was so much upset because she turned from me to Ann...'

(*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.73)

etcetera, etcetera...

### *The Abbey Girls find the Real Thing*

To almost all the major characters, however, the prize of marriage is granted, even though the men, and EJO's feeble attempts at describing heterosexual emotion, put up a pathetically poor show. Some extracts from an early volume, *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* (1922), illustrate EJO's struggle to balance love for one's women friends and love for one's man. At a vacation school of the English Folk Dance Society, the Abbey girls meet "Madam", of whom Cicely remarks: "Like her! There isn't anyone else!... If she looked ill, I'd feel there was something wrong in the universe" (p.187).

But this heroine-worship must give way to the greater claims of heterosexual love. By the end of the book, after an extraordinarily brief courtship (mercifully concealed from the reader), Cicely is engaged to be married. And, in the last week of the vacation school, when "Madam" returns to teach them,

Cicely's face had grown radiant at sight of her the moment she entered the classroom, but she had not made straight for her as she would have done three weeks ago. (p.267)

No, "Madam's" place has now been filled more appropriately by "Dick".

But husbands are strongly resented by the unmarried women for taking their friends away. When Joy marries, in *Queen of the Abbey Girls* (1926), Jen moans: "I daren't face the thought that we've really lost Joy; it doesn't bear thinking about" (p.129). And when Joy returns from her honeymoon leaving her husband game-shooting in Africa, Rosamund declares: "It's ripping to have Joy come back alone. We like Andrew of course; but I'm quite content to have him in East Africa" (*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.175).

So, clearly, is EJO, who contrives to have him murdered on safari by some "wild natives" so that Joy may be left free to bring up twin daughters with the help of her women friends unencumbered by a man.

### *Heterosexuality wins through*

The 1930s brought a change. When the eleventh book in the series, *The Abbey Girls Play Up*, appeared in 1930, the characters had moved on a few years. The focus is now very much more domestic; Joan, Joy and Jen all have young families and a new and even less convincing approach to heterosexual romance is in evidence. Jen introduces Maribel to her husband's cousin and a relationship develops which seems to be entirely based upon meaningful looks: "Mike Marchwood's eyes had been saying something very emphatic, which he might not put into words" (p.163). Maribel discusses the phenomenon of love with her chum, but the subject embarrasses them: "Oh, I say, Bel, don't let's be idiots! Come and play tennis, and forget all this tosh!" (p.166). Would that they did! But Maribel is engaged by the end of the book.

Already in *The Abbey Girls at Home* (1929) there are signs of the different approach. Like its predecessors, this book is mainly about love between women. There is plenty of kissing and pages of discussion about feelings: "I never knew how much I cared about you till I thought you cared more for Betty than for me", Joy (now widowed) tells Jen (now married) (p.103). But in this book first Joy and then Mary and Jen realise they are no longer obsessed with folk-dancing. "At present I feel I've come up against real things too sharply ever to go back to a play thing like country-dancing", declares Joy (p.191). Mary takes up the theme:

'The dancing is all right. It's beautiful, and the music is jolly; the figures are fascinating, and it's a splendidly healthy recreation, some way to let oneself go... But it is play. And there are more important things, real things'. (p.234)

Jen agrees:

'I used to think country-dancing came first of everything. You've shown me its right place... I think perhaps there are adventures ahead of me that are worth while!' (p.238)

(She is expecting her first baby.)



In the early and mid-20s the members and activities of the English Folk Dance Society were of central importance to EJO. But by the late 1920s she had come to feel that her attitude to them was no longer appropriate. Would it be too far-fetched to suggest that the Society and its activities represented more to EJO than healthy exercise?<sup>6</sup> And is it just a coincidence that her change in attitude is expressed in a book she was writing in 1928, the year of the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*?

### Lesbians at the Abbey

Lesbianism was not seen as a threat to morality before the 1920s. Indeed, it was hardly even recognised as an idea. Close friendships between women, particularly young women, were encouraged in Victorian times. After 1885 male homosexual acts were made illegal, but no mention was made of women. By the 1920s the writings of Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfeld and Freud on normal and deviant sexuality were well-known in intellectual circles in Britain, and an attempt was made in 1921 to bring lesbian acts within the Criminal Law. It was argued, however, that silence about this 'abomination' would be a better preventative than criminalisation and the Bill was defeated. As a result, lesbianism was slow to enter the popular consciousness. The trial of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 put an end to that. The press coverage of this famous scandal was probably the most significant factor in creating a public image of lesbianism, as defined by psychiatrists and sexologists. Though Radclyffe Hall's novel was banned, there could hardly be a reader in the country who did not know what it was all about. EJO and her sister-writers must surely have begun to realise that the behaviour of their characters was open to 'misinterpretation'.

Take, for example, the ingenuous introduction to Norah and Con in *The Abbey Girls Win Through* (1928):

They were a recognised couple. Con, who sold gloves in a big West-End establishment, was the wife and home-maker; Norah, the typist, was the husband, who planned little pleasure-trips and kept the accounts and took Con to the pictures. (p.9)

Descriptions such as these caused critics great amusement in the 1950s and after-

wards. How could EJO have been so naive, or so explicit? But these words were written before *The Well of Loneliness* trial, before the lesbian scare had made women in couples into objects of suspicion and disgust. EJO was simply describing a phenomenon which she and her readers were familiar with, which they saw all about them in the male-depleted generation after the first world war and of which they thought nothing. In the same book Ann observes that:

'Perhaps Miss Devine remembers that girls often live in twos. She used to be in the office herself; she'll know girls don't like to go and leave their other half alone'. (p.12)

EJO does distinguish between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships between women, but in the early books the distinction was not the one that Freud and Havelock Ellis would have made. 'Unhealthy' relationships were unreciprocated, uncontrolled crushes. For example, Jen, in *Queen of the Abbey Girls* (1926), speaking of Amy's unreciprocated crush on Mary:

'I've heard the girls at school talk like that about certain mistresses, but I didn't know grown people in business kept it up... Of course it's a sign there's something wrong with the girl. Not that she should like you; I admire her good sense, and quite agree with her. But that she should let her liking run away with her, as if she were a schoolgirl. That's wrong. It's uncontrolled; want of balance'. (p.186/7)

### The Abbey Girls Go Downhill

From 1930 on there is an ever-declining expression of love between women in the books and much more of a feature is made of heterosexual romance, marriage and motherhood. Possibly because it was now clear that only young women could safely be open about their feelings for one another, EJO made the decision in 1938 to revert to the pre-marriage years of her original characters. She produced seven stories which filled in gaps in the first sequence. The title of the first of these, *Schooldays at the Abbey*, is revealing of the switch. Though the books continued to be about women's friendships, the relationships described are reduced to the level of schoolgirl passions. Meanwhile heterosexual love is idealised beyond belief.

Here is Joan, aged about 18, in *Schooldays*: 'It must be a wonderful thing. I don't suppose it will ever happen to me, but it must be the happiest thing in the world'. (p.116)

Contrast this with Jen in *The Abbey Girls in Town* (1925):

'It's that man. Being in love's a fearful disease, I hope I never catch it'. (p.299)

In *Tomboys at the Abbey* (1957), which, though written nearly 20 years later, depicts Joan as only a year older, she expands upon the theme:

'I don't know anything about being in love; I've had no experience. But I've always imagined that it was a feeling for which one would give up everything and be glad to do it. That if I fell in love, for instance, I'd be willing to go away with — him! — and leave Mother to Joy's tender mercies, and leave my Abbey, that I love so much... And that if I wasn't willing to leave everything, I shouldn't really be in love and it wouldn't be worth while getting married'. (p.125)

Contrast this with Jen in *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* (1922):

'Isn't it awful? Are Joan and Cicely going to think about those men all the time?'. (p.216)

Or Joy, after Joan is married, in *The Abbey Girls Again* (1924):

'I say, it must be such a nuisance having a man round all the time'. (p.106)

If the early Abbey books were about women's friendships, the later ones are about marriage pure and simple. Even Mary, the only spinster among the principal characters and the one who earlier stood for EJO's own experiences and aspirations, becomes a mouthpiece for the marriage party-line. World-famous ballerina Damaris gives up her career to marry: "Other people can dance, but only Damaris can marry Brian", says Mary, incredibly. "Other people don't dance as she does", Nanta objects. "You do think she ought to give it up, Mary-Dorothy?" "To be married — yes, Nanta, I do." (p.172).

*Two Queens at the Abbey* (1959), the last in the series, is yet more preposterous. With a sense, perhaps, that she had to tie off all loose ends before she died, EJO launched every character into frenzied heterosexual activity. Nanta, aged 19, marries and falls pregnant; Littlejan, aged 19, marries and has a baby; Rosamund has her seventh, Jen her ninth. Jansy, Joan's

daughter, talks of marrying Dickon, Cicely's son (both are aged 16); Lindy gets engaged to Donald, one of Maidlin's rejects. When good-old understanding Mary prepares supper for Littlejan (Queen Marigold), whose husband has just gone off to the Antarctic, she remarks that "Marigold is hungry for more than sandwiches tonight" (p.65). In 1924 Mary had been hungry for a sight of Jen!

### The Abbey Girls Sink Without Trace

As a source for attitudes to women's friendships over 40 years, the Abbey books are remarkable. They show how in the 1920s schoolgirl story writers had a unique freedom to explore all the dimensions of women's love for women. As the years passed this freedom was progressively curtailed, with writers becoming more and more confused and restricted by the new heterosexual demands and the negative image of lesbianism. In later decades critics looked back and sneered at their naivety, or amused themselves by exposing (or denying) the homosexual tendencies of schoolgirl heroines and their creators. A.O.J. Cockshut, for example, takes up 'The Lesbian Theme' in his *Man and Woman: a Study of Love and the Novel*, commenting that "an inferior writer like Elsie Oxenham might in her innocent unawareness use language seeming to imply a lesbian relationship, while meaning no such thing". He noted, however, that the public showed a "calm acceptance" of her "puerilities". "Lesbianism simply did not enter into most people's calculations". Of course it didn't. This was because during the period in which the schoolgirl story flourished, lesbianism was progressively redefined. From a deviant sexuality caused by abnormal genetic or social development, it was extended to encompass all intimate relationships between women, whether explicitly sexual or not (in which case they were categorised as 'latent' or 'unconscious'). This was represented as a newly-discovered scientific fact, not the man-made invention that it was. A new equation sank into the public mind; close friendships between women = lesbianism = sexual perversion.

Among those who swallowed this version of women's psychology were Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, authors of the



### Notes

1. Helen McClelland *Behind the Chalet School* (New Horizon 1981).
2. Angela Brazil *My Own Schooldays* (Blackie 1925).
3. Quoted in Edward Blishen's *The Thorny Paradise* (Penguin 1925, p.59).
4. Sara A. Burstall *Retrospect and Prospect, 60 Years of Women's Education* (Longman 1933, p.60).
5. For example, *The Abbey Girls Again* (1924): "To MADAM, who teaches us and dances to us, and THE PIXIE, who gives us help and wise advice, this story is dedicated with thanks for continued friendship." "Madam" was Helen Kennedy North and "the Pixie" was D.C. Daking, author of books on spiritual matters and Jungian psychology. Both were officers in the English Folk Dance Society, founded in 1911 by Cecil Sharp. He is referred to in the Abbey books as "the Prophet" and other real-life characters are also identifiable.
6. In *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* (1922) EJO describes, a vacation school run by the English Folk Dance Society: "For the first time she saw the whole school together and began to sense its atmosphere, of eagerness and excitement, of friendship and good fellowship, of keen artistic joy in beautiful sights and sounds... many of the girls had brilliant jumpers over their tunics and looked more boy-like than



ever, with almost no skirt at all showing — especially those who had bobbed their hair, and there were many of them. Keenly interested in everything and everybody, Cicely wondered again how many of these girls were teachers; how many had come because they had found in this folk-art the widening and uplift of which Miss Newcastle had spoken; and if it would be possible to make friends with many outside their own immediate circle." (p.163).

