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feminist response to pop culture

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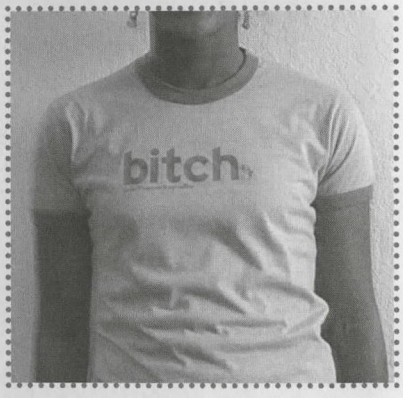

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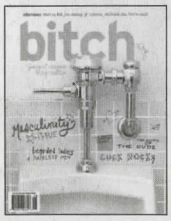

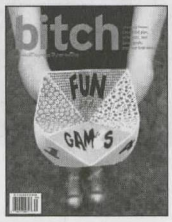

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COVER AND THIS PAGE: PHOTOS BY JEFFERY WALLS

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ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING Opinions expressed are those of their respective authors, not necessarily those of *Bitch*. We have many—and sometimes conflicting—opinions.

THANKS Kevin B. Chen, El Rio, Daphne Gottlieb, Intersection for the Arts, Beth Lisick, Rainbow Grocery, Marjorie Rouche, Susan Sarratt, Scott Warren, Eric Zassenhaus

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There was a time when we here at *Bitch* got, to put it mildly, a little oversexed. Like every other magazine in the world, we did a sex issue way back in the '90s, and most issues thereafter contained a smattering of whoopie-fied content: interviews with renowned sexperts, discussions of sexualized media imagery, battles between pro- and anti-porn folks that dominated the letters section for several issues running.

It got exhausting. Pitches for porn-review columns ("like *Hustler*, but feminist!") and stripper-empowerment activism were increasingly greeted with unbridled yawning. It wasn't that we didn't think these could be compelling, crucial subjects; we were just, frankly, tired of talking about sex.

But the thing is, no feminist magazine worth its soy ink can afford to ignore sex for long. For many people, a growing awareness of the politics of sex and sexuality is a gateway to an awareness of feminism. And for feminism, which has over the years added reams of material to an understanding of the complex interplay of sex and politics (whether personal or structural), keeping a dialogue going is crucial to the evolution of our movement. Whether we're talking about sex work, sexed-up images and their viselike grip on advertising, or just plain old sex, a feminist analysis always comes in handy.

While sex is one of the most obvious (and complex) aspects of discussing and defining a feminist perspective, the politics of anger is an equally crucial and longstanding component. The angry-feminist stereotype, much as we loathe it, has its roots in reality, after all: Change only comes when we learn how to channel outrage and personal frustration into intellectual critique and collective action. And if it isn't already clear from this magazine's title, we think there need to be more public forums for the reasoned expression of women's dissatisfaction, anger, and outrage—it's not always pretty, and it's not even always useful, but it's a vital part of looking critically at our world. Judging from the letters you all send us (and keep 'em coming, by the way), we're pretty sure you agree. —*Eds.*

Contributors

Jennifer Loviglio ("Bloodless Coup," page 20) is a freelance writer who has a column about sex, politics, science, and pop culture. It doesn't get any better than that. Oh, wait, it does: The column, "The XX Files" in Rochester's *City Paper*, won first prize in the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies' annual competition last year. What's more, she gets to write about food for a local glossy magazine. When she's not writing or eating, Loviglio does humorous commentaries on her local National Public Radio affiliate. To read or hear more of her work, go to www.jenniferloviglio.com.

Before **Rebecca Onion** ("Tree So Horny," page 29) decided to go back to graduate school for American Studies, she wrote for a living, contributing to such bewilderingly diverse publications as *YM*, *ELLEgirl*, *Slate*, *Pop Matters*, *Backpacker*, and *Wiretap*. Now she spends such an inordinate portion of her life reading old adventure stories about sled-dog races and racist Arctic explorers' books about "Esquimeaux" that she hardly has time to do anything else—except, of course, for *Bitch*. If you have any good recipes for bread-'n'butter pickles, recommendations of places to hike around Austin, Texas, or just want to dialogue about how awesome black licorice is, contact her at www.rebeccaonion.com.

Joshunda Sanders ("Reading Is Fundamental," page 71; Bitch Reads, page 76) is an Austin journalist by day and a writer at all hours of the night when she's waiting for the coffee to wear off. Her essays have appeared in *Secrets and Confidences: The Complicated Truth About Women's Friendships* (Seal Press) and *My Soul to His Spirit: Soulful Expressions from Black Daughters to Their Fathers* (SoulDictates Publishing). Her work will appear in a forthcoming Seal Press anthology about women and their homelands. She has written for *Vibe*, *Suede*, *Pop Matters*, and several newspapers.

Ai Tatebayashi (illustration, "Hooking Up," page 40) is from Japan. After working for an advertising agency for five years, she came to New York to study illustration at the School of Visual Arts' MFA program. Her thesis project was illustrating contemporary women's issues. Since 2003, she has been working as a freelance illustrator in both the U.S. and Japan; her illustrations have appeared in the *New York Times* and *New York* magazine and have been acknowledged in American illustration competitions almost every year. She is still roaming around New York City, enjoying the ethnic and cultural diversity—especially food!—and has just started taking a yoga class. Visit www.miniai.com.

bitch thanks

THE CITY OF OAKLAND'S CULTURAL FUNDING PROGRAM

We made a pretty embarrassing mistake when we sent our 10th-anniversary issue off to press earlier this year. That issue, and the organization as a whole, was immensely improved by the City of Oakland's Cultural Funding Program, which generously gave us a grant as part of its program to support Oakland-based artists and nonprofit organizations. And frazzled as we were, we flat out forgot to acknowledge this incredible support that helped make our anniversary issue as big, special, far-reaching, and chock-full of articles as it could be.

We want to make sure that all of our readers know about the important work of the City of Oakland's Cultural Funding Program and how much it does for local arts communities here. The program distributes over $1 million in awards annually through a variety of funding categories, including general support, neighborhood arts, and arts education. It's easy to see how that work ripples out across the country in the form of magazines like ours. (For more information about this important program, please visit www.oaklandculturalarts.org.)

So we're sending this big, fat, heartfelt thank-you to the Oakland City Council and the City of Oakland's Cultural Funding Program for helping to make our 10th-anniversary issue such a success—and for all the other arts and cultural projects they fund.

CITY OF OAKLAND

dear bitch

Really not kidding

Thank you for your article "The New Breed" (no. 32). I am one of those who chooses to be childfree. Besides my boyfriend, I don't have anyone to really talk to about my choice: The few times I tried to discuss it with friends during general conversations about the future, I was met with questions like "Are you scared of the pain?" or "Aren't you curious what your children would look like?" And then after giving them my reasons, I was told I would "change my mind." Oh, will I? Thank you for reminding me that I am not crazy, selfish, or alone.

S.U. Kimber
Bellingham, Wash.

AS A LONGTIME READER OF *BITCH* AND A LABOR AND delivery nurse at a small rural hospital in New Hampshire, I read "The New Breed" with interest. I am 33 and although I plan to have children, I don't have any now. I work in the same community I grew up in, and children are treated like a status symbol by many. If you don't have kids (whether by choice, infertility, or circumstances) [people assume] that there's something wrong with you.

No one should feel compelled through societal or family pressure to have kids. As feminists, we need to respect the decisions of others, even though they are not necessarily the decisions we ourselves would make. Thank you for bringing this issue to light, since it's not always discussed honestly.

Sarah Cournoyer, BSN, RN
Jaffrey, N.H.

THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU FOR "THE NEW Breed." It seems so odd to me when people interrogate me on why I don't want children while the motives of those who do go unchallenged. At 24, people often smirk and tell me I'll change my mind in time. I really resent the assumption that it's something I haven't seriously thought through. But I know I'll have the last laugh when I'm traveling around the world, sleeping in on Saturdays, and retiring earlier.

Marsea Nelson
Ocean View, Del.

READING "THE NEW BREED" made me so happy. Until I got (accidentally) pregnant last year, I had never really thought about whether I wanted kids or not. I miscarried, and while that left me with plenty of frustration, I also felt relief, because I realized I really didn't want to be a mother.

I am one of those who will happily say I love kids and I am the proudest aunt ever, but it feels good to know I've actually thought about whether I want to be a parent, instead of just assuming it'll be a part of my life someday.

Casey Carlson
Littleton, Colo.

I REALLY LIKED "THE NEW BREED," THOUGH I WISH there had been some discussion of how difficult it is for men to have a vasectomy for the same reasons women are often denied tubal ligation: too young to know what they "really" want, must be crazy to not want kids, etc. My partner made the decision to have a vasectomy when he was 24 years old and had a difficult time getting a doctor to consider the procedure. In fact, the only reason the doctor even agreed was because he said that he could tell my partner was set on the idea, and the doctor didn't want him to have it done by someone who might be "unethical" (his word choice). As a woman who has made the choice not to have children and has to face the social stigma of that choice on a regular basis, I feel there needs to be some acknowledgment that this stigma also extends (albeit to a lesser degree) to men.

Sassy Lee
Via e-mail

UNLIKE MOST MAGAZINES, *BITCH* DOESN'T INSULT MY intelligence, and I am so glad it exists. However, "The New Breed" presents itself as an article on a trend, and I dearly hope that no one makes the decision to be childfree (or, for that matter, a parent) to be trendy.

As someone who had her first child at 40, I have had a taste of being childfree (by choice) as well as being a parent (somewhat by surprise). In my experience, while there are certainly people who are hostile to women without children, a lot of the attitude directed at small children

and their parents seems to come from the terribly self-involved (who may or may not be childfree). Some of these attitudes were echoed in this article and range from "How dare your child act like a child in my presence!" to "Why don't you control your kids?" to finally—the killer—"You're not as hot as you were before your body changed."

I suspect the *Bitch* demographic includes both parents and the childfree. I also suspect that most of your readers are progressive and intelligent enough to see both as valid reproductive choices. So why this article? It mostly seems to be a glorification of Jennifer Shawne's alterna-celebrity status. Most of her one-liners seem to be a regurgitation of the old cruelty-as-humor ruse, and in reality, she is simply attacking the possibility that if a woman becomes a mother, she might opt out of self-indulgent consumerism. Doesn't this deserve some deconstruction?

Tink Manslaughter
Denver, Colo.

It's not like she makes the trip daily...

Regarding Rachel Fudge's interview with Judith Levine about her year of reduced consumption ("Shop in the Name of Love," no. 32), I am perplexed by a point that was raised in the introduction. I find it quite odd that Levine would be dividing her time between New York and Vermont, given that she professes to be so conscious of her consumption and its environmental consequences. It seems to me that someone who speaks of concerns over being fuel- and earth-friendly would attempt to limit what sounds like an unnecessary amount of travel.

John Jaeger
Saskatoon, Sask.

Style or substance: Do we have to choose?

I welcomed "Paper Dollhouse" (no. 32) and the thought-provoking discussion of prominent female writers and the ambivalence they face in the professional literary world. As someone who sees herself as both a fashionista and an intellectual, I often desire a magazine that can somehow freshly incorporate two such seemingly contradictory concepts.

I feel the issue not addressed in this article is that women feel ashamed to be associated with "women's magazines" (*Vogue, Cosmo,* etc.) for all the wrong reasons, mostly because we think they cater to the general notions of stereotypes and hyperfeminization that most feminists feel undermines the beauty we hold as individuals. However, rather than renouncing these magazines or feeling that working/writing for one is demeaning, shouldn't socially conscious professional writers hope to bring change to this world? Perhaps the new goal should

be changing these magazines to a more accommodating mixture of fashion and feminism.

Erika Schmidt
Orlando, Fla.

THANK YOU FOR KARA JESELLA'S COMMENTARY ON the myth of why style writers can't get any respect. As former editor-in-chief and style columnist for my college newspaper and a *Jane* intern next fall, I can't help wondering just where my career is heading. I love fashion and politics—and have always felt that analysis of both should be taken seriously—but I fear getting boxed into either industry. Thanks to Jesella's essay, I know that while my fears are not unwarranted, the obstacles facing a career in both are not insurmountable.

Emily Ascolese
Oberlin, Ohio

Judge me not

I don't care whether the women in Ms. Wheelchair America are judged on looks or not. The bottom line is: They are women being judged. The fact that the "Ohio physician" who came up with this oh-so-fresh pageant idea developed a way to "showcase the often unacknowledged accomplishments of people with disabilities" by parading females in front of judges proves one thing: Pageants exploit women. Period. Unless, of course, there just happened to be no available MEN in the "people with disabilities" sector of society that he could pick from...

Jen Nichols
Portland, Ore.

PMSing

In the most recent *Bitch*, you published an article titled "*Ms.*: Cruising for a Bruising?" (Love It/Shove It, no. 32) The consistent quality publication of *Ms.* is representative of the staying power of the feminist movement, and of my generation's continued participation in its evolution: We subscribe, we participate, we contribute, and we support this quarterly. I do feel that *Ms.* could have found a more environmentally friendly venue for their fundraiser, but the fact that they found an attendance roster full enough to float a ship should be lauded! How long have we been rallying toward such participation?!

Ultimately, the magazine has made a mistake. Their event may have raised capital to continue the publication, but it also dumped a huge amount of feminist waste into Mother Earth's open waters. I hope they learn from this. And that we do too.

Christina Ricks
Boston, Mass.

I WANT TO COMPLIMENT YOU ON THE BLURB ABOUT PMS Media and their exposé on *Ms.*'s not-so-guilt-free fundraising cruise. I count on *Bitch* to be pushing the edge and representing voices that would otherwise be silenced or passed over, and you delivered here. As long as you keep seeking out the small (yet strong!) radical voices, I'll keep renewing my subscription. Viva PMS Media and viva *Bitch*!

Justicia Friese
St. Louis, Mo.

Surprisingly, this was the only letter we got about porn

I was left disgusted and angry by your interview with Carly Milne ("Bare Necessity," no. 32). In my opinion, it glorified (or attempted to) the porn industry as an asset to women. It seems as if Milne is trying to justify porn by turning a blind eye to the abuse that happens both in the industry and because of it. She does acknowledge that there is abuse in the industry, but is satisfied with only scratching the surface. For someone who edited an entire book on the subject, she should have done her research. When Milne is asked directly about this, she skirts the issue by talking about Halle Berry. Does the fact that abuse happens in Hollywood as well as in porn make it justifiable?

Porn is an industry run by men for men, and the only thing changing is that some women are turning from prostitutes/performers to pimps/producers. Porn cannot change into something positive and empowering because its very nature is negative.

Desiree Alonzo
Los Angeles, Calif.

Chick fight

I am one of the authors with an essay in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (Bitch Reads, no. 32). In fact, I was coeditor of the first anthology that used the term "chick-lit" (*Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, 1995), and it has been no secret since then that I am not a fan of the genre that coopted (then distorted) the term to represent a series of popular novels about young urban women looking for love.

Reviewer Jessica Jernigan is not alone in her desire to have a definitive definition for the term "postfeminism." But even if the book she reviewed had set out (and failed) to define this term, I'm not sure there is a single correct definition. It has consistently proven to be many-tentacled and has been used for different agendas by different ideologies, both left and right. It should be noted that the anthology I edited in 1995 was not only the first time "chick-lit" was used but became the first time "postfeminism" was attached to "chick-lit," and might be the only reason "postfeminism" is ever associated with

"chick-lit" to this day. This is a correlation that tends to warp the meaning of "postfeminism" in the same way "chick-lit" was perverted when the title of the original anthology was used to represent the new commercial genre. In other words, from my perspective, to presume to define "postfeminism" using commercial chick-lit is counterproductive.

Cris Mazza
Chicago, Ill.

Pimp slap

I'd like to thank Jennifer Pozner ("I'd Like to Thank the Academy...for Recognizing that Pimpin' Ain't Easy," Love It/Shove It, no. 32) for putting into print what my husband and I were yelling at the TV on Oscar night. I predicted that "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" would win; sometimes I hate being right. It didn't shock me because, well, it is Hollywood we're talking about here, not exactly a hotbed of feminism. Still, for all of its recent preaching against racism and homophobia (lip service though it may be), the film industry should do better by women. Hate the name, love you!

Kara Johnston
Via e-mail

A word from the Postal Service, courtesy of Ray's aunt

Judy and I have a bit of a "bitch" to get off our chest. We received our postcard announcing our gift subscription. On the postcard, at the bottom left, it states "Please keep us updated about any address changes at least six weeks in advance. Please do not rely on the postal service for forwarding, it is not reliable."

What the heck does that mean? We are very reliable, but the fact is we do not forward magazines after more than three months. The postal service will forward first-class mail for over a year, but not magazines. So perhaps you can change that to read: "Take responsiblity and update us about any address change, as the Postal Service will not forward second-class mail over three months, and since this magazine only comes out every three months, they probably won't forward it at all."

April Averbach
Mission Viejo, Calif.

***Bitch* welcomes your letters.**

Send them to 1611 Telegraph Ave. Ste. 515, Oakland, CA 94612; bitch@bitchmagazine.com. Please include your full name and your city and state. Letters will be edited for length and clarity.

Bitch's Wish List

Some of our supporters—like you, perhaps?—may not have the means to donate cash, but may have access to other much-needed items. *Please note*: Because much of our current equipment is used or dysfunctional, we're looking to replace old things with new or almost new, late-model equipment. ***For more info, e-mail wishlist@bitchmagazine.com.***

- Four 2005 or newer **G4 Powerbooks or iBooks** (500 mhz or greater processors and CD burners)
- Mac software: **Adobe Creative Suite** (InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator) & **Macromedia design suite** (Dreamweaver, Flash, Illustrator)
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THE FINE PRINT: *Bitch* is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Wish list items are usually tax-deductible at their fair market value. We will provide you with a tax receipt stating the item you donated, but we do not place a market value on it. If you have questions about the tax implications of your gift, please seek the help of an accountant or other tax advisor.

Memo to: The *New York Times*

In re: Sunday Styles

So, about this June 2006 story "Ascent of a Woman." Americans are really loving the whole speculative first-female-president motif that's been simmering in the media for the past several months. And setting the scene for a story about resistance to women's political power with a real-life potential candidate (Hillary Rodham Clinton) lauding a fictional president (*Commander-in-Chief*'s Geena Davis) while introducing an actual female president (Chile's newly elected Michelle Bachelet) was all very clever. One question, though: Why the hell was it in the Styles section?

I get why stories about, say, extreme pedicures, high-end maternity clothing, and pet detectives are in Sunday Styles—they're light, frivolous, and in keeping with the historically aspirational function of the section, what with its statusy wedding pages and full-page ads for diamonds and fur. But "Ascent of a Woman" was neither breezy nor frivolous. The only thing that seemed to qualify it for the Styles section was that, well, it was about women. (And the accompanying photo—a pink leather purse bearing the Presidential Seal—wouldn't have worked quite so well in the National pages, perhaps.)

It's not the first time something like this has happened, you know. There was the February 2006 piece positing that the so-called Opt-Out Revolution (a concept that you folks invented back in 2003, if you recall) isn't being embraced by all that many black female professionals ("Work vs. Family, Complicated by Race"). There was the November 2005 feature on female soldiers stationed in Baghdad and the evolution of women's roles in combat ("In the Line of Fire"). And there was the June 2006 piece profiling teenage girls mobilizing in protests and walkouts against proposed anti-immigration legislation ("Taking to the Streets, for Parents' Sake"). There was no mention of Botox or self-tanning in any of these pieces. The only thing the articles have in common, in fact, is that they are about women, either individually or as a representative group. **The overarching message of Sunday Styles has always been that style is a women's issue; are we now supposed to agree that women are a style issue?**

These are not fluffy articles we're talking about, either. "Ascent of a Woman," once you got past the pink purse, was a bit of boosterism for Hillary, but also a straightforward assessment of why people—women included—balk at the thought of women with significant political power. "Work vs. Family, Complicated by Race" acknowledged that the cultural mommy wars tend to focus on wealthy white women while obscuring the class and race factors that determine whether or not women can "choose" to work. And "In the Line of Fire" uncovered the troubling, if unsurprising, everyday sexism that permeates military culture, unchanged by the presence of women. The trouble is, placing these articles alongside a dispatch from the online-shopping columnist and a report from Paris fashion week sends one of two indelible messages: Either the *Times* thinks women will only read about current events when they happen to fall in between puff pieces about fashion and celebrity, or the editors consider stories about things like women in the military or immigration activism trendy enough for the Styles section. Either is a problem, because both suggest that women's issues are trivial, and that even marginally heavy social coverage can be lightened up by proximity to strappy sandals.

Not that there's anything wrong with strappy sandals per se, but let's look at the context. Style sections in newspapers evolved from the "women's pages" of old, which historically comprised engagement, wedding, and birth

announcements, and were most crucially a way to sell advertising that specifically targeted women. These days, newspaper style sections are still heaviest on chick content, especially given the wedding announcements. (Yes, some people call them the "women's sports pages." We know.)

There are women who do pick up the Sunday paper and head straight for the Styles, but I'd wager that most of them continue on to the hard news. So put the ladies where they belong. Sometimes it's by the $200 rare-earth face cream. But at least as often, it's in the blemishes-and-all places where everyone can see them. —Andi Zeisler

Hell-Bent for Trademark

The United States government has conferred the valuable privileges and protections of a U.S. trademark on a clothing line called Evil Pussy, a brand of booze-filled beverage containers called Suck & Blow, and a wildly successful TV series called *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. So why have San Francisco's Dykes on Bikes had to fight so long and hard to get those same trademark privileges and protections?

Dykes on Bikes—officially, the San Francisco Women's Motorcycle Contingent, a mostly but not entirely lesbian group—has been leading the city's annual Pride Parade down Market Street since 1977. Seeing the Dykes on Bikes in all their ear-splitting, leather-loving glory is an annual highlight for hundreds of thousands of spectators. Although officially unaffiliated, equally crowd-pleasing local chapters of Dykes on Bikes have sprung up in other cities across America.

Longtime Dykes on Bikes member Soni Wolf, currently the group's secretary, remembers a time when she was "kind of ambivalent" about being called a dyke. But now, she says, "I embrace it." So she and her riding sisters were stunned when they learned that the Patent and Trademark Office claimed to be looking out for the best interests of all lesbians when, beginning in early 2004, it repeatedly refused the club's application for a trademark on the grounds that the terms "dyke" and "Dykes on Bikes" are offensive, disparaging, and even vulgar to lesbians.

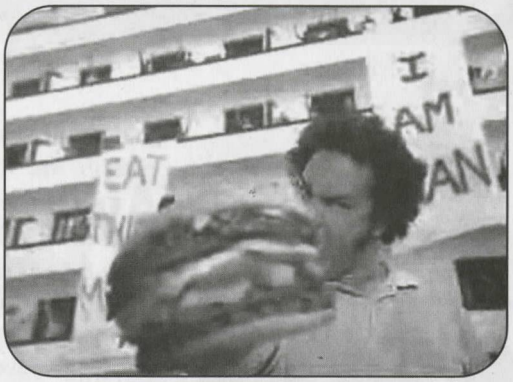
The Dykes on Bikes' legal team spent the next two years trying to prove that the majority of lesbians in America—in legal language, a "substantial composite"—did not, in fact, consider "dyke" a dirty word, and that therefore, according to the government's own legal standard, it could not refuse to issue the trademark.

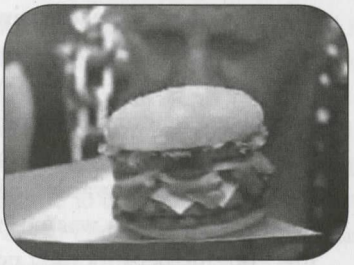
Lead attorney Brooke Oliver and her legal team submitted evidence citing the multitude of books, magazines, documentaries, and poems by and for lesbians that use the word "dyke," and about all the ways that many lesbians proudly describe their own everyday activities—from dyke softball to dyke dances. Twenty-three prominent scholars, linguists, activists, community leaders, teachers, writers, and cultural observers stood up for the word as well, including *Dykes to Watch Out For* creator Alison Bechdel, whose statement to the Trademark Office read, in part, **"I cannot imagine anyone in the [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] community currently taking offense at the word 'dyke' when used by other lesbians in a self-descriptive way."**

Faced with such voluminous evidence, the Trademark Office backed down and in December 2005 agreed to grant the trademark. Now, however, the Dykes on Bikes are sitting in legal traffic once again. During the required public-comment period before any trademark can be issued, a California man named Michael McDermott filed a notice of opposition—a rant, really—claiming, among other things that "I and ALL other MALE citizens are subject to Criminal Attack and Civil Rights Violations committed by Dykes taking part in a Anti Male Hate Riot."

Dykes on Bikes calls McDermott's opposition nothing more than an irrelevant hate diatribe and has asked the Trademark Office to dismiss it, but the wheels of justice—unlike those of these dykes' bikes—grind slowly. So while the lawyers, the government, and McDermott fight it out, the Dykes on Bikes will do what they've always done: ride proud, and ride strong. —Barbara Raab

Meat Beat Manifesto





I GOTTA SAY, I'M KIND OF IMPRESSED THAT THE AD EXECS behind Burger King's new "Manthem" commercial even knew about Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman," let alone were able to produce such a thorough parody of it. After all, the song may be a piece of feminist history, but it's not exactly in heavy rotation on the oldies' stations. Adapting the warbling woman-power lyrics ("I am woman, hear me roar/In numbers too big to ignore/And I know too much to go back and pretend") to promote the virtues of an apparently man-sized bacon double cheeseburger ("I am man, hear me roar/In numbers too big to ignore/And I'm too hungry to eat chick food"), **the ad serves up an impressive smorgasbord of clichés about hetero male anxiety along with a sizable dollop of homosexual undertones (what could be gayer than a man shouting "I will eat this meat"?).** Rejecting quiche (natch), minivans, tighty-whities, tofu, and chichi meals with girlfriends, a cavalcade of schlubby dudes celebrate the virtues of manliness, which seem to include eating meat, cheering on brawling construction workers, karate-chopping, bad facial hair, sloppy t-shirts, and "eating meat."

In its incoherence and confusion over sexuality, the ad could be seen as a tidy summation of current attitudes toward and discourse around both masculinity and femininity, unable to articulate what it means to be a man except to be a meat-eater. Or perhaps it's just an ego-stroking exercise in banal cleverness by ad-agency hacks. Maybe some meat-loving fella out there can explain it to this perpetually hungry beef-*and*-tofu-eating gal, 'cause I just don't get it. One thing's for sure: Between this and the creepy "Wake Up with the King" campaign, I'm not going to be hanging in the BK lounge anytime soon. —Rachel Fudge

MY BODY, MY...GARDENBURGER?

The chant "My body, my choice!" has long been the backbone of the reproductive-rights movement. Now, with threats to *Roe v. Wade* abounding, and state legislatures jumping on the antichoice bandwagon, the phrase needs to be shouted louder than ever. But to sell veggie burgers? Not so much.

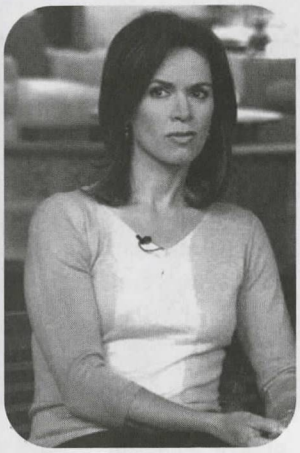
In their latest series of ads, health-food company Gardenburger co-opts common progressive catchphrases—"Make Gardenburgers, Not War," "Peace, Love & Hominy," and, yes, "My Body, My Gardenburger." Paired with the image of a raised fist clutching a leaf and the sexually suggestive text "You never forget your first veggie burger. It was pure and natural. Nothing fake about it.... Why did you two ever break up?," the ad suggests veggie burgers line the path to women's happiness and sexual liberation.

Sure, the politics of food are important, but you can hardly argue that the choice to go meat-free and the choice to control your reproductive destiny are one and the same. Given our increasingly tenuous hold on reproductive freedom, the ad seems especially ill-timed; **Gardenburger might as well just come out and say, "Hey, you may not have the right to abortion on demand, but at least you can have a tasty meatless burger!"**

Gardenburger might just be having some kitschy, retro-'60s-activism fun, or maybe they really do want to spotlight female power, urging women to be in control of their bodies both gastronomically and sexually. But hawking veggie burgers as the means to this end only underscores the way the expression of choice and power is too often limited to the supermarket shelves. —Erica Wetter

Anchors Away

Now that ABC News has axed Elizabeth Vargas, the 43-year-old anchorwoman who is expecting her second child, will her male replacement for the evening broadcast keep up the network's growing interest in news lite? Officially, Vargas is stepping down to "spend more time with her family," but questions abound. (Bob Woodruff, Vargas's coanchor, was severely injured in January while on assignment in Iraq, and instead of keeping Vargas as sole anchor or finding her a new partner, ABC has replaced her with network stalwart Charles Gibson, ostensibly at Vargas's behest.)



During her brief stint at the anchor desk, Vargas didn't pull up the ratings overall, but her newscast gained ground with 25-to-54-year-olds. Andrew Tyndall, in his weekly news-monitoring report, opined that replacing Vargas with Gibson "displays a woeful tin ear towards the very demographic ABC News was purportedly courting." But the network can't possibly be deaf to the hullabaloo over CBS's recent acquisition of Katie Couric as its evening-news anchor. Many pundits have criticized the decision to place the former *Today Show* host in the seat formerly held by Dan Rather. Some even speculate that the once-prestigious broadcast will become a forum for jokes and celebrity gossip, accusing CBS of choosing Couric not for her skill but for her appeal to a young-adult demographic that generally doesn't watch the news.

If this is true, CBS wouldn't be alone: With Vargas at the helm, ABC's hard news developed a softer side. **During the months of March and April, the broadcast devoted an average of 39 minutes a night to "Sex & Family" stories—more than NBC and CBS combined.** With breaking news like scandal in Washington, the raging immigration debate, and conflicts in Iraq, Iran, and Darfur, it's not unreasonable to question a sharp increase in airtime for softer stories, such as the most popular baby names or obesity in toddlers. Is ABC simply responding to market demand, or did they think Vargas, with pregnant belly, was specifically suited to cover lighter, fluffier stuff aimed at twenty- and thirtysomethings? The real question is, will they continue on this easy-watching track with Gibson at the anchor desk?

It's not clear how much control new female anchors like Vargas and Couric have over the kinds of stories they report. And it's unlikely that we'll find out if Vargas stepped down willingly, or if she was pushed out because ABC feared that her audience would be too similar to Couric's to compete in the soft-news market. Unfortunately, there are no clear answers that offer much comfort to women seeking inspiration that the ceiling—glass, or maybe plastic by now—has been removed.
—Sarah Werthan Buttenwieser

HONEY, WE'RE SHAMING THE KIDS

MAKEOVER SHOWS AREN'T KNOWN FOR BEING KIND. PART OF the appeal of tough-love shows like *What Not to Wear* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is their humorous evisceration of the participants' pre-makeover clothes, hair, or body.

But what if you didn't choose your makeover fate? What if, without your consent, humiliating images of you were broadcast across the country as a mass warning? If you're a chubby kid, that's just the threat TLC's new show *Honey, We're Killing the Kids!* poses. Here, kids are the symbol of the obesity epidemic, and their humiliation is perpetrated under the guise of good intentions and medical science.

A typical show involves a family in trouble: Both parents and kids—there are invariably two or more—are shown going about their daily routine of bad food choices (sugary

breakfasts, fast-food dinners, lots of processed snacks and sodas), and are then introduced to nutritionist Dr. Lisa Hark, whose job is to save the family from going any further down the road to diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. But before the show can address the behavior that could lead to these things, it gives the parents a scare: digitally created images of their sweet 9- and 12-year-old children morphing into fat, unhappy fortysomethings.

What unfolds is an almost comic progression, first from sunny kid to sullen-looking, zit-faced teen. In the 20s, the frowns appear, along with the occasional nose ring (presumably to telegraph trouble). As the years click by, the frowns deepen, the faces get more bloated, the hair more frizzy or poorly dyed or pathetically combed over an obvious bald spot. The skin is pockmarked and ruddy, the eyebrows unkempt. **By the time the image reaches a projected 40 years old, once-cute children are looking like mug shots from *Cops*** and, if they're male, sporting unfortunate facial hair. Cue Dr. Lisa intoning to foreboding music, "You are killing your kids!"

But it's not death that's implied by the montage of bad hair and washed-out wardrobes—it's ugliness and, by extension, unhappiness.

Over the course of the show—each hour encompasses a three-week span—the focus is on behaviors, not looks: The parents cook rather than get takeout, the family eats together, the parents try to quit smoking, all of which are directed toward better living.

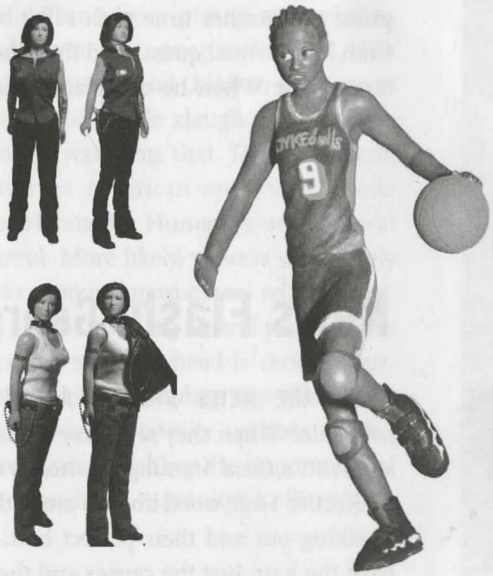
For the big finish, the parents are rewarded with a revised image of their children at 40. This morph is dramatically different: Smiles appear. Boys who had gone bald in the earlier projection suddenly sport full, glossy heads of hair. Sloppy t-shirts and frizzy hair are replaced with business suits and professional haircuts. Blotchy skin becomes porcelain.

Ultimately, *Honey, We're Killing the Kids!* means well, and its message—we don't think about what we eat, and then eat too much of it—is an important one. But the show's money-shot morphs are just a reiteration of the same stereotypes the diet industry has been dishing out for decades: There are no attractive, well-groomed fat people, and to be fat means to be miserable and poor. For a show about changing habits, that's one ugly message. —Heather Boerner

Hello, Dolly

When they debuted several years back, Dyke Dolls seemed like a 'bout-time concept; the company, devoted to widening the doll and action-figure market, seemed to be all about inclusiveness. But oh, my gay girl heart was broken when blogger Blac(k)ademic broke the news: With one exception, all the dolls are white. There's a white cowgirl. A white rockabilly girl. A white SoCal skater girl. And, of course, a white diesel dyke. The exception is black bulldyke basketballer Badness (of course she plays basketball), who, while cute and all, is one of the company's Baby Dykes—she's eight inches shorter than the full-sized Bobbie dolls, and unlike them she doesn't come packaged with a teeny-weeny vibrator, leather harness, and dildo.

What's the message here? That Badness, proudly heralded by the company as "the first black lesbian action figure" doesn't get to get it on? I can't be the only one who'd like to see more of us represented on the faces of her Dyke Dolls. (And I'm not counting the Asian baby who makes up the tongue-in-cheek Baby Dykes family of "Kelly, Christine, and little Soo Jin.") If you're with me, offer your own plea for more flavor at the Dyke Dolls website (www.dykedolls.com/site/feedback.htm). —Celina De Léon



Sex or the Sexism

Imagine if *The Bachelor* were judged by God, and instead of winning a big diamond ring, the prize was a life of celibacy. The recent five-part A&E miniseries *God or the Girl* attempted just such a hybrid of voyeurism and piety, detailing five weeks in the lives of four young, presumably heterosexual men as they decide whether or not to become priests.

If there was any lingering doubt about the estimation in which the Catholic Church holds women, *God or the Girl* did away with it. Take Dan: After choosing to carry an 80-pound cross for 22 miles in order to test his faith, he reflects on the helpful women who came out to offer him water and encouragement, comparing them to the women who helped Jesus on his quest and reflecting on how Christ "had women at His side to serve Him." Elsewhere in the show, Dan is also shown saying the rosary outside of abortion clinics and strip clubs. While he does so peacefully and is willing to engage in sincere discussion with people who approach him, he's never shown praying for the sins of male flesh. **Neither the men whose patronage keeps strip clubs in existence nor the men who cocreate unplanned pregnancy are the target of Dan's repeated reference to "sinners."**

Throughout the series, older people in positions of authority reinforce the mutual exclusivity between God and the girl. Contestant Mike's priest refers to lustful thoughts as "sick and disgusting"; when Mike later tells the priest of his decision to choose teaching and his girlfriend over priesthood, the priest compares the news to receiving a stake through the heart. Mike's girlfriend, Aly, says repeatedly that the priest resents her time with Mike because it distracts him from his spiritual quest. And then there's the mother of contestant Joe: When he complains that the family dog won't stop eating donkey feces, she compares Fido's habits to Joe's inability to renounce sexuality and become a man of the cloth.

Unsurprisingly, the show gives short shrift to any in-depth discussion of celibacy. None of the *God or the Girl* guys actually admit to sexual desire in the course of deciding whether or not to enter the priesthood. Cloaking the subject of sex in euphemisms like "female companionship," the presumed hierarchy of spirit over body is maintained through the explicit disavowal of sensuality as an expression of love.

Sure, *God or the Girl*'s themes of faith and life choices can resonate with all viewers, Catholic or not. However, the show makes it clear that as long as Catholicism maintains its staunch madonna-whore dichotomy, women shouldn't be expected to be treated like anything but a distraction, a temptation, or, well, donkey shit. —Erin Martin

News Flash: George Clooney Robs Rape-Crisis Centers!

WHEN ARE NEWS STORIES ABOUT GENOCIDE NOT ABOUT genocide? When they're flimsy excuses for NBC's *Today Show* and ABC's *Good Morning America* to run puff pieces about how ineffective Hollywood liberals are with all their causes and their speaking out and their perfect hair...oh, no, wait, they didn't bash the hair. Just the causes and the speaking out.

Let me back up, because I've just buried the lead. Come to think of it, so did numerous *GMA* and *Today* reports on George Clooney's advocacy for international intervention in Darfur, in which the actor—not the suffering of Sudanese victims of rape, torture, and slaughter—was the primary news peg.

