Fall 1992

Feminist Scholarship Review

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Trinity College

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Trinity College

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Feminist Scholarship Review

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Letter From the Editor
Women’s Center: Reviewed Sources
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Gallows-Hill Bookstore: Additional Sources
To the Recipients of Feminist Scholarship Review

When I decided to review the twentieth anniversary issue of Ms. for this issue of FSR, I also decided to write an editorial about the differences between the original magazine and the "new" Ms., the publication which resulted from a 1990 decision to produce a document that is free of advertising and the interests that advertising represents. My plan was to interview people who had read both and ask them to compare the two. I'd summarize my myriad interviews and be able to write on the subject with the wisdom of hundreds (well, maybe scores) of informed readers to back me up. I spent my time at coffee machines, lunch lines and office doors asking the question: "Have you read Ms. both prior to and since September, 1990?" I found only one person who had been such a loyal fan: Diane Martell, director of the Trinity College Women's Center.

Diane believes that the new Ms., the Ms. that doesn't depend for its survival on advertising interests, has been enabled to include more perspectives and to enlist scholars, activists and writers, with greater freedom. I, too, find the new Ms. to be a fuller, richer magazine, still commercial, but free of the "slickness" that made me stop reading it several years ago.

What becomes apparent in reviewing current women's magazines is a split in commercial magazines between the "women on the go" magazines in which pay equity, child care for working women and sexual harassment in the workplace tend to be the only legitimate issues and those magazines, such as Ms., in which the explication of issues for women of all classes and nationalities is seen as an essential goal. I have reviewed both types of magazines in this issue of FSR, the new Ms. and the "women on the go" magazine called "Working Woman". I don't intend to make an evaluative statement about either "type", but with reading time in such short supply, it's worth knowing what perspective you'll find and what might be included or left out when you open the cover.

Both in the editorial and in my review of Ms. I encourage people--people who read the old version and gave up, as well as people who haven't yet been introduced to Ms.--to read the current edition of Ms. It is a journal that started out as a commercial venture, succeeded, and then found the energy and the courage to shed an image that was getting worn out at the least, faithless and jaded at the worst. It is a journal that took a risk with its very existence in order to re-establish a finer vision of itself. A rather noble action, I'd say: important, and worthy of support.

---Deborah Rose O'Neal
The Twentieth Anniversary Issue of *Ms.* celebrates the history of much more than its own existence. Articles about feminist fashion (a funky cartoon version of this topic) and the National Organization for Women as well as histories of the feminist print media (in the form of abstracts), of feminist bookstores and of the feminist art movement all chronicle two decades of disappointment and joy, doubt and elation in crucial areas of feminist accomplishment. Editorials by Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem present a pictorial and prose history of *Ms.* itself. The perspective is keen and is communicated in an engaging style.

Neither is the present neglected in this issue of *Ms.* One time articles such as Maxine Waters' response to the Rodney King incident/aftermath as well as recurring sections such as the one on international issues that effect women, including virginity testing in Turkey and sexual harassment in Japan, are clearly topical. An article called "Radical Heterosexuality" is refreshing both in style and content. This article by Naomi Wolfe begins: "All over the country, millions of women have a secret indulgence. By day, they fight gender injustice; by night, they sleep with men. Is this a dual life? A core contradiction?" Finding the answers is worth the reading time!

The *Ms.* of 1992 is a new *Ms.* Two years ago, *Ms.* went to a no advertising format in an effort to be free of the influences and subtle inhibitions that catering to the outside interests inevitably brings. The result is a "magabook" that is worth looking over, no matter what your experience with the old *Ms.* While the style of writing still reflects *Ms.*'s status as a commercial magazine, the articles are more scholarly and avowedly radical. The disadvantages of this move is that the cost of this magazine has inevitably increased. The advantage is that one can read about complex issues covered in few other journals, but written to carefully appeal to a wide range of readers. That is: non-technical, accessible, easy-to-read, maybe even humorous.

Although much has changed about the magazine over the years, I found one thing to be the same. Whenever I read *Ms.*, I feel as though my needs and interest are in the foreground: my personal needs and my needs as a member of a community of women. A warning about hair care products directed towards black women, a poem called "Persephone Abducted," information on the latest research about the most fortuitous days of the menstrual cycle for breast cancer surgery, a short story by Ursula LeGuin. I don't know how they do it but I feel taken care of when I read *Ms.* Still. After all these years. And that feels good.