EJO devotes lengthy paragraphs in several of the Abbey books written during the '20s to descriptions of country-dancing events, revealing a social world far more women-centred than today. A minor character, the Writing Person, who appeared at that time and is generally taken to represent EJO herself, says, in *The Abbey Girls Again* (1924): "Really, I consider folk-dancing responsible for most of the work I've done in the last two years" (which, if she does represent EJO, is all the Abbey books to date) "It's a most valuable stimulant! And such a healthy one! I'm better in every way". (p.164).

7. A.O.J. Cockshut *Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel, 1740-1920* (Collins 1977).

8. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig *You're a Brick, Angela!* (Gollancz 1976).

**Bibliography**  
All the Abbey books mentioned in this article are published by Collins.

**Further reading**  
*The Chalet School* stories, by Elinor Mary Brent-Dyer, published by Chambers.  
*The Dimsie, Springdale* and *Nancy* books, by Dorita Fairlie Bruce, published by Oxford University Press.  
**Biographies**  
Gillian Freeman, *The Schoolgirl Ethic: the Life and Work of Angela Brazil* (Allen Lane 1976).  
Barbara Stoney, *Enid Blyton* (Hodder & Stoughton 1974).  
Lynette Muir, '50 Years of the Hamlet Club' (*Junior Bookshelf* 30, Feb 1966 p.19), an article about the Abbey books in a periodical for children's librarians.

immensely readable but often unsympathetic study of girls' fiction *You're a Brick, Angela!* They dismiss Madam in *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* as a "stop-gap love object" for Cicely, for whom "a more potentially satisfying relationship" in the person of her future husband is subsequently provided. They seize upon the many instances in which EJO's heroines share a bed as evidence that the women's intimacy is (however unconsciously) not 'healthy' or 'normal'.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1960s 'sleeping together' became a synonym for sexual activity, but it is a mis-reading of history to impose this idea on the social mores of the 1920s. For EJO and her public, sharing a bed with a girlfriend was but one way of showing affection and a perfectly acceptable one at that. In *The New Abbey Girls* (1923) Jen (aged 18) establishes this point when she suggests to Joy (aged 21) how she could make shy 14 year old Maidlin feel she is welcome in the Abbey household:

"Why don't you have her to sleep with you, at Jack's? [Jack is Jacqueline, a former school chum of Jen, whom she refers to as "husband".] You know Jacky-boy said she'd get a bed ready for the heiress! You could tell her not to and Maidlin could go in with you, and I'd tuck in with my husband. You know she always wants me to!" (p.175)

What this reveals is not unconscious perversion but a very conscious love for women, which in 1923 was fine and after

1928 became abnormal and unhealthy. It represented a level of intimacy which was too threatening to be allowed to continue. Censorship was inevitable. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s a handful of Abbey books were reprinted in cheap condensed editions. EJO's often tautologous prose can take a bit of blue-pencilling, but it is significant that the portions excised were frequently the passionate and, to post-Freudian eyes, sexually suggestive scenes between women. In the bowdlerised version of *The New Abbey Girls* (1959), for instance, Jen no longer suggests that Joy sleep with Maidlin.

Elsie Oxenham died in 1960. By the mid-seventies her Abbey books, along with virtually all schoolgirl stories, had disappeared from the publishers' lists. Readers were told that there was "no demand". The truth was that the critics had condemned them to death; the later books for being appallingly written (which they were), the early ones for their lack of 'relevance' and 'social realism'. It would be more truthful to say that the destruction of the schoolgirl story is a major piece of evidence of the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality in 20th century Britain.

Fortunately there are signs of a revival. Feminist authors take note! If girls and women want schoolgirl stories, let's give them some, written on *our* terms. I'm writing one myself! □



# "Building a Stairway to the Stars"

*Bessie Head, the great African writer, died on 17 April 1986. Margot Farnham pays tribute to her and her work, which has received little attention in this country.*

Bessie Head was born in Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, South Africa in 1937:

The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me — naming me after this unknown, lovely and unpredictable woman.<sup>1</sup>

She was educated in Durban. She worked as a primary school teacher and then as a journalist on *Drum* magazine. In the wake of the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 she was prominent in the Demonstration and involved in South African politics through the 'Sixties. She joined the Pan African Congress. Following arrest, imprisonment and growing disenchantment she abandoned organised politics. 1964 she began, with her son, an exile in Botswana on an exit permit after she was refused a passport by the South African authorities.

In Botswana she taught, was involved in the Serowe Brigades doing gardening and projects known as Boiteko and wrote.

Of her exile, she wrote:  
Life never asked me to be a politician; it has conferred that authority on other men and women. Life asked me to be a writer of a certain kind. I examined everything when I was very young and, while being well aware of the suffering of black people in southern Africa, I knew I could not cope with the liberatory struggle. . . . (The Country) was a

desolation of financial greed and puerile racial prejudice. I could not write about the country and the people. I could not lever any magic and charm out of the situation.<sup>2</sup>

## Historian and writer

Bessie Head's books are grounded in the history and daily lives of the Batswana people and the experiences of her own life. The inner lives of her characters are so finely conveyed that it appears as if they had actually spoken to her. She was an oral historian as well as a writer of novels because she cared deeply about the history of Serowe, her adopted village. She was interested in the factors of change behind social and educational reform in Serowe and independence, which came to Botswana in 1966.

Because she lived with her characters so closely, her writing could not accommodate any form of closed door nationalism. Neither would she have been able to ignore or reject the colonial experience because she saw how people and the culture had been changed by it. Her own acquaintance with the ugliness of white minority domination in South Africa meant that she saw and was unable to be silent about the position of the outcast tribe Basarwa in Botswana. Her work taken as a whole can be seen as a shaking and delicate exposition on power: between men and women, outcast and judge, people and land, colonisers and those whose legacy is to create a new

Bessie Head's novels include *Where Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974), *A Collector of Treasures* (1977), *Serowe Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) and *A Bewitched Cross Road* (1984).

All books are published by Heinemann.

economy, agriculture and society out of that history. People also have to live with their own power and imaginations, and Bessie Head also writes of the profound mental suffering and sickness, when a person has to fight in nightmarish interior landscapes for possession of her own soul.

I would like to trace briefly, the themes which run through and are developed in her writing, beginning with her first novel, set after independence.

### Exile

*When Rain Clouds Gather* deals with the exile of Makhaya to Botswana. Like the writer, Makhaya escapes persecution and the static death culture of South Africa to another part of the continent which does not squander all its resources propagating false belief. In the newly independent Botswana he becomes involved with the villagers' struggle to transform their agriculture and cattle raising in harsh conditions. Part of the villagers' struggle is against tradition and the scheming nature of the local Chief whose interests are threatened by collectivisation. The villagers also painstakingly have to adapt an agriculture to the rain-poor climate and meagre soil.

Makhaya comes to the village having lived in a spiritual graveyard. Through his involvement in making village reforms he begins to feel a connection to life. Bessie Head uses the dark Botswana nights, unlit by street lamps as a metaphorical landscape of her character's inner life. Here Makhaya struggles to bring integrity to a self made sick by apartheid.

An important aspect of African history which Bessie Head discusses is the role of the Christian mission. Through dialogue between Makhaya and an elder, Mma-Millipede, the legacy of a colonial Christianity is considered. What could be a post-colonial morality? Because Africans were captivated by the doctrines of Christianity, taking centuries to realise its contradictions, how should Makhaya now view love and peace? What other concept of unity could replace the debased brotherhood of Christianity? To Makhaya, God could mean nothing unless clothed in the skin of the dehumanised black African. While Mma-Millipede is deeply touched by the Tswana version of the Bible, reading in it

the history of her own people, she represents another generation. Makhaya needs another form of belief. Christian compassion is bankrupt for him.

If it is possible for Makhaya to restore his self it is because he finds a place for himself in the daylight of ordinary work and the love of a villager. He is sustained by human generosity in a land with few and precious resources.

### Outcast

Bessie Head's second novel *Maru* stirred people throughout the country because in it she questions the dehumanisation of the outcast Basarwa by the Batswana. The novel concerns a Masarwa, Margaret Cadmore who was brought up by a white missionary's wife and comes to the village of Dilepe to teach. This is an outrage to the villagers who consider the Basarwa as a slave class.

*Maru* appears as a simple love story between the chief, Maru, and the new visitor.

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time.

Through this love story Bessie Head looks at the consequence to the village that it does not question itself as an oppressor. Through the character of Margaret Cadmore she also looks at the personal pain of the outcast.

Leloba Young wrote in tribute that Bessie Head, like all exiles, had no option but to grapple with her new country — in her case to the point of breakdown.<sup>3</sup> This involved adaptation at great cost to herself.

### Ghosts

Her masterpiece *A Question of Power* followed.

In her first novel Bessie Head asks, "And who could tell what ghosts really do when they come alive in the dark night?"

In *A Question of Power* the ghosts walk and speak and through their clamour the central character, Elisabeth explores the questions she needs to ask in order to live. The struggle takes the form of a "God show".

"Nearly every nation had that background of mythology — looming, monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods', personalities who formed the base of their attitudes to royalty and class . . ."



GEORGE HALLETT

Through her breakdown, Elisabeth questions God and Devil, Evil and Good. Elisabeth comes from South Africa where she was rigidly classified Coloured. Through her illness she relives that experience and questions her feeling of difference from the Africans of her adopted country. As well as the "God show", Elisabeth is plunged into a nightmarish world of sexual obsession, becoming a captive spectator to a grotesque drama of male/female relationships.

Using a landscape of private hell, Bessie

Head explores major questions of morality. When Elisabeth's mental pain diminishes and she is able to resume her work in the village garden, she salvages one value from the experience of suffering — ordinariness.

Of this concept the writer herself said:

I want to be ordinary before I am anything else and this is tremendously important to me . . . The opposite of that word is everything that makes people suffer. The opposite of ordinariness is racialism, the sort of people who think they are more than what they are, who need to live at the expense of others.<sup>4</sup>

Her own ghosts having spoken, Bessie Head devoted the next phase of her life to looking more deeply into the tales and history of her adopted country, particularly the stories of women. She becomes, like the title of her short story anthology, *The Collector of Treasures*. The collection is arranged sequentially with the first part dedicated to themes of traditional tribal migration and the conflicts of 'heathendom', witchcraft and Christianity. She delicately exposes Christian hypocrisy and the hatred and violence expressed through witchcraft.

The latter section of the book is dedicated to women and is concerned with the breakdown of family life and the failure of men to accept responsibility for children and to accept women as their equals.

The only value women were given in the society was their ability to have sex; there was nothing beyond that.

Relationships between men and women are analysed over three time-spans: before the British colonial invasion, the colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa and Independence.

#### *Portrait of a village*

*Serowe Village of the Rainwind* is an important contribution to the history of Botswana. Using both written records and spoken word accounts, Bessie Head traces the history of the village, Serowe, from the last century to the present. The book is arranged in three parts. The first deals with the era of Khama the Great (1875–1923), the second with the era of Tshekedi Khama (1926–1959), the third with the work of Patrick Van Rensburg at the Swaneng Project. Around the lives of these three men Bessie Head draws a portrait of Serowe. This programme is an important backcloth to much of Bessie Head's work. Her history traces the self-help theme from the social reforms of the leaders Khama and his son, Tshekedi Khama to the collectivisation programme initiated by Patrick Van Rensburg.

While these three leaders form the backbone of the book, the writer is most interested in the ordinary conclusions, work, relationships and movement of ordinary people:

It was by chance that I came to live in this village. I have lived most of my life in shattered little bits. Somehow here the

shattered bits began to grow together. There is a sense of wholeness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of how strange and beautiful people can be — just living.