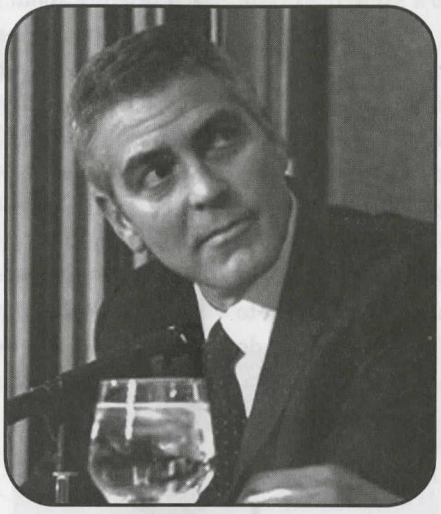
"Every day, bands of government-backed genocidal thugs ride across a chunk of Africa the size of Texas, killing men, raping women, and burning their homes," *GMA*'s Bill Weir

told viewers in April. "The UN has been stymied, African peacekeepers overpowered. Even Condoleezza Rice's team was roughed up by the Sudanese government. Now enter an actor."

Statistics on the slaughter? Critical information and perspectives from representatives of the United Nations, or NGOs such as Human Rights Watch or MADRE?

Never mind all that, let's get back to Batman. Immediately following the mention of ineffective UN and African peacekeeping efforts, *GMA* cut to a context-free clip of Clooney at a Darfur-related event in D.C., saying, "Look, I'm the last person in the world that should come up and tell people what they should or shouldn't do. We have senators for that."

Since details about Darfur were immaterial to *GMA*'s story, the substance of Clooney's comments wasn't aired. Instead, his rhetorical statement was immediately followed by a trivializing discussion of the concept of the cause celeb: "While Clooney can't dispatch peacekeepers, he is trying to muster the masses through *Oprah*, *Entertainment Tonight*, even his old show, *ER*. But," Weir said, "in the age of Iraq, Al Qaeda, and Katrina, it is a tough sell, and a career risk."



How so? Cut to public-relations-industry guru Fraser Seitel, identified simply as an image consultant. "The risk that George Clooney faces is he becomes a limousine liberal supporting the flavor-of-the-month cause."

Over at NBC, Katie Couric echoed that sentiment, asking Hollywood's favorite hottie-with-a-head-on-his-shoulders, "You've been quite vocal on a number of issues: the environment, liberal causes, presidential politics. **I am just wondering if you worry that your message is being diluted by kind of focusing on so many issues that people are gonna be like, 'Ugh, there's that Clooney guy again'?"**

As if it weren't enough to portray Clooney's liberal politics as a personal liability, a follow-up segment in May on "donor fatigue" in the wake of numerous national and international natural disasters portrayed the actor's advocacy as bad for America. Asked by *Today*'s Lester Holt about the impact of "the Clooney Effect," Charity Navigator's Trent Stamp replied:

> What's important to remember is that all it does is it diverts funds away from someone else's charity. Charitable giving is the last thing in anybody's budget.... So when George Clooney's on TV, while his cause may be admirable and it's great that he's bringing attention to it, what generally happens is that people don't write their checks to their local homeless shelter, their local rape-crisis center, they go to the cause for the celebrity instead.

Oh, so all international aid does is rob local causes—silly me, I thought it went to feed, clothe, shelter, and give medical treatment to victims of unimaginable trauma.

Today's clear implication was that celebrities raising money for supposedly sexy international atrocities are doing damage here at home—and that Clooney may care about Darfur, but he should shut up already lest he wants to shut down shelters and deny support to rape victims in the U.S. This misguided nationalism is both cynical and factually dubious. Holt didn't ask Stamp to back up his claim with hard financial figures or philanthropic research, nor did he inform viewers that there is no cap on the number of dollars Americans can give to worthy causes. And, of course, *Today* didn't mention that **of the world's 22 wealthiest nations, the U.S. ranks second to last in providing foreign aid funds, at .16 percent of our gross national income.**

It's hard to see anything positive that could come from pitting rape victims and homeless people in the U.S. against women and children gang-raped and hundreds of thousands of people slaughtered and displaced in the Sudan. After watching that *Today* segment, would Mr. and Mrs. Average American open their checkbooks to Housing Works, Habitat for Humanity, or their local rape-crisis center? Doubtful. More likely, viewers will simply become more reluctant to support international relief efforts.

Good for *Today* and *GMA* for running several pieces about Darfur over two months, but what we need is serious journalistic investigation, not celebrity-bashing that allows the networks to throw a chisel-jawed ratings grabber on the screen while simultaneously diminishing the importance of humanitarian intervention and aid. —Jennifer L. Pozner

Bloodless Coup

I'm no menstrual activist. You won't catch me at a rally swinging nunchucks made of tampons or at a roundtable discussion about store-bought panty liners vs. reusable organic cotton pads. But the new extended-cycle oral-contraceptive pill, called Anya, has me thinking. Like Seasonale—which limits periods to four per year—Anya uses low doses of hormones to allow women to suppress their periods indefinitely. Though "Anya" sounds a little like "hello" in Korean, it's more like goodbye. Goodbye to tampons and pads. Goodbye to cramps and bloating. But is it goodbye to other things too?

The young women who are targeted by marketing campaigns for contraceptives like Seasonale and Anya already live in a society where the acceptable amount of body hair for women is approximately zero, compelling them to wax the bejesus out of themselves. Now, thanks to a skewed ad campaign by Barr Pharmaceuticals repeating the fallacy that 68 percent of women don't like getting their period, girls are learning that menstruation should be eliminated too. Sure, some women have so much pain and discomfort that this option will be a blessing. (In fact, only one-third of the survey respondents were unhappy with their periods, according to the National Women's Health Network, which pointed out in a 2004 *Newsday* article that Barr had fudged their numbers.)

And it's not just Big Pharma whose grubby hands want to get all in our pants. Some conservative Christians want to do away with contraceptives altogether; as Russell Shorto reported in a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story, the antiabortion movement is shifting its focus beyond abortion and onto mainstream contraception: condoms, diaphragms, IUDs, pills, you name it. Contraceptives, the argument goes, encourage extramarital sex and homosexuality, and **some conservative politicians, like Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, are working hard to undermine public trust in contraception with specious claims about their efficacy.** Like the Catholics of my childhood, today's Christian Right hopes for a return to a time when sex was acceptable only as a grim, baby-making venture. Not that anyone will admit it. But the signs are there: When pressed at a briefing about whether President Bush supports contraceptives, for instance, then–White House press secretary Scott McClellan clammed up.

What's a good girl to do? Well, just that: Be a girl, not a woman. Though many women will welcome the opportunity to be menses-free, it's tempting to draw parallels between contraceptives like Anya and the prevailing Christian Right vilification of birth control (and, apparently, menstruation): Both approaches evince a need to keep women in an idealized state—the knocked-up Madonna or the nonmenstruating child. —Jennifer Loviglio

A version of this piece originally appeared in Rochester's City Paper.

Dial D for Diversity

APPARENTLY IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO GET A "BEST OF Innovations" Award from the Consumer Electronics Association. The 2006 winner, Firefly, "the mobile phone for mobile kids," named after the product's colorful light display, includes security features to prevent kids from making or receiving unauthorized phone calls and pay-as-you-go service offered through Target, Toys 'R' Us, and Limited Too.

But besides the issue of whether 8-year-olds really need their own cell phones, Firefly raises the question of, once again, why the makers of seemingly gender-neutral products feel the need to separate the sexes. Reminiscent of restroom doors, the phone's main features are gendered mom and dad speed-dial keys that apply only to those in heterosexual nuclear families. In a country where more children are raised in nontraditional households each year, kids living with same-sex parents, single parents, transgender parents, grandparents, and so on really don't need a cell phone to drive home the point that their lives are not reminiscent of some retro-fantasy Ozzie and Harriet.

Although the phone only comes in blue, Firefly offers consumers an array of heavily gendered accessories. Interchangeable soft plastic shells are sold to "individualize" the product.

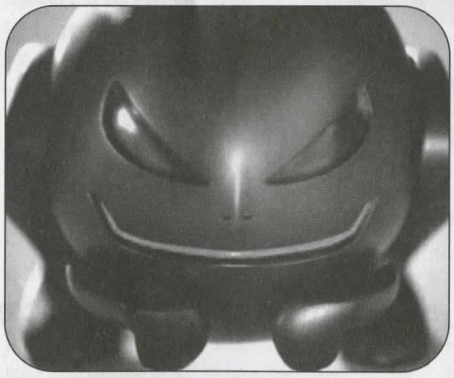
One series of shells has bold names like Slime, Fire, X-Ray, and Urban Camo—featuring a military blend of red, orange, and yellow. **The other includes Bubblegum (all pink), Hearts (mostly pink), and Polka Dots (which also contains pink).** The starter kits are no better. One comes in an "Action Kit" including a slime-colored shell and a green-and-black pouch to hold the phone, house keys, and other small items. The other, which includes the exact same items but in pastel, is called a "Fashion Kit" and comes with a pink protective shell and wristlet purse. Can you guess which is targeted to boys and which to girls?

While some may argue that girls are more than welcome to purchase an Urban Camo phone shell or slime pouch, some retailers limit the products available for consumers. For example, the Limited Too (a tween-girl clothing store) only sells Firefly's phone, lanyard, bubblegum shell, and pink-and-black wristlet purse.

Am I the only person who thinks that gender stereotyping is less than innovative, or that Firefly is just another product for kids ages 8 to 12 that promotes the tired old dichotomy of active boys and pretty girls? —Kerri Kanelos

THE FAST and the Furious

REMEMBER WHEN VOLKSWAGEN ADVERTISING WAS ABOUT QUIET guys dumpster-diving ("Da Da Da") and a cute Cabrio cruising under a "Pink Moon"? Apparently in today's masculine ad world you're either with us or against us, and Volkswagen's newest spokesthing, a small, mean-looking robo-creature with a demonic voice, has staked out an unmistakable position. This creepy icon, which refers to itself as "My Fast," urges the male drivers in a series of four commercials for the Volkswagen GTI to drive faster and generally be more masculine, as when one man is pushed to pick up his food order instead of getting delivery even though it's pouring rain because "delivery is for the weak." While all the commercials are annoying in that they glorify the perception of the road as a purely masculine space, encourage gratuitous driving, and promote the idea that one can never have too much testosterone (how else does the little bastard's voice get so low?), two of the commercials are particularly misogynistic.



In one, the scene begins with a man all ready to drive off, when his partner runs up and pleasantly offers to come with him on his errands. Enter the little demon, who points out that a woman will weigh down the car like the ball and chain she is. "My Fast likes to keep things light," it sneers, eyes glowing. As the woman struggles with the still-locked car door, the wimpy guy finally sputters, "Pumpkin, I'd rather not carry the extra weight.... I just want to keep things streamlined" and rolls up the window on her frowning face. **Sadly, this ad does not end with slashed VW tires. Instead, the joke seems to be that even wimpy guys can look tough if they recognize that girlfriends are just fat asses who take up space:** My Fast makes it hard to have a functional relationship.

In another commercial, a couple is driving down the highway with the windows down, the wind whipping the woman's hair into her face and mouth. She asks the male driver, "Honey, can you roll the window up a little bit?" The little demon says, "My Fast likes the windows down." As the woman tries to engage in a dialogue with the driver about why the windows always have to be down, he can't hear her because the little monster is shouting, "Down! Down!" The driver says to his girlfriend, "Sweetie, it's really hard for me to enjoy the sound of the engine with all that yakking." Amazingly, she doesn't punch him.

I can't be the only one disturbed by an ad campaign in which a creepy figment of the imagination embodies machismo and pressures men to be rude to women. I mean, castration anxiety is so 20th century. Remind VW that assholes aren't the only ones who drive: E-mail them at www.vw.com/contactus/contact_us.html or call them at (800) 374-8389.
—Meghan Krausch

shik✡sa

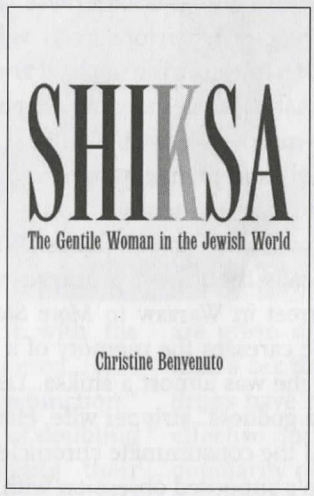
From insult to irreverence

When I wrote a book called *Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World*, I bought myself a lifetime conversation starter. As I began to research the history and contemporary experiences of gentile and converted women in Jewish families and communities, I tagged the work-in-progress *Shiksa*, never expecting it to stick. Ha, I thought. Imagine really titling it that. But as the work progressed, it became clear that the word, along with the myths, history, and cultural incarnations it has generated—and how real women collide with all its ancient baggage—was actually what the book was all about.

Shiksa is a Yiddish word that means gentile—that is, non-Jewish—woman. But the term has its roots in the Hebrew verb *shakaytz*, meaning to abominate or loathe an unclean thing. The Torah admonishes Jews time and again not to allow the *shikutzim*, the hated things, into their houses. But why would people need to be warned against opening their doors to something loathsome? The conclusion reached by biblical commentators is that the shikutzim must not all have been as nasty as their reputations. Some must have been downright irresistible.

In biblical days, the shikutzim were pagan religious idols and nonkosher food, not human beings. But while individual gentile women figure in a number of Torah narratives as heroines loyal to the cause of Jewish survival, as a class they are the feared and reviled subject of warnings and admonitions similar to those issued against the shikutzim.

Exactly when the Yiddishism "shiksa" came into use is, according to scholars of the language, impossible to trace. What's certain is that at least by the 18th century, Jews in Eastern Europe had coined the term, using it variously to mean non-Jewish girl, female servant, lady of ill repute, and, eventually, any non-Jewish female at all. But however it is intended, the term has never been neutral, and along the way has picked up associations—most of them sexual—like lint. At her most basic, the shiksa is a non-Jewish, sexually available female on the make for a Jewish prince. Frequently blond, slender, and remote, she's a femme fatale who seduces hapless Jewish men away from their proper Jewish-girl counterparts, and in the process, her detractors hold, contributes to the decimation of a culture.



During book talks, I often ask audiences whether they're aware of any male equivalent to "shiksa." Usually a Yiddish-speaking volunteer supplies the much less familiar *shaygetz*, meaning non-Jewish male. But when I ask whether "shaygetz" carries sexual connotations, whether it's ever used to denote a non-Jewish male who preys on Jewish women, dead silence always follows. Others occasionally volunteer the gender-neutral term *goyische*, which translates to simply "foreign" but has, over the years, come to signify non-Jewish. Yet even the descriptor "goy" has picked up unflattering connotations of inferiority and is felt to be offensive by some people.

If I suspected that it might be provocative to title a book *Shiksa*, I didn't realize quite how provocative until I began hearing heated opinions about my use of this sexually and racially charged word. Some feel

that, as a convert to Judaism myself, I'm out of line in employing a term that has been used against me and other women, even in the service of dissecting it. ("It's like titling a book *Nigger*," more than one person from this camp has protested. "Yes, that's exactly what it's like," I agree. Except that if you call your book *Nigger* you probably don't get asked, "Oh, are you one?" at cocktail parties.) Others, just as passionate, insist that I'm wrong to treat the word as offensive when it actually carries no particular connotations at all.

My experiences beg to differ. At readings in the San Francisco Bay Area, some Jewish groups refused to publicize the events because of the book's title. At a synagogue gift shop in a Boston suburb, the families of bar and bat mitzvah kids asked that the book be taken out of the window so their guests wouldn't see it. Yet when I spoke at the same synagogue, one audience member after another told me point-blank that "shiksa" was an innocuous term with no associations, sexual or otherwise. This line of argument finally ended when one man volunteered the information that while growing up, he'd always heard that a shiksa was what a Jewish man was supposed to "practice on" before he married a Jewish woman.

The term "shiksa" has never been neutral, and along the way it has picked up associations—most of them sexual—like lint.

Shiksa, as both word and concept, has enjoyed a robust shelf life in American culture, from literary fiction to Hollywood films, television comedies, and weblogs. When Isaac Bashevis Singer recalls the Jewish prostitute who lived on his childhood street in Warsaw in *More Stories from My Father's Court*, he caresses the memory of a girl so dangerously sexy that she was almost a shiksa. Lenny Bruce lionized his "shiksa goddess" stripper wife, Honey, in his autobiography. And the consummate chronicler of the Jewish-American man's supposed obsession with the all-American shiksa figure is, of course, Philip Roth. Ever since the eponymous narrator of the 1967 *Portnoy's Complaint* discovered that, "as far as a certain school of shikse was concerned, [her] knight turns out to be none other than a brainy, balding, beaky Jew," Roth's protagonists have played out their alienation from their Jewish heritage, their sexual insecurities, and their ambivalence about assimilation on the bodies of gentile women who can never hope to understand them. As Portnoy puts it, "[A]s though through fucking I will discover America. Conquer America—maybe that's more like it."

Elsewhere, Neil Simon's 1972 film *The Heartbreak Kid* offered a look at a young Jewish man, his painfully nebbishy Jewish bride, and the gentile siren with a heart of ice he dumps her for. That particular twist—the WASP beauty who promises untold erotic delights, then turns out to be withholding and uptight—is also a familiar theme in many of Woody Allen's films, typified by the charming but sexually unresponsive title character of *Annie Hall*.

The subtext of *Annie Hall*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and others is that the Jewish male, schooled in shiksa desire by popular culture, often finds that he can't live with his shiksa and can't live without her—and, perhaps more to the point, can't bring himself to hanker after her obvious alternative, the Jewish woman. Television seems to feel obligated to offer at least one significant example of this dilemma per decade. A product of the optimistic, youth-will-save-the-world 1970s, *Bridget Loves Bernie* presented an apolitical view of a working-class Jewish cab driver and a Catholic heiress brought together by true love. Neither attracted nor repelled by their spouse's otherness, they're also powerless to defeat a parental generation that reacts with horror to their marriage. (Indeed, such figures from both Christian and Jewish camps managed to drive the show off the air.) Later portrayals, from *Thirtysomething* in the '80s to *Seinfeld* in the '90s to, most recently, *Sex and the City*, present less innocent views of a non-Jewish woman's potential for bucking up the Jewish male ego: When *Sex and the City*'s uber-WASP Charlotte demands to know why her Jewish boyfriend went out with her if he won't marry a non-Jew, he defends himself by saying he "never thought a shiksa goddess like you would fall for a putz like me."

The inevitable result of this longstanding dichotomy is that shiksas and their Jewish sisters are set up for antagonism. In the 2005 film *Prime*, Meryl Streep plays a Jewish therapist appalled by the relationship between her son and a gentile woman, played by Uma Thurman. Without irony, self-consciousness, or evidence of disgust, a (male) reviewer for the *Canadian Jewish News* described Streep's character as "the epitome of a distinctly dowdy Jewish woman" and Thurman as "the quintessential shiksa." When *The Devil Wears Prada* was published in 2003, a (female) writer in the *Jerusalem Report*, which bills itself as a serious left-of-center political (*Continued on page 28*)

bad medicine

Big Pharma's female trouble

Call it Viagra culture: In the eight years since the little blue pill made the scene, its wild success has institutionalized the impulse to treat any and all sexual problems, idiosyncrasies, or irregularities with prescription drugs. The result is an increasingly commercialized approach to sex that turns attention away from the complex social, cultural, and psychological determinants of sexuality that have been the subject of feminist analysis for several decades. Feminist activists and scholars have long observed that sexuality—especially, but not exclusively, women's sexuality—is as much a matter of politics as biology. But in their effort to medicalize sexuality, big pharmaceutical companies want us to believe that sexual problems are a result of biology alone. Of course the drug industry wants us to believe that the solution to our sexual woes lies in a pill/patch/cream/nasal spray; after all, a pill that puts orgasms easily within reach can be marketed in a profit-making system, but social change is a little trickier.

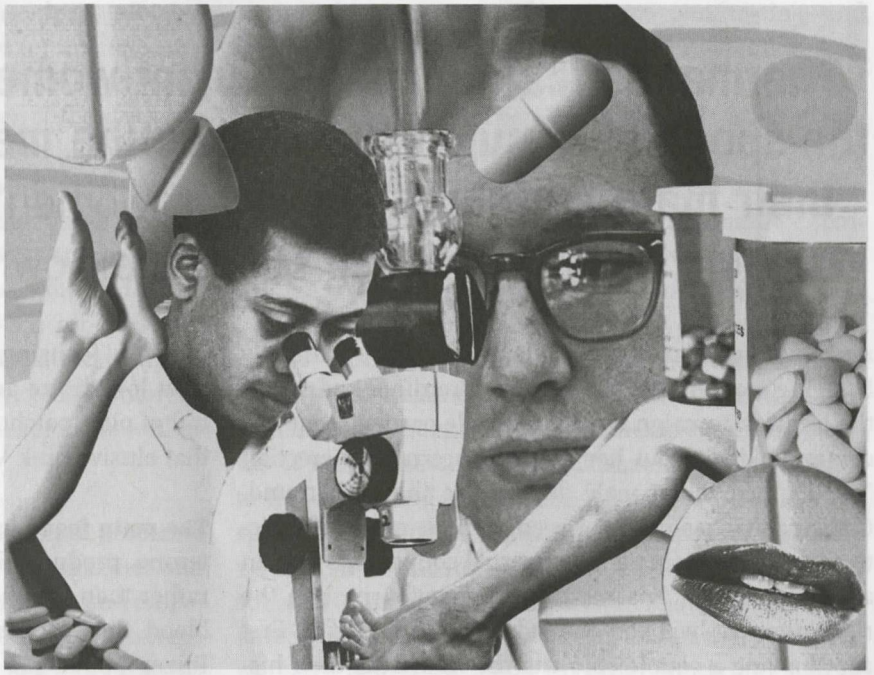


Illustration by Nicholas Brawley

The first success of Viagra culture, apart from the drug itself, has been the success of drug companies in successfully banishing the term "impotence," with all its psychological connotations of weakness and failure, and replacing it with the more biologically oriented, less judgmental "erectile dysfunction," or ED. And in the hopes of doubling their profits by doubling their market, pharmaceutical companies are now working toward their second challenge—reconceptualizing women's sexual problems as physiologically based "female sexual dysfunction," or FSD. So far, no "pink Viagra" has yet received approval from the Food and Drug Administration, but dozens of products are in development, and each year growing numbers of women are given off-label prescriptions of men's sex drugs, even though these drugs have not been proven safe or effective for women. (Despite the popularity of Viagra as a party drug for gay men, Big Pharma's marketing and research programs betray a deep heterosexual bias. The current research on FSD in particular tends to focus almost exclusively on heterosexual women, relying on a heterocentric view of sex and implying that only certain women's sexual problems—and only certain kinds of sexual problems—are worthy of consideration.)

The year 2003 marked both the fifth anniversary of Viagra's launch and the release of two prominent new sex drugs for men, whose names will be familiar to any e-mail user: Levitra and Cialis. All these drugs are intended to treat ED, a condition made famous by those first Viagra ads featuring an aging Bob Dole confiding in us about his post–prostate-surgery erection troubles. Nowadays, drug makers are seeking ways to distinguish their ED products in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Pfizer, the maker of Viagra, realized it needed sexier ads to capture the younger set, and soon dumped Dole as its poster boy in favor of highly masculine (and less wrinkled) professional baseball players and NASCAR drivers. The ads for Levitra and Cialis, however, have attempted to secure a portion of Viagra's multibillion-dollar annual market share by literally bringing women into the picture: Prominent ads from the Levitra campaign feature a female partner front and center, talking about her man's concern with erection "quality," the silent male demoted to the background. Cialis capitalizes on its alleged 36-hour range of effectiveness by depicting a heterosexual couple enjoying an air of romance ("If a relaxing moment turns into the right moment, will you be ready?"), with one of its first ads showing a couple enjoying the view from their his-and-hers bathtubs.

But pharmaceutical companies want women to be more than the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down for their male partners; they want women to spend an equal amount of time worrying about their own sexual problems and what pill might treat them. Female sexual dysfunction is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the official catalogue of mental illnesses), so if a woman is diagnosed with something that falls under the umbrella of FSD (say, lack of desire, lack of arousal, pain during intercourse, or lack of orgasm), she is automatically considered to have a mental illness or disorder. A few generations ago, a woman might be considered mentally ill (more specifically, a nymphomaniac) if she wanted sex too much; these days a woman might just as easily be labeled mentally unsound if her libido is below "normal."

For years, Pfizer hoped to determine that Viagra could be used to counter low arousal in women, but in 2004, the company stopped its clinical trials, concluding that Viagra was no more effective than a placebo. (The placebo, by the way, did have a positive effect on sexual arousal, suggesting, if nothing else, the important role of expectation in psychology.) But why have women share the men's candy when an FDA-approved sex drug specifically for women could be just as much of a marketing boon as Viagra was? With a market for such medical treatments at an estimated nearly $2 billion per year, pharmaceutical companies have a tremendous financial incentive to produce a successful contender, and thus far more than half a dozen companies are focusing their efforts on drugs intended to treat low desire and arousal, developing and testing a raft of pills, patches, creams, and sprays, hoping to find that elusive pink Viagra.

Pharmaceutical companies want women to be more than the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down for their male partners—they want women to spend an equal amount of time worrying about their own sexual problems.

The main focus in FSD-drug development is on testos- terone products intended to amp up sexual desire, rather than the Viagra model of products that increase blood flow to the nether regions. Just months after Pfizer pulled the plug on the Viagra trials targeting women, Proctor and Gamble announced plans to seek FDA approval for its Intrinsa testosterone patch, designed to remedy a lack of desire in women. Mainstream media obediently followed Proctor and Gamble's marketing spin—it's not sexual arousal that's the problem, it's desire for sex to begin with—proclaiming the failure of the Viagra trials to be evidence of women's complex sexuality. Testosterone—often called the "hormone of desire"—seemed like the most promising fix.

Though low sexual desire in women is often considered to be a product of testosterone deficiency, this assertion has not been borne out by evidence; a 2005 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* explicitly debunked the notion of a link between low sexual desire and low testosterone levels in women. In

December 2004, the FDA reviewed the first-ever application for an FSD-specific drug—the aforementioned Intrinsa patch. The FDA's advisory committee determined that the benefit of the drug (an average of one additional sex act per month, according to the trials) was overshadowed by the patch's potential long-term health risks, and they unanimously voted against approval of Intrinsa.

Yet despite the lack of scientific data on the efficacy of testosterone to treat low libido in women, the absence of FDA approval of use of testosterone to treat these problems, the known risks of testosterone therapies for women (ranging from beard growth to more health-threatening liver problems), and the unknown long-term risks of such therapies, a growing number of physicians are prescribing testosterone drugs off-label to women. (If a drug is FDA-approved for any one condition, a doctor is allowed to prescribe it off-label at her discretion for any other condition, even if the drug has not been tested or approved for that condition.) In an October 4, 2005, article in *Newsweek*, testosterone researcher Dr. Jan Shifren estimated that one-fifth of all prescriptions of testosterone products approved for men are actually written off-label for women for the treatment of "sexual dysfunction." Such off-label prescribing is becoming increasingly normalized in mainstream media accounts of FSD, and depicted favorably in outlets such as *CBS Evening News* and *20/20*, as well as in numerous women's magazines.

Women in search of solutions to their sexual problems often turn to the mass media, looking to magazines and television talk shows for advice, information, and empathy. But because many of these sources encourage women to see disappearing libidos or foiled orgasms as de facto FSD, these encounters often work to spread the Viagra culture, to the detriment of the women themselves. Two sexperts have risen to particular prominence in this coverage of FSD, largely through their presence in pop venues: sex therapist Laura Berman, PhD, and urologist Jennifer Berman, MD. The Berman sisters have been favorably featured in numerous women's magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*; appeared on many TV shows, such as *Good Morning America*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *20/20*; and had their own weekly cable-TV talk show on the Discovery Health Channel. (Laura has a reality show called *Sexual Healing* upcoming on Showtime.) With cowriters, they've published two mainstream books on women's sexual problems: *For Women Only: A Revolutionary Guide to Overcoming Sexual Dysfunction and Reclaiming Your Sex Life* and *Secrets of the Sexually Satisfied Woman: Ten Keys to Unlocking Ultimate Pleasure*.

In 2001, the Bermans founded the UCLA Female Sexual Medicine Center. Three years later, Laura Berman left UCLA to open a private clinic, the Berman Center, in Chicago. Jennifer Berman soon followed suit, opening a sexual-medicine practice in Beverly Hills at the Rodeo Drive Women's Health Center. The shift of the Bermans' practices from an academic center to the explicitly for-profit commercial sector speaks volumes about the new retail-oriented cultures of both sex and medicine. Both practices offer a boutique experience in a high-end, spa-like environment. A review of the Berman Center's website, where a prospective client can secure an appointment with a credit-card number, indicates that an initial assessment will cost $550 plus testing, and another $550 will buy a session of "bio-identical hormone therapy." Not surprisingly, there's no mention of insurance coverage. (There's already been a lot of outrage in feminist and women's health circles about the fact that Viagra is more likely to be covered than contraceptives, and one can easily imagine that insurance companies might similarly refuse to cover sex drugs for women, even if they are eventually FDA-approved.)

Even more important than the commercialized nature of the Bermans' practices, however, is their approach to treatment. Although both assert that they combine the strengths of psychotherapy with the benefits of sexual medicine, they ultimately give preference to the biomedical perspective. As part of a 2004 *20/20* special on women's sexuality, the Bermans treated a woman whose husband had threatened to leave her if she didn't remedy her low mojo. Though the sisters failed to find any biophysical indications for the woman's depressed libido (in other words, no sign of "low" testosterone), they nevertheless wrote a prescription for testosterone and, with this magic bullet, sidelined the deeply problematic nature of the woman's relationship with her husband and any psychological factors that may have affected her sex life.

The spread of an already prevalent "just pop a pill" approach to the realm of sexual desire minimizes the myriad ways in which our society fosters sexual problems in both women and men. People work more hours in the U.S. than in any other industrialized society, take fewer vacation days, and have increasingly longer commutes—so exhaustion alone is quite possibly a major explanation for many an underused American bed. But for women, the same political struggles that have long informed their sexual choices and well-being are still in

existence. Persistent gender inequality in heterosexual couplings (manifested in women shouldering much of the burden of household work and childcare), an increasing threat of restricted reproductive rights, an active epidemic of sexual violence against women, and women's higher likelihood of being diagnosed with depression (and higher rates of antidepressant use) all likely play a role. In addition, women's magazines' continual emphasis on sex and how to make it longer, better, and more frequent can easily give women the impression that they're at fault if they can't blow their man's mind—to say nothing of their own—every time. Certainly, a sex drug won't address these fundamentally social and cultural causes of sexual discontent. Men, of course, can also experience sexual problems for many of these same reasons as well, a point usually minimized in discussions of ED.

As the medicalization of sex expands, growing numbers of critics are raising voices of dissent. Since its 2000 inception, the New View Campaign has used a variety of tactics to counter the growing biomedical orientation surrounding women's sexuality (see www.fsd-alert.org). Critical articles about FSD have also appeared in medical journals, such as the *British Medical Journal*, and a number of mainstream publications, including 2005 features in the *Seattle Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. And recent drug scandals, such as those involving the Vioxx brand pain reliever and hormone replacement therapy, appear to be ushering in a more widespread critical appraisal of the health threats of our pill-popping culture.

Perhaps the biggest danger of the rise of Viagra culture is that the source of women's sexual problems is becoming overtly depoliticized. A main intent of the feminist women's health movement was to politicize women's sexual/health problems, often by challenging the power of the medical establishment. Now that drug companies are the major players hijacking the characterization of women's sexual problems, we need to firmly resituate women's sexuality back into the political realm. Sure, some women may be helped by a new sex patch or pill, but this quick fix (with health risks) might just put a Band-Aid on a larger problem. Neither the medical establishment nor the drug industry is going to change, so it's time for women to demand that these profit-hungry entities stop trying to peddle drugs that benefit their bottom line at the expense of our health.

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(*Continued from page 24*) magazine, drooled over Jewish author Lauren Weisberger's "blond shiksa goddess looks." With echoes of I.B. Singer, if a Jewish woman is attractive, she's almost a shiksa. And if educated, 21st-century Jews can still maintain that Jewish + female = unattractive, perhaps it's no surprise that Jewish men are still counting shiksas when they lie in bed at night.

Of course, many Jewish women have their own take on all of this. Hostility to shiksas snapping up dwindling reserves of single Jewish men manifests on blogs as well as in traditional print venues, including advice and opinion columns in the Jewish press, and even works of feminist scholarship. In one installment of the "Ask Wendy" column in Jewish weekly the *Forward*, advice columnist Wendy Belzberg vilifies both a convert to Judaism for taking her religion too seriously and her husband for marrying a "shiksa." In her understandable enthusiasm to defend Jewish women against anti-Semitic and misogynist stereotypes, feminist scholar Sylvia Barack Fishman blames successful Jewish women's problems finding Jewish mates on the obliging gentile bimbos she says are always available to stroke Jewish men's egos. And was it a sly, inventive desire for revenge that inspired Rabbi's Daughters, a company that puts out a hip line of t-shirts emblazoned with words and phrases culled from yiddishkeit ("YENTA," "OY VEY," "KVETCH," etc.), to create a "SHIKSA" model? If so, they've succeeded: The shirt has been spotted on the likes of Madonna, Christina Aguilera, and other non-Jewish celebrities. It seems unlikely that these women mean to proudly announce themselves as objects of loathing. More likely, they're buying into the view expressed by Chosen Couture, a website selling the Rabbi's Daughters line, that the shirts sport a "favorite term of endearmeant" and are "perfect for anyone with Shiks-appeal."

If "shiksa" is a term of endearment when used to sell t-shirts, why does it make some people so unhappy to see it in the title of a book examining a 4,000-year-old stereotype? The difference, obviously, is that one is sexy and the other isn't. Donning a "SHIKSA" t-shirt, a woman isn't laying claim to a new definition of an old ethnic slur. She's announcing herself as the familiar sexually available bimbo, a role some still feel comfortable having her play. In my travels with the S-word, I have yet to come across a use or guise for the term that manages to shake its racist and misogynist origins. The experiences of gentile and converted women in the Jewish world today run the gamut from exclusion and derogation to inclusion, empowerment, and homecoming. With all the baggage it carries, "shiksa" is just too tired to tell their stories.

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tree so horny

Can sex sell environmentalism?

What you think about Fuck for Forest, a Berlin-based website that lets subscribers watch videos of environmental activists doing the nasty, depends in part on what you think about porn as a whole. If you think it's liberating, empowering, and fun for the folks involved, then you can feel good about supporting an organization that channels its massive earning potential toward worthy antideforestation efforts—unlike regular internet porn, the dollars you spend aren't paying for the gold plating on some smarmy webmaster's hot tub. And if you're aesthetically or ethically opposed to pornography—well, you can always donate to the Sierra Club.

Fuck for Forest talks a good, if somewhat garbled, game. The site's front page contains a warning that the project

> is [*sic*] born to give attention to how humans destroy nature and contains natural nudity, including graphic sexual and erotic images and sexually explicit language.... It also contains shocking information about how humans exploit this planet.... If you are underage or get offended by love or truth, you better exit this site now.

The main page proclaims, "This project is made by openly sexual people, who use they're [*sic*] sexuality to put focus on and collect money for the earths [*sic*] threatened nature." In the section of the site where activists are encouraged to send in their own porn, or to volunteer to "model," the creators declare, "Sex does not have to be a trade object. Let's reclaim sexuality!"

Whether or not Fuck for Forest can truly be said to be reclaiming sexuality, they've put their money where their mouths (among other orifices) are. In a 2004 article in *Grist* magazine, the Norwegian activist couple behind the site, Leona Johansson and Tommy Hol Ellingsen, claimed that the project had raised $50,000 so far. A lot of that money rolled in after the duo climbed onstage at a rock festival that year and had sex in front of several thousand people, directing major traffic to the site. The two

Illustrations by Corey Pierce

seem sincere about their desire to save the world through sex, and they are befuddled by the mainstream environmental world's reluctance to take their money. "Society is so upside down," Ellingson told *Grist* writer Lissa Harris. "In Norway, we have this prime minister talking about war and defending it, and at the same time putting sex down as something bad. Any kind of action to help nature is good."

Can sex save the planet, as Fuck for Forest's idealistic founders suggest? Or is it more likely that environmental activists are so frustrated by both a seemingly complacent world populace and their reputation as freaky fringe dwellers that they're willing to do anything (or anyone) to bring attention to the cause? Whether this sex-for-green concept seems brilliant or boring to you, it's a simple extension of the fact that sex—and, in particular, a sexualized woman—sells. And though what it usually sells is something easy (beer, say), using sexually charged images of women is emerging as the chief tactic for environment-related groups in search of a commercial push.

The best-known example of this phenomenon is PETA's notorious, long-running ad campaigns promoting animal rights and rallying against animal testing and eating meat. When PETA hoists a billboard or slaps up a glossy poster featuring a woman, you can bet she's unclothed or close to it. In an ad campaign targeting the Iams pet-food company for their animal-testing practices, sad-sack rocker Morrissey lounges with two pooches, fully dressed. For the same campaign, spokesmodel and internet pinup Cindy Margolis wears a silver bikini and clutches a small dog. The ad's tagline? "Iams isn't my doggy's style." Elsewhere, a campaign promoting vegetarianism features the likes of Elizabeth "*Showgirls*" Berkley and Pamela Anderson dressed in lettuce-leaf bikinis and other scanty coverings made of salad fixings; the male rapper Common, however, appears with his shirt firmly on, holding a veggie burger.

Can sex save the planet?
Or are environmental activists so frustrated that they're willing to do anything (or anyone) to bring attention to the cause?