---Deborah Rose O'Neal
Working Woman
August, 1992

Working Woman is a commercial magazine which targets the population for whom it is titled. The emphasis is either on moving upward either into the ranks of or on through the ranks of white collar business professions. Of the five feature articles in this issue, two are on job security, one is on fashion (“how to stay stylish with integrity”), one is a character study of a successful career woman (in this case, Hillary Clinton) and one has to do with a woman’s rights/working conditions issue: discrimination against pregnant workers both before and after maternity leave. Articles are written for a quick, easy read by a great range of readers. While the topics are directed toward a specific audience—women of ambition who have made their careers in the world of business—the writing contains neither technical terms nor difficult language. Meaning is clear; the message is a straightforward one.

Working Woman’s report on pregnancy discrimination provides some disheartening information about the subject. For the first time in years, the number of complaints that have been brought before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has risen. In addition, the EEOC, which is the federal enforcement agency most often used in discrimination cases, rarely rules in favor of the woman bringing in the complaint. In fact, EEOC ruled to support a pregnant woman against her employer only 3% of the time! The article elaborates on the subject, delineating the increasing subtle ways in which discrimination can be brought to bear to the detriment of pregnant employees. The article is discouraging in the end, but it has enough of a statistical bent to inform the reader rather thoroughly on this subject. The theory is, it’s good to know what you’re up against when your back is to the wall.

Working Woman speaks to a specific audience. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its advertising. Since the review of Ms. in this issue of FSR includes wholehearted support of a magazine which has chosen to go forward without advertising, the contrast between these two magazines presents itself as quite prominent. Cigarette ads, car ads and more—soap, luggage, toothpaste, diet foods. This is a part is what you get when you flip through the pages of Working Woman. But, you also get a mainstream magazine which doesn’t pretend to be anything else. A magazine which addresses mainstream issues from a woman’s point of view. Nothing radical here, one would think, but, in the letter to the editor, Lynn Povich states, “Government and business cannot continue to pit our children against our work so that one or the other suffers.” I suppose I can read between the wine ads and the cosmetics ads to support that sentiment!

---Deborah Rose O'Neal
Celebrating 20 Years of Ms. Magazine

Alison Bechdel
Marilyn Chin
bell hooks
Patricia Ireland
Maxine Kumin
Ursula K. Le Guin
Arlene Raven
Gloria Steinem
Lindsey Van Gelder
Maxine Waters
Naomi Wolf
Virginia Woolf
The First Lady With A Career?

Hillary Clinton Talks About What She Will—and Won’t—Do In the White House

Making Yourself Indispensable

Getting the Most From A Performance Review

Why Pregnancy Discrimination Is On the Rise
FEATURES

THE FIRST LADY WITH A CAREER?
Hillary Clinton is running the toughest campaign of all: convincing voters that having a career, a child and an agenda for change is good for America
By Patricia O'Brien ........................................ 44

YOU'RE PREGNANT? YOU'RE OUT
A special report on why discrimination, both before and after maternity leave, is on the rise—and why companies are getting away with it. Plus: What to Do if It Happens to You, and more
By Diane Harris ........................................ 48

MAKING YOURSELF INDISPENSABLE
How the smartest players survive—and flourish—in the era of conspicuous cutbacks
Plus: Survival strategies from Sandra Kurtzig, Michael Eisner, Kay Koplovitz and others
By Barbara Hetzer .......................................... 52

SURVIVING THE SURVIVOR SYNDROME
Is anxiety about your job security affecting your work performance?
By Patrick Houston ......................................... 56

TRAPPED IN TIME
Life moves on, but your look doesn't. How to stay stylish with integrity
By Elizabeth Sporkin ........................................ 62

WEEKENDS

MAKING SUMMER LOOKS LAST
Beauty and style notes to bring you effortlessly into fall
By Nima Makhni ............................................... 67

THE LAST DETAIL
Five August-to-September accessories that bring a simple summer look into focus ........................................ 68

BEAUTY IN THE BAG
Last-minute packing tips to save your skin, hair and peace of mind ........................................ 70

DEPARTMENTS

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR ................................. 6

LETTERS ................................................................ 12

BUSINESS BUZZ
TV Women Get a Word in Edgewise; The New Old-Boys Clubs; Getting Your Way; and more ........................................ 15

MANAGING
Pumping Up Your Staff's Productivity: Managing to get more results with fewer resources
By Andrew S. Grove ........................................ 22

HOW I DID IT
Using Friendly Persuasion: Carrie Tibbetts of Microsoft on recruiting managers when the sky isn't the limit ........................................ 27