This book is especially important as the history of Serowe, apart from the writings of white missionaries, is precariously oral. Her portrait is a simple evocation of the village's history and concerns, using the words and memories of many different people with different occupations and experiences.

In her tribute, Leloba Young wrote: "It is as catalyst that we value her contribution to our lives as Baswana." As a white European, one of the values I have found in her work is that many of our own myths and deep-seated colonial instincts are reflected back in a revelatory light with a brightness falling over new places in human experience. Her writing makes people look again. Her writing suggests how intimately the histories of Europe and Africa are linked without using Europe as reference point and without sparing the feelings of Botswana's growing elite whose materialism is symbolised by its colonial white house and showy car.

Recently in the work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, I came across an exact description of the power of Bessie Head's writing. He speaks of "the ten heavens that earth cost us": the tragedy, the magic of this planet. This is what Bessie Head saw in Botswana and, in the Baswana people, hope.

Her writing is inspiring because it suggests that it is possible to create a new morality. She does this without diminishing the destruction of colonialism, racism or the oppression of women by men. Moving on from, at its worst, the tawdry legacy of Christianity, Bessie Head has attempted to create

a kind of people religion that is rooted in the African soil. . . I foresee a day when I will steal the title of God, the unseen Being in the sky and offer it to mankind . . . I am building a stairway to the stars. □

#### Notes

1. Quoted in *A World of Her Own* by Seatlholo Tumedl in *Mmegi Wa Dikgang* Vol.3, No.15 26 April 1986.
2. From *Why do I write?* by Bessie Head in *Mmegi Wa Dikgang* Vol.2, No.12, 30 March 1985.
3. From *The end is where we start from* by Leloba Young in *Mmegi Wa Dikgang* Vol.3, No.15, 26 April 1986.
4. Quoted in *A World of Her Own*.

I acknowledge with many thanks the help of the Botswana High Commission.

Flora Mmbugu-Shelling speaking at the International Feminist Bookfair in Oslo.

ARNHILD SKRE



# A Goldmine of Knowledge

In 1984, the Swedish International Development Agency advertised a literary competition for African women's short stories. 800 women submitted work. This article describes the appalling way in which these writers were treated, and how their work was stolen and mutilated.

The paper which follows was presented in a workshop at the Second International Feminist Bookfair in Oslo, June 1986. It was given by the three women involved in fighting the case it describes: Everlyn Nicodemus, a Tanzanian writer and artist who lives in Sweden, Flora M'mbugu Schelling, a writer and film-maker who lives in Tanzania, and Nita Kapoor, a Black woman who lives in Oslo and works at the Anti-racist Centre. Flora and Nita first got involved on behalf of Everlyn and the other African women writers at the UN conference in Nairobi in 1985.

Everlyn, Flora and Nita's paper is printed as it was given to the workshop in Oslo. It is followed by some further infor-

mation and suggestions for action, put together by Gail Chester.

The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) is enormously influential in the development field. They are responsible for huge amounts of overseas aid and development workers in third world countries. Many people, both there and in Europe, especially Scandinavia, are afraid of antagonising them. In the West, SIDA has a liberal image, which includes their funding of many women's projects. The Swedish women's movement has done little to support Everlyn against SIDA. The only media coverage she got was from one Swedish feminist radio station.

### Who Owns the Knowledge of the Third World Women?

*Flora M'mbugu Schelling:* For centuries the White world extracted information and stories from our grandmothers and our great grand mothers.

They have taken the Third World women's knowledge. They have simply not recognised our oral tradition as literature.

The songs that were and are the African women's poems have been stolen and exploited in many ways without recognising the existence of the poetess.

The narrations have been recorded as anthropological raw material and used in many ways without recognising the novelists, the biographers and the dramatists behind them. Their craft, their art, even their image has been stolen . . .

*Everlyn Nicodemus:* In my ears ring the rhythms and the reasonings of my grandmother's narratives and songs. Hers are not the same as the neighbour woman's — and not like my mother's either. To say that the Third World women have no literature is nonsense. Writing down a story or a poem is to listen to what sings inside you. Some let it out orally and some write it down.

F: Up to now most of the Third World women do it the old way. Those who are using the pen meet a hell of a lot of problems. They have to face the sexist and racist world which still does not recognise the Third World women's way of writing and reasoning. What the Third World women are transmitting orally is a gold mine of knowledge. There are veins of knowledge about their life history, about agriculture and medicine, about women's psychology, about manners and customs, mythology, tales, poetry, music, etcetera.

The first people to exploit this knowledge were the explorers, missionaries, anthropologists and ethnographers. And now they are followed by social scientists, media people, artists and people from the development organisations. They all tried and are trying in good faith to express what they believe are the needs, the feelings and the fantasies of the Third World women. They also thought and still harbour the attitude that this knowledge of the Third World women is free to exploit or cheap to buy.

Now there is a new phenomenon. The Third World women are taking a stand in salvation of their mothers' knowledge. It is a precious stone. Those who are monopolising it are seldom interested in its unique values, but more in its marketable value in the West.

At the same time we Third World women find ourselves in conflict with what has been presented about us by the exploiters. What has been presented hits us in many ways.

E: But how come dear sister, that our powerful and rich traditions with their unique structures and strong function are so mistreated in the West?

*Nita Kapoor:* When their own mines are emptied and their wells are dry then follows the cultural colonisation. This is popularly called cultural exchange. Those who colonise others hardly have any high thoughts or respect for the victims. Added to this colonisation, Third World women suffer sexism, and racism. So there are three reasons for treating the Third World women's knowledge with pure arbitrariness.

F: Well, they just come to our countries to learn something and to educate themselves.

N: Sorry, sister. They do it to 'educate' us. To teach us the conformities of their culture and their traditions.

Let us take literature.

The publishers treat most of the Third World women's literature as curiosities or exotics. The translators do not respect the Third World women's own ways of writing, their form and rhythm and ways of reasoning. The critics use Western value systems which include racism and sexism. They do not look for the specific values of the Third World women's literature. They end up by belittling it and dismissing it. By the time it reaches the reader it is already distorted and condemned. The reasons why we cannot control this is partly our economic system. The lack of everything including information about our own rights. We cannot set conditions. They set the premises.

#### The SIDA case

E: We have a concrete example. In 1984, the Swedish International Development Authority, SIDA, advertised in English-speaking African papers and invited African women to write short stories. It was a

#### The Original Title: No easy way to motherhood Chapter one

"Wind will sometimes blow from all different directions when you are in trouble — bringing with it nothing but irritating hot air, which slaps you in the face as if it is mocking you, especially in the hot season."

#### SIDA Version in 'Whispering Land'

##### Chapter one

"Sometimes, when you are in trouble, the wind will blow from all directions, bringing with it nothing but irritating, hot air which slaps you in the face as if to mock you, especially in the hot season."

literary competition. It was supposed to result in a literary anthology to be edited and published in Sweden and presented at the Nairobi Conference in 1985. SIDA defined all participants as authors and the narratives as literary works. This means that all the 800 African women who participated fall under the Swedish Law of Author's Rights.

N: The law says:

When a work is published it must not be altered in a way that violates the literary reputation or the distinctive character of the author. Neither may it be published in such form or in such connection that is offensive to the author.

The law is built on the Berne

Convention, which tells us:

The author keeps during all his lifetime the right to oppose distortion, mutilation or other changes of the work that harm the honour or the reputation of the author.

F: Now, SIDA has in no way respected the invited African sisters as authors. They have treated them in a most paternalistic way one could imagine.

First of all they cheated the 800 women. In the advertisement SIDA had promised them to be judged by a jury including African women representatives. But Everlyn was alone in the jury as the only Black woman among four white women. Obviously as a hostage. The Black women she had suggested were not even asked by SIDA to participate in the jury.

This does not fall under the law. It is a moral question. But we want to stress it. A jury including Black women would have been a forum of principle discussing what African women's literature is and able to initiate a lot of positive discussion on Black women's terms.

E: Every Third World woman who takes to the pen in such conditions as those of the African women fulfils a great achievement. 800 women responding to the invitation, sitting down among their daily duties to write a short story! What a sign of confidence! What a creative insurrection!

To coldly let them down was a crime. To let them be judged by white experts and bureaucrats was a crime.

N: Then, let us look at the two books eventually published by SIDA. The anthology of short stories selected by the jury,

called *Whispering Land*. And a second book, *Breaking Free*.

Several of the short stories in *Whispering Land* have been rewritten, their rhythm and character being violated.

Not only have the stories all been mutilated, but they have been shortened and published as excerpts.

Just think of that! You have your first literary work published, but cut into pieces so that nobody can judge it as a whole.

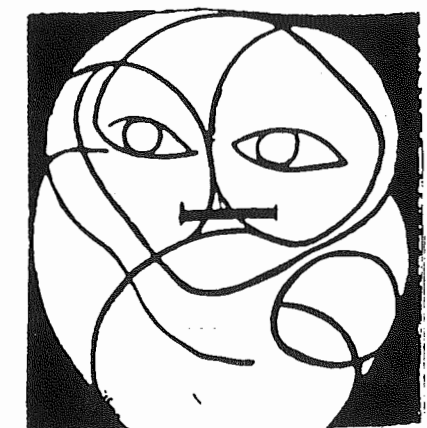
And worse still! They are shortened in a special way which alters them, giving the impression that they are written by "young African women".

This is specially offensive in a culture where age is held in high esteem. So, to quote the law, these books are truly "such a form and such a connection that is offensive to the author". Examples of the sort of mutilation that was done are given in the margins.

This is so obvious. But as you heard, under the Berne convention, no one else but the author can claim that her rights have been violated.

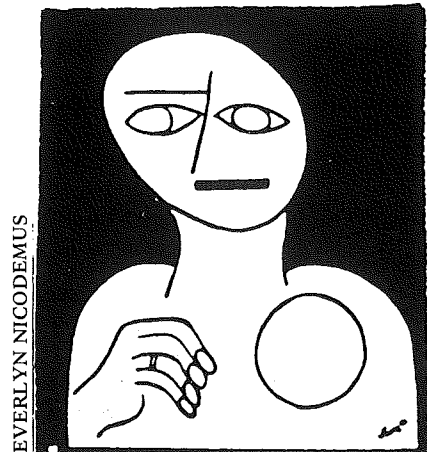
So the African women, being far away and unaware of their rights, are helpless. SIDA hindered Everlyn from getting in contact with the authors. SIDA even applied the Swedish Secrecy Law on the case in order to stop her from having the addresses. The authors could not commission her to take SIDA to court as their representative.

E: With the help of the Law, I could only fight for my own rights. SIDA was forced to admit that *Breaking Free* is a violation of authors' rights. But towards me, as the editor, not towards the ten violated authors.



EVERLYN NICODEMUS

I had been commissioned to edit a volume which should do justice to the fantastic achievements of the 800 African women. I selected 34 of the short stories and wrote a clear feminist preface. It was meant to be a weapon for African women.



But SIDA stopped and censored it. They didn't like to offend the African men's world. Then they stole my editorial work and corrupted it into that mutilated and falsified collection of excerpts from so called Young African Women, which they edited themselves. My original preface to *Breaking Free* starts:

This is a cry from the heart of African women. From those of us who have not yet given up. I end with 13 political claims of equality for African women.

Karin Himmelstrand, the head of SIDA's women's department, writes in her preface to the published version of *Breaking Free*:

Birthe Horn and I have selected ten stories from which we have taken excerpts for publication in this volume. We had to search a long time to find the few stories wherein men are presented in a somewhat favourable light.

SIDA admitted that they had violated my original edition and they have paid me damages. That part of the case is settled.

After that, I thought SIDA would clean up after its deeds, and would take *Breaking Free* out of circulation. To clear up the situation they had to admit publicly that it is a non-book which should not be looked upon as literary work, not sold or bought or lent out in libraries.

They should then have published a new edition of the ten short stories, in full and undistorted and paid the authors once more, as the least of compensation.