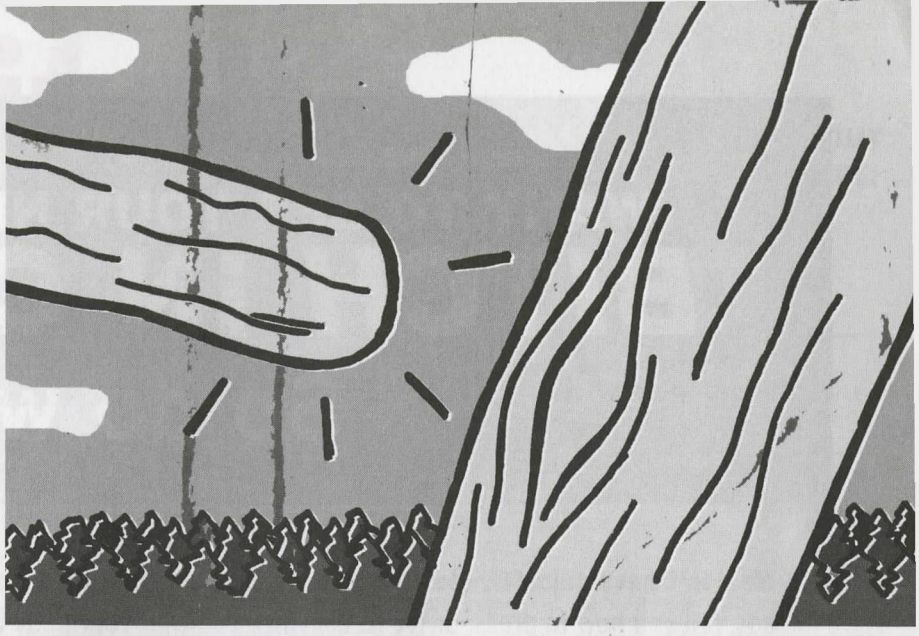
In 2005, the environmental group Forest Ethics followed PETA's lead. Their target: Victoria's Secret, whose relentless effort to provide every American household with a lingerie catalogue has led to clearcutting and exploitation of virgin forests. To kick off the media campaign, called Victoria's Dirty Secret, the group placed an ad in the *New York Times* featuring a model wearing a garter belt, corset, Victoria's Secret's trademark angel wings—and a chainsaw. "Some companies get a tree for Christmas," the ad announced. "Victoria's Secret is taking a whole forest." The campaign garnered coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, among other places.

On the initiative's website, the same angel-with-a-chainsaw appears. One banner on the site declares "Victoria bares it all! Exclusive photos!" and sports a little quadrant of an angel-winged model—just her right breast, hair, arm, and wing. When clicked, this banner takes you to a picture of a clearcut—a brutal-looking piece of land that used to be a forest and is now a spiky field covered with stumps—with the tag "Victoria's Secret Holiday Clearance."

On the website CampusProgress.org, writer Desirina Boskovich describes a presentation given by Forest Ethics at Emory University, at which the speaker showed off Victoria's Dirty Secret ads and a video of a protest. Describing the video, which captures a protest in front of a Victoria's Secret store in a mall, Boskovich notes, tongue somewhat in cheek, that "one female protester, dressed above the waist in only a bra and a huge sign, is catching the most eyes. People stop to talk to her, either about her sign or why she's not wearing a shirt."

These lingerie-clad female protesters are young and good-looking, all the better to attract otherwise disengaged mallgoers who might stroll on by your average Birkenstocked, frizzy-haired, old-guard environmentalist. And that's precisely the point of this new face of advocacy. Likewise, Fuck for Forest's vision of revolutionary sex doesn't stray far from conventional porn images. The teaser models sprinkled around the site (most of them women) are thin and conventionally pretty, save for a pierced nose here and some dreadlocks there. When men appear, they are exclusively depicted in sex scenes with women, in keeping with the site's emphasis on pleasing the tastes of heterosexual visitors. The main page sports a photo illustration of a naked girl crouching in a forest, blindfolded with a sort of bag over her face, while a hand holding a chainsaw advances from stage right. (Sexy women in close proximity to chainsaws must be a growing fetish.)

PETA's ads, the Victoria's Dirty Secret campaign, and Fuck for Forest share one crucial feature: The images they use to sell their causes not only exploit the female body,



but also reinforce and perpetuate ideas of female beauty that everyone who moves in progressive circles should, at this late date, recognize as less than progressive. To use a woman's polished, plucked body as an emblem of environmentalism seems to contradict everything else they might have to say about the importance of natural and respectful forms of living.

For the past 30 years, ecofeminism, a blending of the environmental and feminist movements, has been making the point that exploitation of women and exploitation of the earth are intertwined, fueled by many of the same destructive societal and cultural mind-sets. Which is not to say that ecofeminism and female nudity are incompatible—one longtime environmental activist named Dona Nieto regularly doffs her top while reading her goddess-themed poetry to confused loggers in California's redwood country, calling her performance "striptease for the trees."

In protests like Nieto's or those of Baring Witness, the California group whose members arrange their naked bodies into peace signs to protest war, the women involved are just ordinary people, albeit nude ones. They're not celebrities, or made up to look like Victoria's Secret models, or positioned in traditional porn tableaux, and they point out the crucial difference between a naked protest that counts on societal norms of female beauty for its dubious power, and a naked protest that explores the nature of femininity and its possible interconnectedness with the earth. Contrast Nieto's protest, for instance, with the recent Greenpeace action at a Vienna summit of the European Union, Latin America, and the Caribbean, which featured a guerrilla protest of pulp-mill pollution by the scantily clad Carnival Queen of Argentina. "I speak for our people and the nature around us. I am entirely qualified to demand to any head of state that they protect our environment," stated Evangelina Carrozzo of her remarks demanding that European mills stop polluting the Uruguay River. But why she needed to do so wearing only a bra and thong went unexplained.

I, along with others who question ecofeminism's essentializing of the Nature of Women, might reject any implication that females are more closely tied to the earth, but my discomfort with these types of protests is far removed from my virulent dislike of the other, more exploitative campaigns. But ecofeminism's contention that society uses women as resources just as it uses timber or oil or gold seems to hit a bit too close to home with this new environmentalism, which puts women's bodies to use in an extremely cynical way. We expect this treatment from the mainstream realm of advertising, but to get it from ostensibly progressive organizations feels like adding insult to injury.

It's entirely questionable whether the interest that's aroused by a Victoria's Dirty Secret protest in the mall or a Fuck for Forest video is really directed toward saving the environment. The kinds of sacrifices and changes in outlook that becoming a true environmentalist entail are not going to be brought about by a moment of lust for a sexy girl in a bustier, a strategically placed lettuce leaf, or nothing at all.

It's safe to say that the environmental movement as a whole isn't sliding downhill into some kind of woman-hating quagmire. GE's recent television ads feature an elephant dancing with joy to "Singin' in the Rain" at the mere mention of the corporate giant's Ecomagination campaign—but, thankfully, no buxom rainforest pinup as its companion in greenwashing. (The company's sexier bid for cleaner emissions does feature modelesque coal miners of both sexes, though.) Al Gore has managed to promote his recent documentary about climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*, with nary a slice of activist cheesecake. And the World Wildlife Federation rejected a donation from Fuck for Forest, presumably because of its provenance. But the difference between these two arms of environmentalism—one entrenched and establishment; the other fiery and grassroots—points out the need for organizations that, like Fuck for Forest or Forest Ethics, have sharp instincts and creative thinking. But is saving the earth on the tits and asses of women the best idea we've got? For all of our sakes, I sure hope not.

Rebecca Onion lives in Austin, Tex., where most sexy environmentalists keep their shirts on—even in summer.

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WHERE TO BITCH

SHOW SEX TOURISTS THE DOOR

What with all the concern over who's sneaking into our country these days, it's easy to forget why we might be sneaking into theirs: Despite the 2003 Protect Act (under which U.S. citizens can be prosecuted for having sex abroad with children under 18), Americans still account for 80 percent of the child-sex tourists in Latin America. Worldwide, U.S. citizens account for one-quarter of sex tourists. There are an estimated 2 million child prostitutes in the global sex trade. That makes 500,000 children allocated to U.S. demand alone. Yet only 25 Americans in the past three years have been arrested for sexually abusing children in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Russia. Help these organizations get to the kids before our perverted travelers do. –CAITLIN HU

Captive Daughters (*3500 Overland Ave. #110-108, Los Angeles, CA 90034; www.captivedaughters.org*), California's first antitrafficking organization, addresses sex trafficking as both a human rights issue and a feminist issue (80 percent of victims trafficked annually are female). Their focus is on education, and you can use the movies and contacts on their "Take Action" web page to spread the word.

World Vision is a Christian organization whose money goes to nondenominational protection; their **Child Sex Tourism Prevention Project** (*www.worldvision.org*) attacks sex tourism with a three-pronged campaign, including a media blitz on billboards, U.S. airports, television ads, airline in-flight videos, and magazines; law-enforcement assistance through community networks; and educational programs. Join the project with a donation or use the site to send letters to your congresspeople.

ECPAT-USA (*157 Montague St., Brooklyn, NY 11201; www.ecpatusa.org*) has been researching and fighting child sexual exploitation since 1991. In April, they joined with UNICEF, ECPAT Sweden, and the World Tourism Organization to create a Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children in travel and tourism. Visit their website for a sample letter urging your local tourism board to sign it.

JOIN THE FARM TEAM

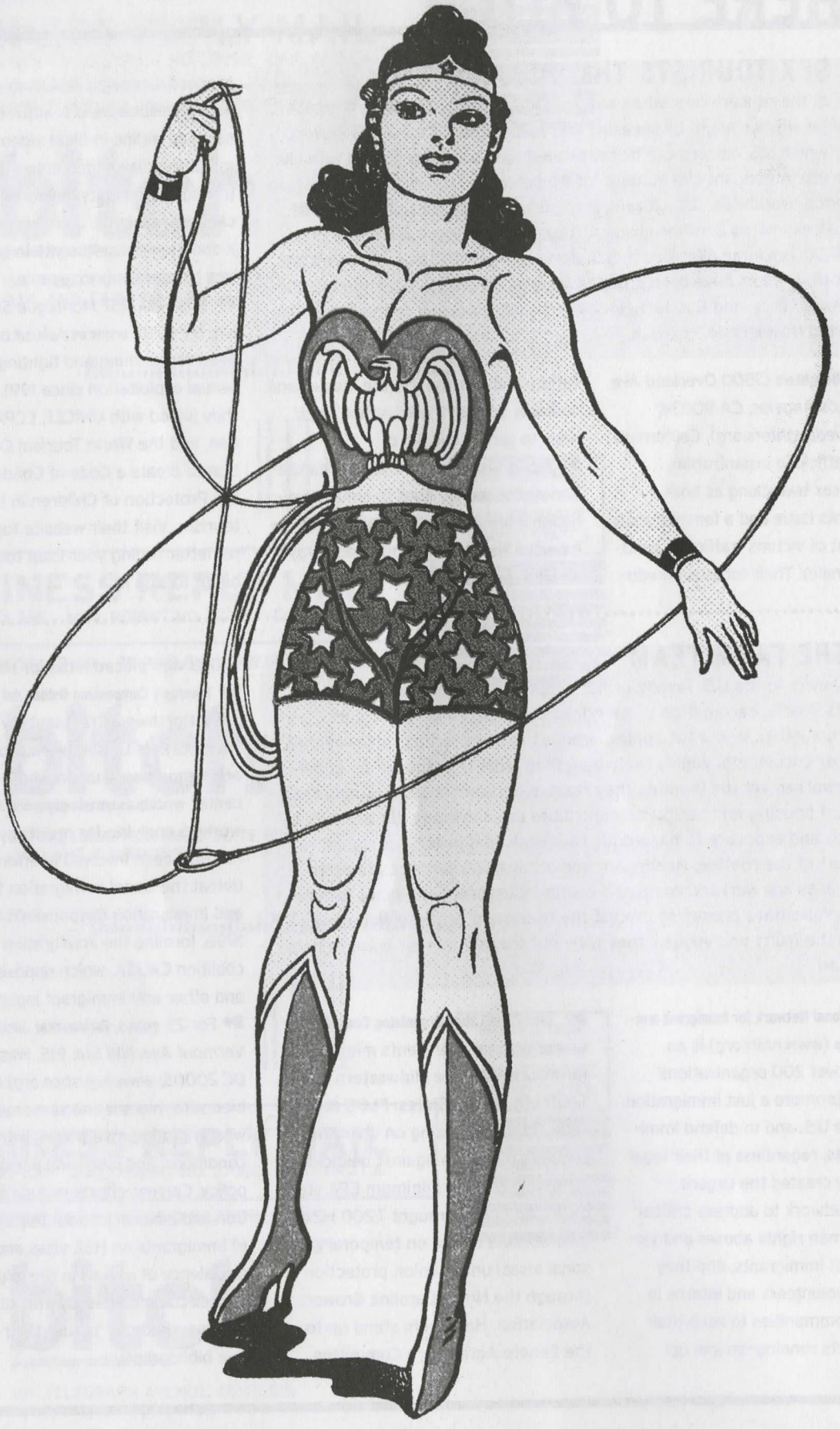
Whether they're in the U.S. legally or not, migrant farmworkers deserve basic rights. A little recognition of American dependence on their labor wouldn't hurt either. If you eat apples, oranges, grapes, lettuce, strawberries, tomatoes, or cucumbers, you've likely benefited from the labor of an immigrant farmworker, yet the benefits they receive in return are shockingly few. Substandard housing and sanitation contribute to an average life expectancy of 49 years, and exposure to hazardous chemicals and pesticides is just another part of the routine. Healthcare and other basic services are often inaccessible, as are workers' comp and health insurance. Child labor is common. Many folks have chosen to protest the treatment of these workers by boycotting the fruits and veggies they pick, but there are other ways to help as well. –C.H.

The **National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights** (*www.nnirr.org*) is an alliance of over 200 organizations working to promote a just immigration policy in the U.S. and to defend immigrants' rights, regardless of their legal status. They created the Urgent Response Network to address critical cases of human rights abuses and violence against immigrants, and they depend on volunteers and interns in individual communities to keep their many projects running–so join up!

The **Farm Labor Organizing Committee** (*www.floc.com*) represents migrant farmworkers in the Midwestern and Southern United States. FLOC rehabilitates migrant housing on union farms, protects members against pesticide poisoning beyond minimum EPA standards, and once brought 7,200 H2A farmworkers (those on temporary/seasonal visas) under union protection through the North Carolina Growers Association. Help them stand up to the Senate Agriculture Committee with a well-placed letter or two.

Pineros y Campesinos Unidas del Noroeste–a.k.a. Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (*www.pcun.org*)–is an Oregon-based union whose service center works extensively with farmworkers applying for residency. PCUN has also been involved in efforts to defeat the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, forming the immigration rights coalition CAUSA, which opposes this and other anti-immigrant legislation.

For 25 years, **Farmworker Justice** (*1010 Vermont Ave. NW Ste. 915, Washington, DC 20005; www.fwjustice.org*) has lobbied with migrant and seasonal farmworkers to improve wages, working conditions, and labor and immigration policy. Current efforts include education and advocacy about the treatment of immigrants on H2A visas and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the migrant worker communities. Download their free newsletter, or peruse their extensive bibliography.



FEMALE BONDING

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF WONDER WOMAN

BY KL PEREIRA

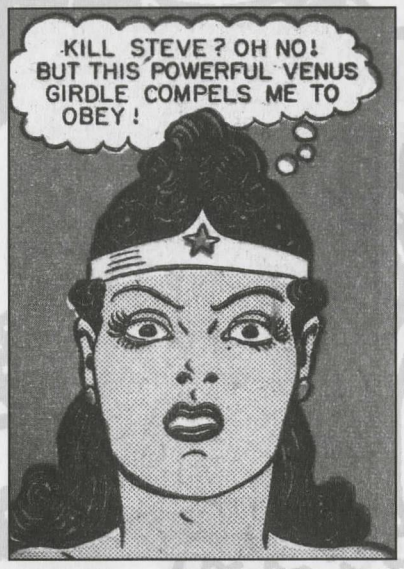
"BIND ME AS TIGHT AS YOU CAN, GIRLS, WITH THE BIGGEST ROPES AND CHAINS YOU CAN FIND!" The woman is smiling in ecstasy, plastered against a large wooden beam, ropes and chains taut against her body, as she begs her captors, a group of jubilant, scantily clad young women, to pull her shackles just a little bit tighter. The girls taunt their captive: "We are, Princess, even you can't escape these bonds!"

The scene reads like the climax of a story in *Best Bondage Erotica*, rather than something from a 1940s-era comic book. As for its subject, most of us know her as that sexy superhero with the racy, star-spangled hot pants and eagle-emblazoned bustier who caught our attention as the star of a campy television show in the 1970s. But like all superheroes and comic-book characters, Wonder Woman has gone through major changes over the years, and before she was the earnest do-gooder of '70s TV, she was a bondage-lovin' Golden Age superstar. Despite her status as a feminist icon, few feminists truly know the depth and character of this feisty gal's origins.

Though she was preceded in the comic-book pages by Red Tornado—a housewife who transformed into a whirlwind to get her housekeeping done—Wonder Woman was, in 1941, the first female comic-book character to be called a superhero. The creation of William Marston, a psychologist and self-proclaimed feminist, Wonder Woman was conceived as an antidote to what Marston saw as a troubling lack of female superheroes and an abundance of violence in the comic-book medium.

Feminism as Marston defined it was less about advocating gender equality and fighting sexism than it was a variant of the 19th-century temperance movement, which held that women were morally superior to men and, as such, responsible for controlling their appetites. Marston, who invented a precursor to the modern-day lie-detector test and was a top researcher in submission-and-domination sexuality, thought that society's male-wrought problems would be solved by women—who, unlike men, would rule the world with love, compassion, and justice. In November 1937, Marston predicted as much to the *New York Times*: "[T]he next one hundred years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy—a nation of Amazons in the psychological rather than physical sense."

In the context of modern feminism, Marston's female-dominance hopes might seem deeply flawed, but his politics were progressive for their time. He truly believed that it was his duty to make people realize that the only way to peace and justice was through the leadership and advancement of women—but first he had to figure out how to relay his message of female superiority to the masses of unbelievers.



COMICS WERE the fastest-growing creative medium of the early 1940s, and although they were (and often still are) scorned as juvenile, they were nevertheless a powerful media source that could influence a large audience of young, mostly male readers. (According to *Wonder Woman* historian Les Daniels, it's been estimated that up to 90 percent of readers of *Wonder Woman* comics have been male.) Marston brought his ideas to M.C. Gaines, the head of Sensation Comics. Gaines, who was more intrigued by the idea of a female superhero than by Marston's feminist agenda, gave Marston the go-ahead and Wonder Woman her first home.

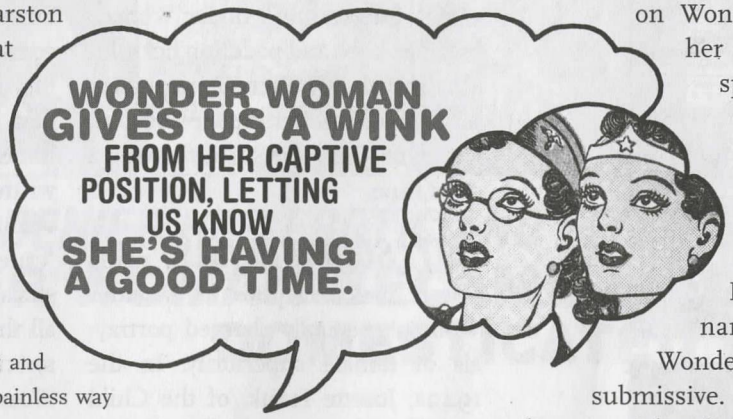
From the start, *Wonder Woman* was a conglomeration of many efforts. Most histories of the comic note male players such as Marston, Gaines, and artist H.G. Peter, but women had a significant role in its creation. Under a thinly veiled pen name (Charles Moulton), Marston wrote all the stories, but various male and female artists illustrated the comics and contributed ideas to the creation of a strong, dominant, self-sufficient woman. Marston was also assisted by his two marital partners, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne. (The three maintained a polyamorous relationship in a time when even the hint of unconventional sexuality was socially unacceptable; in fact, after Marston's death, Holloway Marston and Byrne remained committed to one another and raised their four children together.)

Together these artists created the perfect spokesperson for Marston's ideals. From the first panel of the inaugural issue, it is apparent that Wonder Woman, an Amazon from Paradise Island—a society inhabited by superwomen—has an agenda. Wonder Woman leaps onto the page with a star-spangled skirt and a determined attitude. (It's worth noting that this was the first and only time Wonder Woman appeared in a skirt; the costume was changed to shorts when the artists realized that a skirt would prove impractical in fight sequences.) The reader learns that this amazing Amazon chose to leave her island paradise to tell the women of America that the only way to succeed in life was to be strong and to excel without the help of men.

The earliest comics are saturated with explorations of Wonder Woman's Amazonian history and her unique superpowers, but these particulars were never emphasized as the key to Wonder Woman's success. Where male superheroes such as Superman and Spiderman are revered for their incredible strength and X-ray vision, their mild-mannered alter egos serve as foils to their super selves: Not only do their aliases hinder them in the "real world," these personas are ultimately identified with the pale, shadow selves of the populace at large, making it clear to the reader that no amount of pumping iron or fancy cars could ever transform him into his male hero. Wonder Woman and her alter ego, Diana Prince, are a different story. Whether she's in her starry panties or a smart suit, Wonder Woman/Diana encouraged the women she met to realize that while their talents and hard work were important, a positive attitude and confidence in oneself was what really got the job done. Stories like "The Five Tasks of Thomas Tighe!" (*Wonder Woman* no. 38, November–December 1949), in which our heroine is challenged by the titular arch-sexist to a series of physical challenges, finds Wonder Woman not saving the day, but rather encouraging other women to prove their strength to themselves and to patronizing men.

A secondary but no less potent theme in the comics was that of bondage. Marston felt that showing characters restrained by ropes and

chains, rather than killed or maimed, cut down on the violence he found so abhorrent in other comics. Indeed, those who were roped or chained in the comic rarely protested, and some even asked to be confined, often as a way of proving their strength or forcing someone to tell the truth. But as a researcher of submissive/dominant behaviors, Marston wasn't ignorant of the fact that bondage was also sexually stimulating for some people; in a letter to Gaines on February 20, 1943, he noted:

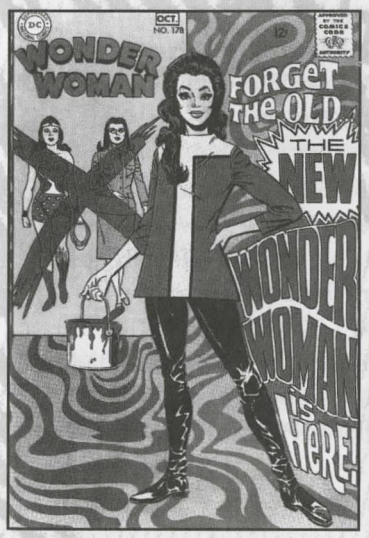


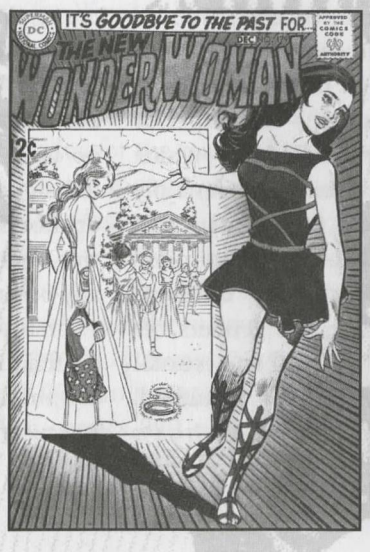
> Sadism consists in [*sic*] the enjoyment of other people's actual suffering.... Since binding and chaining are the one harmless, painless way of subjecting the heroine to menace and making drama of it, I have developed elaborate ways of having Wonder Woman and other characters confined.

Though Marston initially conceived Wonder Woman as an antidote to men's mistakes, the most challenging forces faced by the superheroine were often not male villains, but fierce and clever females. Uniformly sexy and downtrodden, these she-villains are portrayed as prisoners of a male perspective who don't believe that women are natural psychological and physical leaders, and who are thus punished for their male identification. By the end of their stories, they are inevitably rescued by Wonder Woman and her band of female friends, and the resulting scenes of female bonding teem with sexual tension.

Take the erotic dynamic between Wonder Woman and Marva Psycho, wife of the evil Dr. Psycho. Whether Wonder Woman is encouraging Marva to be strong and unafraid or trying to stop Marva from helping Dr. Psycho, the sub/dom vibe is surely meant to titillate. Marva is often pictured being captured, liberated, and comforted by Wonder Woman. One panel in "The Battle for Womanhood" (*Wonder Woman* no. 5, June–July 1943) even shows Marva reclining on Wonder Woman's lap, her arms around the spangled one's neck as they gaze into each others' eyes. Elsewhere, the dynamics are reversed, with Marva in the dominant position and Wonder Woman acting as submissive. Scenes like these speak to a social reality of feminine comfort and friendship in the '40s, when men were off at war and women bonded in the workplace and at home, but they also mirror the fantasy island, a literal no-man's-land, from whence our heroine came.

The Sapphic undertones that permeate Wonder Woman's relationships with foes, damsels in distress, and friends have often been overlooked by comic critics and feminists alike. Her almost exclusively female relationships have been explained away by her absentee boyfriend Steve Trevor, an army captain so uninteresting he's been killed off several times in various Wonder Woman comic runs. This heterosexual identification allows Wonder Woman to be seen enjoying the company of women without comment, whether she is rescuing them or tying them up. There's a clear frisson of erotic partnership, for example, in scenes between Wonder Woman and Etta Candy, a chubby, sassy girl who loves to dominate people and tell





them what to do, as well as with the young Amazons of Paradise Island, who bind Wonder Woman with ropes and chains. An advertisement in July 1944's Sensation Comics no. 31 has Etta taking Wonder Woman over her knee and paddling her with a hairbrush. Wonder Woman gives us a wink from her captive position, letting us know she's really having a good time.

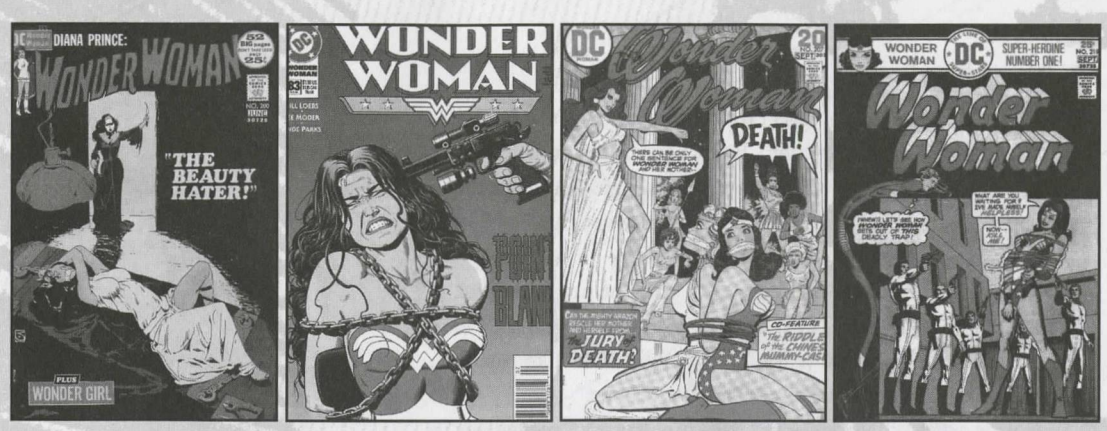
NOT SURPRISINGLY, many people took exception to Wonder Woman's sexually charged portrayals of female superiority. In the 1940s, Josette Frank, of the Child Study Association of America in New York, was outspoken in her criticism and advocated drastic changes—among them action sans chains and more respectable garb for the "scantily clad" superheroine. M.C. Gaines himself often argued with Marston about the amount of bondage in the comic; although he attempted to clean up the storyboards, those ropes and chains always managed to resurface.

Still, none of this controversy seemed to dampen Wonder Woman's popularity, and she and her cohorts, like their male superhero counterparts, became a lasting symbol of American willpower and hope. But the superheroine's feminist, homosocial world is in many ways shortsighted. Instead of advocating for human equality, Wonder Woman tends toward a feminism that sees women (more specifically, Caucasian women) as superior beings. Even as the comic—which began in wartime with horribly racist portrayals of German and Japanese soliders—grew into more sensitive portrayals of different races, ethnicities, and genders, its progressive feminist and sexual themes became a bit muddled. After Marston's death in 1947, Wonder Woman comics became more concerned with romance and marriage than equality and freedom. DC bought out Sensation Comics in 1952, but *Wonder Woman* never went out of print, and the title continued to make a splash until the publication of the book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. The tome, a crusade against comics, was written by Dr. Fredric Wertham, who felt that Wonder Woman was a "cruel, phallic woman" and that her stories were extremely dangerous to all those who read them. Wertham specifically denounced Wonder Woman as a threat to young women, who would read her comic and believe that feminine independence and strength were socially acceptable:

> The Lesbian counterpart of Batman may be found in...Wonder Woman. The homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable. The Psychiatric Quarterly deplored in an editorial the "appearance of an eminent child therapist as the implied endorser of a series...which portrays extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian."

Wertham's reading of the lesbian undercurrents and the proliferation of bondage scenes in Wonder Woman had such an impact that the Comics Code Authority was formed to enforce the strictest censorship the world of comics would ever know. For the next 20 years, no hint of the "morbid ideals" of female independence and strength or nonheteronormative sexuality was seen in Wonder Woman (or any other comic-book character).

Instead of the strong, self-sufficient woman Marston had conjured, the new Wonder Woman was a caricature, a weak figure with



DENIED HER EROTIC AND FEMINIST HISTORY, WONDER WOMAN BECAME A VIRGINAL, DOMESTICATED FIGURE.

no personality or wit. Denied her erotic and feminist history, she became a virginal, domesticated figure whose goal of fighting injustice was abandoned for marriage and shopping. In the September–October 1968 issue of *Wonder Woman*, Diana Prince is stripped of her superpowers to become a mortal woman. One glance at the cover's embellished print and fashionably mod Diana—shown painting a large X over an old *Wonder Woman* comic-book cover—says everything about the story that awaits readers inside: a veritable cacophony of hatboxes, shoes, and fashionable outfits. The most important thing about this Wonder Woman, it seemed, was the way she looked.

If losing her powers wasn't enough, in the mid-'70s Wonder Woman endured numerous trials in order to convince the Justice League of America (the band of otherwise male superheroes that included Batman, Aquaman, and Superman) that she was worthy to fight alongside them. After she proved herself by winning battles unaided by superpowers, she was allowed to rejoin—a bitter victory for those who knew the Amazonian heroine of the 1940s.

Things started looking up for Wonder Woman when *Ms.* magazine put her on their first cover in 1972, declaring her the forgotten champion of women's rights. While Gloria Steinem and company were able to reclaim Wonder Woman's feminist origins for the realm of popular culture and consciousness, the themes of sexuality, implied homosexuality, and bondage were completely absent from their discussions (most notably in Steinem's 1970s' book *Wonder Woman*). Wonder Woman was once again subsumed into the more socially acceptable role of sex symbol by the immensely popular TV series. Since then, Wonder Woman has gone through another character overhaul in comics, but none of her portrayals have rediscovered the depth of her original persona. (Some 1980s portrayals attempted to revisit her feminist roots, but all these efforts, most notably that of George Pérez, who created his Wonder Woman with the input of Steinem, simply fell flat.)

WHILE WONDER WOMAN'S descent into mediocrity is sad enough, even more troubling is the way that her image, whether it be a panel from the original comic or a studio still of a lariat-swinging Lynda Carter, is readily adopted by people who probably don't realize how groundbreaking the original Wonder Woman truly was. The story of her early years, of her feminist, bondage-happy self, needs to be told. My hopes are pinned on Joss Whedon's *Wonder Woman* movie, which is currently in production and scheduled to come out next year. And while Whedon—the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, featuring some of the best feminist characters to date—is more than qualified to produce a Wonder Woman we can all get excited about, the re-creation of the character yet again raises another interesting question: Why is it that only men can create a feminist Wonder Woman (or any Wonder Woman at all, for that matter)? Is it because of the enduring lack of women in the boys' club of comic books? Or is it due to lack of interest? In a world that rarely embraces even real-life feminist heroes, is there any room for Wonder Woman?

One thing's for sure: We need someone to advocate for the interests of strong women who are independent, sexy, and smart. This crime-fighting, woman-loving Amazon just might be the person for the job.

KL Pereira is a writer and poet who lives in Jamaica Plain, Mass. When she's not reading comics or reviewing zines for her blog (wordstowatchoutfor.wordpress.com), she likes to pull on her star-spangled panties and fight crime.

hooking up

The upwardly mobile new face of the world's oldest profession

Looking out at Williamsburg, Brooklyn's McCarren Park, Nola slips her Chanel sunglasses down over her eyes, sips her latte, and makes a sweeping gesture toward the jogger-strewn park, its busy dog run, and the new high-rise condos that have sprung up along its borders.

"There is no way I'd be living here without my nurse hat, if you know what I mean," she says. "This place is going to look like Park Slope in a few years. They might dress like hipsters, but they're just yuppies with vintage wardrobes."

Nola is actually "Nurse Nola," a dominatrix who specializes in medical role playing. She and I used to work together at an upscale dungeon in midtown Manhattan, giving and receiving enemas and spankings three days a week. Raised in a suburb of Boston, Nola is the daughter of a college professor and an elementary-school teacher, and has been working in the sex industry for nearly 15 years.

Nola started stripping while she was an undergrad at the University of Massachusetts. She tells me, "After I graduated, I had no illusions about what kind of money I could make with a liberal-arts degree in art history, so I went to Seattle and [worked at a] peep show for a little while." As a diehard East Coast girl, however, she was back in New York within a year, doing a webcam phone-sex gig. "That was easy," she recalls. "I just had to wear a 'college girl' outfit for about 30 seconds, and then lie around and touch myself for a few hours. I could even read while I did it."

"After that," she continues, "I started domming, which I did for a long time, but have never liked much. I'm not really into being mean. I always liked submissive sessions better. It was at the house I'm with now that I found my niche, and I've stuck with it ever since."

By ***Melissa Febos***
Illustrations by ***Ai Tatebayashi***


OFFEE

Over the hiss of the espresso machine, Nola explains that her whole family knows about her work. "I guess no parent would choose for their child to use that pricey college degree to take off their clothes. They'd rather me be a professional doctor than play doctor professionally, but they've accepted it." Only half-jokingly, she likens a career in sex work these days to being gay 20 years ago: "It's fine, as long as you're in New York and your parents are liberals."

Is this true? It appears to be for Nola; she is as far from the strung-out, stiletto-heeled streetwalker stereotype as can be. She's well spoken, educated, and comfortable in her body. On her bookshelves are works by Simone de Beauvoir, Chekhov, the Marquis de Sade, David Sedaris, and a slew of glossy art books. With a generous income but no health insurance, she could just as easily be one of the copious freelance web designers, yoga teachers, and writers who make up a large chunk of Williamsburg's demographic. But Nola isn't looking for another job; this is her career. She predicts that within the next 10 to 15 years she'll have socked away enough of a retirement fund (and made enough off investments advised by her clients) to quit the business and move someplace warm.

For some, it appears, sex work has become a legitimate career path, just another option for middle-class (and white) women who aren't interested in law or medical school or a job with a nonprofit. Nola and my friends from the dungeon, along with the other women interviewed for this article, are college-educated; they are not drug addicts, few lead secret lives, and all of them consider their work a worthy endeavor, a decision they would make again if the choice were theirs to do over.

We all know the story by now: In 1963, Gloria Steinem went on an undercover reporting assignment, working as a Bunny in Hugh Hefner's New York Playboy Club. The resulting exposé launched her career, was adapted into a television movie in 1985, and is still reprinted today. That Steinem's story has outlived all the Playboy Clubs both in the U.S. and abroad is testament to the continuing keen public interest in the "true" nature of sex-industry jobs.

Painstakingly crafted strippers and prostitutes now populate the fictitious cities of popular video games like *Grand Theft Auto*, while dominatrices peddle beer and play tic-tac-toe with whips on a man's back atop Diesel Jeans billboards. "You're wasting my oxygen," growls a leather-clad Amazon to a man tied to a chair in her basement in a recent commercial for Heineken. When her cell phone vibrates, she answers it with the high-pitched coo of a Valley Girl. "No, I miss *you* more!" The overdub explains, "Heineken Special Dark: It's dark, but not *that* dark."

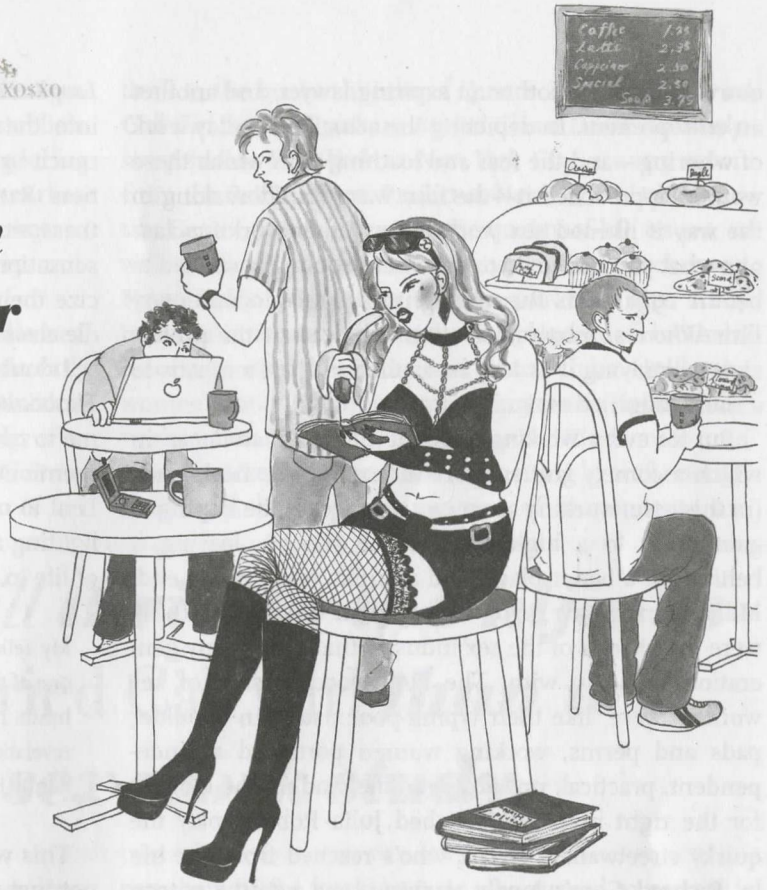
Our fundamental human interest in the taboo and erotic has prompted big business to bank on the appeal of these images; as once-scandalous scenarios and images are repackaged and fed to us on an increasingly mass-media scale, they move further into the mainstream. In a time when burgeoning cultural trends are swiftly commodified, the life span and quality of subcultures are both altered and truncated; nothing with even the slightest potential for profitability remains underground for long. Kids raised on MTV, zines, and the internet have become ad execs who now have corporate resources to fund their cultural savvy for ferreting out the next happening thing. The same phenomenon that once brought the glue-spiked hair and studded belts of a working-class music movement (punk) to chain stores in the malls of every wealthy American suburb now has Upper West Side hausfraus shelling out generous sums to enroll in striptease aerobics classes at Crunch.