CAREER STRATEGIES
Making the Most of Your Review: Presenting a good case can set the stage for advancement
By Dr. Adele Scheele .......................................... 30

TECH TALK
From Computer Wimp to Power User
By Hillary Retzig ............................................... 37

YOUR MONEY
Planning Your Parents' Estate: How to make a difficult time a little easier
By Emily Card .................................................. 39

HOTLINE
Weird Places to Network; The Automated Business Card; Layover Luxuries; and Undressed for Success ........................................ 41

OUT-BOX
Political Parties: Turn On, Tune Out
By Gail Collins .................................................. 80

YOU'VE GOT THE LOOK—BUT FROM WHAT YEAR?

WORKING WOMAN • AUGUST 1992
CONTENTS

JOCELYNE A. SCOTT 441 The incredible woman: a recurring character in criminal law

RITA ARDITTI 461 "Recovering identity": the work of the Grandmothers of
M. BRINTON LYKES Plaza de Mayo

MAUREEN HONEY 473 "So far away from home": minority women writers and the
ERICA BURMAN New Woman

CYNTHIA BURACK 487 Identification and power in feminist therapy: a reflexive
history of a discourse analysis

499 A house divided: feminism and object relations theory

WOMEN'S STUDIES

ANNE MULVEY 507 Irish Women's Studies and community activism: reflections

and exemplars

LOUISE MORLEY 517 Women's Studies, difference and internalised oppression

BOOK REVIEWS

MARGARET JACKSON 527 The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism edited by

Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond and

Pornography and Feminism: The Case Against Censorship
by Feminists Against Censorship, edited by Gillian
Rodgerson and Elizabeth Wilson

LYNNE ADRIAN 528 Immigrant Women in the United States: A Selectively

Annotated Multidisciplinary Bibliography compiled by

Donna Gabaccia

MARY MONTAULT 529 Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters by Janet

Goodwyn and Edith Wharton by Katherine Joslin

DIANE LICHTENSTEIN 529 From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of

Aging in Contemporary Literature by Barbara Frey Waxman

JODI ANNE GEORGE 530 Writing for Women: The Example of Woman Reader in

Elizabethan Romance by Caroline Lucas

ALICE PARKER 530 The Tongue Snatchers by Claudine Herrman. Translated by

Nancy Kline

(Continued on inside back cover)

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361
Inside:

Self-help or self-harm?
by Cynthia D. Schrager


More than twenty years after “the personal is political” became a rallying cry, American politics ironically seems obsessed with the personal. Republicans have mounted a campaign that packages anti-feminist and antigay messages as a call for “family values.” Democrats have turned to ever more personal confessions to regain the moral high ground. After the Clinton and Gore acceptance speeches at the Democratic convention, The New York Times quoted Sally Jessy Raphael as saying, “These people belong on talk shows.” Even Gloria Steinem, whose name was once synonymous with second-wave feminism, has written her own self-help confessional. In these strange postfeminist times, two new books on self-help and recovery offer contradictory explanations of what it all means.

I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional, an intelligent, often funny, critique of America’s love affair with recovery, is sure to offend as many readers as it pleases. Ranging broadly and anecdotally over such contemporary phenomena as self-help books (both secular and religious), twelve-step support groups, TV talk-show “testifying” and recovery and New Age workshops, Kaminer takes on the recovery vogue with the same glee and razor-sharp analysis with which Mark Twain took on Christian Science (another self-help movement that, she reminds us, is a forerunner of our current variety). A self-described “skeptical, secular

and more...
CONTENTS

1 Cynthia D. Schrager • I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions by Wendy Kaminer; Women and Self-help Culture: Reading Between the Lines by Wendy Simonds

5 Letters

6 Barbara Belejack • Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil by Nancy Schepen-Hughes

8 Jill Johnston • Women Respond to the Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection edited by Kay Leigh Hagan

9 Elizabeth Alexander • The Hottest Water in Chicago: Family, Race, Time, and American Culture by Gayle Pemberton


11 Carol LeMasters • Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism edited by Elizabeth Reba Weise

13 Joan D. Hedrick • Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman by Joyce Warren

14 Sonia Jaffe Robbins • Mothers Talk Back edited by Margaret Dragu, Sarah Sheard, and Susan Swan

15 Anne Herzog • Out of Silence: Selected Poems by Muriel Rukeyster

16 Jeanne Schinto • Reading between the Recipes: the Culture of the Cookbook

18 Suzanne Sowinska • Nuclear Summer: The Clash of Communities at the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment by Louise Krasniewicz