F: But SIDA did nothing like that. On the contrary, SIDA goes on selling *Breaking Free* and *Whispering Land*. And worst of all, *Breaking Free* has already started to creep into the bibliographies of African women's literature as a respectable anthology. This must be stopped.

We have asked the Swedish Authors Union to demonstrate for the African women's rights, but they have neglected our request.

So now we urge you, the Black and Third World women in this workshop and the white sisters in solidarity to take the case of these abused African sisters in your hands.

### Reactions to protest

After the Nairobi conference, Karin Himmelstrand sent a paper to the Swedish Foreign Minister accusing Everlyn and Flora of extremism and of organising extremist feminist groups to demonstrate against Swedish interests. She also complained about Everlyn's behaviour to the Swedish Immigration Minister (Everlyn is a Swedish citizen) and about Flora to a Tanzanian Minister. (After many months, Flora received an apology and retraction, but you can imagine how insecure and vulnerable all this made her feel, especially when her livelihood is dependent on western aid agencies.)

The attitude of the male establishment in Sweden may be glimpsed from Per Wästberg, founder of the Swedish Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, who recently retired as world president of PEN (an international organisation supposedly devoted to defending the rights and freedom of authors). He states in his review of the SIDA books in *Dagens Nyheter* (a large daily paper he used to edit): "I have yet to find that a Black had written a thought above the level of plain narrative." Unsurprisingly, he makes no mention of the mutilation of the pieces. This man has recently had one of his books on Africa published in Britain. In it, he claims not only to have great respect and admiration for African people, but also to be an active supporter of women's liberation.

Several Norwegian papers picked up on the publicity surrounding the case at the Feminist Bookfair in Oslo, and carried stories about it. A petition was sent to

### The original

Title: *Torn between marriage and education*  
14 manuscript pages

### Part two

#### Example

"Who was a girl in our community? A girl was looked upon as an item on the market. A girl was not supposed to see the four walls of a classroom. Once a girl's breasts sharp-pointed out and a small swing from her hip, cows, goats and money in the form of dowry was counted. 'She is fit for our stew', men would say."

(Before the story ends, the girl is taken to a boarding school by her uncle. After her studies she gets a scholarship to Europe where she stays three years and graduates as a nurse. Meanwhile her father first had denounced her. With the years he gradually changes his mind. Returning from Europe, the daughter meets her father. And here the story ends.)

### End of the story:

"I had disowned you. I had cursed you. I had denounced you. I didn't know what I was doing. I was misled in the name of God. Please forgive me!"

He spoke without sarcasm! There was a dry sincerity in the stilted phrases. Within no time I found myself in the hands of my father and he in mine.

Everybody remained rigid and shocked. They never thought my father and I would come together this way. The end."

### SIDA Version in 'Breaking Free'

Title: *Bridewealth*

4 pages

(Parts one and two, the first four pages of the manuscript, have been omitted.)

(The last five pages are omitted. The story ends where her uncle takes her to the missionary school.)

### End of the story:

"When we were walking Uncle Jumba said: 'Namta, I want you to co-operate. I would like to see you continue with the school. This neo-slavery ought to be stopped!' I nodded, numbly. 'Where are we going?' I asked automatically. 'I am taking you to a missionary girls' boarding school. Your father must be made to realise that education is better than those cows and goats.'"

SIDA signed by many people at the book-fair. A journalist from *Klassekampen*, a Norwegian marxist daily paper, phoned SIDA for their reaction to the protest. This was their response:

1. Time was short, which is why we did not contact the individual authors about the edited material.
2. SIDA is a government agency, and therefore we have to be balanced in what we publish. We cannot publish literature which portrays African men so negatively.
3. We admit that we cut down the stories, but we informed the authors afterwards.
4. None of the authors have complained.
5. We do not understand why the women at the bookfair got the petition together.
6. As far as SIDA is concerned, the case is closed.

Up to now (November 1986) no further action has been forthcoming from SIDA, so what can be done?

Something I feel particularly strongly about is the danger that the collection of 800 stories may be lost. Everlyn could not afford to copy all of them, and has been unable to find out what SIDA is doing with them. Taken together, the work forms an irreplaceable archive of current writing by English-speaking African women. As well as conventional 'short stories', as the west understands the term, there are many folk tales, myths, jokes, factual accounts, etc.

The only way to stop SIDA further betraying the 800 African women is to mount an international campaign of publicity and solidarity.

1. Write letters of protest to SIDA containing the following demands:

- a) to completely withdraw and destroy the present distorted volumes;
- b) to publish a statement and distribute it widely explaining why the books have been withdrawn and apologising to the African women writers;
- c) to publish a new edition of the winning short stories undistorted and in their full original length;
- d) to pay the authors anew and adequately for this new edition;
- e) to give back copyright of the stories to the authors. (This was stolen from them under the terms of the competition, against

the usual practice of most capitalist publishing houses these days.);

f) to release all 800 stories to a jury of African women, so that a completely new volume can be prepared under the terms already agreed.

Write to SIDA Legal Department, Birgerjarlgatan, S 10525 Stockholm, Sweden.

2. Everlyn and Flora need to know that they have international support. They are particularly keen that Black women's groups should hear about their case. Do what you can to publicise it, and write to Everlyn and Flora to let them know what you are doing.

Everlyn Nicodemus, Trevebovagen 142, 18400 Akersberga, Sweden.

Flora M'bugu-Schelling, Shoga Women's Group, Box 7393, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

3. Join the group which is working on this case.

4. Join the fight to make the feminist media in all western countries consciously anti-racist and anti-imperialist, so that this sort of thing cannot happen again. □



EVERLYN NICODEMUS

Contact us by writing to: SIDA/African Women, c/o Ultra Violet Enterprises, 25 Horsell Road, London N5.

Everlyn has written a full report of the case up to June 1986 giving more details than can be included here. Copies are available from this address for a minimum donation of £2 (to cover photocopying and postage).

# The Spinster and her Discontents

*The publication of Sheila Jeffreys' 'The Spinster and her Enemies' provoked a stream of hostile reviews. Here Margaret Jackson examines what is, she believes, an important analysis of women's struggle against compulsory heterosexuality in the years 1880-1930.*

Sheila Jeffreys describes the period examined in this book as a watershed in the history of sexuality. Traditionally it has been interpreted as a time when the sexual puritanism of Victorian England gave way to the first sexual revolution of the twentieth century. Sheila turns this interpretation on its head, arguing that the sexual revolution undermined one of the central aspects of the last wave of British feminism: a woman's right to sexual self-determination.

Many readers are probably familiar with some of the research on which the book is based, as Sheila has already published several articles and given many talks on the subject. For most of us who attended her early talks several years ago, her work came as a revelation: we had not realised that women in the present Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) were not the first to demand a self-defined sexuality. We were furious to think that such important historical evidence about the ideas and campaigns of our fore Sisters had been buried for so long under a heap of rubbish about prudish, man-hating spinsters. We wanted more evidence, and this is what this book provides.

The first half documents the feminist struggles against the ideology and practice of male sexuality; the feminist critiques of 'normal' heterosexual practice; and the

challenge posed, especially by spinsters and lesbians, to the institution of heterosexuality and hence to the system of male supremacy. Feminists had an important influence on the "social purity" movement which aimed to eliminate prostitution and the sexual abuse of girls. Sheila's account clarifies the differences and tensions between the feminists and the more conservative, reactionary elements within social purity. The latter wished to eliminate "vice" by "protective" — which usually meant restrictive — measures against women. In contrast, the distinctive contribution of feminism within social purity was to challenge the assumption, still prevalent today, that prostitution and other forms of male sexual abuse and exploitation of women are a necessary and inevitable consequence of men's uncontrollable sexual urges:

Feminists within 'social purity' saw prostitution as the sacrifice of women for men. They fought the assumption that prostitution was necessary because of the particular biological nature of male sexuality, and stated that the male sexual urge was a social and not a biological phenomenon. They were particularly outraged at the way in which the exercise of male sexuality created a division of women into the 'pure' and the 'fallen' and prevented the unity of the 'sisterhood of women'. They insisted that men were responsible for prostitution and that the way to end such abuse of

women was to curb the demand for prostitutes by enjoining chastity upon men, rather than by punishing the supply.

The same theme was taken up by militant feminists at the height of the struggle for women's suffrage, and the slogan "Votes for Women, Chastity for Men" encapsulated the suffragettes' view of the link between the political disability of women and their vulnerability to male sexual exploitation and abuse. The word 'chastity' (like 'continence', 'excess', 'vice' and many others) has an unfortunate ring today, but Sheila reminds us that it was part of the common vocabulary of sexuality in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, when religion had a much greater influence in society, including amongst feminists, than it has now. In insisting on chastity for men feminists were demanding that men change their sexual behaviour and stop using women as sexual slaves. Suffragette newspapers such as *The Vote*, *Votes for Women* and the *Suffragette*, devoted much space not only to reporting the numerous campaigns, but also to refuting the idea that it was men's 'nature' that necessitated the sexual abuse of women. One of the clearest and most challenging statements to this effect was made by Emmeline Pankhurst:

If it is true — I do not believe it for one moment — that men have less power of self-control than women have, or might have if properly educated, if there is a terrible distinction between the physical and moral standards of both sexes, then I say as a woman, representing thousands of women all over the world, men must find some way of supplying the needs of their sex which does not include the degradation of ours.

## Psychic love

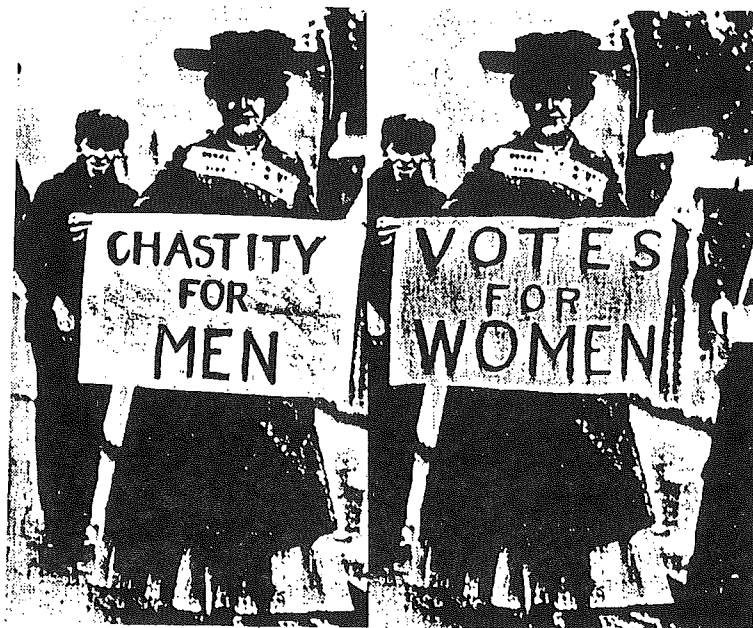
By no means all of the feminist campaigners were spinsters; and Sheila also examines the philosophies of sex held by feminists who were married or involved in sexual relationships with men, and who advocated what they called "psychic love". The central theme of their writings was the right of women to control their own bodies, including not only whether or not to have children but when and how heterosexual activity should take place. As well as challenging the concept of "conjugal rights" and sexual coercion by the husband of the wife, they attempted to develop a critical analysis of "the sexual act", arguing that

many women disliked it, that it was the cause of many diseases and disorders of women's reproductive system, and that it was perfectly possible to have a fulfilling sexual relationship based on other forms of lovemaking. Sheila interprets these feminists, rightly in my view, as trying to articulate their discontents with male-defined sexuality and to explore what a woman-centred sexuality might consist of. She quotes from a letter published in the journal *The Freewoman* in 1912, in which the writer spoke of "the absolute indifference or dislike of the sexual act in many women", even in those who enjoyed "lovemaking".