But for sex work to have achieved its current naughty-hip frisson, the public has had to be slowly weaned from a concept of sex workers as desperate and exploited: After all, nobody wants to buy beer or designer denim hawked by a crack-addicted street hooker from the Bronx with bruised legs and five kids, for whom the most available public service is being routinely corralled by cops to spend the night in jail. In order for sex work to be shillable, it had to be liberated from its most ignoble circumstances, transformed from a festering wound on the public conscience to a bright, smiling slice of transgressive sex appeal.

Gloria Steinem's coworkers at the Playboy Club were exploited, it's true, with low wages, long hours, undignified (and uncomfortable) uniforms, and stringent rules demanding affability in the face of constant advances and denigration by the club's patrons. But they were also, in societal parlance, normal: that is, white, middle-class, college-educated girls looking to make a decent living—perhaps America's first "girls next door." There was an innocence to them, as revealed in Steinem's *Show* magazine essay, that helped fashion a new image of the American sex worker, one that was not so at odds with our ideas of what a young woman should be: pretty, with a healthy combination of naiveté and ambition, a hard worker, and highly concerned with pleasing men and eventually landing a husband.

In 1977, *Playboy* debuted its first-ever college-girl issue with a spread titled "Girls of the Big 10." Voluptuous coeds from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin revealed all, in cheerleader skirts or with pencils tucked behind their ears. The *Playboy* website claims today that "these beautiful, brainy women

Nobody wants to buy beer or designer denim ***from a street hooker with five kids.***



paved the way for hundreds of other college girls to bare all, and we can't thank them enough!" Indeed. If not for these beautiful, brainy women, would we have *Girls Gone Wild*? Or all those college-girl porn websites and "amateur" videos, or "dorm" webcam sites?

When I ask Nola if she's ever participated, or considered participating, in such venues, she scoffs. "I don't do this because I like to show off my tits. This is my business. It's a trade. Not everyone can give a nine-quart enema to a 300-pound man with a smile, and in stilettos." This is true; not everyone can do what she does, and surely many women willing to lift their shirts in front of a camera would stop short of erotic colonics. The obvious distaste with which Nola refers to these women reflects a dissociation from their objectification that was evident in every middle-class sex worker I spoke to. In my own experience, while the belief that I was at the helm of my own sexual exploitation persisted for a good long time, in the end, I saw little difference between the conformation of *Playboy* models to a certain female ideal and my own to a different one. The distinction served mainly to bolster my own feelings of superiority and maintain the kind of estrangement between women that I had always been staunchly opposed to. But despite whatever cultural factors may affect the middle-class girl's decision to go into sex work, it's also about the money—and the real money isn't found in flashing your boobs on spring break.

Two years after *Playboy*'s first college-girl issue, Sydney Biddle Barrows entered the business. The Mayflower Madam's high-end Manhattan escort agency prospered from 1979 to 1984, when it was closed down by the police. A self-proclaimed descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims, Barrows enjoyed the subsequent worldwide media attention, and in 1986 published a memoir that was eventually translated into seven languages and is currently in its 14th printing; the made-for-TV movie it inspired still airs on cable. She went on to publish a second book, *Just Between Us Girls: Secrets About Men from the Madam Who Knows*, in 1996, an erotic version of *The Rules* that divulged all the tricks that she required of "her girls" at the agency; an A&E *Biography* on her premiered the same year.

If there were no previous examples of sex workers who made a successful career out of it, who enjoyed not only financial security but a generous dose of celebrity and even a grudging respect (the New York police are said to have conceded publicly that Barrow's was the most honest and professional house of ill repute in the city's history), now there certainly was one. Barrows confidently connected the dots between ancestral social prestige, the sex industry, and that most lustrous of American dreams: fame. Barrows, along with successors like Heidi Fleiss, adorned sex work with bourgeois status markers and brought it out of the closet, where the cameras were waiting.

In 1986, Lizzie Borden's documentary Working Girls portrayed a tightly knit group of New York prostitutes—

one a Yale grad, another an aspiring lawyer, and another an entrepreneur. In depicting the actual day-to-day work of whoring—and the fear and loathing with which these women approached it—the film was groundbreaking in the way it likened sex work to any other working-class gig: what you had to do to get where you really wanted to be. In 1991, Ken Russell's gritty, pseudodocumentary film *Whore* similarly took an inside look at the profession, portraying it as less an aspiration than a means to a more dignified end.

But for every *Working Girls*, there was a *Flashdance*, in which a comely lass supports herself in the flesh trade (in this case, working as an exotic dancer while hoping to gain entry to a high-toned dance school), leaving it behind for a better place (and a hunky man) in the end. Millions more saw *Pretty Woman* than *Whore*. And these were the visions of the sex industry that girls of my generation grew up with. The Hollywood version of sex workers were, like their typing-pool sisters in shoulder pads and perms, working women portrayed as independent, practical, upwardly mobile, and on the lookout for the right man. We watched Julia Roberts play the quirky streetwalker Vivian, who's rescued from the life by Richard Gere's lonely, dashing, and wealthy patron and given a crash course in fine-dining etiquette, proper dress, and true love. We understood that Vivian, like past filmic hookers with hearts of gold, wouldn't be hooking if she didn't have to, but nothing too terrible ever happened to her. She was certainly not a bad person, she wasn't stupid, and when anyone dared to treat her like, well, a whore, we were meant to be outraged.

While the heroines of *Pretty Woman* and *Flashdance* were portrayed as nice, working-class girls who, in a hard-up situation, simply did what they had to, a slew of memoirs has taken a more sociologically investigative approach to examining the decision to go into sex work. A year after *Flashdance* enticed little girls everywhere to slice up their sweatshirts, Lauri Lewin published her memoir, *Naked Is the Best Disguise: My Life as a Stripper*, an account of how she made her way through college in Boston by taking it all off. She has since gone on to become a regularly published academic in the field of women's studies. Almost a decade later, Heidi Mattson recalled in her memoir, *Ivy League Stripper*, how she paid for her Brown education. Robin Shamburg, a dominatrix, *New York Press* columnist, and author of *Mistress Ruby Ties It Together: A Dominatrix Takes on Sex, Power, and the Secret Lives of Upstanding Citizens* (2001); Shawna Kenney, the college girl who penned *I Was a Teenage Dominatrix: A Memoir* (2002); and Jeanette Angell, author of the memoir *Call Girl: Confessions of an Ivy League Lady of Pleasure* (2004), all describe their entrance into the subterrain of sex work as being inspired as much by anthropological curiosity as economic desperation. Rather than a shameful, secret life to be hidden, these women's sex-industry jobs became their claim to sensational life experiences of the sort that could exoticize their otherwise prosaic and unmemoirworthy middle-class lives.

I doubt that my childhood love for *Pretty Woman* and *Flashdance* would have been influence enough to prompt me to take the leap into actual sex work. It was the aforementioned Robin Shamburg, in fact, who convinced me. Lent to me by a friend of a friend—a law student moonlighting as a dominatrix—her wry and eloquent account of life in a dungeon was crowned with the claim that:

> My fellow citizens—freaks and weirdos, absolutely, every last one of them—speak their secret desires in a language only I can intuit. I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to disclose the nature of these revelations, but I assure you, they are all totally twisted, eminently bizarre—and gloriously human.

This was the sort of insight that made a great writer, not just a great dominatrix. Armed with this proof that one could have a successful writing career and an intellectual perspective on an anthropologically fascinating occupation while making scads of money for playing dress-up and spanking some bankers, I answered an ad in the *Village Voice*.

"I would never have gone into the business if I hadn't known other girls who did," Camille, a former stripper and current Manhattan-based escort, agrees. "I had friends in college who had stripped, or even been doms. I tried those jobs too, but once I realized how much better the money was in escorting...I mean, I'd never go back." After a moment, she adds, "I've always wanted to be a good girl who does bad things. I guess I wanted to prove that I could do what I do and still be who I am, and not have to be damaged goods. I mean, I had a happy childhood." She flashes a disarming smile that I imagine is reserved mainly for her patrons. "And now I'm having a happy adulthood."

While these middle-class sex workers have paved the road for younger women to further infiltrate the industry, popular media is enthusiastically jumping on the bandwagon, with approving commercial images of strippers, prostitutes, porn stars, and BDSM practitioners increasing exponentially. Retail sales for *Playboy*'s fashion and consumer products, for instance, are estimated at well over $350 million yearly, and the brand is enjoy-

ing new partnerships with mass-appeal labels like Sean John clothing and M.A.C cosmetics. Retail establishments moved more than $610 million in g-string panties from 2002 to 2003, according to market-research firm NPD Group, and *Time* reported that, in 2003, girls between the ages of 13 and 17 spent $152 million on them.

On television shows targeting middle-class audiences, images of sex workers abound. HBO seems particularly devoted to chronicling the lives of sex workers, with documentary series on everything from the porn industry (*Pornucopia: Going Down in the Valley*) to stripping (*G-String Divas*) to prostitution (*Cathouse*). T-Pain's hit "I'm N Luv (Wit a Stripper)" can be heard pulsing from the windows of teen-piloted SUVs from Manhattan to middle America, and the producer of *Sex and the City* recently bought the film rights to former escort Tracy Quan's chick lit–style novels *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* and *Diary of a Married Call Girl*. If 10 or 20 years ago middle-class American adolescents didn't know what a dominatrix was, or what went on behind the scenes at the Adult Film Awards ceremony, all they need to do now is turn on the tube.

Saturated as our magazines, movie theaters, televisions, and Amazon wishlists have become with defanged images of sex workers, there remains a vast distance between what we see in a Heineken commercial and actual sex work. Strip clubs make for thrilling mise-en-scènes in TV shows like *The Sopranos* and critically acclaimed films like *Closer*, but these homogenized representations are not actually bringing the experiential reality of the sex industry out of the closet. This new proliferation of images serves mainly to fatten the wallets of corporate media, not to bring social approbation, improved working conditions, or useful legal resources to actual sex workers, whether they're strippers at the Lusty Lady or streetwalkers in Los Angeles. In the end, the projection of only the most marketable images of middle-class, nominally wholesome sex workers onto a national big screen simply glamorizes a narrow concept of a complex reality.

It's safe to say, for instance, that far more people will thrill to the hooker hijinks of Quan's *Diary of a Married Call Girl* than will pick up *Behind Closed Doors: An Analysis of Indoor Sex Work in New York City*, a 2005 report from the Sex Workers' Project at New York's Urban Justice Center, which examines the quality-of-life issues, as well as the impact of law-enforcement approaches, on New York's population of sex workers. The study includes interviews with the employees of brothels, escort agencies, dungeons, and private clubs. Unlike the women writing memoirs and selling movie rights, these workers are ethnically diverse, and include men and transgendered persons. Some are getting by well enough financially, although 67 percent of respondents are members of the working poor who turned to sex work because they couldn't earn a living wage anywhere else. Forty-six percent of these workers have experienced violence in the course of their work, and 42 percent have been threatened or beaten for being a sex worker. Forty percent are illegal immigrants, and 8 percent have been forcibly trafficked into the country for prostitution. This survey did not even include the statistics of streetwalkers, of whom 80 percent are raped an average of 8 to 10 times per year. (Another study shows that 78 percent of the prostitutes surveyed were raped 16 times a year by pimps and 33 by johns.)

Far more people will thrill to the hijinks of* Diary of a Married Call Girl *than will pick up a sex-work study.

Truly, these statistics are far less seductive a read than Quan's *Sex and the City* knockoffs, whose impeccably groomed escorts trot back and forth from the Waldorf to their Upper East Side apartments, with an occasional stop into Barneys or Bloomingdale's. Perhaps if these new bourgeois sex workers took further advantage of the spotlight, and chose to shine it on the starker lives of the vast majority of their industry colleagues, or chose to endorse the sex-worker activist movement rather than name-brand designers and media magnates, a broader concept of sex-industry reality might begin to grow in the public consciousness.

I'm the first to say I'm part of the problem. And though the fact that I earn my living in what has long been the province of a working-class (if not poverty-stricken) demographic isn't *(Continued on page 94)*

The term "sex worker" means different things to different people, but it often means something extreme—glamorous high-priced escort at one end, desperate crack-addicted streetwalker at the other. Among feminists, perceptions are no less polarized—sex workers are either fully empowered agents using their sexuality in unassailably positive ways, or victims of a job that degrades them by its very nature. Most feminist dialogues about sex work sound more like monologues; defensiveness, mischaracterizations, and willful ignorance abound, making casualties of complexity and nuance. Until recently, few publications—feminist or otherwise—have tried to grapple with these issues and move the debate forward. Enter *$pread*, which published its first issue in the spring of 2005 with the subtitle "illuminating the sex industry."

$pread was created by a small group of women with little more than a great idea, a provocative title, and a desire to speak up. Founders Rebecca Lynn and Rachel Aimee were frustrated that discussions of sex work are too often academic and disconnected from most workers' lives and from the general public's consciousness; their aim was to create a forum for sex workers to speak for themselves, build a community, and work to destigmatize their industry. With no experience in the publishing world and little money to get the project off the ground, Rebecca and Rachel, along with a small group of volunteers, have made it this far on their own commitment and determination.

In the first five issues, *$pread* has covered an impressive array of topics: prostitution laws in various countries, racism in the porn industry, HIV and trans women sex workers, and mothers in sex work. They also publish sex-industry news from around the world and interviews with well-known folks in the industry, like Carol Queen, Michelle Tea, and Rich Merritt.

Though all the *$pread* ladies call themselves feminists, the magazine is not billed as a feminist project. Which is understandable, in a way: Feminism, like sex work, means different things to different people (and, like sex work, it often provokes

Knowledge

Talking labor with sex work magazine *$PREAD*

Interview by Debbie Rasmussen

strong reactions, however ill-informed). And different branches of feminism have not always done well by sex workers. On the other hand, what could be more progressive—and potentially radical—than a proud articulation of the connection that should exist between the fight for a sex workers' rights movement and feminism? After all, feminism at its best focuses on the working conditions of women and other oppressed groups, and how the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and other identities shape our lives—all of which are issues of paramount importance in the lives of many sex workers.

But this could simply be a question of idealism vs. pragmatism—and *$pread* is ultimately practical. The magazine's editors and writers are working in the murky area where the limitations of theory meet the real world of complicated choices. With any luck, as more self-identified feminists realize the importance of supporting a sex workers' rights movement—regardless of their own feelings about the nature of sex work itself—the movement will admit more complex perspectives on the topic. Then, perhaps, magazines like *$pread* will be able to let their feminist flags fly without fear of alienating a healthy chunk of their audience.

To get some perspective on these issues and more, *Bitch* chatted with *$pread* founders/editors Rachel Lynn and Rebecca Aimee and editors Audacia Ray and Eliyanna Kaiser about the possibilities of worker organizing, why anything resembling an actual sex workers' rights movement is still far off, and that oh-so-complicated F-word.

So, to lay it out: What are the primary labor issues affecting sex workers?

Rachel: The primary issue for prostitutes (including private call girls, streetwalkers, agency escorts, etc.) is the fact that prostitution is illegal in this country. The fear of being arrested makes everything more dangerous. If your job is illegal in the first place, you can't call the police if you get beaten up or raped by a client. For strippers, there's the issue of exploitation by managers, because it's now become the norm for strip clubs to charge strippers a house fee in order to work. Strippers often end up paying out over half their tips to the house, or even going home in debt, because in some places the house fees are so high.

Sex-industry workplaces tend to be more exploitative than most workplaces, mainly because even the legal industries are still usually run in a somewhat under-the-table manner, with workers getting paid in cash and many workers not having legal work permits. The managers can get away with more because they're not regulated. Most sex workers don't have contracts, so they can be fired anytime; they don't get sick pay, paid vacation time, health insurance, etc. But this is a very tricky issue, because many sex workers would prefer to take their chances in a semi-legal, unregulated, exploitative business environment where they can make money off the books, not have to pay taxes, have a flexible schedule, take vacation time whenever they want, etc., rather than be tied down in a 9-to-5 job, even if it means forfeiting the benefits. So when people talk about wanting to unionize and regulate the sex industry, that's not necessarily what the majority of sex workers want. There are even some prostitutes who don't want their work to be decriminalized because they're concerned about what the change would mean.

There's no one ideal solution to any of these problems, which is why *$pread* doesn't advocate for particular action to be taken on any of these issues. We just want sex workers to be able to speak for themselves.

What are some of the successes of the sex workers' rights movement over the past few decades?

Audacia: Though in some ways I'm conflicted about it, I do think that the mainstream attention to and increasing acceptance of sex workers as part of the culture at large is a success. [But] there's such a long way to go before we can really say that there is a strong nationwide sex workers' rights movement. We're not yet at the point where there is lots of labor activism and government lobbying happening; hopefully that will come in the next few decades.

The workers at San Francisco's Lusty Lady peep show were famously the first—and possibly only—sex workers to try and unionize. Is it still the only unionized sex-industry workplace? Have there been any other recent organizing attempts?

Eliyanna: The Lusty Lady became part of SEIU Local 790 after a 1997 organizing drive. In 2005, it became a worker-owned cooperative. As far as I know, it's still the only unionized sex-trade establishment in the country. The IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] has a sex worker local, but it's not a union in the real sense of the word.

It's important to remember that the Lusty Lady wasn't the first sex worker union. In the old west, many brothels were unionized by the more established local girls to fix pricing so that immigrants from Europe wouldn't hurt their market. Also, throughout the 1990s and this decade, there has been union organizing happening pretty consistently all over the country, most recently in Las Vegas. It's pretty much limited to dancers on the West Coast and in Nevada. And while it has been unsuccessful, the act of organizing is important to the future capacity of others to succeed.

I'm sure there are other pieces of history that I'm missing, but there's no really solid source for this part of labor history.

Is sex work considered a legitimate locus of organizing within the labor movement? Do existing labor unions want to be aligned with the sex industry?

Eliyanna: The U.S. labor movement isn't working to unionize sex workers; that's just the reality. And it's not because union leaders or staff aren't progressive enough, although that might also be true in some cases. *$pread* editors are split on this, but it's my belief that there is no [organized] sex workers' rights movement in the United States. And until sex workers have achieved a minimum of self-organization, there is no reason why the mainstream labor movement should be expected to lift a finger to do that work for us.

It's also possible that some parts of the sex industry in particular geographic regions will be ready for mainstream organizing campaigns sooner than others. I'm thinking about strippers and porn actors, particularly on the West Coast, who have more significant institutions and networks and local sympathy. But self-organization is a prerequisite.

When I interviewed [labor movement veteran] Bill Fletcher Jr. for *$pread*, the main issue that he raised was morality. And there's no point in underemphasizing the role that morality plays in how sex workers are able to work with other movements. Until sex workers can achieve a broad consensus for our rights—at least in the progressive left—it's silly to think we will be able to do anything significant to achieve real change. Movements are not comprised of their constituents. They are dynamic coalitions that require that the affected constituency is talking to others who have found common cause in struggle. Workers in the labor movement don't look at sex workers right now and see their mirror image. This is our challenge, and it starts with organizing ourselves to talk about these issues.

Are other countries having better success at mobilizing a sex workers' rights movement?

Eliyanna: Just about every industrialized country is ahead of us. The DMSC [Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee] in Calcutta—now that's a real union! They have real political power and are able to negotiate for their membership. The Dutch Red Thread union in Amsterdam is also an impressive example. There are strippers' unions in Canada. Australia has prostitutes' unions.

Almost every industrialized country has some form of decriminalization of prostitution or is seriously considering that step. The United States, meanwhile, is making NGOs sign pledges not to work with prostitutes in order to get AIDS money. We're so backward. And the reason is moral conservatism.

Much of the debate about sex work tends to focus on legislation against pornography and trafficking. What should people know about these types of legislative attempts?

There's no point in underestimating the role that morality plays in how sex workers are able to work with other movements.

Above: The *$pread* ladies (from left, Rebecca Lynn, Rachel Aimee, Erin Siegal, and Eliyanna Kaiser) take the cake. Left: Editor-in-chief Rebecca Lynn and outreach coordinator Kevicha Echols.

Audacia: Antiporn and antitrafficking legislation is often misguided because the laws aim for people's gut reactions. Of course exploitation and sexual slavery are bad things that we should all work against; however, not all workers in the industry are exploited or enslaved in the ways that some people would have us believe, and those who are exploited are exploited in a broader context of labor issues that expand beyond sex and are linked to class, race, language, immigration status, and gender differences.

It's frustrating that debates about sex workers' rights too often get reduced to the "is it exploitation or empowerment?" question. How can we move people beyond that?

Rachel: There's a misconception about the sex workers' rights movement that it's all about how sex work is empowering, whereas in fact many sex worker activists find that an annoying or at least mostly irrelevant argument. If sex work is empowering, it's generally in that it allows people to make more money than they would otherwise be able to make and therefore raise their living standards. I don't think many sex workers find the act of sex work empowering in itself. *$pread* is trying to move beyond the simplistic debate by presenting a whole range of sex workers' experiences, from the positive to the negative and everything in between. I think the most useful way to frame the debate is in terms of choice: Do you believe people should be able to choose what they do with their own bodies?

Audacia: I think that the empowerment-vs.-exploitation debate is a good one to keep having. Polarizing those issues is not so helpful, but it's a useful framework, because it's the way that people get introduced to these concepts. But what's really important is to listen to the variety of experiences that sex workers have—it doesn't make for good soundbites, but it's important to see the various perspectives. It's okay to be muddled about it, to not be able to say "It's definitely a good thing" or "It's definitely a bad thing." For myself, I have different opinions on different days. [*Laughs.*]

Sex workers can have a difficult time voicing their opinions because generally [other] people come at this issue with their minds made up, and that can be really threatening when it's your life. It's tough to have people shake their finger at you and tell you what you're feeling.

I've always identified as a feminist, and to deal with feminism from the perspective of being a sex worker has been really jarring to me. Right when I started working on *$pread*, the *Village Voice* had a piece about me and someone else, about our lives as sex workers, and it got picked up by the blog Feministing. The comments that people left about us almost made me cry. It was awful because I read that site religiously—I mean, these are my people. And getting these reactions made me realize these are not my people; they hate me.

Sex—whether commercial or not—is an emotional issue. It's a really challenging thing to talk about. When you talk about sex, people assume that you're talking about them, or that you're talking about sex for all women. And it's just not the case. But those reactions come from it being such a personal thing.

Are we anywhere near mobilizing a sex workers' rights movement in the U.S.?

Audacia: One of the biggest obstacles to mobilizing sex workers is the fact that many sex workers don't willingly and publicly identify themselves as a part of the industry, and many sex workers either drift in and out of the industry or are in it for a very brief time period. Long-term careers in the industry are rare—people often take what they can and then move on. As a result of the stigma and short working careers, many workers don't feel committed to advocating for change.

When you talk about sex, people assume that you're talking about them, and that's just not the case.

[But] I see it happening, and the people who I see doing this work are really passionate about it and really supportive of each other. I think the basic groundwork definitely exists. But a variety of things need to happen, and honestly probably one of them is that something bad needs to happen. Bad things tend to mobilize people, for better or worse.

Let's talk about the class divide between people who see sex work as an experiment or a performance or a job they're curious about, and people who see it as a financial necessity. How does *$pread* try to bridge this divide?

Rachel: Class plays a huge role in the sex industry, for a start because it has such an explicit effect on the amount of money you can make. Things like class, race, thinness, etc. that affect how easy or difficult it is for people to get ahead in real life are made extra explicit in the sex industry, because the amount of money you can make, or the places you can get hired to work, are so baldly based on those things. So class becomes something that is openly talked about in the sex industry in a way that people tend to avoid [elsewhere].

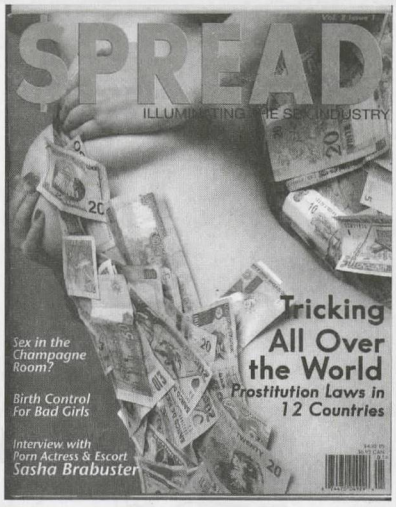
But in terms of a divide, I think it's more of a gradient than a divide. There are certainly people who are working in the industry because they have very few options other than sex work. I also think, though, that almost all sex workers do it for the money. The idea that the ones with college degrees are doing it as an experiment or performance is really a myth, or at least it's very rare. The mainstream media likes to play up that angle because it's more acceptable and titillating, and less political than talking about exploitation and workers' rights.

How do you see generational differences playing out in these debates?

Rachel: I definitely think that feminism has evolved a lot over the last few decades, partly as a result of [the movement] becoming more diverse and inclusive of different perspectives, rather than being mainly led by white, middle-class women who assume that what's best for them is best for all women.

A lot of younger feminists are more open to the idea of sex work as a choice and see it as a complex issue, whereas old-school feminists often tend to see the whole debate in very black-and-white terms, with sex work as something that is a result of a patriarchal culture and therefore inherently degrading and exploitative. If you're in that mind-set where sex work is degrading to women, sex workers become symbols of something negative, and it's difficult to see beyond that and actually conceive of sex workers as people with agency. But I don't want to generalize and suggest that all older feminists don't get it or that all younger feminists are supportive of sex workers' rights, because that's definitely not the case.

Rebecca: All of us who started the magazine are from a younger group of activists, and I think some of the older sex work activists were skeptical [of us]—in part because we're younger and in part because we're on the East Coast (most sex work activism has taken place on the West Coast). There's a handful of people who've been



around this movement for a long time, and their focus tends to be more pro–sex work activism. We take more of a neutral stance on sex work, try to avoid saying whether it's good or bad; we support sex workers' rights rather than the sex industry itself. But really, I doubt that our philosophies are that different [from theirs], and they've been super supportive.

But it does seem like a lot of activism around sex work promotes the idea of sex positivity. If true sex positivity were to become a reality, would there be a sex industry?

Audacia: I do think that a lot of sex work activists promote sex positivity, but I also think that the dialogue around sex work is becoming increasingly complex. In the 1970s and 1980s, the two contrasting opinions on the sex industry were "It's exploitative!" and "It's liberating!" Today I think there's an increasing sense of ambivalence about [what to think]. If true sex positivity became a reality, I think that the sex industry would definitely still exist, though the shape of it would certainly change—sexual services might be treated more as an acceptable luxury, and maybe more women would become clients.

Sometimes *$pread* is critiqued for promoting and condoning the sex industry—but I think this is a misunderstanding of the magazine. Really, we are very much critical of the industry—though at the same time we think it's possible to be involved in an industry and be critical of it, even conflicted about it, and we promote this discussion—not the industry as a whole.

You stated in one editors' letter that "the editors of this seemingly controversial new publication tend to define ourselves as feminists." Yet I get the impression that there's an effort to avoid calling the magazine itself feminist—which is understandable if the concern is not turning certain potential readers off. But isn't organizing for sex workers' rights by definition a feminist project?

Rachel: All the editors at *$pread* identify as feminists, and for us advocating for sex workers' rights is an inherently feminist project, but we don't specifically label *$pread* a feminist magazine because we want to be inclusive of all sex workers, and not all sex workers define themselves as feminists. In fact, some specifically define themselves as not feminists!

What are your hopes for the future of the industry—and the magazine?

Audacia: *$pread* strives for a world in which the lives of sex workers are self-determined. I hope to see more sex workers harness their earning potential and understand the power that they have to question and change the ways that different sectors of the industry operate, while making healthy decisions about their needs.

Rachel: One of our main goals for improving the magazine is to make it more diverse and representative of different perspectives. It's not surprising [that] the majority of submissions we receive are from more privileged sex workers, because they're the ones who have free time to surf the net and find out about sex worker activism, or to sit down and write an article. Sex workers who are single parents, or working on the streets, or taking a lot of drugs are less likely to have the time and resources to seek us out and write for us. So one of our immediate goals is to get *$pread* out to more sex workers, through donating magazines to outreach organizations and sex-industry workplaces, so that the magazine isn't only reaching those who have the time and resources to seek it out themselves. Hopefully that will be reflected by an increased diversity of perspectives in the magazine over time. We are very much about starting an open dialogue about all aspects of sex work, rather than trying to put forward a particular perspective.

Find out more about *$pread* at www.spreadmagazine.org. Debbie Rasmussen is the publisher of *Bitch*.

Kicking *and Shrugging*

Why We Resist Self-Defense

I DELIVER FULL-IMPACT SELF-DEFENSE TRAINING—THE KIND WHERE WE ROLE-PLAY TYPICAL ATTACKS against women and hit the guys (they're fully padded) for real. Though my teaching partners and I work with kids and adults from a variety of socioeconomic brackets, our main gigs are at girls' private schools. The commutes are long and the classes tend to be short, which diminishes the hourly pay rate significantly. But I find the experience of bringing self-defense training to girls in grades 3 through 12 so politically radical and rewarding, so pure a manifestation of my fantasies, that it borders on science fiction. I only have to squint to see—among the rows of 10-year-old girls stepping forward in unison and yelling "NO!" as they drill a front counterattack—potential Slayers, Storms, Rogues, and Mystiques, crouching tigers and hidden dragons.

Teaching 10-year-olds to fight is almost easy. Teaching teenage girls is much more difficult. Carol Gilligan's observations about teen girls' backsliding self-esteem play out with painful predictability. At age 10, the girls are warriors; by 14, many of them are duds. They file into the classroom, typically used for drama rehearsals, looking wary and bored. They lower their heads and slouch their shoulders. Even those a whole head taller than I am manage to look up at me through long hair falling forward out of headbands and breaking free from elastics.

In ninth grade, they wear less makeup than I did at their age, but show more leg on account of the private-school uniform: a gray, pleated skirt—formal only in theory and yet just as trashy as can be once the girls have folded it up one, two, three times at the waist until it hangs mere inches below their butts. This creates a problem when they try to sit without showing their underwear. While they tug at the skirts' edges, which are suddenly made of too little fabric to provide adequate cover, I notice thick, chubby legs, long, scrawny legs, lean, muscled up-to-there legs. Years ago, I would have seen only the bared skin of schoolgirls, and it would have caused me to worry. Now, I see weapons, and it's good.

By Anastasia Higginbotham

Illustrations by Kiersten Essenpreis

Many will ignore my instruction to form a seated circle, frequently disrupt class, and roll their eyes before I've said a word. As predominantly rich, white, well-socialized girls, they are undoubtedly, as their school's website suggests, "the leaders of tomorrow." But I'm not looking to inspire the kind of power that gets them into Ivy League colleges. I just don't want them to get raped, ever. I don't know how much they know already—or how much they want to know—about sex, violence, and the ugly commingling of the two.

Their wariness at taking the class does not necessarily mean they don't want to learn how to fight. At this age, it mostly means they don't want their classmates to see them learn how to fight. Whether they do it well or poorly is hardly the issue, since either could bring negative social consequences. They fear coming across as too strong just as much as they fear being seen as weak. By design and definition, realistic attack scenarios loosen a girl's grip. The dread she feels upon seeing my male colleague and me in her classroom rises in proportion to how much effort is required for her to maintain her image in front of her peers. When a guy wearing a giant helmet, football jersey, shoulder pads, and diaper-shaped groin protector under his pants grabs you from behind and pulls you to the ground, it's difficult to keep your composure. Those who don't erupt in a fit of nervous laughter may blush beet red and become enraged by the emotional overload. This is not what they were looking forward to as they headed off to school today.

Which brings us to another reason that adolescent girls are wary of this training: context. No girl wants to be reminded of her vulnerability to any kind of attack—least of all rape and sexual assault. But adrenalized fights are a tough sell at any age, and it's not just girls who need convincing. In spite of a cultural shift in recent years where women's heroism is glorified on TV and in the movies (even kids' movies, such as *Shrek* and *The Incredibles*, abandon the notion that a woman would arrive on the scene with no fighting skills of her own), women of all ages continue to resist, avoid, and ridicule this training.

The rate of crimes against women and girls being what it is, this intrigues me. According to the United States Department of Justice statistics, about 44 percent of rape victims are under age 18, and 80 percent are under age 30. Women who were raped or abused in girlhood are twice as likely as those with no prior sexual-assault history to be raped in college, and girls and women aged 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rates of violence by someone they know. Though the overall crime rate is down nationwide—since 1993, rape and sexual-assault rates have fallen by more than half—Department of Justice estimates for the year 2003–2004 put the number of victims of rape, attempted rape, and sexual assault at 204,370. Nearly two-thirds of these crimes were committed by men the victims knew. When women are attacked by a stranger, about 10 percent of those assailants present a weapon. Half choose guns, half choose knives, and their goal typically is not to kill their victims, but to scare them so badly they don't dare fight back.

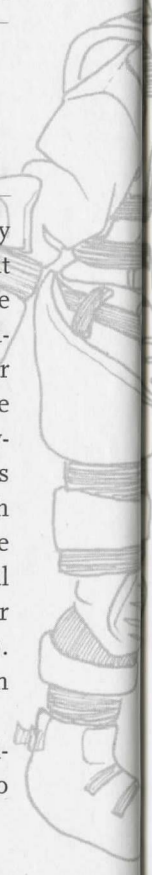
For the majority of women and girls just trying to live our lives, it comes down to this: When we are raped, it's usually by men or boys we know who are so confident in their ability to overpower us, they don't even think they need a weapon. As insulting and depressing as that sounds, there is hope: This is an enemy we can beat.

LIKE SO MANY THINGS MIGHTILY FEMINIST, adrenaline-based personal-safety training for women was developed in the 1970s. Its founders, most of them martial artists, aimed to address the fact that martial arts as a mode of self-defense for women is highly impractical. (Or, as the male instructors I work with put it, "No one bows to you before they attack you.") But the genius of what is officially called the IMPACT curriculum goes far beyond the fact that "you hit the guys for real." It's grounded in four basic components: 1) the most common ways women are attacked (predatory-style, tricked, grabbed from behind, raped by our dates and other men we know); 2) how we're built (strength concentrated in our hips and thighs); 3) how we're socialized to behave (stupidly); and 4) the physiological effects of fear and trauma (adrenaline obstructs clear thinking and acting but can be managed, with practice). Today, women can train in this system of self-defense in cities around the country.

It took me five years of knowing that there was a full-impact self-defense class in my city before I decided to

NO GIRL WANTS TO BE REMINDED OF HER VULNERABILITY

to any kind of attack—least of all rape and sexual assault.



sign up. I was already plagued by misery and self-loathing at having endured abuse in my relationships and sex life. The thought that I might be raped "for real" or by another brilliantly coercive boyfriend left me in a paralyzing rage: The last thing I wanted was to have my fears dramatized (and my anger unleashed) in a class that uses realistic scenarios to trigger an adrenaline rush, approximating what one might feel during an actual attack. I rejected the idea that the solution to my suffering was to pay some guy to call me names until he let me knee him in the groin.

Women I talk to about self-defense training echo these reasons for avoiding it. They're all too aware that they might be targeted as crime victims. They walk around all day knowing it, step onto elevators with men knowing it, join their friends for drinks knowing it, go to bed with a man knowing it, and wake up in the morning still fucking knowing it. Why should they pay $495 to have someone manifest that awareness by pinning them to some blue mats, talking all kinds of trash, and daring them into a fight?

"If I get raped, I'll deal with it and move on," a woman said to me recently when the subject of my work came up. But I'm determined not to be raped. I don't think any of us should have to deal with it and move on: Raising awareness and publishing bleak statistics keeps people informed, but it fails to stop men who commit rape from raping us. Wonderful therapists who help us heal do not stop men who already raped us from getting away with it. The only thing that stops the rapist from raping us is when the girl or woman he has chosen physically prevents him from raping her, either by flight or by fight. Rather than prepare to deal with a completed rape and move on, why not prepare to defeat the person who may attempt to rape us and move on?

Many women I've talked to feel that they are too angry to take the course. They imagine they will explode if they so much as lock eyes with their own anger and could kill somebody if given half the chance. Some worry it will make them too sad—unable to buy groceries, pay bills, go to work, and be nice to their loved ones. They can't afford to feel that way right now, or ever. Others expect it to be too self-helpy—an intolerable 20 hours of witnessing other women break down and tell their horrible stories about being molested by their fathers or uncles and raped in the upstairs bedroom at a high-school party while all their friends were having a ball not 15 feet away. In truth, there are often tears in the class—some from rage, some from despair. But if ever there were an example of "less talk, more action," an adrenalized, full-impact self-defense class is it.

THE PURPOSE IS TO TRAIN TO FIGHT, AND THERE is great fun to be had. The thrill of vengeance and promise of recovery are pleasant side effects. We can envision ourselves as Vampire Slayers, Charlie's Angels, or superstar badasses portrayed by Uma Thurman, Halle Berry, Ziyi Zhang, and Michelle Yeoh. What woman hasn't felt breathless with envy at the sight of Linda Hamilton advancing on her molten nemesis in *Terminator 2*?

And though it seems fantastical, what a woman takes away from the fantasy is a practical self-defense strategy and a set of skills imprinted on her muscle memory that are based on weapons, targets, and her body's innate intelligence and protective instincts.

These days, with such a fantastic array of superwomen in movies and TV shows, it surprises me that women aren't lined up to take a class that teaches real fighting to real women so we can defeat real bad guys. If we love watching women fight in the movies, what's not to love about watching women we know fight on the blue mats? There's the resistance to feeling our own anger, yes, and the sadness, of course, and the sickening thought of hearing too many incest stories. But I sense that some of what keeps intelligent, self-preserving women from taking advantage of this training is that it isn't sexy enough.

On superchicks like Uma Thurman, fighting is hot but it isn't real. We don't know anyone who can fight like she did in the *Kill Bill* flicks, or anyone who would need to. (Swords? Come on.) The downside to this reality check is that it sneaks into our daily lives and perceptions, into realms where a woman fighting for her right to not be raped or coerced is not so far-fetched. As common as rape and sexual assault are, we should all be emotionally and physically prepared, starting in girlhood, to deliver a series of pain-causing, disabling techniques. But at no point will these techniques ever include a spinning, flying back kick. There's no sexy outfit, no skipping up the side of a hut and floating over rooftops. The moves are basically: Get out from under him, hurt his head, hurt his testicles, repeat as necessary—not as easy as it sounds, but just as unglamorous.

Movies and comic books uphold this mythology of ordinary vs. extraordinary women. We are delighted to idolize female characters who are bionic, chosen, endowed, mutant, and heavily armed to defeat enemies great and small, robotic and extraterrestrial, diabolical and reptilian—but always with the stinging reminder that such power is fiction. Even when it's meant to be real, it's less believable. None of us are dropping into our abusive ex-husband's apartment through the skylight to surprise and kill him, as in the Jennifer Lopez domestic-abuse-payback movie *Enough*. Neither are we delivering

a punishing backward roundhouse kick to a bruiser college boy, as the mortal character Lana does on the sci-fi show *Smallville*, to avenge herself after a past encounter where he and his friends nearly attacked her. The sheer unreality of these real and unreal women exerting physical power distances us from our heroines. While we might allow ourselves to try on some superstrength for a sexy Halloween costume, we don't trust that we could adopt that powerful a stance in our everyday lives.

AT THE START OF EVERY CLASS, MY FELLOW instructors and I gird ourselves for the onslaught of "what-ifs": What if he's 300 pounds? What if he's drugged up and insane? What if he chokes me, ties me up, or blindfolds me? What if he puts me in his car and starts driving away? What if he has a gun? A knife? What if there's more than one person? What if I accidentally kill someone?

Every question wants a direct answer: Tell me what to do with my body and with his. Each also hides additional questions up its sleeves: What if I'm too scared to do this in the moment? What if I'm not strong or coordinated enough? What if I miss? What if he laughs at me and then rapes me anyway? What if you aren't teaching me the one thing I will need to know if I get attacked?

No self-defense or martial-arts course can guarantee that its graduates will never again confront a moment's trouble. Any of us may find ourselves in a situation where there appear to be no more options. The company I teach for covers a ton of ground by offering classes that deal with increasingly challenging and threatening situations: environmental what-ifs (what if I'm on the subway, in an elevator, blindfolded, in my bed?), weapons what-ifs (gun, knife, bat), and multiple-attacker what-ifs.

The skepticism that fuels students' questions also drives the material. It's an instructor's job to constantly test the moves and question the theories behind it. Students' hypothetical horror scenarios show they're thinking, invested, strategizing—except when this line of questioning serves only to delay actual learning. Often, women continue to resist what a class like this can offer even after they've shown up, by pursuing a steady stream of what-if questions. Consumed by what they don't know, they bat away opportunities to learn some simple techniques that could prevent a rape. The woman who founded the chapter that delivers this training in New

York City compares it to learning to swim: Does the fact that you know how to swim mean you will never be in danger of drowning? No. Is the solution, then, to not learn how to swim?

Let's look to our heroines again. In the first six seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy saves the world from five apocalypses, escapes from Hell, turns bullets into doves with a wave of her hand, and claws her way out of her own grave, among other feats. In season six, Buffy is almost raped by a distraught ex-boyfriend on the floor of her own bathroom. What stops him is not her Slayer strength. Instead, she pleads with him, begging and squirming for an agonizing and believable amount of time before managing to work her knee in under his chest and giving him an old-fashioned, no-frills shove across the room. It doesn't hurt him, but startles him enough to realize he is out of line. He's speechless for a moment, then apologizes. Normally, I would object to a scene like this for pandering to our culture's collective hard-on at seeing a woman we desire and respect overpowered sexually and disgraced. But it illustrates that a strong woman can still get raped by a man who is familiar to her and points to sizable psychological barriers women face as we dare to object violently to being raped—both on principle and in reality.

"I could never do that class," I've heard women say. They're not afraid of their anger, creeped out by other people's abuse histories, or looking for something a little more *Aeon Flux*-y. They just have trouble envisioning their own deft, perhaps even nonviolent, handling of an ordinary man who is behaving terribly. What would that even look like, in an ordinary woman who refuses to be raped (especially by a former lover!) and has trained to defend herself against it? We then make the tragic error of attributing our disbelief to reasonable skepticism. Rather than demonstrating how shrewd we are in not falling for some whacked, West Coast self-defense regimen, this skepticism betrays our profound fear that we will fail in any attempt to save ourselves from harm, "get ourselves" raped, and be exposed as the irrational fools our oppressors would like us to go on believing we are. Worse, if we've taken self-defense training, we fear will have no one to blame but ourselves (and the course) if our strategy doesn't work.

In this method of self-defense education, it has never been and will never be women's responsibility to stop men from raping us. That burden belongs to the man or boy who doesn't understand that what he's doing is rape (it's time he learned) and the one who sets out to commit rape. Like the feminism that drives it, this training offers options to women where historically our choices for dealing with an attempted rape have been abysmal. No more rape whistles, no more pepper spray rolling around in the bottom of our purses, no more time wasted wondering what we would do, or should've, could've, and wish we'd done. We don't choose to be selected as victims—not when we are girls, and not as grown women. We can choose to know more about our real-life enemies and our honest-to-god ability to beat them.

Even 14-year-old girls who resent our twisted scenarios and have never experienced a moment's trouble begin to get off on the permission we give them to fight back as hard as they can, with as much intensity and aggression as they can generate. They laugh after landing their first solid knee up and under a well-padded groin. They shriek at seeing their friends roar out a sidekick to the head. It only takes a few classes, a few thumps to the helmet or groin protector, for girls as overprotected as these to absorb what this training means. Rather than robbing them of their sex appeal and desire to have fun, it adds to it.

Even 14-year-old girls who resent our twisted scenarios get off on the permission we give them TO FIGHT BACK WITH AS MUCH INTENSITY AND AGGRESSION AS THEY CAN GENERATE.

After this shift has occurred in the room, it's safe to teach the hip toss—a move that can be done once forced penetration has already occurred—followed by a slam-grab-and-throttle to the testicles. "These belong to you now," I say to my students, not letting go of the handful of my colleague's black, oversized pants that I've gathered into my fist. I make a show of giving the implied testicles another extra-brutal tug, the way my female instructor once did for me. "He gave up his claim to this part of his body when he tried to overpower yours. You can do with these whatever you wish."

The girls groan and giggle into each other's hair. But one or two or three of them may blush and look back at me, right in the eyes. There is joy in this destructive power, they realize, and obviously freedom.

Anastasia Higginbotham is a freelance writer for social justice organizations and an instructor for Prepare, Inc.

SEEING RED

12 (OR SO) ANGRY WOMEN ON FILM

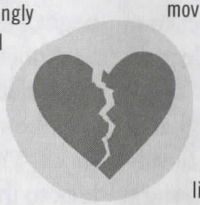
BY RACHEL FUDGE AND ANDI ZEISLER

OH, NO HE DIDN'T: A WOMAN SCORNED

THE MOVIE: *THE UPSIDE OF ANGER* (2005)

The spark: Comfortable suburban housewife and mother of four daughters Terry Wolfmayer finds her husband gone, and concludes that he's run off with his secretary to Sweden. Venomous anger is soon seeping from her very pores.

The flame: Terry immediately begins sleeping in, boozing it up, and bitching out various daughters in scenes that involve a lot of clenched fists, set jaws, and alarmingly prominent neck tendons. In between, she finds a drinking buddy and eventual lover in her neighbor Denny Davies, a faded former baseball star with a sports-radio show and a lot of free time.



The resolution: When she learns the shocking truth about her husband's disappearance, Terry has to wade back through months of bitterness and fury and learn to see herself as something other than a spurned wife.

Lessons learned: Don't jump to conclusions. Don't get so attached to your own version of events that you lose perspective. Don't drink before noon. Definitely don't name your daughter "Popeye."

Female-fury rating: 💔 💔 💔 💔

THE MOVIE: *DIARY OF A MAD BLACK WOMAN* (2005)

The spark: Loyal, long-suffering Helen is dumped by her philandering lawyer husband of 18 years; cad Charles hires a U-Haul to move Helen out and his mistress in.

The flame: Helen finds refuge with her gun-toting, chainsaw-wielding, foul-mouthed grandmother, Madea (played as a bewigged, fat-suited behemoth by male actor Tyler Perry). Turns out it isn't really Helen who's the mad black woman—Grandma is a different kind of mad, going all commando on Charles's house and bitching out his new ho.

The resolution: Implausibly, Charles redeems himself enough to be forgiven by Helen, who subsumes her own happiness under the guise of Christian charity and forgiveness.

Lessons learned: Any man can be redeemed—sadly, the same is not true for every movie. See also: *Waiting to Exhale*; *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman.*

Female-fury rating: 💔 💔 💔

THE MOVIE: *FATAL ATTRACTION* (1987)

The spark: When otherwise happily married everyman Dan tries to end his conscience-needling fling with sexy, successful, assertive Alex, she gets a little upset.

The flame: Okay, she goes nuts, stalking dan and his family, threatening to kill herself, claiming to be pregnant with his child, boiling his daughter's pet rabbit, kidnapping the daughter, and finally trying to murder his wife, Beth.

The resolution: Before attacking Beth with a butcher knife, Alex hacks away at herself a little bit (in case it wasn't already clear that she's crazy); Dan tries to drown her, then Beth shoots her dead, and the happy family is restored.

Lessons learned: Beware of assertive career women. Don't stray from the marital bed. Also, there's a fine line between a justifiably angry woman and one who's full-on batshit. See also: *The Crush*, *The Temp.*

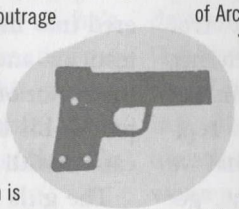
Female-fury rating: 💔 💔 💔 💔 💔

THE ACCIDENTAL VIGILANTE

THE MOVIE: *THELMA & LOUISE* (1991)

The spark: While Thelma's verbally abusive husband is the inspiration for the legendary road trip, it's her attempted rape that ignites pal Louise's already-smoking anger.

The flame: Rape survivor Louise shoots and kills the predatory Lothario, feeling no remorse. As the two hit the road, Thelma herself becomes increasingly pissed off at the routine mistreatment of women by men: From sexual harassment by a trucker to being seduced then swindled by sexy Brad Pitt, they respond to each new outrage with burgeoning confidence—and a growing rap sheet.



The resolution: Believing that there's no possibility of true justice for wronged women, despite the seemingly sympathetic detective on their trail, they make the famous cliff-dive, choosing to go down in flames rather than be judged by a male system.

Lessons learned: Even the good men can't keep women safe. A firearm is a lady's best friend. There's no legitimate place in the world for female outrage.

Hair-trigger rating: 🔫 🔫 🔫 🔫

THE MOVIE: *THE LEGEND OF BILLIE JEAN* (1985)

The spark: After a crew of teenage creeps destroy her younger brother's scooter, Billie Jean Davy goes to the cops, who dismiss her with a boys-will-be-boys attitude. Billie Jean takes matters into her own hands, asking ringleader Hubie Pyatt's father to make reparations, but the man tries to rape her—so brother Binx shoots him in the shoulder.

The flame: Knowing the cops really won't listen this time, the siblings and a couple friends hit the road, committing further petty offenses—in the service of self-protection—along the way. As word of Billie Jean's unfair persecution gets out, she becomes a local celeb, inspiring legions of teenage girls (and a few boys) to adopt both her Joan of Arc haircut and her mantra, "Fair is fair!"

The resolution: After an aborted rendezvous with Mr. Pyatt, Billie Jean and pals stage their own beachside confrontation—which results in financial restitution, if not the apology she sought, as well as the eminently satisfying literal destruction of Mr. Pyatt's reputation (and business).

Lessons learned: The kids are alright. In the adult world of law and order, sometimes the only way for a teen to get satisfaction is to do it herself—although it doesn't hurt to recruit an army of sympathetic teens, either.

Hair-trigger rating: 🔫 🔫 🔫

THE MOVIE: *FREEWAY* (1996)

The spark: As scrappy, semi-literate Red Riding Hood manqué Vanessa says, "I'm pissed off and the world owes me." Abused by her drug-addled mother's boyfriend,

failed by social services, and longing for a normal life, she heads north from L.A. to Sacramento to find her grandmother, packing little more than a gun.

The flame: After making the dire mistake of accepting dinner and a ride from Bob Wolverton, who in short order pervs out on Vanessa, reveals himself to be the notorious I-5 Killer, and tries to make her his next victim, Vanessa flies into a rage, eventually shooting Bob and leaving him for dead. (When a living but badly maimed Bob shows up at Vanessa's trial, she screams with delight, "Holy shit! Look who got beat with the ugly stick!")

The resolution: The jury doesn't believe her, so Vanessa is sent to juvie, where her rage continues to boil. As she breaks out, the detectives realize she was telling the truth. In a final showdown with Bob, Vanessa shoots him—just as the cops arrive.

Lessons learned: Empowerment doesn't always come through raised consciousness and feminist theory; sometimes a firearm is crucial. See also: *Ms. .45*; *Bandit Queen.*

Hair-trigger rating:

THE MOVIE: *9 TO 5* (1980)

The spark: A trio of female office workers commiserate about their unfair treatment by their "sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot" of a boss (and the patriarchal system in general), dreaming up fantasies of revenge—including murder. Wacky hijinks ensue when they think they've actually poisoned Hart, leading them to kidnap him to keep him from talking.

The flame: With Hart trussed up in his house, the ladies set about finding evidence of his corporate malfeasance—and restructuring the biz in a female-friendly sort of way. They also relish the opportunity to get a little payback, humiliating and tormenting Hart.

The resolution: A female-friendly workplace is also a corporate-friendly place: When the chairman of the board finds out what Hart has been up to, he cans him.

Lessons learned: Sisterhood is powerful. When women rise up in anger—at least in 1980—real change can happen.

Hair-trigger rating:

IF YOU'RE NOT OUTRAGED, YOU'RE NOT PAYING ATTENTION

THE MOVIE: *NORMA RAE* (1979)

The spark: Inspired by a speech by a New York labor activist, the never-before-political minimum-wage cotton-mill worker Norma Rae jumps into the effort to unionize her shop.

The flame: Dealing with stress on the home front (her husband thinks she's having an affair with the New York activist) and at work (management is doing everything it can to crush the nascent labor movement), Norma Rae reacts by getting even tougher.

The resolution: Thanks to the impassioned efforts of Norma Rae, the workers shut down the mill, and the union is victorious.

Lessons learned: A woman's place is in her union.

Outrage rating:

THE MOVIE: *NORTH COUNTRY* (2005)

The spark: During the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings, single mom Josie needs to support her family, so she applies for a job at the iron mine, which, under duress, has reluctantly begun to hire a few women. She quickly learns to handle the work, but won't ignore the extreme sexual harassment bestowed on her and the other few female employees.

The flame: Unable to get the mining company to take her complaints seriously, and with the harassment getting increasingly violent and ugly, Josie tries to convince her fellow female employees to join her in a class-action lawsuit. She ultimately succeeds, but then finds herself—and her sexual history—on trial.

The resolution: Even though she is forced, on the witness stand, to tell the story of her own high-school rape, Josie is vindicated when the judge agrees to certify her lawsuit.

Lessons learned: Once again, sisterhood is powerful—and sometimes, so is the legal system. See also: *Erin Brockovich.*

Outrage rating:

WOMEN PAST THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

THE MOVIE: *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* (1991)

The spark: Insecure, overweight, fortysomething surrendered wife Evelyn providentially befriends an elderly woman, who over the course of several months tells her the story of two young women she once knew who conquered abusive husbands and societal pressures. As the story unfolds, Evelyn is inspired to stand up to her husband, get a job, and become an all-around sort of female avenger.

The flame: With the battle cry "Towanda!," Evelyn famously tackles age discrimination: After two young women steal her parking space and tell her, "Face it, lady, we're younger and faster," she responds by ramming her car into theirs half a dozen times and retorting, "Face it, girls, I'm older and I have more insurance."

The resolution: Evelyn emerges triumphant and empowered.

Lessons learned: It's never too late to change your life. Also, judging by the film's success, in the early '90s middle-aged women were desperate for celluloid heroines.

Powder-keg rating:

THE MOVIE: *CARRIE* (1976)

The spark: Abused for years by her fundamentalist Christian mother, sheltered, naïve, social outcast Carrie White freaks out when she gets her first period; her classmates respond not-so-sympathetically by pelting her with tampons.

The flame: This latest round of humiliation sparks Carrie's latent telekinetic powers. Come prom time, the kids add insult to injury by arranging for her to be crowned prom queen—and ceremoniously drenched with pig's blood. Carrie taps into her telekinesis to burn down the school with the students trapped inside, then goes on to torch most of the town.

The resolution: Carrie's mom thinks her sinning offspring must be punished by death, but Carrie won't go down alone.

Lessons learned: Sex ed is really important. Don't play with matches, especially telekinetic ones.

Powder-keg rating:

THE MOVIES: *FRIENDS WITH MONEY* (2006); *LOVELY AND AMAZING* (2001)

The spark: Both female-ensemble movies feature one character with explosively unresolved anger. In *Lovely and Amazing*, it's Michelle, who can't sell her sculptures of little chairs and ends up lashing out at everyone around her. In *Friends With Money*, it's Jane, a well-known clothing designer who has stopped washing her hair and has become prone to fits of rage over being cut off in traffic and other everyday annoyances.

The flame: *Friends With Money*'s pivotal scene comes when Jane is hustled out of an Old Navy store after going ballistic on a couple who cut in line, and ends up breaking her nose in the process.

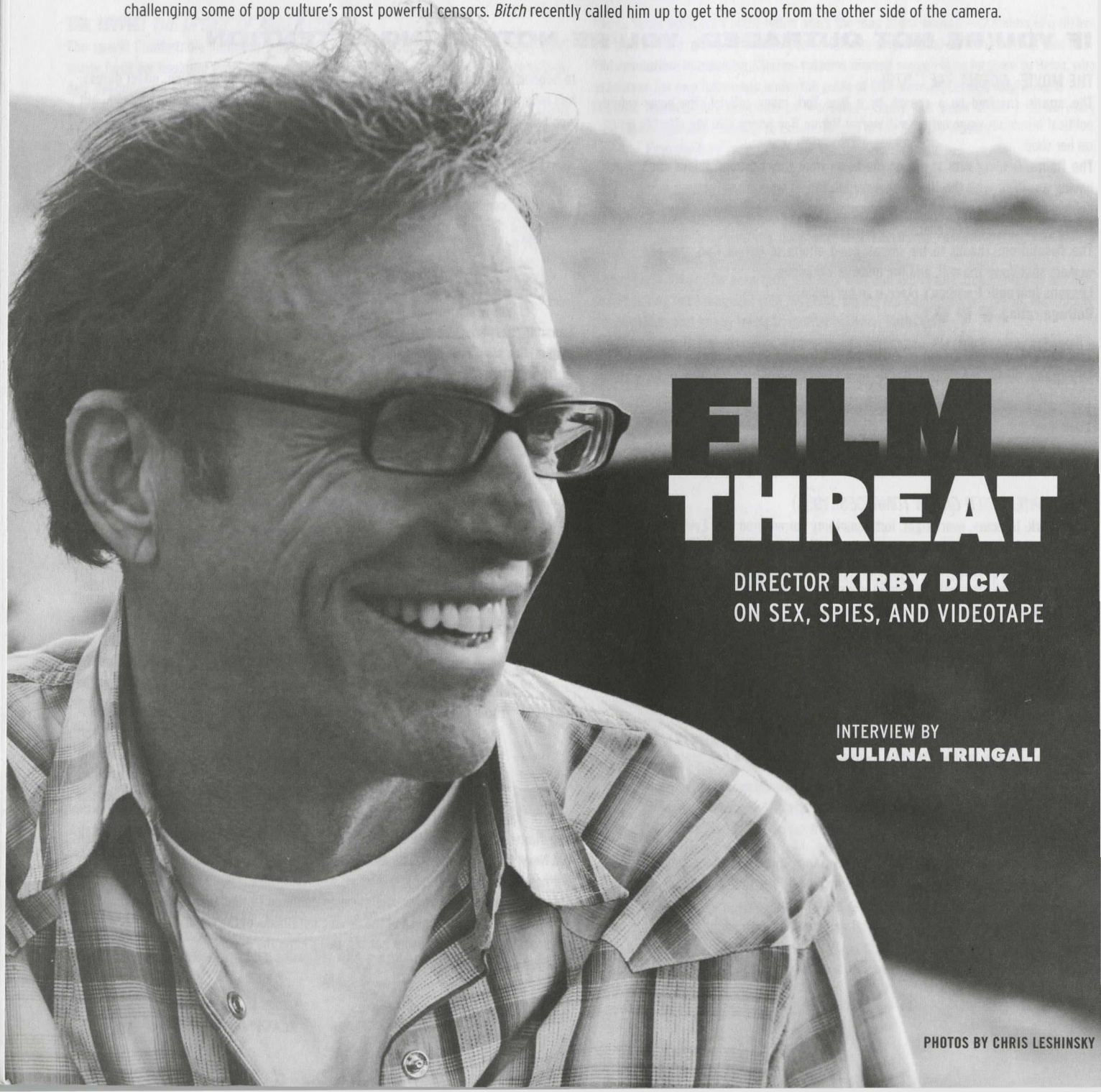
The resolution: None, really; both women continue to find themselves spilling over with irrational anger because of the cosmic unfairness of the world.

Lessons learned: Choose your battles. Don't jump the queue.

Powder-keg rating:

KIRBY DICK HAS NEVER BEEN SHY WHEN IT COMES TO THE SUBJECTS OF HIS DOCUMENTARIES. His 1997 debut, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, captured the famed performance artist with a moving mix of humor and discomfort. Four films later, 2005's *Twist of Faith* explored the issue of sexual molestation by Catholic priests through one man's experience—a poignant documentary that earned Dick an Academy Award nomination. But none of Dick's work has garnered nearly as much attention as his newest project, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*—and not just because of the standing ovation it received at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. The reason for the rumpus is that, for the most powerful organization in the film industry, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* is a major burn.

Dick spent a year researching the Motion Picture Association of America's secretive ratings system and the board behind it, working with a private investigator to uncover the identities of the raters, along with the complex and sometimes shocking mechanisms of their job. That mystery is the driving force behind the film, but the documentary also features interviews with some of independent film's most engaging directors (including Allison Anders, Kimberly Peirce, Kevin Smith, and the irrepressible John Waters) and plenty of insight from industry insiders and experts on what gets cut—not surprisingly, sex tops the list—and why. By the film's conclusion, Dick has revealed the MPAA's dirtiest little secrets, effectively challenging some of pop culture's most powerful censors. *Bitch* recently called him up to get the scoop from the other side of the camera.



FILM THREAT

DIRECTOR **KIRBY DICK** ON SEX, SPIES, AND VIDEOTAPE

INTERVIEW BY
JULIANA TRINGALI

PHOTOS BY CHRIS LESHINSKY

Was there a particular experience that inspired you to investigate the MPAA?

No. [But] this is something that I think there's a great deal of outrage about throughout the film community. I've seen this process play out for many years, where independent filmmakers seem to be on the receiving end of overly restrictive ratings that affect [both] their film and their box office, or they're forced to change their ratings to conform to the demands of their studios or investors. So it just got to a point where I wondered, Is there a film to be made here? If there was, it could have a great deal of impact, because it's about the film business and the film business would pay attention to it, and it could actually, perhaps, prompt some change. And so once I came up with the idea of [using] a private investigator to get behind this wall of secrecy that the MPAA ratings board has been able to hide behind, I realized that would be a good hook for the movie. The centerpiece was submitting what I had of the film to the ratings board—there was a real delicious kind of pleasure [*laughs*] in doing that, especially catching them unawares.

Was it difficult to get the film produced?

Initially, yes. Once I had the concept of the film—interviews with directors, following the private investigator as she went through her work to find out who the raters were, and [submitting] the whole film to the ratings board—I felt like it was going to work. And when I went out to pitch it to a number of places, they also felt like it was going to work. But they couldn't make the film because they were too closely associated with MPAA companies.

So it was finally IFC Films that came on board, and fortunately they're not owned by an MPAA signatory. And they've been completely supportive. Initially I had planned on showing how the MPAA impacts culture beyond the ratings board. I go into issues of their collusion with the Pentagon in terms of allowing the Pentagon to vet their films in such a way that it's favorable to the Pentagon, and in turn they get to use Defense Department equipment—aircraft, tanks, etc. So it's a tradeoff, but as a result, critical views of the military are getting censored. The whole issue around their intellectual property—obviously, that's become more and more of an issue. I wasn't sure how IFC was going to respond [to that], but they were completely behind it.

How would you respond to critics who call the film one-sided?

[*Laughs.*] You know, I suppose you could say there are two sides to this issue. But there has been so much criticism of this ratings board from so many arenas for so long. I mean, major critics. Major parent organizations. Major politicians. Filmmakers. Even a great deal of the public. And [the MPAA] has been completely unresponsive to it. So it's time, I think, that this kind of criticism be made public. They've gotten away with operating under the radar for so long.

One of the film's most revealing moments occurs when you present side-by-side comparisons of scenes showing female pleasure vs. male pleasure and gay sex vs. straight sex, the point being that these subjects are rated differently. What's at stake with these double standards?

Well, I have to say I was completely shocked by the homophobia that's built into the ratings system. It was really evident around Jamie Babbit's [film] *But I'm a Cheerleader*, where there's a shot of a girl masturbating, with her clothes on—and it's a very tame shot, but that [got] an NC-17 rating. And there's been many, many films with [male] masturbation scenes that are more explicit that have not gotten an NC-17. So there's definitely a double standard.

And it was interesting, because after *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* [premiered] at Sundance, Kori Bernards, who's a spokesperson for the MPAA, was asked about this double standard. And her response was, "We don't set the standards; we reflect them." Which I found pretty illuminating. Because it suggests that—well, let's put it this way: If the standards were racist, would [the MPAA] reflect those? If the standards were anti-Semitic, would they reflect those?

There are certain pressure groups that the MPAA does not want to rile up, because they want to be able to control the system without any interference from anyone. And obviously the Christian Right is part of those pressure groups, and [the MPAA] has chosen to buckle under to that kind of pressure, rather than to stand up and say, If we're going to have a ratings standard, we're not going to have a double standard; it's going to apply equally to gay and straight [sexuality].

Some of the more explicitly sexual scenes you cite are from the 1970s. I'm thinking specifically of Jane Fonda's orgasm in *Coming Home*, which came out in 1978, when the ratings board was relatively new. How have ratings standards changed in the past 30 years?

In the film, [former rater] Stephen Farber, and also Allison Anders, make the point that in the '70s the [MPAA wasn't] quite as strict on sexuality as they are now. In some ways that reflects a shift in culture, although you could easily argue that [our] culture has become more sexualized since the '70s. I think that what it reflects more is that the studios are less and less making films for adults, and therefore about adult sexuality, and more and more making films for adolescents, and trying to attract an adolescent audience by making the films more violent. That's one of the reasons the ratings have changed. Because in

FILM CENSORSHIP'S GREATEST HITS

Double standards have been part of American film censorship ever since it began with Will Hays's Production Code in 1930. Not only was the code clearly biased toward Christian values (it actually banned the portrayal of ministers as villains), it was puritanical in its views of adult life. All subjects that related to sex—especially female sexuality—ranked higher on the taboo scale than violence and crime. The rules of the Hays Code institutionalized sexism during American film's most formative years, and that sexism remains a common thread in contemporary film rating and censorship.

The Hays Code may have started the process, but many groups—from the NAACP to the Christian Coalition to the Anti-Smoking League—have found something to protest at the movie theater. Whatever our beliefs, we can still appreciate the potential of film to inspire public debate—a necessary companion to freedom of expression. So, in celebration of all kinds of controversy, here's a brief history of film's hot topics and the hassles that surrounded them.

—J.T.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION (1915): This dubious classic was years ahead of its time technologically, but its racial message was awfully crude, to say the least.
Allegedly Hot: Sympathetic depiction of lynching; all black men are shown as rapists and imbeciles; the Ku Klux Klan saves the day.
Bothered: The newly formed NAACP and disorganized rioters in many cities across the country. Nearly a century later, the film still generates scorn whenever it is screened in public.

BABY FACE (1933): Barbara Stanwyck unapologetically schemes, smartasses, and sleeps her way to the top in this code-challenging delight.
Allegedly Hot: Under the guiding principles of Nietzschean philosophy, a woman engages in premarital sex for material gain without suffering any negative consequences.
Bothered: The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America made an example of the film by replacing Nietzsche's writings with generic statements about right and wrong, and added a final scene to show that the heroine ended up penniless.

GONE WITH THE WIND (1939): David O. Selznick's Technicolor masterpiece purposefully contained a lot for censors to chew on in order to trade some cuts for others.

the past, when [studios] were making films more for adults, they would have wanted a more open ratings system, a system that was less restrictive of adult sexuality, because they would want to market [the films] unencumbered by ratings. Now what's happening is that most of the films they're making are much more violent, and those are the kinds of films they're letting through.

You and Becky Altringer, the private detective you hired, seemed almost gleeful as you discovered new information about the raters. Were there moments when you felt uneasy about your methods?

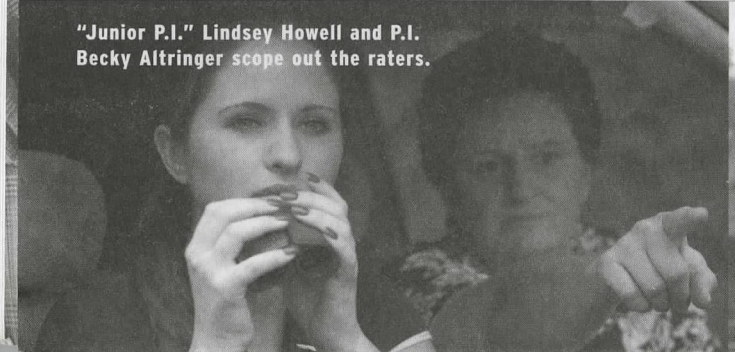
The job that the raters are doing is completely in the public interest. It's a very important job, and the public deserves to know who these people are. Now, the MPAA says that the reason the raters' names are kept secret is to protect them from influence. However, there are many positions in society—like school-board officials, judges, etc.—who make decisions every day subject to influence. Their names are public. And in fact, by keeping their names public, if there is influence going on, it's much easier to track it and put a stop to it.

The fact is that the people who would have a motivation to influence [the raters]—people within the studios—are the only people who actually know the raters' names. There are positions in each of the studios, usually postproduction supervisors, [whose] job is to guide a film through the ratings system. So these people develop relationships with people on the ratings board, over many years, and, you know, the studios are in a very good position to influence people if they choose to.

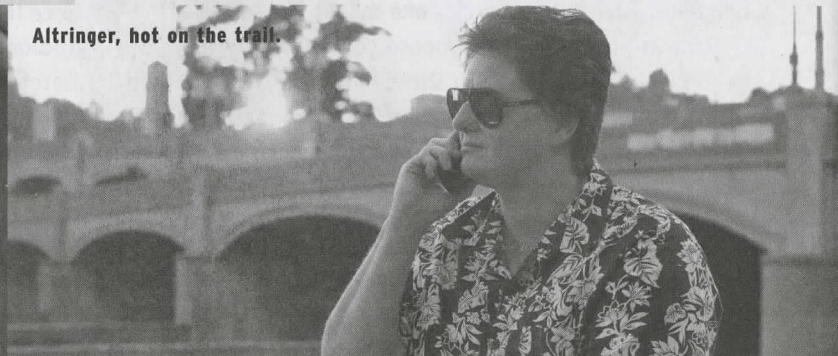
We didn't stalk [the raters]. All we did is find out who they were, and then go get a photo of them. Everything was done completely legally; we didn't harass them in any way. There was no need for us to. This is not about the raters themselves; it's about the way the system is set up, to keep the public from knowing what's going on, and to benefit the studios.

How did you find out about the ratings board making illegal copies of *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*?

Before I submitted the film, I called up the administration of the ratings board, and I said, "Can you assure me that there will be no copies made of this?" And they assured me, in writing, in e-mail, and on the phone, that



"Junior P.I." Lindsey Howell and P.I. Becky Altringer scope out the raters.



Altringer, hot on the trail.

not only would no copies be made, but that only the raters would see it. Well, I subsequently learned that an MPAA attorney had seen it. I learned that [MPAA president] Dan Glickman had seen it. So I called up Joan Graves, who at the time was the head of the ratings board, and I said, "Look, Dan Glickman's in Washington—have there been any copies made of the film?" And she kind of hemmed and hawed and said, "Not to my knowledge."

And then a few days later, I got a call from an MPAA attorney who said, "Look, Kirby, I have to tell you, we have made a copy of your film. But you don't have to worry, because it's safe in my vault." [*Laughs.*] I can tell you that wasn't reassuring. In a way I wasn't surprised, but on the other hand, there's such hypocrisy there. The MPAA has launched this huge antipiracy campaign, and on their website they define even one act of unauthorized duplication of material as piracy. And that's exactly what they did.

Did you anticipate the film being rated NC-17?

I did, yes. I mean, it includes scenes that were removed from [other] films to get them from an NC-17 to an R rating, so I wasn't surprised by that. The rating is consistent with the way they've rated other films; I don't think it was punitive.

One of the reasons we submitted the film to the ratings board was that the process is so secretive that we felt like the best way to find out what's going on is to send our own film through the process and document that. But they only saw the film up to the point that it was submitted, so the third act of the film was added on later.

The way it works is that once you're given a rating, you don't have to accept it—you can reject it and go unrated. It's going out unrated, [so] there will be some theaters that won't play it, and some newspapers that won't advertise it. But it's less of a problem to go out unrated than it is to go out with an NC-17 rating.

[With] the ratings board, nothing gets done in writing. Only the most basic procedural kind of scheduling gets done by e-mail; everything else is done verbally. So after we got our NC-17, I thought, Well, they told me I did, but don't I get some sort of written confirmation? Sure enough, about a month later, this envelope arrived with this little form that looked like it was originally printed up in 1980, with "NC-17" stamped on it. And so when Joan Graves called me up [after we appealed] the NC-17 rating, she said, "You also have to send back the form" [*laughs*]. I said, "We've had it framed! We're not sending it back."

At the end of the film, when we learn the identities of the ratings appeals board, it evokes the feeling of a conspiracy being uncovered. Would you care to elaborate on what it all means?

The entire ratings system is set up so that the MPAA

Allegedly Hot: Sexual innuendos between Rhett and Scarlett; a sympathetic portrayal of the prostitute Belle Watling; the repeated use of the N-word. Most bizarre hotness: Melanie's labor scene, which was forbidden under the code because it related to sex.
Bothered: Joe Breen, notorious hardass and longtime head of the Production Code Adminstration (PCA).

THE OUTLAW (1940): This pulpy Western lionized Billy the Kid and Doc Holliday and would have brought heat for lack of moralism, but Howard Hughes codirected and created a sensation with camera work alone.
Allegedly Hot: Jane Russell's scantily clad breasts.
Bothered: Breen again–he made a total of six cuts, including over 16 feet of film that showed the buxom Russell bending over in front of a mirror.

OUTRAGE (1950): Ida Lupino, one of Hollywood's first female writer-directors, wanted to explore the realities of rape, devoting most of the story to the main character's trauma and recovery. This would be one of few films of its time to depict rape as a crime and not a bizarre form of foreplay–under the code, seduction and rape were categorized together.
Allegedly Hot: Using the word "rape"; including a rape scene.
Bothered: PCA staff members, for whom Lupino replaced "rape" with "criminal assault" and "criminal attack," and had the attack occur off-camera.

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR (1961): In 1936, William Wyler had directed *These Three*, which was based on Lillian Hellman's play but without the lesbianism. He returned to the script 25 years later in hopes of creating a more loyal adaptation.
Allegedly Hot: Open criticism of homophobia and elliptical references to homosexuality.
Bothered: The PCA, but United Artists stuck to their guns, eventually winning a rare amendment to the code: "In keeping with the culture, the mores and the values of our time, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion and restraint."

LOLITA (1962): Because of the story's infamous May-December "romance," writer Vladimir Nabokov and director Stanley Kubrick faced an uphill battle to get the film produced.
Allegedly Hot: Lolita's age (12); copious sexual innuendos.
Bothered: Potential distributors. Nabokov and Kubrick cast Sue Lyon–a 13-year-old who looked 16–in the title role and wrote in references to high-school activities in order to suggest physical maturity and make the film more socially acceptable.

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? (1966): Mike Nichols's faithful adaptation of Edward Albee's hit play virtually destroyed what remained of the Hays Code's restrictions on language and sexual references.
Allegedly Hot: Nonstop drunken profanity.
Bothered: Jack Valenti, the new head of the PCA, who was inspired to develop an age-based ratings system; it went into effect two years later.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971): This Kubrick classic follows a criminal/gang rapist as he's brainwashed by a futuristic government in order to cure him of his violent streak.
Allegedly Hot: Supposedly inspired copycat crimes in the UK, including a rape to the tune of "Singin' in the Rain."
Bothered: Stanley Kubrick himself. He withdrew the film from UK circulation, and it was only released there on DVD after his death in 2001.

appeals process works primarily on precedent—to compare if the decision that's being appealed is consistent with other decisions that have been made and supported by the legal process.

I was also very surprised that there's two representatives from religious organizations on the appeals board, and one is a member of the clergy. That is something that I think very few people in the film business knew. Finally, from doing this research, [I know] that it's almost exclusively people from the film industry who are on the appeals board, but what surprised me when I showed [the film] at Sundance was that no one knew about them. Friends, people they worked with—no one knew that they were on the appeals board.

What effect do you hope this film will have on the ratings board and the way that audiences perceive it?

One of the things that's really unfortunate is that independent filmmakers and foreign filmmakers tend to make films [that are] more about adult subjects and therefore about sexuality. And those kinds of films are getting caught up in the ratings in such a way that their audiences are being limited. Look at a film like *The Dreamers*, by Bertolucci—he's a wonderful filmmaker, and he made a film without concern about what the rating would be. And as a result, you see sexuality being visually treated in a different way. A lot of people have complained that sex scenes in American films all look the same, and I think that's partially because of this ratings system.

The wider issue that I hope audiences pull from this is to look more critically at the American film business itself. It's a business that's as expert as it's ever been; it sells movies every day. And it's been able to spin its own industry in a very positive way and convince the public that what it's doing doesn't have any negative effects. I mean, it's a business. It's a pursuit of the bottom line, and the process of that pursuit is, oftentimes, not in society's best interests.

***This Film Is Not Yet Rated* opens September 1. For more information, see www.ifctv.com. Juliana Tringali is *Bitch*'s assistant editor.**

BASIC INSTINCT (1992): All the noise around the NC-17 rating (which was later changed to R) successfully diverted public attention from the feeble dialogue, contrived characters, and obvious ending of Paul Verhoeven's so-called thriller.
Allegedly Hot: Graphic crotch-flashing; portrayal of lesbian characters as crazed, man-hating, or homicidal.
Bothered: The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, who protested the movie even before it was released, prompting contrarian Camille Paglia to call this stinker her "favorite film."