It was these same feminist ideas and theories about sexuality which informed the protracted campaign to raise the age of consent, also dismissed by most historians as instigated by prudes and puritans. Two chapters are devoted to a detailed and scholarly examination of this multifaceted campaign, which was aimed essentially at preventing the sexual abuse of children. It included struggles to gain women magistrates, women police, women doctors to deal with abused girls, and reserved playgrounds for children in parks. Publicity campaigns were mounted against the bias of the police and the judicial system, which persistently excused male sexual abuse of girls on the grounds that it was "the sort of thing that might happen to any man". As in the case of the campaigns against prostitution, not all of those involved were feminists, and there were many divisions and clashes, which added to the difficulties of dealing with the virulently anti-feminist opposition. The parliamentary debates over the various bills to raise the age of consent make fascinating reading: male MPs accused feminists of "henpecking" and continued to assert the uncontrollability of the male sexual urge — "... sex attraction is one of the elemental things of life, and it will be agreed that when you get down to the instincts which move men and women in sex matters, the outstanding instinct of the male is pursuit..."

At the centre of the book, literally as well as symbolically, stands the spinster. Sheila maintains that spinsters provided the backbone of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and offers considerable evidence to show

that for many women celibate spinsterhood was a deliberate choice, and not simply a consequence of the "surplus" of women. In some cases it was not only a deliberate, but an explicitly political choice: an expression of solidarity and love between women, a refusal to co-operate with the sexual demands of men, and resistance to male



power. Lucy Re-Bartlett, writing in 1912 said that women who were campaigning around sexuality

feel linked by their womanhood to every suffering woman, and every injured child, and as they look around upon the great mass of men who seem to them indifferent, there is growing up in the hearts of some of these women a great sense of distance . . . In the hearts of many women today is rising a cry somewhat like this . . . I will know no man, and bear no child until this apathy is broken through — these wrongs be righted . . . It is the 'silent strike' and it is going on all over the world.

#### *Threatening heterosexuality*

Several lesbian feminist historians have already documented the close relationships and passionate friendships between women which have existed throughout history, and which for most of the nineteenth century appear to have been socially acceptable. Drawing on the work of feminists such as

Lillian Faderman, Sheila shows that by the turn of the century these relationships came to be regarded as unhealthy and stigmatised as lesbian, even if they were devoid of genital sexual expression. She argues that the combination of a strong women's movement, the rise of the economically and sexually independent spinster, and the perceived "spread" of lesbianism together constituted a threat to the heterosexual structure. This was why passionate emotional involvement between women came under attack.

The number of women in excess of men in the population was steadily rising in the last half of the nineteenth century. When this 'surplus' of women had the possibility of living and working outside the structures of heterosexuality they became a threat to the maintenance of male control. This threat was particularly serious when independent women were engaged in passionate friendships with each other and were in a position to form a strong female network which could bond against men. It was this last danger that the development of a strong feminist movement appeared to be creating in the late nineteenth century . . . An attack upon passionate emotional involvement between women served to undermine the link between them and dilute their potential strength.

The spinster's enemies are thus the sexologists and sex reformers who promoted a sexual ideology which was in total contradiction to the feminist analysis of sexuality which had prevailed up to the first world war. They began by constructing a model of the "real" lesbian, based on the stereotype of male fantasy and pornography: the pseudo-man who preys on or leads astray nice, ordinary women who are only "pseudo-homosexual" or "spurious imitations" — in other words "really" heterosexuals. (Both stereotype and scenario are best illustrated in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.) It was the heterosexual woman, however, who was the main target of sex reform: she was to be granted her "erotic rights". But, as Sheila shows, this was very different from the sexual self-determination which feminists had been demanding. Heterosexual women were to be sexualised on male terms, which meant accepting that male dominance and female submission were inherent in "the sexual act" and that this was not only an inescapable biological fact but essential to female as well as male sexual pleasure. It is not difficult to see how such an ideology

might undermine the feminist critiques of male sexuality and heterosexuality. As Sheila points out, not only did it legitimate the ideology and practice of male sexuality, which feminists had been working so hard to challenge and transform; it must also have made it extremely difficult for women to continue their exploration of what a woman-centred sexuality might consist of; especially as the 1920s and '30s witnessed a massive propaganda campaign conducted mainly via sex manuals to teach women the "joys" of male-defined heterosexual sex — including the absolute necessity of engaging in regular sexual intercourse in order to remain healthy!

#### *The anti-feminist backlash*

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the insights it gives into the divisions among feminists over issues of sexuality, suggesting many parallels with the debates and controversies within British and American feminism today. In the Afterword, Sheila makes these parallels explicit, arguing that both past and present attempts to dismiss feminist campaigners against male sexual violence and male-defined sexuality as "anti-sex" or "pruders" are misguided. Such labels reveal a failure to examine critically the prevailing patriarchal definitions of sex established by the sexual 'scientists' of the early twentieth century. One of the effects of the male-defined sexual revolution has been to polarise views as pro- or anti-sex. Sheila argues that both positions are based on a common assumption: ". . . the idea of a powerful, well-nigh uncontrollable, imperative male sexual drive" (p.196) — the very assumption that many feminists, then and now, would wish to challenge.

The crux of the argument developed in this book is that far from liberating women, the sexual revolution was a central plank of the anti-feminist backlash of the inter-war years, and made a significant contribution to the decline of militant feminism at that time. One indication of the influence of the new sexual ideology is the extent to which the so-called "new feminists" of the inter-war years were involved in its promotion, and the backlash against spinsters. That many of these feminists were themselves spinsters seems at first contradictory; but this strongly suggests that it was not the

unmarried state *per se* which made spinsters the targets of hostility, but rather their refusal to engage in sexual relationships with men.

The similarity between the language of the (mainly male) anti-feminists and that of some of the attacks on spinsters by feminists is striking and disturbing. Compare, for example: "a motley host, pathetic in their defiance of the first principle of Nature, but of no serious account in the biological or social sense", and "sexually defiant and disappointed women, impervious to facts and logic and deeply ignorant of life". The former was written by a male sex reformer, the latter by Stella Browne, a socialist feminist who has been praised by Sheila Rowbotham for asserting a woman's right to control her own body! Stella Browne (who was herself a spinster) was not the only feminist, then or now, to launch such a vitriolic attack on her sisters for challenging the institution of heterosexuality and male definitions of sexual pleasure. Why did she fail to perceive that sexual self-determination was precisely what they were struggling for? Why are feminists still so divided over what constitutes female sexual autonomy, and strategies for achieving it?

The evidence which Sheila presents suggests that the sexual revolution played an important part in creating or deepening those divisions. She argues that after World War 1 heterosexual intercourse acquired "a radical new significance. It became both a metaphor for the subjection of women and a method of effecting that subjection", thus undermining the feminist demand to live "free from all uninvited touch of man". In the penultimate chapter she explains how the concept of frigidity was invented during this period to account for the failure of many women to respond enthusiastically to heterosexual intercourse, arguing that it effectively removed women's freedom of choice over whether or not to engage in a form of heterosexual practice suited to men's needs rather than women's.

#### *History repeats itself?*

The enemies of spinsterhood, especially in its political sense, are still active, and not only outside the WLM, to judge by the distinctly unsisterly tone of some British feminist reviews of this book. Most have

been dismissive rather than critical, and some have been frankly vindictive, little more than attacks on Sheila's political position — revolutionary feminism — disguised as reviews. Attacks on revolutionary feminism from within the WLM are not new or surprising, especially when we develop arguments and present evidence which challenge the institution of heterosexuality and give political affirmation to lesbianism and spinsterhood. In the absence of counter arguments or evidence however, such attacks are divisive and merely fuel sectarianism. It is interesting that although Sheila makes her political position explicit, none of the reviewers do. Why not, I wonder? And why is it that so far only feminists unsympathetic to revolutionary feminism have been chosen to review this book? It is ironic that the only review which really took the book seriously was the one published in the *Sunday Times*! Anita Brookner (who as far as I know does not consider herself to be part of the WLM) managed to review the book both critically and appre-

ciatively, without using the review as a platform for scoring political points. Perhaps it is time we considered the politics of reviewing as an issue in its own right?

I am conscious that in this review I have erred on the side of appreciation. That is not so much because I too am a revolutionary feminist and have worked with Sheila (though I would not, of course, claim to be neutral), but rather because I feel constrained to redress the balance. There are many criticisms which could be made. It is possible, for example, to point to some important omissions, such as the work of Elizabeth Blackwell, to some rather sketchy treatment of key areas, such as militant feminism, and to occasional lapses in historical precision and the accuracy of references. I also felt that there was a tendency to pile on the evidence rather than to use it to develop the argument, which sometimes resulted in a lack of clarity. Overall, I felt that the attempt to combine scholarship with readability did not entirely come off, though the book is certainly much more accessible than most feminist history I have read.

The major significance of *The Spinster and her Enemies* lies in the positive contribution it makes to a feminist history of sexuality, as well as to current debates about sexuality and its role in women's oppression. It restores feminist ideas and campaigns around sexuality to their rightful place at the centre of the last wave of British feminism. It exposes the anti-feminist implications of the sexual revolution, questioning not only the conventional wisdom about the period but also 'progressive', and even most feminist, interpretations. It is a provocative book, in that it challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions of male supremacy, but to me that is the whole point of feminist theory. Above all I believe it is a book which will encourage other feminists to pick up the loose ends and explore the issues further. There is an urgent need for more research into this period so that we can reach a better understanding of how and why feminism suffered such a decline in the inter-war years (and beyond). Perhaps we can learn some lessons which will help us to prevent the same thing from happening again? □

# Tales from a labour ward

Bridget Foster reviews "*The Women's Decameron*" by Julia Voznesenskaya, an exiled Soviet feminist.

*The Women's Decameron* is Julia Voznesenskaya's modern, Soviet-style version of the Boccaccio classic. Instead of medieval cavaliers and courtiers quarantined in Florence, we find ten women in a Leningrad maternity ward, where — as often in the USSR — an outbreak of infection has led to ten days' quarantine. Inspired by Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which one of the new mothers is reading, the women agree to tell stories each night to while away their enforced stay.

What a treat, I thought. Such a novel idea, and from one of the original Soviet feminists. (Julia Voznesenskaya was forced into exile in 1980 for her social and literary activities and now lives in Munich.) The quarantine scenario too held particular interest for me, having been once compulsorily hospitalised in the USSR myself. What's more, I had translated an earlier article of Julia Voznesenskaya's on her experiences of the camps. I could hardly wait to get reading.

I should have paid more attention to the initial note on copyright, which gives the title in Russian as *The Ladies' Decameron*. An important difference and one which overshadows the book. It has been heralded and marketed as a feminist work, and Julia Voznesenskaya as the mother of Soviet feminism. Julia Voznesenskaya was indeed a founding member of Leningrad's "Club Maria", a supposedly feminist club named after the

virgin Mary, regarded by members as their patron and symbol. Since the club was formed, other strands of feminism have emerged, often in opposition to the religious model (see *Trouble and Strife* no.6). An acrimonious split occurred in *Women and Russia*, the feminist journal and crucial underground publication. So Julia Voznesenskaya's politics are far from shared by all Soviet feminists. From this novel I can see why.

There's in fact scarcely any overt religion in *The Women's Decameron*. But nor, to my mind, is there much feminism. The book ends up with a key speech from the ordinary, likeable Irishka.

I still wish life here could be civilised. I think we women deserve to have life get a bit easier; and I don't just mean us who have been sitting here telling each other various stories, but all the women in this country. That's all.

"I still wish life here could be civilised. I think we women deserve to have life get a bit easier."



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"A simple woman will see a pile of shit and say to herself 'shit'. But an intellectual dreams to herself: 'Perhaps I could transform that shit into cream'."

"Her husband was a wild animal. He was a violent drinker and a violent man and he would get drunk and go after his wife with an axe ... She complained to the militia so many times, but they always said the same things: 'It's a family matter!'."