KIDS (1995): This day-in-the-life portrayal of urban teens was released in both an NC-17 and R version to maximize distribution.
Allegedly Hot: Teen sex, drinking, and drug use.
Bothered: Disney, which discouraged Harvey and Max Weinstein of Miramax from taking on the the film. After seeing the final cut, the Weinsteins were moved to produce it with their own money.

AMERICAN PSYCHO (2000): Feminist director Mary Harron also wrote the screenplay to what had been thought an unfilmable and wildly anti-woman novel by Bret Easton Ellis.
Allegedly Hot: Fantasy three-way sex sequence; frequent sexual violence.
Bothered: The MPAA ratings board, which gave the film an R rating only after the ménage à trois scene (in which two women experience pleasure) was removed. Many feminist critics remained displeased with the excessive abuses of women that made the cut.

SECRETARY (2002): This brilliantly nuanced dark romantic-comedy about workplace submission and alternative sexuality has something for everyone...to be bothered by.
Allegedly Hot: S/M in the office.
Bothered: Feminist critics, who questioned the film's male = top / female = bottom dichotomy; secretaries, who challenged the film's tacit connecting of administrative assistance and masochism.

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST (2004): Mel Gibson's gory, Aramaic retelling of Christ's torture and crucifixion is considerered by many to be the most controversial film of all time.
Allegedly Hot: Anti-Semitism; pro-Catholicism; creative interpretation of the New Testament.
Bothered: The Jewish Anti-Defamation League; fundamentalist Protestant groups; biblical scholars; some atheist critics, including Christopher Hitchens and Howard Stern.

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CARNAL KNOWLEDGE (1971): Mike Nichols (are we sensing a pattern here?) directed this stark exploration of male sexual hypocrisy and misogyny.
Allegedly Hot: Sexually explicit dialogue and nudity, though no sex was actually shown onscreen.
Bothered: A court in Albany, Georgia, which slapped an obscenity charge on the film that was later overturned by the Supreme Court.

LAST TANGO IN PARIS (1972): This tale of a casual relationship featured some of the most explicit sex scenes of its time. It was considered by many to be the last X-rated art film and even earned Bernardo Bertolucci the Best Director Oscar.
Allegedly Hot: *Sodomie avec du beurre.*
Bothered: The Italian government, which revoked Bertolucci's civil rights for five years and sentenced him to four months in prison.

MANDINGO (1975): Like many blaxploitation films, this one was set in the pre-Civil War South, and reveled in defying the social standards of the 1970s status quo.
Allegedly Hot: Miscegenation, nudity, incest, infanticide, and racism.
Bothered: The Coalition Against Blaxploitation (including members of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Urban League), which used its media attention to quicken the demise of the genre by the late '70s.

THE COLOR PURPLE (1985): This rendition of Alice Walker's classic black feminist novel was suspect from the start because of its white male director, Steven Spielberg. The film was an ambiguous success, nominated for 11 Academy Awards but winning none.
Allegedly Hot: Lesbianism plotline replaced by platonic female bonding; domestic-abuse scenes injected with humorous battle-of-the-sexes banter.
Bothered: African-American civil rights leaders; feminist and gay and lesbian critics.

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST (1988): In the most controversial film of its time, director Martin Scorsese gave us a Jesus Christ who experiences human desire.
Allegedly Hot: Fantasy sequence in which Christ has marital sex with Mary Magdalene.
Bothered: Christian religious leaders, some of whom blasted the film in sermons; French Catholic fundamentalists, who tossed Molotov cocktails at a movie theater that was screening the film.

DO THE RIGHT THING (1989): Spike Lee's funny, tense, and heartbreaking tale of racial conflict in an urban microcosm features one of the most combustive endings in Hollywood history.
Allegedly Hot: Rioting; destruction of property.
Bothered: Movie reviewers, several of whom fretted in print that black audiences would be incited to riot. They weren't.

HENRY & JUNE (1990): This biographical telling of the relationships between Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller, and June Miller was as shocking for its controversy as its content.
Allegedly Hot: Lesbian sex scenes (the straight ones weren't a problem).
Bothered: The MPAA ratings board, which bestowed its very first NC-17 rating on the film.

can keep control of it and use it completely to its advantage. [Its] ratings board is [made up of] people who have no special qualifications—who have no training, even. These are people [who] are very easy to control.

And the MPAA has an appeals board that is staffed by people within the industry, mostly from within the MPAA or NATO [National Association of Theatre Owners]—the people who have created this whole system. And so, again, they can sway the way the board issues its decisions.

One of the really absurd things—and this isn't in the film—is that it requires a two-thirds vote to overturn [a rating decision]. The appeals board is the highest body in the ratings system, and it's absurd that even in cases where it's apparent to the majority of this body that the rating was wrong, they can keep the rating in place, just because of the kind of control they want to keep.

How would the rating system change if the individuals involved were held accountable for their decisions?

I don't know. What I would like to see is, first of all, the whole process be opened up, be transparent. So that we know who's on the board, we know how the decisions are being made, [we know] that there are written standards being developed through a professional process involving child psychologists and media experts, and that those kinds of people are also on the ratings board. If there was that kind of process, then the raters would be held accountable the way anyone would be, but they'd also have the stature and the tools to make the proper decisions.

What was the most surprising thing you learned during this process?

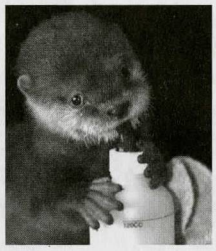
I was really surprised that all the filmmakers we interviewed who had gotten an NC-17 thought they [would get] an R rating when they submitted their films to the ratings board. That tells me that the MPAA has done absolutely nothing to get information out to the film community about what their standards are. In fact, they've done just the opposite. And course [that] works to the ratings board's advantage, because if there are no written standards, they can fudge films in whatever direction they want—certainly, they can go more lenient on studio films with violence if they want.

[My experience with] the appeals board was like going down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. There was so much absurdity around it. I couldn't bring an attorney of my choice to the appeals, even though the chair of the appeals board was an MPAA attorney. I couldn't use precedents. No filmmaker can. You can't say, "You gave an NC-17 for this shot [in my movie], but you gave five other films an R rating for exactly that same kind of shot." You cannot make that argument. They say it has to be evaluated solely on the movie that's being presented. Any other

thebitchlist

an annotated guide to some of our favorite things

Chloe O'Brian



Cute Overload

Graveyard Alive: A Zombie Nurse in Love

Action Packs (www.actionpacks.net). For beginning women's rights activists, it's not always clear where to begin: a march? volunteering? starting a newsletter? It's these upstarts whom April Billet targets with her handy spiral-bound activism kits. The one called "A Beginner's Guide to Ending Violence Against Women in the United States," for instance, features a legislative overview, tips on writing letters to state representatives, sample letter templates, website addresses, and dates to remember. (Who knew that January was National Stalking Awareness Month?) The second book in the series, on ending female genital mutilation, is just as easy to use, and with any luck there will be lots more to follow.
—ANDI ZEISLER

Chloe O'Brian. There are many things wrong with the Kiefer Sutherland vehicle *24* (among them a sickeningly high body count and a disturbingly cavalier attitude toward torture). But Fox gets one thing very right, and that's the character of Chloe O'Brian, senior analyst and all-around computer guru for the show's fictional Los Angeles counterterrorism unit. Yeah, she's a badass hacker, but more important, she's consistently churlish, cranky, and fed up. It's rare to find such an unrepentantly scowly female on TV, and even rarer to find one who isn't a villain (or labeled a bitch). Actor Mary Lynn Rajskub is a genius. —RACHEL FUDGE

Cute Overload (www.cuteoverload.com). Between working in the (often-dark) depths of the human psyche, fighting a developer who wants to colonize my small neighborhood, and following the shenanigans of the Bush administration, the ends of many days find me filled with cynicism and despair. That's when I turn to the good people at Cute Overload, who scour the web for images of animals that meet their exacting standards of cuteness. We're talking pictures of puppies, kittens, chicks, bunnies, hamsters, otters, frogs, two-toed tree sloths...hell, it's hard to find a baby animal of any species that is not exceedingly cute. Spending a minute gazing at a domesticated squirrel sleeping with a litter of tiny Papillon puppies returns me to my happy place. —BETH BERNSTEIN

East Broadway (Arclight Films). Grace (played by Fay Ann Lee, the film's director and producer) is a young woman from New York's Chinatown who's desperate to be part of high society. She poses as an heiress from Hong Kong and captures the heart of Andrew (Gale Harold)—a well-bred, gorgeous, and slightly tortured young man. What ensues is a refreshing twist on romantic-drama standards: Even the requisite "moment of truth" is edgy, incorporating the politics of sweatshop labor in Chinatown. As for the film's ending—well, let's just say the little feminist in you will jump up and cheer.
—LOOLWA KHAZZOOM

Getting Nowhere Faster (www.villavillacola.com). Skateboarders everywhere turn to skate videos for ideas and inspiration, but watching videos devoid of female presence can make us girls feel more like aspiring outsiders than inspired participants. Then there's *Getting Nowhere Faster*, made by and featuring a group of young, talented female skateboarders getting their groove on both on the board and off. The tricks are awesome, and the skaters' refusal to embrace feminine stereotypes is refreshing. The homespun subplot involving a Barbie, a cupcake, a cowboy, and a dance troupe may be a bit puerile, but it's got DIY charm. *Faster* is a much-needed resource for female skaters craving encouragement.
—KYLA WAGENER

Graveyard Alive: A Zombie Nurse in Love (Reaction Releasing). In the world of the horror flick, there's not much room for complicated female characters. (Anyone up for another Token Slut Who Gets Slashed After Sex?) There's not much ground broken for soulful zombies either. Enter the weirdly enchanting Patsy Powers. A socially awkward nurse bitten by one of the undead, Nurse Powers's subsequent transformation leads to her sexual awakening and a dilemma over morally ambiguous meat-eating that's campy and original. Directed by Montreal native Elza Kephart and originally released in 2003, *Graveyard* is retro-horror with a feminist twist. It finally comes to DVD this year.
—MICHELLE HUMPHREY

House. I first heard about this hospital mystery-

drama from a very eager PR person, and, because I'm contrary like that, only deigned to watch the advance tape when there was absolutely nothing on TV. Anyone who has seen this show knows how this petty little story ends: I'm now hopelessly addicted—and have likewise addicted the other member of my household—to the evolving story of a cranky, unethical, Vicodin-popping diagnostician and his trio of comely and beleaguered underlings, all of whom scramble every week to save a patient dying of some completely esoteric (and invariably stomach-turning) condition. Hugh Laurie is way too watchable as the limping, moody, and—believe it—scorchingly sexy Dr. House. —A.Z.

Lee Miller. We might be shocked today if a supermodel abandoned her career to head for the battlefields, yet 1920s cover girl Lee Miller did just that. Scandalizing Americans by appearing in the first Kotex ad, she later quit fashion modeling to become a photographer with lover Man Ray. Exotic cities and celebrities are immortalized in the silver prints she published in books, but Miller's greatest achievement was being the first female war photojournalist, capturing on film the bloodbaths of World War II. You can read all about her in *Lee Miller: A Life*, the new biography by Carolyn Burke (Knopf). —ROSANNA KOSTER

Leslie and the LYs (www.lesliehall.com). At first glance Leslie Hall seems like just another nerdy small-town Iowa girl with art-school dreams. Her expression in pictures is slack, her enormous glasses crooked; a vintage sweater accentuates her double chin. But don't be fooled—Leslie (along with her LYs) is an internet sensation, deadpanning lyrics like "Thank you mama/For making me gold pants/With room for dancin'/And romancin'" in homemade videos inspired by her favorite thrift-store finds. Hall has taken geek chic and made it raging-dork galore, rocking a beat-dazzling twist on DIY while creating some of the funniest online content anywhere. —JULIANA TRINGALI

Lisa Congdon (lisacongdon.com). Tree trunks, teardrops, pirate ships, peacocks, numbers, and letters populate Lisa Congdon's body of work. Using a multitude of media (textiles, collage, pen-and-ink, shadowboxes, mixed media), she creates deceptively simple images that, on closer inspection, reveal careful attention to balance of color and line. I'm especially enamored of her multicolored log cabin–style pillows, which incorporate the kind of fabric samples that are a thrifter's dream. —R.F.

Mâche. Also known as lamb's lettuce, this salad green has been cultivated in France since the 17th century. Unlike the now-mainstream radicchio or arugula, mâche has been difficult to find in the United States (even in specialty stores). Imagine my delight when I began to see bags of mâche available at Trader Joe's. With a delicate, slightly bitter taste, it will invigorate your interest in making salads. My tips: Don't buy mâche with yellow leaves, keep your salads simple, and go easy on the vinaigrette so you can experience the full taste. —B.B.

The Secret Life of the Lonely Doll: The Search for Dare Wright (Picador). Part biography, part cautionary tale, this book explores the life of Dare Wright, photographer and author of the Lonely Doll series of children's books. Tethered to her mother throughout her adult life in a perpetual-ingenue folie à deux, Wright comes across as a female Peter Pan (she even looked eerily like Tinkerbell well into her 60s). Biographer Jean Nathan indulges in heavy-handed layperson psychoanalysis at times, but tells a compelling tale of a girl/woman/doll who was tragically unequipped for the adult world. —B.B.

She Draws Comics!: 100 Years of America's Women Cartoonists (www.moccany.org). The largest exhibit ever of women's comics is an empowering antidote to the sexist myopia of recent all-male shows like "Speak: Nine Cartoonists" and "Masters of American Comics." It's inspiring to see in full color Nell Brinkley's gorgeously drawn flappers and Jackie Ormes's 1950s African-American adventuress Torchy Brown. Dozens of contemporary ladies keep it coming: Lee Marrs, Mikheila Reid, Lynda Barry, Phoebe Gloeckner, and more. —MEISHA ROSENBERG

Short Pants Press (www.shortpantspress.com). This Chicago- and Missouri-based collective specializes in comics, zines, and art prints. My own pants were charmed off by their series of mini comics, the *Ouija Interviews*. Ostensibly conducted via Ouija board with alternately lonely, mischievous, and perverted spirits living (for whatever reason) on Nantucket Island, the tiny books offer a sweetly creepy, sometimes heartbreaking glimpse at death and its discontents. —A.Z.

The Small Object (www.thesmallobject.com). This artsy-craftsy website sells wonderfully whimsical drawings and collages by proprietor Sarah Neuburger. I especially love the Fill-in-the-Blanks Family Tree Print, a black-and-white drawing that allows for a more open-ended depiction of family than the mother's family/father's family pages found in typical baby books, so you can list all the mamas, daddies, babas, and step-grandparents you want to honor. —WHITNEY MOSS

Leslie and the LYs

Mâche

She Draws Comics!

The Small Object

READING IS FUNDAMENTAL

EIGHT BOOKS THAT TAUGHT US SOMETHING ABOUT SEX

ISLAND CRUSH

In retrospect, I can see why educators would deem *Lord of the Flies* appropriate reading for high-school freshmen: Adolescent boys, stranded without adults, attempt to build a functioning society but instead learn the darker side of human nature. The educators' logic was most likely that male students would relate to the rough-and-tumble boy bonding and hunting action, while the girls...well, girls are generally strong readers anyway. But as a 14-year-old (and a strong reader, I might add), I saw in the book not a microcosm of world politics, not a commentary on the inherent evil in all men, but a tropical paradise populated by sweaty, smoldering, scantily clad boys...*English* boys.

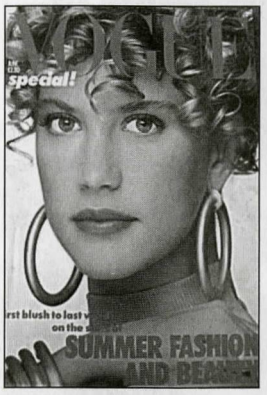
The moment Ralph swam naked in the lagoon, I knew *Lord of the Flies* could turn out to be the best boy-crazy literature my school had assigned since *The Outsiders*. Ralph was no rebel; he was blond, athletic, intelligent, and popular—exactly the kind of boy I would only have a chance with on a desert island. But if I were in the mood for danger, I'd have to take Jack, a classic James Spaderesque bad boy whose offhand authority, I suspected, belied tremendous sexual skill. Passionate and impulsive, his lust for power could only be matched by his, um, lust. And if things didn't work out with the main characters, there were loads of dumb-but-strong ancillary dudes to get down with.

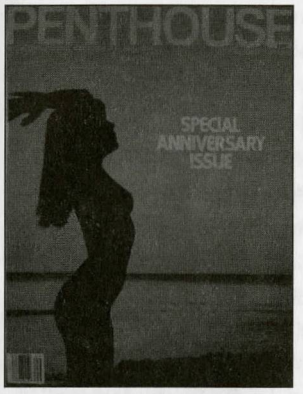
I can't say my crushes were completely removed from the novel's literary devices; in fact, they were a big part of it. William Golding wrote his male characters to embody concepts like good and evil in the dehumanizing way that is usually reserved for female characters. In lieu of Mary Ann and Ginger, Golding gave us the tantalizing dichotomy of Ralph and Jack. Who would you most like to get to second base with in a secret thicket? I spent such a large portion of fourth period pondering this, it should have been an essay question.

Okay, so they were sadists, fascists, and jocks, but they were also young, shirtless teens running around on a tropical island, functioning outside of society's norms. Political allegory aside, that's hot. —*Juliana Tringali*

PAPER CUTS

It was everywhere in my working-class childhood: All our fathers or brothers or uncles had it stashed away in obvious places; we found it during sleepovers, while babysitting; sometimes it was pinned in open view on the walls of gas stations or neighbors' garages. My first significant exposure to the literature of sex was explicit pornography.





And not just the perfectly coiffed vanilla variety. Before I had a fixed idea of the names of body parts or exactly what defined "sex," I had already seen all flavor of fetish. When we were still too young to have received the slightly deranged school lecture on menstruation, my friends and I had already seen photo spreads of three-ways and girl-on-girl action, featuring people of all kinds—young and old, big and small, cute and gross.

But the porn mags had competition. Our mothers and older sisters had their own magazines, and the contrast between what we saw in the two genres was immense. A ladies' magazine might have a long article outlining why a person needn't feel ashamed if she could not reach orgasm, followed by hot tips on how to trap and keep a man, none of which seemed to involve actually enjoying a sexual relationship. Based on the evidence of these magazines, it seemed like most grown-up women did not actually have much fun at all.

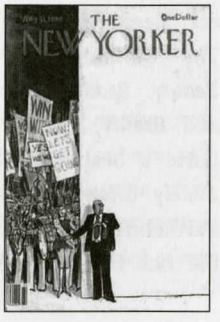
While women's magazines promoted starvation diets and obsessive worry about appearance and grooming, porn celebrated (even, or perhaps especially, while objectifying) the female form in all shapes and sizes. There was an obvious undercurrent of exploitation and misogyny in the industry, but even to my young eyes it was nowhere near as lethal as the self-hatred on display in the magazines targeted at the teen-girl market in an era before *Sassy*, in a town that had never heard of *Ms.*

This was confusing; the two versions of reality didn't seem to have any relationship to each other. Did men and women truly experience sex in such dramatically different ways? Which version was real? For a kid like me, prone to winning spelling bees and memorizing epic poetry, both the pornographic images and the ladies' magazines came to represent the elements of my hometown that I did not enjoy. The girls in the pictures, with their teased hair, looked like the mean girls on the bus. My blue-collar neighborhood simply offered no valid models for what I needed. I didn't want to grow up to resemble anything I saw in the slightly sticky pages, regardless of whether I found them stashed in a garden shed or stacked neatly in a doctor's office.

In the end, music, rather than literature, provided the alternative I so desperately sought, in the form of the first 45 I purchased: Joan Jett's "I Love Rock & Roll." The video, with Joan swaggering around, offered up a clear and compelling ideology of equality and sexual liberation. She was sexy in her own way, unlike anything I'd seen in magazines, and she was in charge. That song and video offered a revelation, and provided a dramatic and romantic opportunity for escape. —*Bee Lavender*

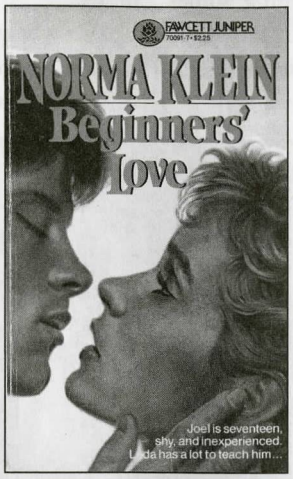
STRIP SEARCH

My introduction to sex came courtesy of my father's anthologies of *New Yorker* cartoons. The references to FDR and Cubism went over my head, but it's pretty clear that a rich old man with a naked lady perched on his lap is up to something, especially if she's pretty and has breasts like basketballs. Even a 4-year-old knows that. My suspicion that naked people were naughty predates memory. In my earliest recollections, I checked that the coast was clear before pulling my playmates behind the wingback chairs to peep at the fat capitalists and their nubile secretaries to our hearts' content. Once I got busted: A child visitor told her mother that she had seen naked ladies at my house. The woman phoned my parents. I wasn't punished until I was a teenager, when my father trotted out the anecdote to anyone who would listen. —*Ayun Halliday*



A NORMA LIFE

I've written elsewhere in *Bitch* about my vast, boundless love for the oeuvre of Norma Klein, yet I keep meeting people who, for whatever reason, haven't heard of her. I want to remedy this, singlehandedly if I have to, so let me break it down: Klein's books about teen girls and boys working through the many confusing aspects of their own sex lives (and, as often as not, their parents' couplings and uncouplings) cut through both the flowery crap and the moralistic judgments of much other young-adult literature, and for that they rule. There was *Beginner's Love* (boy meets girl, girl has more experience, boy is an ass about it); *Love Is One of the Choices* (girl meets science teacher, inappropriate relationship ensues); *Family Secrets* (girl and boy hook up; to their horror, parents marry one another); and *My Life as a Body* (nerdy girl meets boy in wheelchair), among others, and each one is like a little universe of relatable sexual emotion: Nervousness! Lust! Disappointment! Freudian displacement! Jealousy!

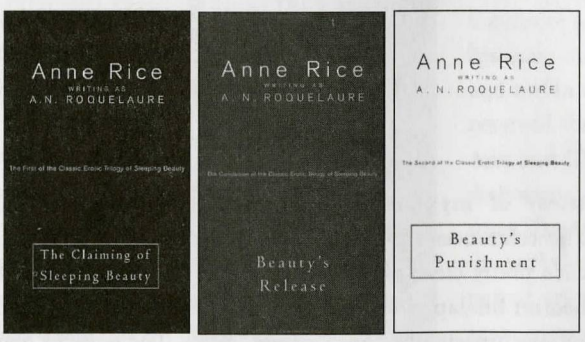


Admittedly, at the time I first encountered Klein's work, I didn't know from relatable sexual emotion, because I was all of 10 years old. (Just as many girls are ready to move on from *Seventeen* to *Cosmopolitan* by the time puberty hits, I had torn through all the Judy Blumes by age 9 and would probably have turned to Jackie Collins for further edification if my elementary school's library had stocked her.) But as my earlier-blooming friends started running into various Afterschool Special situations, my earnest reading habits turned me into a font of news they could use. I listened to hushed stories about boyfriends with bizarre moves, girls who were embarrassed to admit that they wanted to do "it," and all manner of mechanical minutiae, nodding sagely like some kind of pint-size Shere Hite and never letting on that all my knowledge was, though colorful, totally theoretical. If I managed to convince even one friend that she was totally normal, or talk another one out of seducing the janitor, all credit, in the end, must go to Ms. Klein. —*Andi Zeisler*

HIT ME, BABY, THREE MORE TIMES

I've always been something of a sick twist. Blame it on a controlling parent who wielded a mean yardstick, or a childhood Polynesian milieu that blurred steamy nights teeming with insect life with lush rain forests and a certain uncensored, cruel streak among its alternately mellow and menacing islanders. It was a jungle out there—punishing and pleasurable, impulsive and eroticized.

Perhaps that's why, in my early 20s, finally waking from a long, late-blooming slumber of dodging dating and sex, I devoured Anne Rice's '80s-era Sleeping Beauty trilogy: *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty's Punishment*, and *Beauty's Release*. Angela Carter's beautifully baroque *Bloody Chamber* was too self-absorbed to satisfy; Donald Barthelme's postmodern spoof *Snow White* too clinical to do the trick. Instead, when it came to fairy tales with genuine heat, the pop culture Queen of Darkness herself, writing under the pen name A.N. Roquelaure, served as both my S/M sex-ed instructor and my agent of subversion.

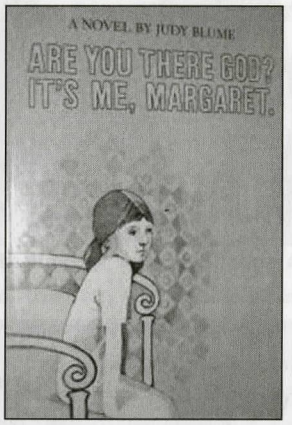


Amplifying the masochistic voluptuousness embedded in the traditional Sleeping Beauty narrative, Rice began where that tale usually ends, as the prince roused his princess with a hot fuck rather than a closed-lipped kiss. Here, happy-ever-after translates as seemingly eternal servitude, inhibition-destroying violation, and clockwork humiliation. Treated as a spoil of war and spirited away to her prince's neighboring kingdom as a prisoner, a trussed, humbled, now-fully-awake-and-aroused Beauty learns to kiss her jailers' feet, submit to gang bangs at the hands of rough soldiers, and savor the taste of bestiality, while princes are slapped, paddled, pronged with dildo-tails, and treated like ponies.

I ate it all up like a fleshy morsel. Rice's hothouse hunger for transgressive kicks—and her will to go where her fantasies took her—fit in like a leopard-skin Speedo amid the fun-in-the-sun pleasure culture of Hawaii. It was fabulously alien, though oddly recognizable. Rice's was a freshly inverted, decadent world where royals were forever abused—and perpetually orgasmic—under the scrutiny of their peasantry. "She would never forget the men and women in coarse breeches and white aprons, with sleeves rolled to the elbows," she writes in *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*. "How they had gaped at her, enjoyed her helplessness." Likewise, as children, my friends and I gazed out of the corners of our eyes at the privileged, innocent haole tourists strolling Waikiki Beach—invisible to them and watching, envying, desiring, and hating them at the same time. When their oblivious naïveté met our casual, sexy violence, we wondered, who was servicing whom? —*Kimberly Chun*

BOY WONDERING

Caught with no unread library books, and staring at a room full of already-dog-eared young-adult lit, I turned to my brother's bookshelf in desperation. Hardy Boys? Booo-ring. *The Great Brain*? Funny, but I'd read 'em all. Surely there had to be some gem lurking there among the sports stories. And that was when I found Judy Blume's *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*. Jackpot! The male counterpart to *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* was full of fascinating, occasionally disturbing insights into the mind—and body—of the pubescent boy.



At age 10, I knew all about the facts of life, but through the travails of its junior-high protagonist, *Then Again* enlightened me on the finer points of wet dreams; unwanted, socially awkward erections; unrequited crushes from the male point of view; and the results of repressing one's emotions (painful stomach ulcers). (Oddly enough, I had completely forgotten the creepy, messed-up voyeurism subplot until I reread the book as an adult.) It also raised some unsettling questions about what my 12-year-old brother might be going through. Suddenly, he wasn't just a sibling with whom I'd once shared baths and who still horsed around with me—he was a boy, and an adolescent boy, at that. This wasn't necessarily information I wanted.

My female classmates must've been getting some enlightenment of their own, because that was also the year they developed the game of running around the schoolyard and assessing the boys for hints of erections. To hear the girls tell it, the fifth-grade boys were veritable hormone machines: Easily a quarter of the boys were loudly declared to have boners. Though I half-heartedly ran around with the rest of them, I found this erection inspection deeply disturbing and wholly embarrasing—even worse than the girls' related predilection for seeking out telltale signs of bra straps on our backs. Didn't they realize that this was private stuff?

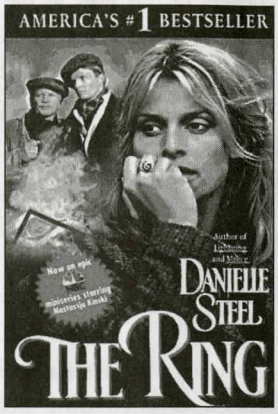
If my male friends and my brother had to go through such humiliating bodily betrayals, I felt that the least I could do was pretend not to notice. I couldn't erase my new knowledge, but I could suppress it—and fortunately, it didn't result in an ulcer. —*Rachel Fudge*

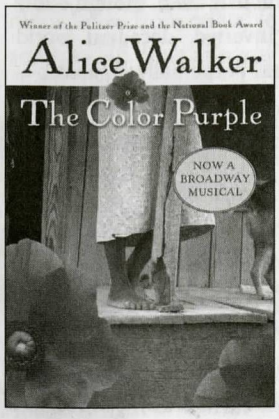
SHADES OF LUST

I discovered sex in a small Bronx library. At 12, I had a Sidney Sheldon and Danielle Steel addiction: Their books were gateway drugs to Harlequin romance novels, complete with covers featuring Fabio with his arms wrapped around a svelte, long-haired damsel. Yes, it was formulaic romance, and I devoured it. The rich ranch foreman and hot divorcée were so removed from my inner-city reality that their stories felt as fantastic as I imagined sex could feel. Somehow, these couples were matched by destiny, left alone to fall in love after descending into the throes of passion—in other words, having a lot of sex

in the barn and the house and the pool.

More salacious scenes were available in the more urban settings of the Lucky Santangelo novels by Jackie Collins. Lucky was a badass who made men melt in their pants, far more so than Danielle Steel's protagonists and with better potty language than a girl could find in Judy Blume books. It was hormonal nirvana. Except that all these people were white. My horny-nerd alert blared: Did black people not have sex?





My early wandering and readings eventually unearthed characters who did get some. They were all women, and having sweet, meaningful, and seductive sex. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Color Purple* depicts Shug Avery and Miss Celie as intimate friends and lovers. In Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, the most memorable and tender relationship was between lesbians. Until I found these works, sex had seemed to me a separate, scandalous act that only wealthy white women could enjoy. Once I saw myself in the act, reading lives like mine, the world around me slowly got far sexier than even the steamiest beach book. After that, I didn't want to just kiss and grope, because the act wasn't as intangible as it'd been when it was on a farm or in glitzy Los Angeles. I wanted to sustain the feeling of being so awake and entranced and dizzy with desire that I could write a new possibility into existence: love in spite of sex, not because of it. Life ain't literature, sadly, so this lustful girl blossomed into a sex-loving woman—love or no. My hormones have yet to align with those sweet adolescent epiphanies. —*Joshunda Sanders*

PREPUBESCENT PLAYGIRL

My parents—though I'm sure they were well-intentioned— were a bit on the smothering side. So it's not hard to explain the excitement I felt when, at age 10, they announced to my sister and me that they would be joining a bowling league. For three hours every Tuesday night, we would be alone in the house. Alone!

As soon as their orange Chevy Nova pulled out of the driveway, we'd race to the basement, unearth the disco light tucked away under the stairs, and stage a dance-off to the soundtrack of *Flashdance* or *Footloose*. But after a few weeks my sister announced that she was bored of me (she'd discovered boys), and I was on my own.

As I sulked and splayed myself across my parents' bed, it occurred to me that it might be fun to rifle through their dresser drawers. I didn't really expect to find anything, but underneath the stack of neatly folded white t-shirts in my dad's drawer was a lone *Playboy*. Back on the bed, as I flipped through the pages, I had that butterflies-in-the-stomach feeling, excited in a way I'd never felt before, as I gazed upon pictures of naked women.

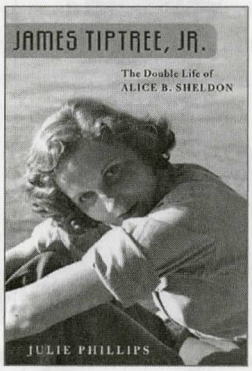
I didn't know anything about girl love. More accurately, I didn't know anything about anything. So I can't say I was surprised to discover that I liked looking at naked female bodies, because I didn't know the first thing about sexuality. All I knew was that I really wanted (needed!) to see real, live, naked girls! So I hatched a plan.

During an overnight stay at my best friend's house, I proposed that we stage our own *Playboy* "photo session." "I'll take the pictures, you just strip and pose," I explained, realizing as soon as the words left my mouth how pathetic my scheme was. But much to my surprise, she agreed, as did a handful of other unsuspecting friends over the next few years.

It feels odd now to credit *Playboy*—that icon of constructed, commercialized, cleaned-up sexuality—with one of my favorite discoveries: that I liked girls. And indeed, I'd like to think that something else would have sparked it eventually. But I really believe that the unearthing of that magazine and those faux photo shoots (which led to subsequent makeout sessions and other experimentation) instilled in me early on an openness to sexuality, a deep connection to the idea of girl love, and at least a slight inoculation against the cultural brainwashing that queerness and female sexuality are wrong. —*Debbie Rasmussen*

books

James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon *Julie Phillips* {ST. MARTIN'S PRESS}



In her biography of writer Alice B. Sheldon, Julie Phillips notes that "like all interesting people, Alli had many sides or selves." And throughout her life Sheldon had more than most: African explorer, high-society debutante, bohemian artist, chicken farmer, CIA agent, and research scientist. However, Sheldon's most notable self was the fictional one she created in 1967, at the age of 51: James Tiptree Jr., science-fiction writer.

What started as a joke (Sheldon found the name in the grocery store on a jar of Tiptree jam) became more than just a pseudonym. Sheldon used scraps of her own background—fishing trips, military service, crushes on doomed rich girls—to create a persona that seemed unquestionably male. Her vague references to government work provided a cover that was so successful, fans often wondered if Tiptree might actually be Henry Kissinger.

Over the course of nine years, Tiptree became a respected science-fiction writer known for his bleak, sexy, and adventurous stories. He also formed intense, long-distance friendships with writers like Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin. In short, he became tough for Sheldon to destroy. She contemplated giving Tiptree a fatal case of MS or coming clean, but she could never pull the plug.

In 1976, a curious editor uncovered Tiptree's true identity, and the truth shocked the science-fiction community. Phillips's account of Sheldon's evasion and ultimate unveiling provides an engrossing read. Even more interesting is Phillips's take on Sheldon's increasingly isolated life after the truth about Tiptree was revealed. Until her suicide in 1987, Sheldon continued to write under her own name. But Phillips suggests that, ironically, when Sheldon wrote as herself, she lost her distinctive voice. Sheldon was also convinced that fans preferred Tiptree: "I miss Tip terribly—as a person," she wrote to a friend in the early '80s. "ABS is a poor substitute."

Such glimpses into Sheldon's psyche are the result of exhaustive research. Phillips spent a decade on the biography, sifting through Sheldon's vast collection of correspondence and personal papers. In addition to reconstructing the author's life and work, Phillips searches for answers to her own questions: Who was the woman behind the swaggering identity of James Tiptree, and why was the persona so important for an accomplished, talented woman like Sheldon?

Phillips finds that Sheldon's pessimism about womanhood and her professional insecurities persisted throughout her life. In a sketchbook from Sheldon's bohemian 20s, Phillips finds a scribbled note that presages Sheldon's decision to write as a man 30 years later:

> Oh god pity me I am born damned they say it is ego in me I know it is a man all I want is a man's life. My damned oh my damned body how can I escape it. I play woman.... I cannot live or breathe I cannot even make things I am going crazy, thank god for liquor.

Despite insightful glimpses like this, at times Phillips's fastidious reconstruction of Sheldon's life plods along. She successfully recounts Sheldon's privileged childhood, wild young-adult years, and circumspect adulthood, but Sheldon's personality is often indistinct. This may be due in part to the fact that Sheldon, who struggled with depression and drug abuse, was notoriously guarded. A lifelong loner, she became increasingly isolated in middle age. It is telling that the best glimpses into her personality, sense of humor, and temperament are in Tiptree's correspondence with his many pen pals. From his letters, it's clear that Tiptree provided the self-assurance and community Sheldon had always sought.

Phillips suggests that some of Sheldon's struggles were the result of her historical context. She notes, "For women of Alli's generation, feminism did feel threatening," but elements of Sheldon's story seem remarkably timely. When reading about Tiptree's creation, his large circle of long-distance friends, and Sheldon's unveiling, it's hard

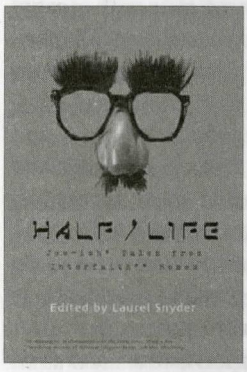
not to be reminded of JT LeRoy, who made a splash as a teenage male hustler–turned–memoirist, but was discovered to be a 39-year-old woman named Laura Albert.

Like Albert, who thought her writing would be taken more seriously if it weren't attributed to a woman, Sheldon became convinced that gender played a huge role in the reception of art, even in the otherworldly realm of science fiction. In the draft of an unused confession letter, Sheldon explained: "Everything sounded so much more interesting coming from a man. (Didn't it? Didn't it, just a little? Be honest.)"

However, unlike the coverage of LeRoy, which has focused on Albert's deception, Phillips's biography provides a sensitive examination of the roots of Sheldon's double life. The portrait that emerges captures a complicated woman who circumscribed assumptions of gender while struggling with their constraints. —ANASTASIA MASURAT

Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales from Interfaith Homes

Laurel Snyder, ed. {SOFT SKULL PRESS}



What's it like to celebrate both Easter and Passover at the same time? This smart, funny anthology of essays narrates the experiences of growing up with one Jewish parent or being half-Jewish, emphasis on *ish*. While these engaging essays deal explicitly with negotiating between Ashkenazi Jewish and Christian parents, they will surely resonate with other Jews, as well as anyone who has pondered the importance of her family history in relation to her identity, or felt like an outsider in a community to which she is supposed to belong.

Each author tells a unique story, but all struggle with identifying as Jewish when being told "you're not really Jewish"; you are or are not Jewish based on whether your mother is or is not Jewish (the matrilineal tradition in Halachic—Jewish—law), or you are recognized as Jewish only after confronting anti-Jewish comments. Many of these writers grapple not just with their half identity, but with what it means to be a Jew at all. For some, their Jewish identity arises from a loving relationship to a Jewish parent or grandparent, family stories, a favorite holiday tradition, the Jewish compulsion to question familiar truths, and—often most important—food. In "Bury the Knife in Yonkers or Bibbety Bobbety Jew," Thisbe Nissen recalls receiving a college care package of hamentaschen—a date-filled pastry treat—from her beloved Nana Bell, and having to explain what it was to her non-Jewish roommate, whose grandma sent her chocolate-chip cookies.

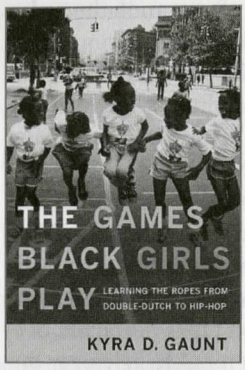
Many also point to and employ a Jewish tradition of dark, paradoxical humor. In "Language & Vein," Dan Beachy Quick recounts the fantastic stories of a grandfather who survived the Depression and liberated a concentration camp as a soldier at the end of World War II. To him, these stories demonstrated a particularly Jewish "ability to laugh in the face of a world that denies laughter." My favorite essay, just over two pages long, embodies both the humor and the sense of doubleness that the best work in this collection conveys: Katharine Weber's "A Child's Christmas in New York" tells of going to buy a Christmas tree in Brooklyn with her father. From the perspective of her 5-year-old self, Weber describes her fear that they won't take home the perfect tree after her father and the "tree man" haggle over the price—in Yiddish. As her father walks away from the deal, the tree man follows them to their car, arguing all the way. They finally reach an agreement, and Katharine and her father are released, tree in tow, to pick up knishes at the deli where her father's cousin Morry used to work. She concludes: "a hot knish—that is the taste of Christmas."

Growing up between two religions can offer an ability to see many points of view, to question dogma, to embrace contradiction, and to refuse the binary construction of being either Jewish or Christian. After describing how his grandfather greeted the news of his birth with "that's all we need, another Jew bastard," Lee Klein argues that "maybe airing all sides of any argument helps you see in-betweenness everywhere, an understanding of ambiguity that hopefully leads to empathy for everyone involved, that then hopefully makes it more difficult to simply call your newborn grandson 'another Jew bastard'..."

While every essay is well written, a few of the writers are a bit too smug in their rejection of religion, as though they are too clever or too rational to be taken in by the ruse of organized faith. (See Anthony Hecht, whose essay claims that "religion's most important contribution to our lives" is guilt.) Furthermore, some of the authors fail to acknowledge that as a minority religion in a Christian-dominated culture that has often been hostile to Jews, Judaism is about more than a blind acceptance of faith, and is in fact a tradition that embodies resistance and survival.

And claiming a Jewish identity, whether cultural or religious, can be seen as part of this refusal to disappear. As many essayists demonstrate, going to temple, celebrating holidays, or recounting family legends can be about connecting with one's ancestors and insisting on an identity that would be much easier to forget in a predominantly Christian society. In fact, the essays I enjoyed the most combined intellect with feeling and the willingness to reside in ambiguity—the ambiguity of not knowing but somehow feeling that one is, after all, Jewish. —WENDY SOMERSON

The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop *Kyra D. Gaunt* {NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS}



Jumping rope may look like kid stuff, but double Dutch separates the women from the girls. Two ropes turn alternately in a pulsing oval, like street art to the untrained eye. But breaching the ropes is a challenge—and not stomping on a rope once you're inside is even harder. Some girls can handle the pressure and even breakdance between the ropes with precision. Others, myself included, take 10 minutes, if not longer, to conquer the matrix, which proves ethnomusicologist, vocalist, and New York University professor Kyra D. Gaunt's point: Not all black people have rhythm. But like everyone else, we can—and do—learn. No amount of book learning can teach you how to sway or step in time to the beat—only black girls, often dismissed as bored improv masters, can show you that.

In *The Games Black Girls Play*, Gaunt argues that cheers—songs and seemingly nonsensical chants performed in conjunction with handclaps and foot stomps—offer entertainment for black girls across the country, but they also play a more important role. They teach young girls aspects of "musical blackness," placing them socially in step with black tradition. The book examines black girls' forays into popular culture—whether unconscious or deliberate—and what their invisibility says about hip hop, musicality in the black community, and when and where girls enter the annals of music history.

At first it seems like a stretch to claim that the way girls play has influenced a commercial behemoth like hip hop. But have you heard Nelly's "Country Grammar"? Its singsong chorus was sampled from black girls' games, and Gaunt suggests that the song gained popularity in part because it was immediately recognizable to black audiences. Gaunt emphasizes that male rappers like Nelly use such games as material, but female rappers do not—an assessment that's blurry and not as convincing as her other arguments; it doesn't help that the aspiring female rappers Gaunt interviews about why this might be don't offer illuminating explanations.

And lest anyone think girls have been passive creators of sampling fodder for boys, over time girls have appropriated snippets of New Edition's "Candy Girl" and the Jackson 5's version of "Rockin' Robin" for their own rhythmic use in games, which underscores the reciprocal and often unexamined relationship between black girls and popular music. When Gaunt traces the origins of traditional games like "Miss Mary Mack" by fusing academic prose with vividly rendered memories, her journey is refreshing, if sometimes daunting in its technicality. Who else but an academic could refer to spontaneous girl games this way:

> Young girls at play are unaware that they are socially performing the embodied memories of a black musical past, but this explains the subconscious links between the generations of youth, between youth and adults, over time.... In other words, girls are telling stories through their embodied play: dramatizing the "infinite process of African-American and black musical identity construction" by practicing and performing the mnemonic rituals of a kinetic orality.

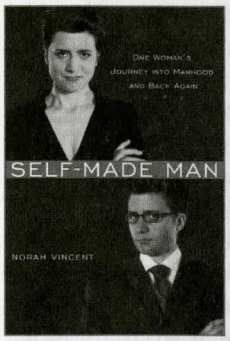
The Games Black Girls Play is most readable for the compelling connections between these games, passed down as an African-American tradition through a kind of intuitive education. The games are explained and shown in the appendix through meter, crediting young girls with creativity that looks complex when rendered as traditional American music. Gaunt successfully lifts ignored girls from obscurity to center stage.

She also recalls her own versions of these games and dances that were passed down to her from her mother and friends, and that's when her writing is most accessible. When she meets and joins the group Double Dutch Divas in Midtown Manhattan, adult women who dance and jump solely to enjoy the games they once played as girls, she is most inspired and inspiring. She writes poems that offer insight into her affection for girls' improvisation, and even throws down a bit between the ropes after she provides a disclaimer to readers that her sense of rhythm is not quite on par with the best jumpers on the team.

Not that her jumping skills matter. With *Games*, Gaunt has created a necessary space for translating black girls' joy in a society that typically overlooks it. Hopefully, others will take their turn and jump in to keep the games going. —JOSHUNDA SANDERS

Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey Into Manhood and Back Again *Norah Vincent* {VIKING}

Norah Vincent has made a career of pandering to straight fears of queers. She got her start writing sensational articles about the degeneracy of gay men for *New York Press* (she's a lesbian, so she can't be homophobic!), and was later recruited by the *Village Voice*. Vincent's pièce de resistance might have been an opinion piece in the national gay newsmagazine the *Advocate*, in which she implied that Laramie hate-crime victim Matthew Shepard deserved to die because he flirted with straight men. More recently, Vincent



landed a job writing a weekly op-ed column for the *Los Angeles Times*, a job she left when she obtained a (presumably) lucrative book deal to go undercover as a man for 18 months. *Self-Made Man* follows Vincent, disguised as a fellow named Ned, as she infiltrates traditionally male spaces, including a bowling league, a monastery, and a men's movement self-help group. She also dates women, works as a door-to-door salesman, and goes to strip clubs, all in the service of investigating the privileges, pitfalls, and pains of manhood.

Anyone assuming that Vincent is intent on eviscerating gender norms will be sorely disappointed when, at the very beginning of the book, she declares, "Gender identity, it seems, is in the genes as surely as sex and sexuality are." Vincent presents this "fact" as if she is unaware that such reasoning has been contested for decades by queers, feminists, radicals, academics, children, and various other thoughtful individuals who have argued that gender and sexual identities are at least as much socially constructed as biologically determined. While banking on the increased visibility of trans men, Vincent is keen never to acknowledge trans cultures, except to assure the reader that she is absolutely not a "transsexual" or "transvestite." This is as sophisticated as her gender vocabulary gets.

To encapsulate Vincent's dismissive approach toward trans issues, one need only scan a brief excerpt toward the end of the book, wherein she invokes the specter of Brandon Teena, who lived and loved as a man until he was brutally raped and murdered. Vincent says, "Look what happened to Teena Brandon. She passed as a guy in rural Nebraska, and then her so-called friends found out...." By choosing Brandon Teena's birth name and using female pronouns to refer to him, Vincent acts as if she's just shooting the breeze, instead of making a calculated blow to render trans identities invisible while simultaneously using the story of Brandon Teena to inform the reader of the kind of wrath Vincent herself might incur if exposed.

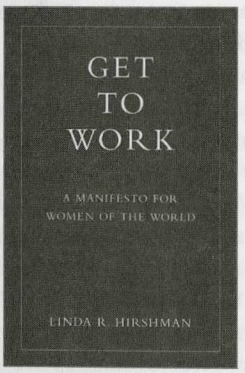
In the egocentric tradition of fellow gay neoconservatives like Camille Paglia, Vincent casts herself as the lonely hero subverting paradigms in order to prove them; in this case, her goal is undoubtedly to normalize and strengthen the gender binary. Entering the bowling alley for the first time as Ned, Vincent states, "I was surrounded by men who had cement dust in their hair and sawdust under their fingernails.... [I]t's at times like these when the term 'real man' really hits home with you, and you understand in some elemental way that the male animal is definitely not a social construct." After living as Ned for 18 months, Vincent declares, "There is at bottom really no such thing as that mystical unifying creature we call a human being, but only male human beings and female human beings, as separate as sects."

Late in the book, Vincent seems on the verge of developing a critique of masculinity, or at least a critique of the strictures of "manhood," which she describes as "a series of unrealistic, limiting, infuriating, and depressing expectations constantly coming over the wire." But, even here, Vincent turns it all around to talk about the pain of being a "double majority" (white and male, and presumably straight). "When certain men shook Ned's hand and called him buddy it felt as if they were recognizing him as one of their own in much the same way that gay people, when we meet each other, often give each other some sign of inclusion that says: 'You're one of my people.'" Once again, Vincent chooses to remain vague in order to make sweeping statements. Who are these "certain men"? Are they the men at the bowling alley, the owners of strip clubs, or the monks? Are all of these men part of the same double-majority subculture?

In the end, after spending a year and a half as a man (and enduring a breakdown due to the impossibility of keeping "my male and female personae intact simultaneously"), Vincent concludes, "Manhood is a leaden mythology written on the shoulders of every man." To the very end, Vincent remains unwilling to grasp the flaw in her logic—after all, if manhood is a mythology, then what on earth is a man?

—MATTILDA, A.K.A. MATT BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE

Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World
Linda R. Hirshman {VIKING}



Last fall, when Linda Hirshman published an article in the *American Prospect* lambasting the notion of "choice feminism"—specifically, the "choice" made by the kinds of educated, well-connected married women regularly featured in the *New York Times* Vows section to drop out of the workforce to raise their children—she ignited a real shitstorm. Now, she's published a short book that reiterates her polemic and outlines prescriptions for change. Hirshman asserts that American women's biggest obstacle is not the workplace but their marriages: They are, in a word, unequal, despite 40 years of post–*Feminine Mystique* femi-

nism. Until women take work seriously and force their male partners (Hirshman is concerned here only with married, heterosexual couples) to be actual *partners* in domesticity, women are consigning themselves to the same old second-class-citizen status that Hirshman's hero Betty Friedan skewered in 1963.

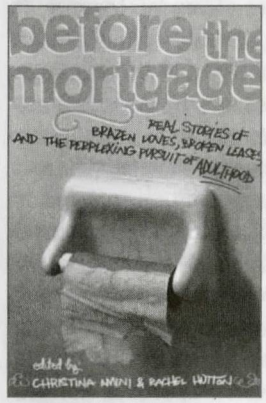
Unlike other recent motherhood manifestos (such as, well, Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner's *Motherhood Manifesto*), Hirshman is wholly uninterested in pushing for the feminist holy grails of quality, universal childcare and family-friendly workplace policies. These are distractions from the real issue, she says (and besides, feminists have been clamoring for these for 35 years, and where has it gotten us?), which is this: In allowing feminism to be redefined as supporting any and all choices a woman makes, the movement has lost its moral center. That is, feminists have lost (or, as Hirshman would more likely state it, given up) the ability to make moral judgments, and in particular the right to judge women who willingly trade their stake in the public world of work for the private world of the home (looking after babies, cleaning the house, and making dinner for their hardworking husbands). Pointing out that many women—especially well-educated, liberal-leaning, middle-class, even feminist women—claim that it is their free and personal choice to stay home with their kids, Hirshman argues that a) it isn't really a choice at all and b) it cannot be a feminist choice.

As you may have intuited, Hirshman doesn't mince words, and even if, like me, you agree with many of her underlying points, you might still find your hackles being raised. Which is too bad, because despite the legitimate critiques to be made of her work (her extremely limited sample size, blaming "the feminist movement" and not the accompanying backlash, her refusal to acknowledge the glacial pace of change for politics at the personal level), her argument has the potential to help reframe the dialogue on women, work, and motherhood and to deconstruct the popular myth of feminism as being all about supporting choices. It's also odd that, for someone who spends the bulk of her manifesto declaring "It's the relationship, stupid," she wraps things up by saying, Actually, the real problem is the tax code, which penalizes married working women. And it's true: What we really need is a levelheaded dialogue about work and parenthood that incorporates both angles—the personal and the systemic—and aims to persuade a generation that's grown up confidently and somewhat naively with all the benefits of feminism that their individual choices have consequences for both their peers and the next generation of women. But you won't find it here. —RACHEL FUDGE

Before the Mortgage: Real Stories of Brazen Loves, Broken Leases, and the Perplexing Pursuit of Adulthood *Christina Amini and Rachel Hutton, eds.* {SIMON SPOTLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT}
Introducing *Before the Mortgage*—a collection of new pieces and material from the zine of the same name—editors Christina Amini and Rachel Hutton explain:

> We're post-college and pre-picket fence. We're technically adults but we don't always feel like it. Everything—work, home, love, life—hasn't exactly fallen into place as we imagined it would. But we're not ready to settle down, settle up or settle for less. We like to say we're "before the mortgage."

The editors recruited a veritable who's who of hip, influential writers—including *Time*'s jokester Joel Stein, *This American Life* mainstay Sarah Vowell, *ReadyMade* founder Shoshana Berger, *My Misspent Youth* author Meghan Daum, *Found* creator Davy Rothbart, and *Quirkyalone*'s Sasha Cagen—to explore this uniquely late-20th/early-21st-century adulthood limbo. These pop culture renegades could write inspirational how-I-got-here pieces; they could lovingly describe their current work or loves; they could provide critical analysis about the social and economic times we live in. But this isn't that book. The pieces—most of them previously published elsewhere—are simply meant to sum up the pure, unadulterated essence of being undefined.



There's some beautiful, lyrical writing here. Thomas Beller's "Portrait of the Bagel as a Young Man" paints an engaging picture of the behind-the-scenes activity at a bagel factory. Meghan Daum's "On the Fringes of the Physical World" describes an online affair that simply couldn't be sustained in real life. Former child actor Anna Chlumsky deals with "Peaking at Ten," and offers some perceptive insight that can help all of us move to the next big thing.

While lackluster employment and unappealing apartments make frequent appearances, being "before the mortgage" seems to have a lot to do with not having settled down into traditional marriage—and it's a protracted period of singlehood that is a hallmark of this generation, as evidenced both by demographics and by personal ancedotes. *Urban Tribes* author Ethan Watters, in "In My Tribe," explores his life as a never-married:

> Girlfriends came and went, as did jobs and apartments. The

> constant in my life—by default, not by plan—became a loose group of friends.... One day I discovered that the transition period I thought I was living wasn't a transition period at all. Something real and important had grown there. I belonged to an urban tribe.

Similarly, novelist and journalist Pagan Kennedy has seen love come and go. Her solution to economic and romantic woes? To form a platonic Boston marriage with her best female friend, who shares her home, friends, and businesses. In "So...Are You Two Together?" (first published in *Ms.* in 2001), Kennedy writes of straight women living alone: "I see the future of single women, and frankly, it depresses the hell out of me. We're isolating ourselves in condos and studio apartments." She hopes that other women will follow her lead and develop supportive friendships—buying homes and raising children together—but she worries about the lack of commitment between friends. When she writes, "How do we commit to each other, knowing that someday one of us may marry?," she echoes Watters's final comments: "Although tribal membership may delay marriage, that is where most of us are still going."

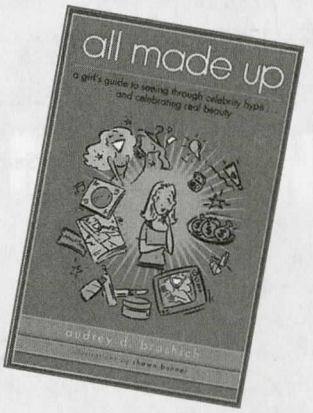
As our life spans are extended and economics make it difficult to live on our own, there may be new life stages and new developmental phases, but the contributors to *Before the Mortgage* suggest that, in the end, these will only be pit stops on the traditional road of life, where young people will while away the years before they inevitably motor on, following the life map of their parents: getting married, buying a house, settling down. Although things may not have "fallen into place" as they thought they would, these are by and large a privileged group of writers, and they seem to believe in the inevitability of their financial and emotional success—the spouse, kids, and mortgage are all presumed. These are not folks who have seen their plans derailed by disabling injury, by unexpected pregnancy, or by income so low that living 10 to an apartment is a necessity rather than a fun experiment in communal homesteading.

And although Watters insists that he uses the term "tribe" "quite literally," I wonder if Native Americans would agree—or some remote tribe in Africa. For them, is a tribe only a group of convenience, one that can and will be left behind upon marriage? I don't think so. But then again, this book is clearly aimed not at them but at youngish, middle-class readers, the kind who like to read zines and imagine themselves as changing the world, but who suspect they will eventually have all those classic privileges for themselves. Just not today.

—JACOB ANDERSON-MINSHALL

EFEMMERA

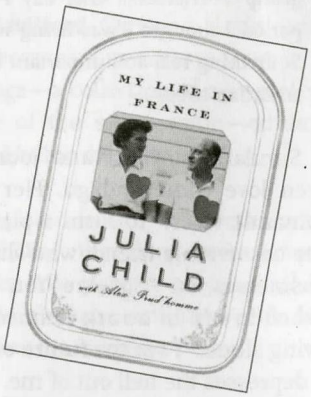
SHAMELESS SELF-PROMOTION CORNER



All Made Up: A Girl's Guide to Seeing Through Celebrity Hype...and Celebrating Real Beauty *Audrey D. Brashich* {WALKER & COMPANY}

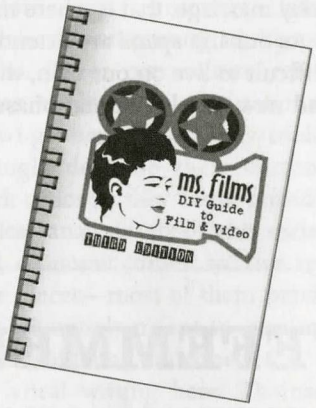
As a former teen model, Audrey Brashich is in a better position than many to debunk, expose, and just plain make sense of the media images and messages that bombard young girls (to say nothing of us older ones). And *All Made Up* is a fun, readable crash course in media literacy and activism especially for girls. From the cult of the supermodel to the increasing glut of product placement in kids' films, it breaks down exactly how everyday media is complicit in things like low self-esteem, anxiety over boys, and cycles of self-criticism that can stretch well into adulthood. The book includes musings from real teenagers, culled from Brashich's long-running website, as well as questions to mull over with friends and parents and tips on contacting media makers and creating your own responses. There's also a "Role Models" section, in which folks like Ariel Fox of Sticker Sisters, Meghan Boone of feminist sorority Zeta Omega Eta, and (here's the Shameless P.) *Bitch* founders Lisa and Andi talk about how to fight the power. —B. HELEN CARNHOOPS

My Life in France *Julia Child with Alex Prud'homme* {KNOPF}



It's one (delightful) thing to see and hear the towering, gaspy, unflappable expert on a *French Chef* DVD, but to read her memoir is to relish a significant slice of her life in luscious detail. It's well known that Child found her calling "late" in life (at a doddering 36), but this self-aware and intimate account makes her transformation from aimless Pasadena party girl to the doyenne of French cuisine in America all the more astounding. A would-be Eliza Doolittle following her older, better-cultured husband to his job in France, Child democratized French cooking for the masses and consequently became one of American culture's seminal culinary influences. She inspires because she followed her passion—which innocently began with an orgasmic sole meunière in Normandy in 1948—and, undeterred by any silly old logistic or psychic obstacles, pursued her interest with laser focus and interminable patience. She was a late-marrying, childfree, opinionated liberal who found in Paul Child an equal who supported her sometimes slow and painstaking career and even washed dishes behind the scenes. Notwithstanding the circumstances that led to Child's seemingly charmed life, it was her dyed-in-the-wool optimism and lack of sentimentality that allowed her to forge ahead, constantly seeking new experiences. The memoir sheds as much light on American and French culture, McCarthyism, and the publishing industry as it does on its memorable heroine.
—KATHLEEN COLLINS

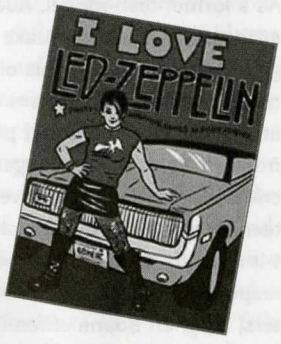
Ms. Films DIY Guide to Film & Video, 3rd edition *Niku Arbabi, ed.* {PARCELL PRESS}



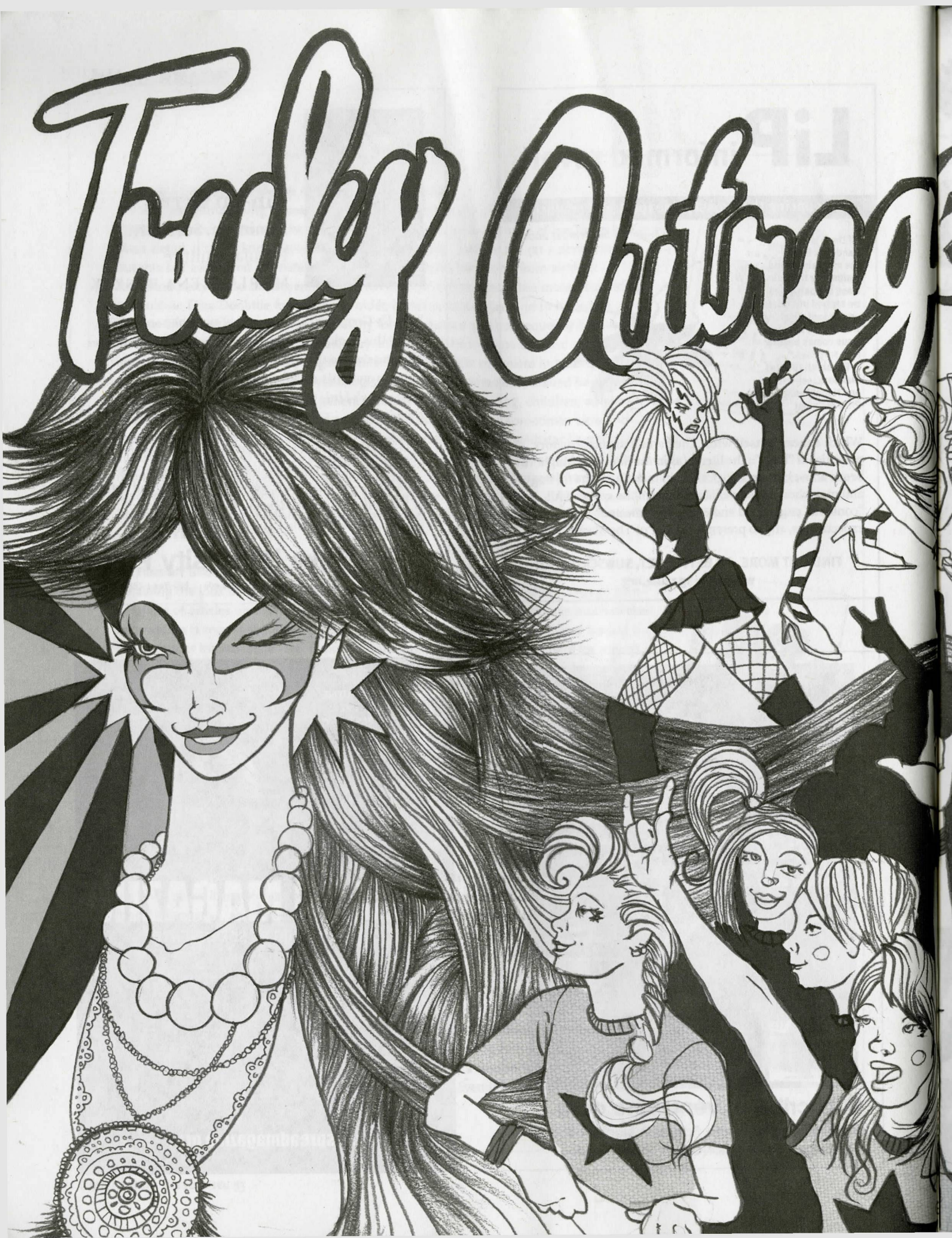
Retaining the look of the cut-and-paste zine from which it originates, this 100-page compendium of articles and resources is written in a warm, direct style. Because much of the information is more general than technical, the majority of the *Guide* is geared toward a beginning- or intermediate-level filmmaker, although there's helpful info here for experts, too. The *Guide*'s how-to contents cover a range of topics, including scriptwriting, planning a drive-in screening, using the Super-8 medium, and even a tutorial on camera-free filmmaking in which Pat Doyen explains the practice of creating art directly on top of film stock itself. In "Organize Your Own Festival," *Guide* editor and Ms. Films captain Arbabi shares advice garnered from five years of planning her own annual event.

The mission of Ms. Films is to "empower women and girls through access to media and media-making" and the *Guide* makes good on that by providing not only ideas, but plenty of references, including websites, zines, books, and a short list of notable lady directors that looks like it came right out of a '60s textbook. —ANNA BRESHEARS

I Love Led Zeppelin: Panty-Dropping Comics *Ellen Forney* {FANTAGRAPHICS}



Aside from the peekaboo views of Mt. Rainier and the lush urban foliage, the most appealing thing about living in Seattle is the prospect of getting a regular dose of Ellen Forney's funny, informative, sharp-eyed (and -edged) comics in Seattle weekly the *Stranger*. Fortunately for those of us who live far from the Northwest (or Southern California, which gets frequent Forney infusions via the *L.A. Weekly*), Fantagraphics has just published a collection of more than 40 of her comics, spanning a decade of work. Whether she's working with experts to provide useful how-tos on everything from smoking pot without getting arrested to finger-fucking a lady, or narrating personal experiences like her quasi-date with Camille Paglia, Forney's joie de vivre and appetite for instruction infuse every page. Portions of *I Love Led Zeppelin* also function as a nifty paean to '90s culture, when Courtney Love was still relevant, Ecstasy was a novelty, everyone was a lesbian (or at least trying to be one), and alt weeklies were infused with queer culture. Even if you don't love Led Zeppelin, how could you not love Ellen Forney? —R.F.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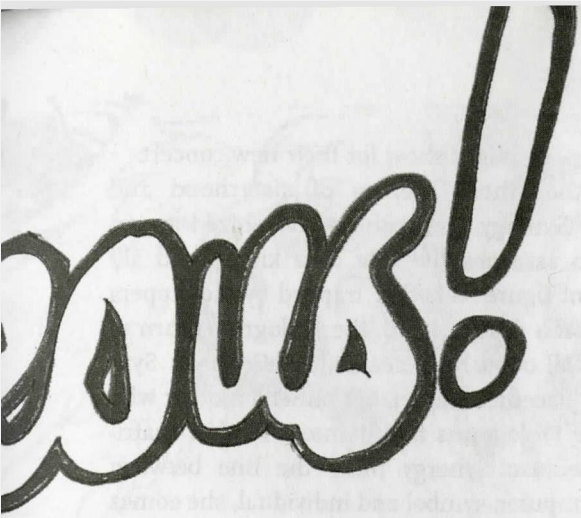


Toward a Defense of JEM AND THE HOLOGRAMS

As a cultural icon, the cartoon series *Jem and the Holograms* is nothing if not tenacious. More than 20 years after its premiere, *Jem* still lurks, sparkling, in the imaginations of its original viewers, refusing to be swept into the garbage like so many broken snap bracelets and Rubik's Cubes. *Jem* manages to hold its head up even in the crowded sea of '80s kids'-toy nostalgia, boasting its own webring, a MySpace page, an annual convention, and a VH1 *I Love the '80s* segment featuring the Donnas. The series deserves a second look not just for its staying power, but for its far-reaching influence on ideas about musical femininity and appropriate female behavior. The show, after all, provided a generation of children growing up in the '80s with an introduction to musical performance and success–specifically, women's musical performance and success. Now it offers a window into a turbulent moment in pop-music history, when mainstream media attempted to reconcile female musicians' growing industry clout with traditional definitions of femininity. As a product of this moment, *Jem* stands to tell us not only where "women in music" have been, but where they might be going.

BY LIZZIE EHRENHALT
ILLUSTRATION BY SKODT MCNALTY

An early version of this essay was presented at the 2006 Experience Music Project Pop Conference in Seattle, Washington.

IN 1985, glowing from the toys-to-TV crossover successes of G.I. Joe, My Little Pony, and Transformers, Hasbro was looking to develop a new line of dolls that could be promoted on a children's cartoon show. Writer Christy Marx was hired to create a complex backstory about a young woman named Jerrica Benton; her rock-star alter ego, Jem; her sister, Kimber; and their friends Aja and Shana. In Marx's pilot episode, Jerrica's inventor father dies, making Jerrica the heir to both his record company, Starlight Music, and an interactive supercomputer called Synergy that can project realistic holograms of people and sounds. When Starlight Music is usurped by the greedy Eric Raymond, manager of a band called the Misfits, Jerrica and her friends decide to start their own band, take back Starlight Music, and unashamedly wear socks with high heels. Synergy's technology allows Jerrica to project a hologram over herself through her earrings, transforming her into the band's mysterious lead vocalist, Jem.

Seeking out a feminist reading of a children's cartoon—or, for that matter, judging its contribution to understandings of women in music—isn't necessarily a rewarding project. But because of its detailed, positive treatment of independent female musicians, *Jem and the Holograms* bears such examination. And indeed, *Jem* both invites and confounds a feminist interpretation, taking several steps toward a subversive encouragement of female ownership of pop and rock music, only to back off into more conservative, traditional territory.

Sisterhood is central to *Jem*'s storyline, supplying both the structure for every episode and the inspiration for the main characters' musical project. After her father's death, Jerrica and her friends live out the rest of the series in Starlight House, a foster home for orphaned girls. As the owners and leaders of Starlight House, Jerrica and the Holograms preside over a homosocially rich, quasifeminist community in which girls are musicians as well as fans. The Holograms are literally a sister act: Not only are Jerrica and Kimber siblings by blood, they adopt Aja and Shana as their sisters as well. Episode three ("Kimber's Rebellion") hangs on Jerrica's refusal to do a TV interview as Jem without her bandmates, while the moral of episode 13 ("The Music Awards, Part I") is that the Holograms shouldn't neglect their foster sisters in order to prepare a light show for their new concert.

Tying together these themes of sisterhood and community is Synergy, the anthropomorphized supercomputer who assumes the role of a kindly and all-powerful parent figure. Whether trapped by kidnappers or marooned on a desert island, the Holograms turn to Synergy when all other hope seems lost. Crucially, Synergy is not a replacement father, but rather a mother who transforms the Holograms family into a kind of matriarchy. And because Synergy blurs the line between human and computer, symbol and individual, she comes to represent a general and feminized potential for action and transformation. When in every episode Jerrica whispers, "Showtime, Synergy!" to activate her magical earrings, it's as if she's invoking some mysterious feminine force within herself.

ONE of *Jem*'s greatest accomplishments was its imagining of a music industry dominated by women, both onstage and behind the scenes. In this world, female musicians are not only the status quo; they are normalized to the point that gender ceases to be an issue. The Holograms, who write their own songs and play their own instruments, are never referred to as a "girl band"—they are simply a band, period. This is remarkable for an era obsessed with calling attention to "girl" musicians and supported by an industry that thrived on "women in rock" magazine covers. Not only are the two biggest bands of the *Jem* world made up entirely of women, so are their competitors. At the Holograms' debut show in episode one, they take the stage following performances by three all-girl bands. But *Jem* also makes a point of creating recurring female characters involved in other realms of the music business. There is Lindsay Pierce, television producer and host of the most important music show in the *Jem* world; Danse, a choreographer; and Vivien Montgomery, a music-video director.

In contrast to the women of *Jem*, the men are not only outnumbered, they're downright dysfunctional. In fact, in the first two seasons every male character is either vil-

JEM BOTH INVITES AND CONFOUNDS A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION.

lainous, confused, inept, emasculated, or marginal to the point of being completely uninteresting. Foremost among these is Eric Raymond, manager of the Misfits. For all his dastardly schemes destined for failure (which include planting bombs, razing apartment buildings, and, in one memorable episode, dismantling the chair lifts at a ski resort), Eric is never really in control of his band. The Misfits, as led by the bitchy, green-haired Pizzazz, put up with their bumbling manager only insofar as he can promote their careers. Eric is assisted by a series of incompetent, interchangeable thugs.

Then there's Rio, Jerrica's hunky, passive boyfriend. He's handy when the Holograms' car needs to be towed away from the edge of a cliff, or when Jem needs to be rescued from a collapsing tower of TV-studio equipment, but his role as savior is overshadowed by Synergy's. Rio's contribution to the show consists mainly of expressing concern for Jerrica, brooding about being left out of Jerrica's life, and kissing Jem in the Holograms' music videos. Jerrica, for the sake of protecting the band, never reveals her secret identity to Rio, and lies to him when asked point-blank if she and Jem are the same person. The show presents this decision not as selfish or immoral, but brave and reasonable, suggesting that music and sisterhood are more important than boyfriends.

At first glance, *Jem* appears to champion many feminist ideals: creative community, female autonomy, and self-direction free from gendered ideas about what is natural or desirable. But having come so far in imagining a parallel musical universe where female bands are the only ones that matter, *Jem* steps away from its feminist center by embracing something all too appropriate for a show born at the apex of the Reagan years: materialism. In the writer's commentary included on the DVD of *Jem*'s first and second seasons, Christy Marx mentions Hasbro's commitment to producing "one big wish-fulfillment show for girls," and no one could accuse them of failing. *Jem* is an endless parade of clothes, makeup, jewelry, cars, houses, and vacation packages, all in keeping with the original theme song's promise of "glamour and glitter, fashion and fame." Like cartoon sister Barbie, *Jem* doesn't just fulfill its little-girl viewers' wishes—it dictates what those wishes should be in the first place. When the Holograms struggle for several episodes in season one to prepare for a Battle of the Bands with the Misfits, they seem much more interested in the mansion promised to the contest's winners than in becoming better musicians. Aside from a few nods to the "magic" of performing, the show persistently equates musical success with money, beauty, and popularity rather than artistic satisfaction.

JEM may have played out within a musical-fantasy girl world, but its characters, plots, and aesthetic were not produced in a political vacuum. In fact, they are the products of a specific and tumultuous moment in pop-music history. Untangling this historical context helps reveal the most virulent way in which *Jem* resists a feminist reading.

By the mid-'80s, it looked like women were finally making good on decades of behind-the-scenes and underground toil, and at last vying with men as equal competitors for video and radio airplay, record deals, and live shows. The year 1982 saw the arrival of the first number-one record written and performed by an all-female band: the Go-Go's *Beauty and the Beat*. In 1986, the Bangles' "Manic Monday" stole the number-two spot on the U.S. Hot 100, to be surpassed by both "Walk Like an Egyptian" and "Eternal Flame." Tina Turner dominated the 1985 Grammys—to say nothing of Best New Artist Cyndi Lauper, or a certain boy-toying Material Girl who had humped the stage at the very first MTV Video Music Awards only a year earlier.

In spite of this new visibility, however, female pop performers interested in pushing boundaries of style, gender, and genre still faced a frosty reception. Maria Raha

introduces her chapter on the '80s in *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* by noting the return to conservatism that straitjacketed popular music in the wake of '70s punk. Citing Phyllis Schlafly's rise to prominence, the Reaganite quashing of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the formation of the Parents' Music Resource Center in 1985, Raha identifies a conservative response to the cumulative upheavals of nearly two decades of feminism on the one hand, and 10 years of punk rock on the other. She also notes that for every Annie Lennox or Chrissie Hynde given mainstream visibility through MTV rotation, there was a Lydia Lunch or Kim Gordon elbowed out of the sightlines of most TV viewers—and young girls.

It was as if, Raha suggests, the mainstream could tolerate the new female force in music only by limiting its public face to a handful of artists deemed wholesome enough for mass consumption. As the '80s progressed, the national political climate conspired with a rising feminist backlash to keep the era's girl-rock role models bubbly, perky, and blithely apolitical. While this trend was certainly gender-blind, stoking the success of kid-friendly, lyrically vapid acts like Wham! and Kajagoogoo as much as the Go-Go's or Bananarama, its effect was particularly damaging for women, to whom late-'70s punk had offered a precious space for social protest and critique. By the time *Jem* hit the airwaves, women were continuing to offer up dissenting musical voices but finding fewer opportunities to make them heard. Punk had long since ceded prominence to new wave and diva-pop, and public tastes inclined toward music without much challenging or political content.

Gillian Gaar documents the same period in *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*. Unveiling the dark side of the *Beauty and the Beat* blitzkrieg, she explains:

> Ironically, once the Go-Go's managed their breakthrough, they found that their success had only led to the creation of a new mold for female performers. Perceptions about women shifted enough to embrace the idea of female musicians—but only if they fit the mold of the Go-Go's. Instead of opening up more possibilities for female performers, the success of the Go-Go's had in some ways narrowed the field.