A very liberal response to a book full of tales of male perfidy and violence, where women live on their wits and ingenuity, and don't always get by.

The ten women incarcerated on the maternity ward are all very different. There are 'intellectuals', a dissident, a theatre director, a doctor of biology, as well as a music teacher and an engineer, a shipyard worker, a Party 'big-wig', an air hostess-cum-prostitute, a secretary and a tramp who has been in and out of labour camps. Together they plan the themes for the ten nights' story telling. These include First Love, Sex in Farical Situations, Bitches, Noble Deeds and Happiness. Much is witty and outrageous, confidentiality being agreed between the women when necessary. There are bawdy tales of robustly heterosexual adventures (not that I'm always convinced of the enjoyment of the women involved). Sometimes the story-tellers get upset, as when they are talking of their own experiences of rape. Often they have an extraordinarily dead-pan delivery as they describe horrifying tales, such as that of the jealous mother-in-law who murders her daughter-in-law and cooks her up for her son's dinner, or the two women who chop off a man's legs to get him to give them more money for booze.

Is Julia Voznesenskaya making a specific comment on the Soviet Union or on the human condition when she portrays women as well as men as being only inches away from uncontrollable 'bitchiness' or even such excesses of physical violence? The book certainly echoes with reminders of our "fallen state". Women come out of it only little better than men, despite the story-tellers showing a fair degree of sympathy for women's plight.



### Nothing is changed

Men are seen as unreliable and drunk, often violent. But there is no suggestion that women might be better off without them. The status quo is upheld, despite such sharp observations as this on class differences in our view and expectation of men:

The whole problem is that a simple woman will see a pile of shit and say to herself 'shit'. But an intellectual dreams to herself: 'Perhaps I could transform that shit into cream'.

As with more or less any group of women, these ten slag men off and laugh together at men's weaknesses. But nothing is changed. The only mention of lesbianism is a horribly homophobic tale of lesbians in a labour camp, where the "butch" knifes her lover for a supposed infidelity. After this enforced stay in hospital, all ten story-tellers will return to their heterosexual worlds and take up arms again in the same way as they always have, in an unrelenting battle of the sexes, as described in these stories.

Of course, there are some redeeming features to the book. Many of the women's stories make an ironic commentary on aspects of Soviet society, which I found amusing. At the beginning, for example, Emma the theatre director notes:

In the West they had invented disposable nappies and plastic pants long ago. Our people were supposed to be involved in industrial espionage, so why couldn't they steal some useful secrets instead of always going for electronics?

On a serious note, the stories bring out the complacency of the Soviet state as regards domestic violence and rape. Albina, the air hostess, tells the harrowing story of her own rape. The neighbours don't respond to her screams for help and afterwards will not come forward as witnesses. Zina, the tramp, tells the story of a woman who is constantly beaten by her husband:

Her husband was a wild animal. He was a violent drinker and a violent man and he would get drunk and go after his wife with an axe. Of course she would grab the child in her arms and run to the neighbours to get away from him. They would hide her and keep her as long as necessary. She complained to the militia so many times, but they always said the same things: 'It's a family matter!'.

The child, a son, finally kills the father, but the mother manages to take responsibility for it and is imprisoned. One of many stories of women's "nobility".



Women are not portrayed as victims, but only just. Their way of resisting the violence of men is not always in solidarity with other women; although there are some touching tributes to women's friendship and support. I remember particularly the elderly mother-in-law who hides her last kopecks in Galina's pockets, for Galina has married her imprisoned son and been spurned by her own family. There is also the woman whose husband has had an affair in Leningrad during the war (she had escaped the blockade herself). She discovers the affair after her return. The "other woman" is a nurse and has nursed her husband through TB. The two women meet, like each other, talk about what happened, the wife thanks the other woman for having saved her husband — and they become firm friends.

But such moments are fleeting. On the whole, I came away from the stories bruised and dispirited by the brutality of men and by the way women are abused and divided. I would have liked the stories to have dug deeper. They are entertainments *not* revelations or a political sharing in any consciousness raising way. The status quo remains unchallenged, apart from the wishy-washy call for a more civilised life.

### Women or Feminism?

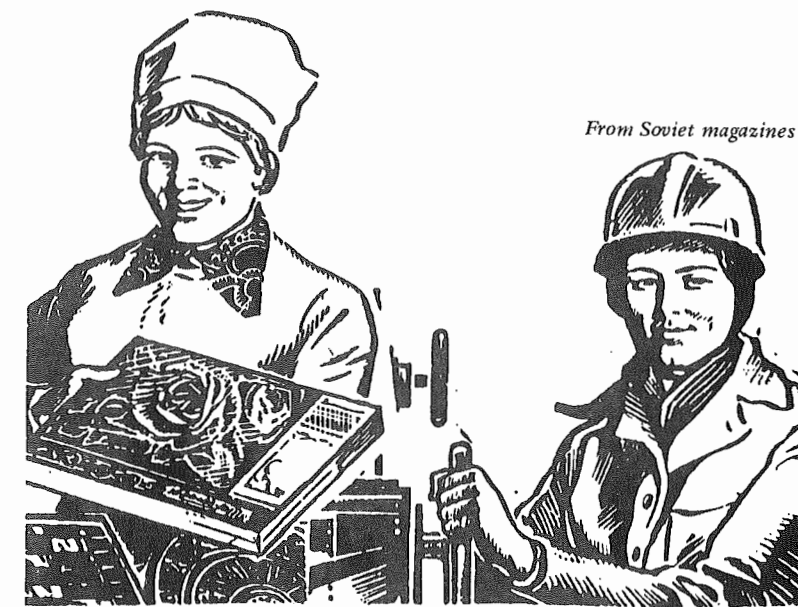
Women's concerns are only raised once in a collective way, in a lively discussion about discrimination against mothers in employ-

ment and pension rights, which follows a touching story of a woman who adopts seven children after her sister dies. Olga, the shipyard worker, turns to Valentina, the party 'big-wig':

'Valyusha, Why don't you write to your namesake, Valentina Tereshkova the astronaut? She could raise the matter at the highest level'.

'Yes! And from her highest level she would go tumbling down to the bottom. Have you ever heard of her putting in a single word for women? Of course not, and that's why she's head of the Committee of Soviet Women'.

Unfortunately, this understandable cynicism with the powers that be, or with working through the official channels, is not followed up by anything more positive. Perhaps this is a true reflection of the lack of any alternative in the Soviet Union, where the minute feminist grouping has been harassed, arrested and even exiled abroad. But something niggles me. It begs the question: what is a feminist book? It needn't be about ways of organising or even about feminists. I hate any preaching in fiction. Yet women don't equal feminism. Feminism is a distinct way of approaching the world, which not all women share, and a group of women is in itself not necessarily feminist, nor is writing about one. I don't always enjoy or agree with feminist fiction, but reading *The Women's Decameron* I felt awash in a horribly familiar hostile world,



From Soviet magazines

"We worked well together, got to like each other, and then decided to build a healthy Soviet family."

without the reassurance that Julia Voznesenskaya believes in women's strength and courage or collective power. It is an issue that women can and do behave treacherously towards each other. I'm not against women been shown in a bad light. But if the author claims to be feminist, this has to be done with responsibility and compassion and with an understanding of why women behave like this. Otherwise, the coast is clear for outright misogyny.



Perhaps there is one hopeful glimmer in the book. It comes, ironically, from Valentina, the party 'big-wig', and from how she relates to the other women. She starts off very stiff and formal, with her story of first love, which sounds more like an official report:

Pavel Petrovich and I both came to work at the regional committee of the Komsomol (Communist Youth) straight from the institute. He was appointed senior instructor, and I was made his assistant. We worked well together, got to like each other, and then decided to build a healthy Soviet family. Our comrades supported us and began agitating to get us a flat. We got it and were married immediately. Our son has been born, and a daughter is planned for three years' time. We're a happy family, and I think it is because we created it with sober heads, without any illusions.

At first, Valentina cannot stop herself interrupting Galina, the dissident. They spar. The other women are obviously uncomfortable, and feel defensive with Valentina. But, slowly, Valentina warms to the story telling. She becomes less orthodox. She talks more sensually about her body and her sexuality. She reveals a spiritual dimension, with a strong feeling for the Russian

countryside and for old customs. She is witty and brave, telling how she fought off a rapist, almost castrating him with the elastic attached to her precious Canadian mittens. She mellows and becomes one of the group. She and Galina, the dissident, draw closer to each other. Valentina even tells a story where the KGB inadvertently learn of how generous the dissidents are towards one another. I came to like Valentina almost best of all, having felt very mistrustful and negative towards her to begin with. Was this Julia Voznesenskaya's intention? And is there a message here? If so, is it that women do share fundamental concerns and world-view, as women? Even a party 'big-wig' and a dissident? God knows. This is a disturbing and contradictory book and not, I'm afraid, one I can wholly recommend. □

*The Women's Decameron*,  
Julia Voznesenskaya, transl.  
W.B. Linton, Quartet Books,  
1986. £9.95.

#### Feminist Library (WRRC)

We've got feminist fiction and non-fiction, poetry, plays, newsletters and magazines — information on women's studies courses and an index of work/projects/research in progress. Free library use to all — income related membership fee for borrowing.

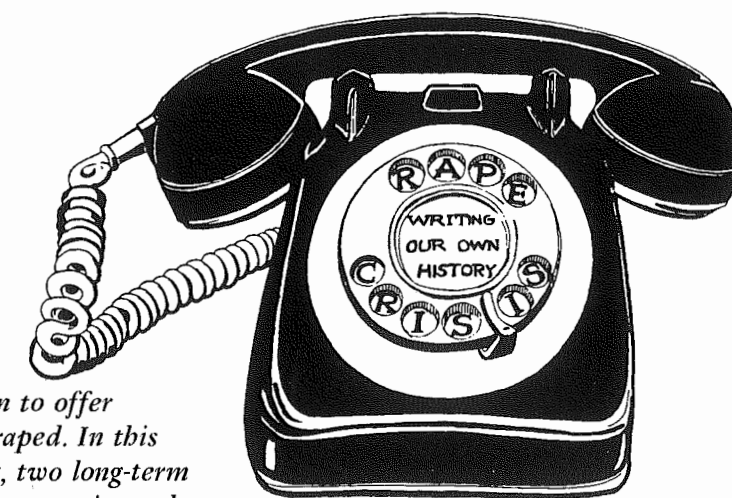
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She tells how she fought off a rapist, almost castrating him with the elastic attached to her precious Canadian mittens.



LYN MAY

*London Rape Crisis was the first group in Britain to offer telephone counselling to women who had been raped. In this interview Romi Bowen and Bernadette Manning, two long-term but ex-members of the group, discuss their own memories and reflections with Lynn Alderson and Liz Kelly.*

LK: Can you begin by sketching out some of the early history of London Rape Crisis?

B: Yes, it opened in March 1976. Neither of us were in the original group which began in 1972/3 and was very much influenced by what had been going on in the US about sexual violence. From what other women have told me it was a group of about 40 women who met because they wanted to do something about rape. Different women had different ideas about what it was they wanted to do. Initially it was a local women's support group in North London. They advertised in various magazines and more women came. That was the original, original group and I think they talked for a long time about what it was they wanted to do. One group became a support group, the others decided they wanted to campaign. It was out of this group that the idea for a Rape Crisis Centre came — I think there was about ten of them to begin with.

R: They did an enormous amount of groundwork. I get the impression they met solidly for a year before the Centre opened. They were waiting for charitable status. I think some women contacted them for counselling even at that stage, and obviously they did what they could but they were very much learning on their feet all the time.

LA: Where did the money come from?

RB: Well they approached a couple of local boroughs for Urban Aid money, but

because they were offering a Londonwide service they didn't qualify. In fact it was the Burrow and Geraldine Cadbury Memorial Trust which took the risk — they felt they were taking a risk — which gave the start-up money. They fully financed it at the beginning when it was small — on the basis that if it worked they would get more money. Cadbury's have been very loyal funders since. They have been trying to reduce their funding, because once a group is established they do like to pull out, but they always provided some sort of safety net.

B: They funded us for ten years, but I think the funding is coming to an end this year. They have not only given us money but lots of advice about funding over the years, have been very supportive in general.

R: It was always important to us not to be totally state funded. In my day we had a little local authority money, some from the DHSS because we offered a countrywide service, some from Cadbury's and then a lot of other trusts giving small amounts. That gave us a lot of flexibility and freedom, although it meant a lot of energy went into fund raising and there wasn't much security.

B: Having seen the experience of groups that got all state funding and the amount of energy that takes I feel at least our time was usefully used in that it allowed us to run LRC how we wanted to.



R: The pattern for the centre was laid down in 1976. A way of working was set up and although we have developed it over the years, the fundamental structures are still very similar to those in 1976: paid workers and unpaid workers, running the 24 hour line come hell or high water and incorporating public education work. The counselling work and the other work that creates change are not separate — they are brought together so that they strengthen each other.

### *Counselling women*

LA: *How many callers does LRC get?*

R: At the beginning I gather it was exciting for the phone to ring. In the first year we had about 150 calls, in 1978 we were getting about 25 new callers a week, and I understand that now they are getting about 100 counselling calls a week. So, early on, the unpaid workers who were taking calls at night or at weekends might have one or two quite lengthy calls to deal with, but now women are on the phone all night. They put it down and pick it up again almost immediately.

B: In January '86 on a Saturday night I was getting 15–20 calls, so I worked all night, the phone just didn't stop.

R: Outside office hours there is an answer phone which gives the number of an unpaid worker. We took all the calls in the office initially, there was space to sleep overnight there. That changed after the door was kicked in by a group of men. Initially there were more calls from women who had been raped many years ago — taking the opportunity to tell another woman about it. It wasn't atypical to get women who were raped 40 years ago ringing — we had lots of women who had been raped during the war ringing us, some of them had never talked to anyone about it. The number of women who had just been raped was quite small. But that built up as our phone number got more and more known.

B: Also as our counselling got better and we began to offer women a bit more in terms of counselling skills, women began to tell us about being raped as children as well as as adults.

LA: *It can't have been what you expected — did you feel equipped to deal with that range of calls?*

R: Well I think the first group of women were very careful to pull in training from all sorts of groups: Samaritans, sympathetic GPs, other counsellors and psychologists. This was put together with the groups' political beliefs: that rape is a crime of sexual violence, that it is about taking control away from women and that there is a huge mythology of rape which actually makes women feel much worse about what has happened. As a new counsellor myself in 1978 I thought, is this going to be enough, is this going to be useful to the women calling? But you soon learnt it was, because what is essential for the caller is that you immediately believe her, which of course we do. You don't put your own views on her, you listen, you help her describe what happened and you try to get across that you can bear to hear the details. Then it is amazing and a lot of other things flow. I think the part of rape counselling that outsiders don't see is that it isn't just that the counsellor is giving all the time and being drained; the energy that you get from women describing what has happened and gaining strength from themselves is enormous.

LA: *For someone who hasn't done it, coming face to face with that kind of violence all the time — bearing all the details, sounds unbearable.*

B: You certainly can bear it. I think as Romi says you get enormous amounts of strength from women — agreeing with their perceptions of their experiences is strengthening for you and them. On top of that we worked in a group that had a political basis and a commitment to working collectively in a women only environment — we didn't talk to men. Our support structures became extremely well developed as the years went on. We put a lot of energy into ourselves, which in turn helped us give energy to the women who called. Thirdly we engaged in public education in which we were able to use the information we were given by the women who called us to effect political change. We spoke to all kinds of groups. We never ever used stories — but we used the information we gathered to validate those women's experiences. That meant we

operated on three levels and for me it was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

R: I think it was very important that we didn't make huge distinctions between the women who called us and the women who counselled. Many of us had been raped in any event, or certainly near as damn it, and also women who had called us joined us as counsellors. It was important not to identify ourselves as superwomen who could cope with anything. A lot of women who called me needed to know that I wasn't bearing it on my own. And it was easy for me to say, yes this is difficult but I've got women here who will support me. One of the principles we built in was that in terms of counselling, every woman calling us was the responsibility of the whole centre.

As rape takes away a woman's control of her life, everything we did in our counselling was about helping her regain control. That meant we shouldn't get into the role of advisor. There were always a number of areas we wanted to cover with women, but we listened to her experience first. If it had been a relatively recent rape we would want to give her information about the need for a medical examination, and the police. We certainly wouldn't say "you've got to get along to the VD clinic" or "we think you should go to the police station". We would see that as bad counselling, we would offer women the information that we had learnt and leave it to her to make the decision.

B: The crucial thing was to say to women: you are not alone, we have spoken to hundreds of women who felt the same as you feel.

LK: *Is there not sometimes a conflict in non-directive counselling when women callers' feelings and understandings reflect the myths of rape that LRC set out to challenge?*

R: Yes — we talked about that Rogerian neutral counselling in the early days. As we became stronger in our identity as feminists we began to challenge those myths but not by having a political argument with the woman. It was a skill that we had to practice with each other. So if a woman says she feels guilty about what happened, there is no point in saying "well don't, it wasn't your fault". Rather we try to get her to unpick why she feels guilty and maybe to

put it in a different perspective, perhaps by looking at what the man did.

LK: *Are there any advantages and disadvantages to counselling by phone?*

R: The first thing that comes into my mind is the anonymity of it. Women don't have to give their names. Also they can control the length of the call, hang-up, call back. It gives a lot of choice to the woman calling and an intensity and closeness if she wants that.

B: The phone is a particularly intense instrument, there's nothing to take away your attention, it's all focused on your ear. On the other hand you can't see who you are talking to and they can't see you, but sometimes that's not a disadvantage.

R: Women did have the choice of face to face counselling. I couldn't swear that we offered it to every woman, it was standard practice to offer it if that's what she wanted.

B: But when things were going on for us we had to be careful about how much we offered because we could only cope with so much.

R: We also offered to meet women in their own homes, especially if they were in crisis. We would encourage her to draw as much as possible on her own support networks, but we knew that wasn't always possible. We didn't do a lot of this, the security procedures we had to set up were quite enormous because of the false calls we got.

LA: *Did you get a lot of those?*

R: Well right from the beginning there was animosity from men to LRC — a massive number of our calls were abusive and threatening. Some were regular saying the same things. It was frightening enough to take them in the office, but it must have been appalling for women in their own homes. This is why we were very strict about never giving addresses. We couldn't even give the centre's address so that women could drop in, which I think we would have done otherwise.

LA: *Did you develop ways of dealing with this type of call from men?*

R: Each woman developed her own style of dealing with it — to put the phone down, shout back. Some of them were so insistent, they would call and call, clearly all they

were interested in was blocking the line. We would also talk to each other about how frightened it made us. Sometimes you had to ask someone else to take over the line.

#### *Victims, survivors or women?*

LK: *I can see the advantages of a phone line, what strikes me is that rape counselling has evolved differently to other feminist organising, which tends to be group based, rather than one to one.*

R: Part of that comes from some of our experiences in women's groups, talking about our own experiences of sexual violence and the group not being able to cope. Now that may have changed, but I remember a lot of women talking about something very difficult and it landing in the middle of the room. That's not to say that groups can't work but I think if you talk about your own rape in a Consciousness Raising (CR) group you might get support, something that you want, but not the individual attention and the time to unpick it so that you know what you want to do about it.

LK: *Did you consider offering groups to the women who called — to meet with each other?*

B: We talked about that about two million times during the ten years I was there and decided not to every time. It came up with monotonous regularity and the reasons we decided against it were different every time. Some reasons I remember were: we saw ourselves as a self-help group, we were not professionals, we didn't want to see women who had been raped separated off into these bounded groups where they

got help. We felt every woman had experienced sexual violence to a different degree and could talk about it. We did encourage women to join CR groups, lots of them did and got involved in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) having been counselled by us.

R: In 1981 the Incest Survivors group started so some women could choose to go there.

LK: *I wonder whether their choice to call themselves survivors rather than victims changed the way some of us thought about groups?*

B: We would say all women are survivors of male violence.

R: It's a political difference and one I have discussed with Incest Survivors. It's not helpful to me to identify myself in terms of the sexual violence committed against me. That doesn't mean I don't want to talk to other women who have been sexually assaulted, but as an identity it doesn't help me as a woman. That's something women who have chosen to call themselves survivors will fight fiercely about with me and other women who think like I do.

LK: *Are you saying that victim and survivor are in a sense the same, because they both define us in relation to sexual violence?*

R: Yes. Obviously survivor is much more positive; stating that women survive the horrendous sexual violence against them is very powerful. But I'm not sure it moves us much further than that. It's interesting the way LRC developed on that. Just before it

opened I think we stopped using the term victim. The Burgess and Holmstrom book, *Rape: Victims of Crisis*, which was influential in the way we counselled, used the word victim. But in our first report there's a whole paragraph, which is much more eloquent than I can be now, about why we weren't using the word. There we used "raped woman" and it wasn't long after that that we began using "women who have been raped". I don't think it's changed since then.

B: We also stopped using the word "case" early on.

R: Well not till 1979 — I was using it in '78. A woman came into the group and questioned it and Newcastle Rape Crisis did too. We did a lot of training of other groups, but they also challenged us because they were coming to it fresh.

#### *The police*

LK: *Did you have any policy about women who phoned you and were considering reporting to the police — did you offer to accompany her?*

B: Yes we did. If a woman had been recently raped we would always talk with her about the police. We would give her information about what would happen, we tried to keep up to date about that. We would help her make a decision, and if she wanted we would go with her, we would also accompany her to court, right through to the end of the legal process. We would offer as much support as possible to any woman who embarked on that. We didn't as a group feel it was necessarily a bad thing

for women to report rape, because we did want to see rapists caught. On the other hand the legal system is very destructive to women. So all we could do was offer as much information about what would happen.

LA: *Without making any judgements about whether a woman was strong enough to cope with it?*

B: No, we didn't see that as our role at all, that was for her to decide. Mostly women didn't go through it, about a quarter of the women who contacted us went through the legal process.

R: There has always been a misconception about the centre in establishment circles about this. Certainly the police themselves in the days when I was involved thought we dissuaded women from reporting. That wasn't the case, we would describe the legal process and procedures, we supported the woman's decision either way. It's the police and courts that are biased against women and we didn't want to get bogged down in trying to pretend otherwise. We used to trot along to the Old Bailey and sit through all the trials with women we had counselled.

B: We did quite a lot of work in order to be effectively supportive. We had an arrangement with the Old Bailey to be able to sit with the woman in the well of the court, we were also allowed to go to the canteen with women.

LK: *There is a story going around in the police, that was repeated in evidence to the Women's Commission report on Violence Against Women, that LRC refused to work*

## RAPE CRISIS CENTRE FIRST REPORT

The RCRP is the first Rape Crisis Centre in Britain and, as with any new project, we have met with generous help and sympathy on the one hand, and suspicion and hostility on the other.

Our definition of rape is much wider than that of the law. We say that any unwanted, forced or coerced sexual attention is a form of rape. While on the whole we have dealt more with attacks on women which are at present recognised as rape or sexual assault, we feel that it is important to consider the widest possible range. All women who feel that they have been forced to take part in a sexual situation should feel that we are open to them and will treat their feelings with equal care and gravity.

We have tried to avoid the use of the word 'victim' in this report since we feel that it does not fairly describe the woman who has been raped. While she has been victimised, this is not her total identity; she does not remain the 'passive subject of attack' as implied by the word 'victim'. The rape will affect her for some time afterwards, but it often unleashes anger that has never been able to find its target before. One of the underlying points of our Centre is to help ourselves, as women, to become aware that we do not have to accept the identity given to us by this society. 'Victims' cannot fight back — 'raped women' will. We as women are used to seeing ourselves as victims of one type or another. As women we have a culture and experience which, if only we can overcome our fears, takes us out of our victim role and helps us resolve the massive contradictions between the absolute need for self-determination and the guilt for wanting it.