In their observations, Gaar and Raha allude to the existence of what I like to call the Good-Girl/Bad-Girl Band paradigm. This paradigm, at work since at least the '60s but solidified in the '80s, dictates that all female bands and groups, no matter how complicated and divergent from one another, are either good (that is, safe, marketable, consumable) or bad (in need of underground exile). A good-girl band is flirtatious but not provocative; seductive but not sexual; chatty but not political; quirky but not complicated. In other words, self-identified feminists, punks, and queers need not apply. It was no accident that good-girl prototypes the Go-Go's became popular only after closeting their Los Angeles punk roots, backstage sexcapades, and taste for hard drugs. While the spectacle of sleaze and rebellion sometimes prompted brief bad-girl visibility, as it did with Chrissie Hynde, innovators like the Raincoats and terrors like Wendy O. Williams remained peripheral as mainstream culture struggled to define what was and was not appropriate female behavior in the post-punk, post-Stonewall, post-Steinem public sphere.

It was in the midst of this musical-cultural feud that *Jem and the Holograms* was born. The show represents only one of the channels through which mainstream culture staked its claim in the girl-band question of the '80s, rushing forward to qualify and curtail, if not defuse, the growing power of female musicians. Because while *Jem* encourages young girls to be in bands, it is terribly particular about what kinds of bands those should be. By taking its premise from the rivalry between the Holograms and the Misfits, the series participates in the Good-Girl/Bad-Girl Band paradigm, contrasting in episode after episode the polite, humble, good behavior of the Holograms with the destructive, selfish hedonism of the Misfits. Where the Holograms manage their home for orphans and perform at charity concerts, the Misfits steal cars, flirt with boys, crash yacht parties, and lock up little girls in trunks. In fact, in their out-and-out brattiness, the Misfits resemble ultimate bad-girl band the Runaways, especially their early 1976 lineup: Pizzazz combines Cherie Currie's sex-kitten snark with Joan Jett's swagger, while the Misfits' manager Eric Raymond seems modeled on creepy Runaways mastermind Kim Fowley.

The Holograms, on the other hand, emulate the squeaky-clean, just-wanna-have-fun image of the sanitized Go-Go's, Bananarama, and the Bangles, as well as Cyndi Lauper, Stacey Q, and Kylie Minogue—that is, the good girls. Despite the theme song's promise, Jem and her friends were not "truly, truly, truly outrageous" at all. Resourceful, perhaps, and always up for a keytar solo, but ultimately careful, frugal, and responsible—great babysitter material. The only characters capable of producing outrage were the Misfits, whose trashy outfits, whiny voices, and comparatively abrasive musical sound suggested a punk edge. *Jem* storylines were less than subtle in throwing down the gauntlet. While the Holograms' songs had names like "People Who Care," "Share a Little Bit," and "Love Unites Us," the Misfits' songs included "Outta My

JEM DOESN'T JUST FULFILL ITS LITTLE-GIRL VIEWERS' WISHES–IT DICTATES WHAT THOSE WISHES SHOULD BE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Way," "Winning Is Everything," "I'm Gonna Hunt You Down," and "Gimme, Gimme, Gimme."

Through its positioning of the Misfits as selfish, spoiled villains, *Jem* warned its viewers against the excesses of bad-girlism, coaxing them instead toward the nonthreatening Holograms world of ladylike good citizenship. Lest the warning go unnoticed, after its first season the show's creators replaced the original theme song with a new one targeted at girl viewers. This song declared, "Me and my friends are Jem girls.../Once you're a Jem girl, you're never the same/Come on, come on and be a Jem girl." The message was clear: Either you were a Jem girl, or you were a Pizzazz girl and destined to come to a bad end. The show's moralizing tone was strengthened by the public-service announcements that aired during the commercial breaks of every episode, in which Jem warned kids not to smoke or get into cars with strangers because, as Jem always explained, "Doing the right thing makes you a superstar!" Christy Marx is open about *Jem*'s schoolmarm agenda on the DVD commentary, admitting, "This show was essentially about being good role models for the girls."

Jem and the Holograms' flirtation with feminism runs only so deep. Moving beyond its cartoon predecessor *Josie and the Pussycats*, *Jem* transformed the spunky-girls-in-a-band premise from an excuse for sexy posturing into a celebration of women's musical work and creativity. But in spite of its radical focus on female artistic community and consistent backgrounding of men, the series provided its viewers with an object lesson in good-girl behavior, discouraging them from the kind of brazen antics for which male rock stars are praised, and female musicians scorned. *Jem*'s message of sisterhood, though ambitious, never extended beyond the Holograms' circle of do-gooders; nor did it disarm the good-girl/bad-girl rivalry that supplied each episode with its dramatic tension.

Interestingly, however, for those women who came of age in the '90s during third-wave feminism, the show's legacy has been anything but monolithic. In fact, *Jem*'s original viewers were able to draw their own lessons of musical independence and avoid the' simplified morals of the series. As music critic and writer Julianne Shepherd explained via e-mail:

> [T]hat Jem was an all-girl band who ran its own operations was certainly important.... I think I grew up with this idea that pop music was exclusively the domain of women.... So being "girly" to me was equated with owning the stage, compelling audiences by your bodacious presence (and, failing that, your big hairdo).

For a kids' cartoon show to have forged this kind of link between femininity and power is remarkable, and counters its good-girl/bad-girl tunnel vision. Even more tellingly, feminist writer Becky Smith recalls:

> When I watched *Jem and the Holograms*, I never really identified with goody-two-shoes, everything-to-everyone, head-to-toe pink Jem. The Misfits were the ones in the fishnets, the Misfits listened to no one but themselves.... Those were the girls I would mimic and look up to.... Eighteen years later I don't want to choose between [the Holograms] and the Misfits.

Perhaps this is the real legacy of *Jem and the Holograms*: proof that young girls make choices, decisions, and identifications far more complicated than those represented on TV screens. For these fans and others like them, *Jem* opened up feminist dreams and possibilities, and looked forward to a future where women were free to be outrageous—really and truly.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt lives and writes in Minneapolis, where she maintains the feminist music and culture blog Dancing With Myself (pogoprincess.blogspot.com).

music

CAMERA OBSCURA
Let's Get Out of This Country {MERGE RECORDS}

On *Let's Get Out of This Country*, Camera Obscura parlay their love of classic girl groups, Northern Soul, and Smiths-era mope-rock into sparkling, snarky songs, expanding the scope of their previous two releases with stronger, more confident writing. Their pleasantly twee past material was more than satisfying, but *Country* reveals a band that's matured into an orchestral-pop powerhouse: Singer Tracyanne Campbell's placid, bittersweet voice soars and sighs earnestly while her bandmates craft rippling waterfalls of echo-laced guitar, muted drums, and dramatic string arrangements. Album opener "Lloyd, I'm Ready to Be Heartbroken" pokes fun at Lloyd Cole & the Commotion's pretentious 1984 call for intellectualism, "Are You Ready to Be Heartbroken?" with an upbeat rhythm and gospel-style keyboard that complement Campbell's cheeky response. "I Need All the Friends I Can Get" employs Ronettes-style handclaps to frame its self-loathing lament. And "If Looks Could Kill" is a magnetic, reverb-heavy charmer: Overlapping melodies, perky guitar, and a cascade of horns provide a cheery tone that belies its tale of heartbreak.

—ANNA BRESHEARS

If music could be worn: Fuzzy sweaters and corduroy pants.
Hangouts: Libraries, garage sales, a bar with an old jukebox.

ROSANNE CASH Black Cadillac {CAPITOL}

When last we heard from Rosanne Cash, she was crooning the haunting duet "September When It Comes" with her famous father. Shortly after that release her mother, her father, and her stepmother, June Carter Cash, all passed on, leaving Rosanne to pen the mournful montage of song and silence that became *Black Cadillac*.

The album opens with a harsh resurrection out of darkness—the title track plays with a bitterness that defies comfort—and then continues with "Burn Down This Town" and "Good Intent," with lyrics that beg for a sense of place even as its scorched-earth anger burns through the landscapes of memory. Cash alternates understated piano harmonies and the heavy strum of acoustic guitar to paint a funereal longing that finds solace only in the expression of its own grief. (She finds redemption on the fifth track, "God Is in the Roses," which rings like a forced march upward from grief—"We're falling like the velvet petals/ We're bleeding and we're torn/But God is in the roses and the thorns.")

The album closes with a 71-second silence—one unmarked beat for every year of her father's life. It's a fitting memorial to the Man in Black, and a moment to remember that the Cash-Carter musical legacy is anything but silent. —JULIE CRAIG

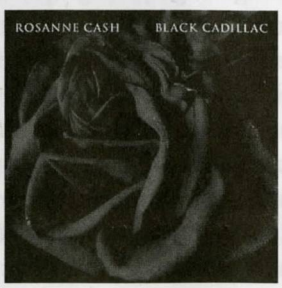
Tastes like: Bitter fruit.
Goes with: The morning after a funeral, when you finally have to get up and go on.

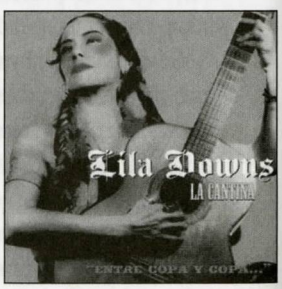
LILA DOWNS La Cantina {NARADA}

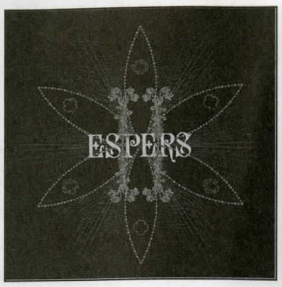
On her fifth full-length album, singer-songwriter Lila Downs returns to her roots: the epic ballads and folk songs of her border-straddling Mexican-American heritage. The opening and closing tracks bookend the album with a Spanish, then English, version of "La Cumbia del Mole," an original tune that captures both the recipe and the sensual witchcraft of the traditional Mexican dish. "Agua de Rosas" wrenches emotion out of lines like "You are a twig of rosemary/Mother of desire/The river sang you," which sounds far more amorous in Spanish: "Eres vara de romero/Madre del deseo/Que el rio canto."

La Cantina, which is far less experimental than her other albums, finds Downs synergizing influences to leap over the boundary between traditional and modern, interjecting electric guitar solos and techno beats between arias that run the full range of her prodigious voice. *La Cantina* showcases Downs' ability not only to capture the spirit of old *corridos* and *cumbias*, but also to write a few of her own—with all the flourishes that make her music both authentic and innovative. —J.C.

File under: Romance.
Goes with: Good friends and a pitcher of sangria.







ESPERS II {DRAG CITY}

"Espers" could be a reference to the goddess-born half-human, half-ghosts of *Final Fantasy VI* or to the parapsychological term for those capable of telepathy. Either definition is appropriate for a band responsible for recording such otherworldly neo-folk. Lest anyone think Espers is piggybacking on a genre recently popularized by Devendra Banhart, Iron & Wine, and Joanna Newsom, founding member Greg Weeks has been making outsider folk on his own since the late '90s.

With coconspirators Meg Baird and Brooke Sietinsons, Weeks blurs classical and modern elements into avant-garde compositions on *II*. The songs on this Philadelphia trio's second full-length album often morph into something unexpected, the simple, pastoral mood giving way to more complicated rhythms. The instrumental track "Widow's Weed" dangles on the edge of a precipice, the volume waxing and waning as if warning of an evil event. "Children of Stone" features Baird and Weeks's interlocking verses and lush strumming, the relaxed mood ending in large strokes of cascading, dreamy vocals. The Nick Drake–inspired "Mansfield and Cyclops" devolves from quiet meditation into late-'70s space rock and jammy guitar, while the psychedelia of "Dead King" meets a dissonance that's more Sonic Youth than Fairport Convention. While the band's instrumentation and airy vocals draw on old-world folk, their winding song structure and acid-rock tendencies place the music firmly in this century. —A. BRESHEARS

Share this album with: Stoner cousin, ex-hippie boss, English professor.

Bands they totally could have toured with: Amon Düül II, Love, 13th Floor Elevators.

FAUN FABLES The Transit Rider {DRAG CITY}

If there were a Renaissance Faire for indie rockers, Dawn "Faun Fables" McCarthy's melodramatic mutation of mystical folk, art rock, and goth would be a welcome sideshow; her music manages somehow to be both beautiful and fantastically dorky. On *The Transit Rider*, her fourth full-length release, San Francisco–based Faun Fables is as indulgent as ever, crafting ancestral, psychedelic odes with operatic vocals.

The album begins with the sound of subway wheels clicking along their tracks; as they fade into a darkened tunnel, the singer assumes the role of bard, the "transit rider" responsible for relating the tales that follow. McCarthy and frequent collaborator Nils Frykdahl (Sleepytime Gorilla Museum) evoke a medieval atmosphere with haunting arrangements of 12-string guitar, glockenspiel, clarinet, flute, kettle drums, and shadowy storytelling akin to that of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Because of their poetic, narrative style and minor-key melodies, most of the songs require one's full attention. *The Transit Rider*'s more accessible offerings stand alone as fine examples of gorgeous balladry: The ethereal "Earth's Kiss" (a song McCarthy recorded with her mother) and lilting "Dream on a Train" lack the overblown theatricality that weighs down much of the album. For those who long for red crushed-velvet capes, heavy ales, and lovers lost at sea, *The Transit Rider* should offer a satisfying experience. —A. BRESHEARS

Like-minded ladies: The Tuna Helpers, Rasputina, Coco Rosie.

Soundtrack to: Those weird modern-dance shows your friend in the performance studies department always drags you to.

HOT CHIP The Warning {ASTRALWERKS/EMI}

If imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, then Hot Chip—whose second full-length album is a whirlwind tour through three decades of pop, soul, and electronica dance history—wins the Sweet Talker of the Year Award. While the British quintet throw plenty of their own personality into the mix, their tracks lean heavily toward reinterpreting and reinventing old genres. "Over and Over" is a standout romp of rollicking guitars and dancehall beats, topped with a psychedelic gospel organ/spelling-bee breakdown. "Look After Me" is pure Marvin Gaye, emotive keyboarding and soul rhythms included. The aural field trip continues on to covers of Al Green, Prince, Blondie, the Rolling Stones, and the Eurythmics.

Style-hopping alchemy aside, the band's true strength lies in their deft manipulations of sound and texture. Alexis Taylor's smooth-as-silk falsetto lends credibility to the group's white-boy soul numbers, while Joe Goddard's practiced monotone balances between creepy and calming. Nowhere is this better showcased than in the title track, a glitchy two-step dance song built around digital chirps and Goddard's chilling, sweet threat that "Hot Chip will break your legs/Snap off your head." Like the LP's other head-bobbers, this one capitalizes on the band's not-so-secret weapon: an ideal blend of the familiar with the unexpected. —CONNIE HWONG

Sounds like: AM radio on scan mode.

Soundtrack for: Entertaining your grandma and your friends at the same time.

JOAN JETT & THE BLACKHEARTS Sinner {BLACKHEART RECORDS}

Maybe the elegance in the sentiment "relax while I pound your ass" escapes casual analysis, but for Joan Jett the blunt attitude enables her to stand out in a sea of her own protégés. Even rarer for a songwriter with 30-plus years under her belt, Jett's latest release avoids self-indulgence; *Sinner* sidesteps the Twinkie philosophy of songwriting—different snack, same old taste—without losing touch with the pared-down thunder that once made her a household name, albeit in slightly odder households.

Indeed, since her brief beatification in the '90s as a forerunner of riot grrrl, Jett's most recent major exposure came from a USO tour, and while her antiburka sentiment proved unassailable, her choice of venue raised a few eyebrows. On *Sinner*, she wastes no time debunking any accusations of sympathy for the devil/monkey/president: Opener "Riddles" takes a characteristically muscular Blackheart beat and states, "Every day's a struggle/'Cos they had to pick a fight." Jett's politicking also encompasses issues of sexuality, with inspired covers of Sweet's "A.C.D.C." and the Replacements' "Androgynous," as well as originals like the above-quoted L7-ish grind of "Fetish." Though you can hear echoes of Jett's followers on *Sinner* (not least due to Kathleen Hanna's presence on a number of songs), an artist as beautifully uncontrived and spare as Jett can't help but, in paying homage to her successors, end up epitomizing herself.

—C.A.B. FREDERICKS

Why my mom likes it: Tough rhythms, strong hooks, perpetually youthful idealism.

The only reason I don't like it: Seriously—my mom likes it.

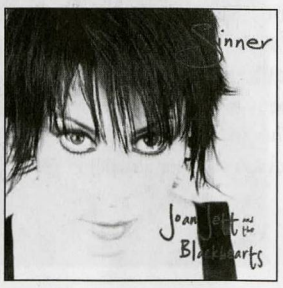
MARK KNOPFLER AND EMMYLOU HARRIS All the Roadrunning {WARNER BROTHERS}

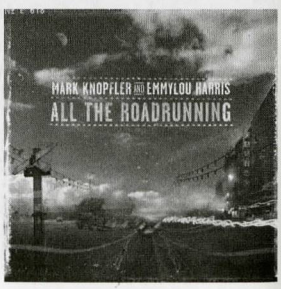
Ex–Dire Straits frontman Mark Knopfler may not be as famous as Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton, or other aging Brits fond of lionizing the stories and sounds of Americana, but he's always had a melancholy elegance those other guys can't touch. Thus, it's disappointing that his new team-up with Emmylou Harris, the grande dame of alt-country, is so often cloying and dull.

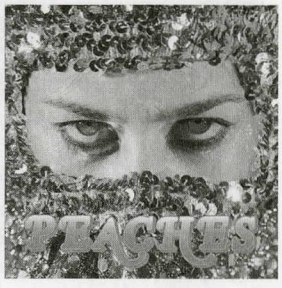
I place the blame for this solely on Knopfler—he not only wrote 10 of the album's 12 songs, but he also co-produced the album. Plus, to her credit, Harris penned one of the better tunes, "Love and Happiness," a trellis upon which her and Knopfler's vocals climb like entwined flowers. Often, however, their duets sound unremarkable, since they both have such soft voices. The sense that this album could have been composed by a computer in Nashville is compounded by the fluffy relationship sentiments and "on the road" settings on many of the songs. A couple examples of Knopfler at his best, however, redeem this project, especially the eerie "I Dug Up a Diamond" and "Beyond My Wildest Dreams," with its tremulous echoes of "Walk of Life." Still, considering his tepid duets with Gillian Welch on a previous album, it might be best if Knopfler didn't revisit this genre. If he does, I hope he teams up with Lucinda Williams; lyrically, they're a perfect fit, and his wooden-floor voice would warm under the sour sunbeam of her drawl. —JIM BURLINGAME

File under Treacly Misstep along with: Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising*.

Soundtrack for: Those '80s commercials for International Coffee, featuring a woman on a sunlit window seat, wistfully stirring.







METALLIC FALCONS Desert Doughnuts {VOODOO-EROS}

From the look of the album art, I was a little hesitant to listen to a collective who describe themselves as "soothsayers of nocturnal activities...transspecied from desert falcons." I imagined I'd hear some artsy, strange-for-the-sake-of-being-strange, headache-inducing noise. Having said this, I can happily concede that, while this Brooklyn duo's mystique is inexplicably odd—i.e., costumes, stories, and creepy spoken interludes—Metallic Falcons' *Desert Doughnuts* is absolutely lovely.

Sierra Casady (of CocoRosie fame)—who originally trained to be an opera singer—and counterpart Matteah Baim have described their debut album as "an emotional journey of Dungeons & Dragonsesque proportions." With its soft, lilting melodies and echoing, indecipherable vocals underlaid with metal-tone guitar or meandering riffs and muted drums, *Desert Doughnuts* truly sounds otherworldly. A cappella strains of operatic arias interspersed with whispered chants and harmonies lend to it a strange feeling of eavesdropping on some carefully constructed, very personal world. Appearances by Devendra Banhart and Antony of Antony & the Johnsons add yet another layer of beauty and intrigue. The sound carries like an old record playing somewhere in the distance. —ANDREA BUSSELL

Play during: Summer rain in the late afternoon.
Might also be used for: Secret rituals performed in a forest (or backyard).

MOJAVE 3 Puzzles Like You {4AD}

There's no denying that Neil Halstead is a great songwriter. Sure, he may have written some bland tunes since Mojave 3's stunning 1996 debut, *Ask Me Tomorrow*, but he's never really written a bad one. Still, after the history of ambition and innovation of Slowdive (his previous band featuring current counterparts Rachel Goswell and Ian McCutcheon), the predictability of the last few Mojave 3 records has been disconcerting, almost enough to make me trade them in for something new.

Fortunately, *Puzzles Like You* breaks out of this rut to combine the band's best elements in a new way. Charming compositions reminiscent of 1960s pop take such precedence that longtime fans will likely question whether this is the same band they knew in 1996, but these livelier songs combine past motifs—the meandering twang of *Excuses for Travelers*, the hushed ambience of *Spoon and Rafter*, and the drowsy, mellow beauty of *Ask Me Tomorrow*—all at once. But, overall, one familiar trait is decidedly missing from *Puzzles Like You*: the sadness that Halstead's songs are usually brimming with. Even slower tracks, like "Most Days," that channel the band's beautiful but melancholy early sound seem somehow lighter and more hopeful. However slight, the change is a good one—if for no other reason than to show that Mojave 3 can still be surprising. —A. BUSSELL

Sounds like: Brian Wilson covering Belle & Sebastian.
Best listened to: First thing in the morning.

PEACHES Impeach My Bush {XL}

For a former schoolteacher from Toronto, Peaches has an uncanny ability to tap into the goofy hip hop legacy of DJ Jazzy Jeff while channeling the mix-master menace of Missy Elliott. While she still can't resist the occasional gag song (the title track is good for about one listen, and eminently skippable thereafter), *Impeach My Bush* pushes Peaches over the cusp of sex siren/novelty act and into the domain of more established female rappers like Princess Superstar.

Hers is an imperfect science: "Boys Wanna Be Her" unites '70s power chords and thumping bass beats with a fierce, hissy rhyme style, and "Stick It to the Pimp" is a raunchy, rapid-fire rap laden with digital booty beats that would make Lil' Kim proud. Less successful is "Two Guys (For Every Girl)": Despite Peaches' clever lyrics and compellingly dirty dance beats, the song squanders guest vocalist Beth Ditto's sizable talents, relegating her to a robotic backup-singer role.

Peaches' strongest songs are those with clear rock roots. The album's forte is "You Love It," featuring a blisteringly brilliant cameo from Joan Jett, who leads the way through a fist-pumping anthem celebrating bad girls and worse behavior: a perfect summation of Peaches herself. —C.H.

Perfect with: Cristal in the club or PBR on the porch.
Future coconspirators: M.I.A. and Lady Sovereign.

SHONEN KNIFE Genki Shock! {GLUE FACTORY}

For a band whose touring drummer just passed away, Shonen Knife certainly maintains a chipper attitude. Admittedly, the band recorded *Genki Shock!* before Mana Nishiura's death, but the lack of even an acknowledgment in the liner notes gives Shonen Knife's trademark wide-eyed ingenuousness an air of creepy pathos.

Locked into a Technicolor cuteness throughout their 20-plus-year career, the Japanese now-duo of Atsuko and Naoko Yamano could be easily dismissed as avatars of stereotypical Japanese kitsch-pop. But when you assume, you make an ass out of Puffy Amiyumi: Shonen Knife embraces punk purism as stridently as any mohawked mall rat, taking a vintage '70s buzzsaw guitar attack to such benign topics as e-mail advertising, compulsive map reading, and denim. *Genki Shock!* isn't as consistently infectious as their halcyon work; when founding Knife Michie Nakatani retired in 1999, she took with her a lusher pop sensibility, and the Yamanos' pared-down approach can come off as either ineffectually twee ("My Magic Glasses") or blandly rote ("Rock Society"). But the band can still strike sparks: "Spider House" embellishes a perfect Buzzcocks riff with spare but gorgeous harmonies, and "Giant Kitty" sounds like *Endless Summer* on Herbal Essences. Even better are the songs where the band stops being inoffensive and starts getting bizarre, such as the veggiesexual lurk of "Broccoli Man," or the you've-got-to-be-kidding AC/DCism of "The Queen of Darkness." In their standout moments, Shonen Knife could almost be commenting on their own career as something simple, innocent, and ultimately—sometimes tragically—twisted. —C.A.B.F.

Goes great with: Fanta-and-diesel cocktail benders.
Endorsed by: IADJRCD (International Association for Dressing Joey Ramone's Corpse in Drag).

SHOW ME THE PINK Velocipedomania {CHAINSAW}

Back in the dark ages of Everclear and the Spice Girls, indie rockers refused to dance. The perception that moving one's body semiskillfully to the rhythm was a grotesque, meat-marketish, ickily Them behavior pervaded the underground. Then suddenly, punk gleefully glommed onto disco and bands adopted the cynical, mainstream lyrical conceits of making out, hustling coke, and doing the hustle.

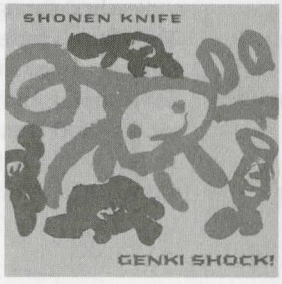
Portland's Show Me the Pink came of age amid this new-world shuffle, but unlike the many radio-ready, blank-eyed privates of the Joy Division, they approach the almighty beat with a sense of excitement, immediacy, and chaos. The seven-song, keyboard-driven *Velocipedomania* begins with the incongruous exhortations "The rock show is inside/The fashion show is outside," and "Human-powered vehicles/Velocipedomania!" These non sequiturs are SMTP's point; for every dumb, Fannypackish adoration of cars—well, bikes—that go boom, there's a riot like "Wrinkle" or "Nightmare Collectors," with three women vocalizing at once, smashing speak-singing, screaming, and actual melody into a sound that easily makes up in energy what it lacks in musical skill. As expected for a band whose name is the key to a pornocopia of Google results, there is a hollow sex song. However, *Velocipedomania*'s finale, "The Beach Cruisin' Crew," debunks any accusations of soullessness via a melody as catchy as a schoolyard taunt, proving that vitality and playfulness satisfy in a way hedonism only pretends to. —C.A.B.F.

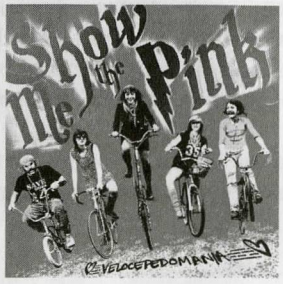
Soundtrack to: Cutting rugs, popping tires, crushing crushes.
Other things that go boom: Cherry bombs, *Mythbusters*, you falling over drunk.

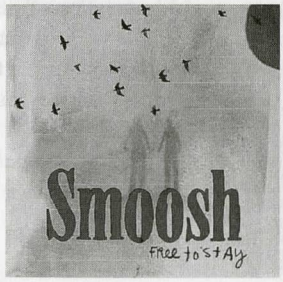
SMOOSH Free to Stay {BARSUK RECORDS}

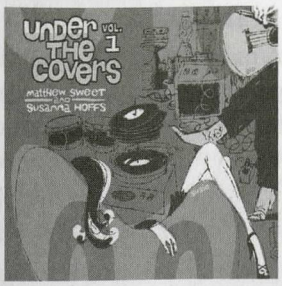
Seattle sister act Smoosh is the kind of phenomenon you might have to hear to believe. Of course, you've probably heard of them: The tween protégés of Death Cab for Cutie's Jason McGerr released their first album, *She Like Electric*, at the ages of 10 and 12, and subsequently earned themselves a 2005 nomination for *Spin*'s Band of the Year. Sure, you might take one look at these lanky, cheerful kids and assume it's all just a bunch of hype, but that's only a reflex—listen once and Smoosh will win you over.

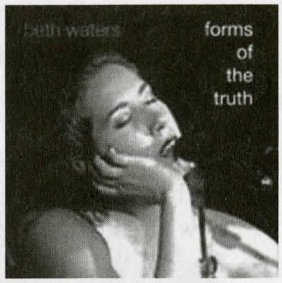
Free to Stay bursts open with kid-sister Chloe's fervent rock backbeat and Asya's bouncy keyboard and "nah nah nah" chorus on "Find a Way," setting an exuberant tone that never really rests, even through the album's many mood and tempo changes. On each song—standouts include "I Would Go" and "Gold"—Asya trills and twirls her low, girl-











ish voice unselfconsciously, achieving sophisticated line-by-line variations that most pop singers can only dream about. It's that kind of risk taking that gives the album its sense of genuine wonder. This is not kid music dressed up to sound 25, nor is it cloying in its naiveté. *Free to Stay* offers a fresh, brilliant sound that's true to its source: two extremely talented girls who mingle their simple love of music with a melodic sophistication that's sure to appeal to even the most discerning grown-ups.

—JULIANA TRINGALI

If bands could be movies: Summer blockbuster meets Oscar-nominated indie.

Appropriate expression of impending musical crush: Trace picture off CD jacket, affix to bedroom wall.

MATTHEW SWEET AND SUSANNA HOFFS
Under the Covers Vol. 1 {SHOUT FACTORY}

On this collection of duets, unreformed pop junkies Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hoffs put their flair for incandescent arrangements to work covering 15 nuggets made famous (or at least made) in the '60s and '70s. Both the CD's swinging Ed Fotheringham cover art and the flawless pedigree of its creators—Hoffs brought the Bangles to MTV stardom in the '80s; Sweet has been an undefeated power-pop heavyweight since 1991's *Girlfriend*—promise a listen that's half guilty pleasure, half blissful retro throwback.

Unfortunately, the results are almost too polished to be truly satisfying. You know that "Kid Jams" series, where top-10 hits are recorded by eager 8-to-10-year-olds singing in unison, essentially draining all the angst and sex out of the songs with the cheerful, unaffected tones of childhood? It's kind of like that. Hoffs, in particular, has a voice that's so bloodless in its perfection that it makes a mockery of the narcotic, sweetly dazed Velvet Underground classic "Sunday Morning" and turns Neil Young's wistful "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere" into a near-hoedown. She does better with the Linda Ronstadt/Stone Poneys chestnut "Different Drum," but did that really need any improving on?

And, ultimately, that's the thing about *Under the Covers*: A little karaoke is nice now and then, but a Beatles tune reworked by two musicians who worship the Beatles is never going to be all that exciting. I'd rather see Sweet and Hoffs venture outside their shag-carpeted comfort zone and into the murk of, say, metal: Black Sabbath's "Sweet Leaf" might sound great recast in shimmering riffs and sleigh-bells. Well, there's always Vol. 2. —ANDI ZEISLER

Will inspire you to seek out: Classic albums by Marmalade, Love, and the Zombies.

Give it to: Your boomer parents, who still like to throw on a Beach Boys LP and boogie after a few G&TS.

BETH WATERS Forms of the Truth {SELF-RELEASED}

With two studio albums, a live CD, and a couple of soundtrack appearances under her belt, Bay Area–based Beth Waters brings a maturing sound to her third album. Luxuriating in a voice like spun silk draped over bare shoulders, Waters commands a sound that hints at the angsty chanteuses of the Lilith Fair era but bursts out with a storm of emotion and talent all her own.

The album opens with a dark musing on hope and escape, with the narrator contemplating running from an abusive home, held back only by the sister she'd leave behind. This theme of finding your fear and meeting it head-on runs throughout the album with tracks like "Lifeguard" and "White Dogs in the Moonlight" ("Maybe she found out he was in love with someone else/Maybe she realized she had never loved herself"). The cheery side of discovering that love isn't such a bad thing after all (as in the up-tempo "Afraid of Love") is gleefully juxtaposed against gloomily wandering piano lines and percussion-driven torment in "Dark Road to Hell." Running the range of passion's terrain, Waters has a voice for every upbeat impulse and downbeat desire from sunrise to sunset. —J.C.

Sounds like: Falling in love, falling out of love, and falling asleep to exhausted dreams.

Goes with: Running away from your adolescence and headlong into adulthood.

(*Continued from page 45*) destructive in itself, responsibility for how that shift affects the lives of its original inhabitants must fall somewhere. Debunking the airbrushed version of sex work that so seductively contributes to the decision of middle-class girls to enter it is a tiny beginning of a bigger truth. I don't know how to convince our nation's public to choose a bitter truth over a sweet concoction—especially when the sweet has the big bucks of commerce to float it—any more than I know how to convince a person to toss out their television in favor of the (struggling!) novel. But I do know that honesty rings pretty loud in a crowd of half-truths.

That said, there isn't always money in truth-telling. It's easy to refuse responsibility when it isn't solely yours to assume, but to ignore a cultural movement of which you are a part—whether as a mover, a spectator, or a consumer—is to tacitly endorse it. Like those yuppies in vintage wardrobes who have poured into formerly dicey neighborhoods, the middle-class colonization of the indoor sex industry is just another case of gentrification: making the neighborhood safer for commerce by pushing the danger further into the fringes, including those most victimized by it. The gap between economic classes within the sex industry is in tidy accordance with our country's economic character, with the money and social clout on one side and the working class on the other. If repairing this divide is a concern of middle-class sex workers, they should not mistake their individual success within the industry as synonymous with that of such greater goals. The media representation—culled from such isolated personal success stories—of only this narrow, privileged version of sex work fuels a distorted public conception and is a complacent rather than progressive role for middle-class sex workers.

However, the question remains whether it is actually a concern of theirs. The heroine of Tracy Quan's books (made in the writer's own image) is decidedly anti–sex work activism; she is interested only in making money, looking good, and fulfilling her housewifely duties. If the goals of those white, middle-class, educated women who grew up idolizing the plucky heroines of *Pretty Woman* and *Flashdance* are along similar lines, then little stands in their way. If, however, they are interested in exercising the power that the current cultural atmosphere and its subsequent media attention could afford them, they'll need to talk about more than sex tips and brand names; they will have to be more than—in Camille's words—good girls who like to do bad things.

Melissa Febos lives in Brooklyn with her dog. She attends the graduate writing program at Sarah Lawrence College, and is at work on both a novel and a memoir about her four-year experience as a professional dominatrix. She can be contacted at mebosfebos@gmail.com.

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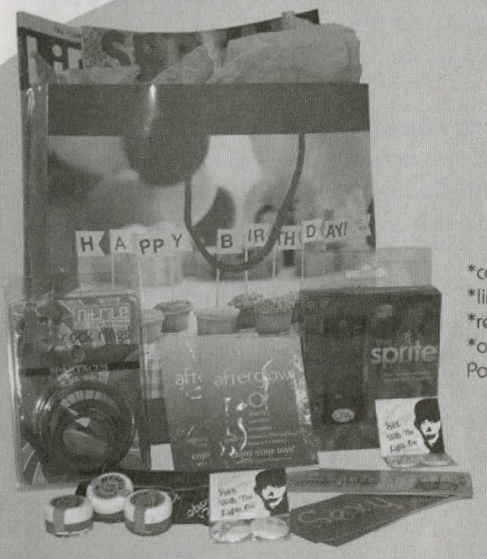

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ANNALS OF MALE NUDITY

By Juliana Tringali

Whether they're splayed across the screen during a sex scene or peeking over the sheets for postcoital dialogue, breasts have come to signify a filmmaker's supposed honesty, as if to say, "We're all adults here, check out these tits." Besides the obvious fact that mainstream sex scenes are severely limited by heterocentrism, sizeism, and ageism, a glance at which body parts are being shown leaves us with one burning question: Where's the beefcake?

If there is a male equivalent to the female breast, it has to be the phallus. Not only does the penis endure similar scrutiny based on size and shape, but, like the bosom, it has come to represent a gendered essence. If male genitalia still carry more taboo, it's because our culture allows maleness to remain veiled, whereas women's bodies are always on display.

Unlike female nudity, which is shown almost exclusively in sexual situations (generally with men), when male nudity occurs it enjoys a variety of settings and a range of dramatic effects that the overexposed breast doesn't dare hope for. Herein, some of the ways we see naked men, and a few suggestions on how nudity can achieve equal treatment.

ARTY/SEXY/COOL

If breasts give a sex scene some creative cred, then a penis can catapult it to the realm of art itself. In erotically charged films like *The Piano* or *The Pillow Book*, unabashed full-frontal shots suggest that the filmmaker is sacrificing mainstream approval in order to stay true to artistic vision. Of course, when male nudity fails to impress, it looks less like art and more like bad taste (see *The Brown Bunny*, in which director/lead actor Vincent Gallo receives fellatio in close-up). **What we'll need for nude equity:** Slow pans of the reclining (male) nude; women shocking their virginal male lovers by aggressively exposing themselves.

SHOWER POWER

Bare-bottomed men can also find sanctuary from sexuality in the locker room. Here, men being comfortably nude depicts not only camaraderie (*Carnal Knowledge*) but also an idealized, confident masculinity. Take the locker-room scene in *Any Given Sunday*, in which Cameron Diaz shakes the hand of a naked athlete who doesn't bother to cover up. When a men's locker room is presented to a female audience (*Steel Magnolias*), it is with the conceit that female characters enjoy the setting because the naked men are capable of ignoring their gazes. This is a rare example where a failure to acknowledge the female viewer is played to be arousing in itself. **What we'll need for nude equity:** Groups of men changing clothes in slow-mo, with special attention to nude hair brushing and aftershave application.

A FROLICKING GOOD TIME

Male nudity in the great outdoors is used, nonsexually, to show a character's unselfconscious connection with the land (*Dances with Wolves, Clan of the Cave Bear*). When groups of men get nude together (especially near bodies of water), they tend to frolic (*Gallipoli, Room with a View*), illustrating fraternity and good will. Of course, this ignores viewers who would look at men as objects of desire, assuming instead that, unlike the naked woman, the naked man can function asexually. **What we'll need for nude equity:** Pantsless pillow fights; cameras lingering rhapsodically on rippling buttocks, some bare-assed snuggling.

STARK COMEDY

In comedies, female nudity is common, but always in a sexual context. Male nudity, however, is played as a joke in itself (Will Ferrell's streak in *Old School* being one of many examples). It can also underscore the humor in odd situations (Ewan McGregor getting thrown out of an apartment in *Trainspotting*) or express a character's comic idiosyncrasies (Robin Williams dancing around Central Park in *The Fisher King*). Someday, when women's nudity is given mainstream license to evoke meanings other than just arousal, I hope we can all look back at these naked double standards and laugh. **What we'll need for nude equity:** Comedies in which groups of women (say, sororities or athletic teams) go ga-ga at the frequent appearance of naked men; the old giant-underwear gag when one of the ladies gets it on with a fat dude.

EWAN AND HARVEY

Then there's pretty much any film starring Ewan McGregor (*The Pillow Book, Trainspotting, Velvet Goldmine, Young Adam*) or Harvey Keitel (*Fingers, The Piano, Bad Lieutenant, Holy Smoke*). No discussion of male full-frontal nudity is complete without a tip of the hat to these willy-waving pioneers. **Nude equity:** Accomplished.


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