## RAPE CRISIS CENTRE SECOND REPORT

Our recommendations for changes in police procedure are laid out in our submission to the Criminal Law Revision Committee (see Appendix II).

In June 1976, as a result of correspondence between the RCRP and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Force, we learnt that our organisation was not officially recognised by the Force and that officers would not refer women who had been raped or sexually assaulted to the Centre. We were also informed that "there would be no useful purpose in arranging an interview with an officer of this (the Metropolitan Police) Force" to discuss the possibilities of establishing a working relationship between the RCRP and the police.

In July 1977 we approached Jack Ashley M.P. and asked him to take the issue up on our behalf with Lord Harris, Minister of State at the Home Office responsible for police matters. Jack Ashley's efforts were unsuccessful, and we have published in full the correspondence between ourselves, Jack Ashley and Lord Harris (see Appendix III).

We fail to understand the recalcitrant attitude of the Metropolitan Police towards the Rape Counselling and Research Project, and will persist in our efforts to change the situation. We hope to have further discussions with Jack Ashley about how best to achieve this.

with the Met.

R: Well that's interesting, maybe that's their latest line. The negotiations with the police were before I joined, although it carried on a bit after. Basically they didn't want to know, they wouldn't recognise the group as an official organisation.

B: When negotiations started, we wrote to tell them that we existed, the service that we offered. They came back wanting the names and addresses of every woman working there. We replied saying that we didn't think this was necessary. They then started on the "you are interfering with witnesses" bit. We told them that we were going to do the work we were doing. Then we heard they issued a memo, which as far as we know has never been retracted, saying they were not to co-operate with us under any circumstances. They went as far as to issue this memo throughout the whole of London. We had some correspondence with them which we published in our first report, and I think they may have been a bit put out by that. After that things just didn't change and I suppose as more and more women came to us telling us how they had been treated by the police, we developed a collective knowledge of how the police were behaving. At the beginning we just didn't know. We discovered all kinds of appalling things like women being left with no clothes, being driven home with only a blanket round them, being taken around the streets immediately after the rape to look for the rapist.

R: Women being told they were liars, had brought it on themselves, all sorts of questions about her past sexual history. When it was on TV — the Thames Valley programme — the 'Great British public' was outraged, but those sorts of interrogation techniques were going on every day as far as we were concerned.

B: We were very wary of developing a relationship with the police because of it. We didn't want to be associated with that kind of treatment of women, most women didn't report for that reason. We have never refused to meet the police, though they have never actually approached us — certainly up till January 1986 they hadn't. The other thing we did was submit a document *Rape: Police and Forensic Practice* to

the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure in 1978. It was extremely critical of what the police were doing to women but also offered a different model of work for the police.

R: We met with a lot of forensic doctors in order to work out ways to improve the circumstances and ways in which women were examined. Effectively the police doctors at that time were conducting a second interrogation, and for all I know still are, making innuendos and concluding at the end as to whether this woman had been raped or not.

LK: *Were you ever asked to take part in police training?*

R: No I don't think so. There came a time when we stopped taking any initiatives. We made our representations for change through these more formal bodies. We weren't seeing any changes on the ground and it didn't seem a good use of our energy to be involved in day to day wranglings with the police or training. Our energy — and there was only a limited amount of it — was for women. We didn't want to work hand in glove with the police. Other Rape Crisis Groups (RCGs) had different views on this.

B: It was very important for us to be an autonomous organisation. So we never got involved in anything that was going to take up more than one or two meetings. Although we did get involved in the Criminal Law Revision Committee groups, but that was within the WLM so that was different.

R: It seemed an important way of keeping our clarity of vision, and I think that was right. Now I'm back in the statutory sector I can see that where you sit affects the way you look at the world. We recognised that we were sitting on the edge and that that was actually useful. It made us more effective in the work we did with women and for ourselves.

LK: *Have you any ideas on why changes in police practice appear to be happening now, rather than say four years ago, when we were saying the same things?*

R: I have to be careful answering this because from conversations with women who are counselling now it appears that

women's experience of contact with the police has changed very little. The police are just saying the right things publicly.

LA: *They are setting up these special units though, aren't they — with flowered wall-paper, where women will be talked to nicely. There's one in Manchester and one or two in London.*

B: There might be, but I don't think it will have much effect on the individual officers investigating. You still have to report rape to your local police station. If you happen to live near to the flowered room, fine; but then you might not ring LRC, so it's difficult for us to comment. But up till January 1986 there certainly was no change.

LK: *So you think it's a PR job — needing to be seen to be doing something?*

B: Well yes, after that Thames Valley programme — they approved of that you know! They had full editorial control of that series and did stop some things being shown. I also think the moves to help children who have been sexually abused are having a spin off effect. Although there is already a new mythology, now they all say children don't lie but adolescent girls do.

R: I don't know, one part of me believes that the WLM, not just RCGs, has created some kind of change over the last ten years. What we haven't analysed yet is how that change has occurred, what the new mythologies are, what the down side is. It doesn't feel very different does it? That they have decided to believe children is to do with feminism. It was discovered as flavour of the month in 1986, but we had been working on it since at least 1978, saying the same thing over and over. It wasn't listened to until the last two years.

LA: *But they still don't say it's men, they just refuse to name them and talk about people and child abusers.*

R: Yes that's true and two of the new mythologies are that women do it as much as men and that it happens as much to boys as to girls — both of which are just not true.

LK: *Part of the new approach is to accept that it happens and say it has terrible consequences. Therefore, girls and young women need treatment, especially so that they won't hate men.*

### Network or coalition

LK: *Can you say a little about the networking between RCGs?*

R: Well it's always been very complex, as was the group's relationship to the WLM. We always saw ourselves as part of the WLM and that we couldn't have existed without it. But there were various parts of the WLM that felt we didn't belong.

B: And still do!

LK: *What were the issues of dispute?*

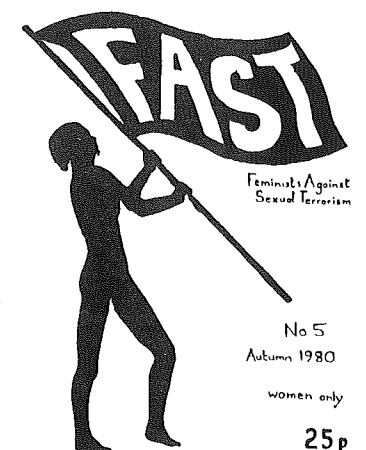
B: The issues have changed over the years. I think a lot of it has to do with being a group that works!

R: One of the things was that in LRC we were so busy that we didn't always pay enough attention to making connections in the WLM. So we often seemed a private, closed system. But, in fact, we weren't — many of us were in CR groups outside the centre and busy at conferences — that was the time when we were all busy. Some groups wanting to set up RCGs came to talk to us about how we had done it. It was a regular occurrence that we met with small groups of women to share what we thought about counselling, funding — what worked for us and what might work for them in their situation. Other more formal meetings took place where we would share the minutiae of information about, say, what the law was, or post-coital contraception. Later on through FAST (Feminists Against Sexual Terrorism) there was an exchange of ideas and debate about the way we should do things. There was some of the usual animosity about London versus the rest of the country. On the whole the exchange was really useful. Because we were in London we were lucky to have visitors quite often. At one point we saw the Birmingham workers fairly regularly — as a worker I found that useful.

B: We also had a lot of international contact, especially in the summer — women from America, Australia, South Africa.

LK: *One of the things I think is interesting is that RCGs seem to have kept a strong sense of autonomy. You never organised as a formal coalition but did do a lot of sharing of information and ideas.*

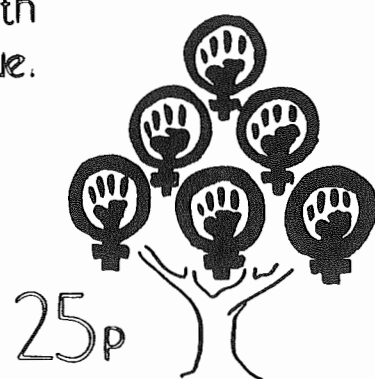
R: That was a political choice. I remember at the Bristol Sexual Violence



Feminists  
Against  
Sexual  
Terrorism

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Conference in 1978/9 there was a move to form a national federation like Women's Aid. Some of us spoke very strongly against that, we didn't see what we would gain. We wanted to stay autonomous because we thought that way we would have more of a chance of developing in ways that met the needs of the women calling us. We had hardly enough time to do the work, what would become of formal networking? What would the purpose have been of trying to get consistent policies between centres? Why would we have done that — that's about male power building. We would have ended up sitting in endless meetings about whether women ought to have 24 or ten hour phone lines. There was a part of me that didn't want to because it was expected of us. People always asked us if we were the national office, they'd talk of "your centres in the rest of the country". We would persistently say "they are not ours, all groups are autonomous". I think we were right, especially as we did manage to talk to each other.

#### *Feminist services and feminist politics*

LK: *Have you found any conflicts being a group that provides a service, being a charity and having feminist politics?*

B: Well the one thing we didn't do officially was WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) stuff. I think we did everything else apart from that because there aren't any restrictions on a charity other than that you can't join a political party. So we went on marches, although there was a conflict about that in the early

days when we were very vulnerable. Some women felt it might place the group and the service at risk, so we didn't then. When we were secure, had our funding, knew we weren't going to have our charitable status removed and that we had proved the need for our existence, then we took the banner on marches. We did everything really, apart from anything that might be seen as illegal.

LK: *In the early 1970s rape was the symbol of women's oppression — have there been any shifts for the two of you over the years in how you have thought about rape?*

R: One of the things that always struck me when I was at LRC was that women who did not have identical politics — we weren't all radical feminists — all had what I felt was a radical feminist analysis of rape. Certainly we all saw rape as the extreme end of male domination. It was listening to women describe what men had done to them which made this so clear, so apparent. It cut through a lot of other political differences. I haven't changed in that view, I still think sexual violence is central.

LK: *The shift seems to me to have been from a focus on rape in particular to sexual violence more generally.*

R: LRC in its first report said ever so clearly that we believed any form of sexual coercion was a form of rape. We always saw the spectrum of sexual offences as forms of rape, which was always very powerful for the women who contacted us. That's not to say there aren't differences between sexual harassment and rape.

B: But we viewed them with equal seriousness on the basis that for the woman calling her experience was the most important one in her life. Nothing has changed for me either in terms of the fundamentals of my feminist politics. I see sexual violence as what expresses male domination most in this society. I think that belief was one of the reasons why so many different women could work together for years. You had Communist Party women working alongside radical feminists like myself and other women who were not feminist in other areas of their lives. It brought women together because it was rape, in that sense I think working to fight rape is unique. □

Women's Commission Report  
*Violence Against Women*, available from the Cabinet Office, Westminster.

London Rape Crisis 1987 research booklet *Strength in Numbers* (£1) and all other publications available from PO Box 69, London WC1X 9NJ.

*Rape: Victims of Crisis*, Ann Burgess and Linda Holmstrom (New York, 1974).

For details of London Rape Crisis reports and publications write to: PO Box 69, London, WC1X 9NJ.



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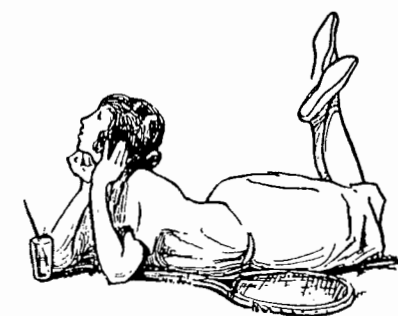
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