19 Lillian S. Robinson • Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon by Leonard S. Marcus

21 Ann Russo • Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men edited by Gregory Herek and Kevin T. Berrill

21 Hilda Raz • Two Poems

22 Beverly Lyon Clark • Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers edited by Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepflmacher

24 Susan J. Kraus • The Erotic Silence of the American Wife by Dalma Heyn

25 Gayle Greene • (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe edited by Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow

26 Books Received

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2
Preface

Sagri Dhairyam  "Artifacts for Survival": Remapping the Contours of Poetry with Audre Lorde  229

Constance Coiner  "No One's Private Ground": A Bakhtinian Reading of Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*  257

Iris Berger, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Nancy A. Hewitt  Intersections and Collision Courses: Women, Blacks, and Workers Confront Gender, Race, and Class (Symposium)  283

Dolores Mitchell  Images of Exotic Women in Turn-of-the-Century Tobacco Art (Art Essay)  327

Anne M. Boylan  Textbooks in U.S. Women's History (Review Essay)  351

Helen Duberstein  Prometheus Bound (Poetry)  362

P. Gabrielle Foreman  Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call  369

Sarah S. Hughes  Beyond Eurocentrism: Developing World Women's Studies (Review Essay)  389

Gail Kligman  Abortion and International Adoption in Post-Ceausescu Romania (Commentary)  405

Jan Clausen  The End of History (Fiction)  421

Notes on Contributors  430

Notes and Letters  432

Publications Received  437
Contents

Articles
Eleanor Flexner's Century of Struggle: Women's History and the Women's Movement
LEILA J. RUPP

"From Outrage to Reconciliation": Political Poetry by Salvadoran Women
MARY K. DESHAZER

Resisting "the Dominance of the Professor": Gendered Teaching, Gendered Subjects
PAMELA A. CAUGHIE AND RICHARD PEARCE

Observations
A Separate Violence: The Politics of Shaming
BONNIE MORRIS

Review Essays
Feminist Organizational Politics
KAREN OFFEN

Tipping the Scales: Feminism and the Law
LESLEY J. VAUGHAN

Women in Asia
NUPUR CHAUDHURI

Male Writers and Feminist Criticism
KAREN HORNICK

Reviews
Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory by Nancy Fraser
TUCKER PAMELLA FARLEY, Reviewer

The Politics of Women's Biology by Ruth Hubbard

Science as Social Knowledge by Helen Longino

Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science edited by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth
JANE BRAATEN, Reviewer

For and Against Feminism: A Personal Journey into Feminist Theory and History by Ann Cuthbert

Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community by Shane Phelan

Radical Voices: A Decade of Feminist Resistance from Women's Studies International Forum edited by Renate D. Klein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg

DEBORAH GUSSMAN, Reviewer

Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance by Gloria T. Hull

Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance edited by Maureen Honey

Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 edited by Kathy A. Perkins

How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature edited by Maryemma Graham
VALENTINE LEE, Reviewer

Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook by Paula Gunn Allen
ANNETTE VAN DYEKE, Reviewer

Women's Friendships: A Collection of Short Stories edited by Susan Koppelman
NAN BAUER MAGLIN, Reviewer

Civilized Women: Gender and Prestige in Southeast Liberia by Mary H. Moran
SUSAN E. DIDUK, Reviewer

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady directed by Gail Singer
CAROLYN RAFMAN, Reviewer

NWSA News

Contributors

Announcements

Books Received
**CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn Nakano Glenn</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen A. Mahoney and Barbara Yngvesson</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>The Construction of Subjectivity and the Paradox of Resistance: Reintegrating Feminist Anthropology and Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary G. Dietz and Sonia Kruks</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Introduction: Debating Simone de Beauvoir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda M. G. Zerilli</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret A. Simons</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>Lesbian Connections: Simone de Beauvoir and Feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley Ferris</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>Absent Bodies, Dancing Bodies, Broken Dishes: Feminist Theory, Postmodernity, and the Performing Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard W. McCormick</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>Politics and the Psyche: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Film Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marnia Lazreg</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>Simone de Beauvoir by Deirdre Bair; Beyond &quot;The Second Sex&quot; edited by Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher Goodesough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Lewis</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>Who Cares for the Elderly! by Emily K. Abel; The Feminization of Poverty: Only in America edited by Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg and Eleanor Kremen; Parental Leave and Child Care: Setting a Research Agenda edited by Janet Shibley Hyde and Marilyn J. Essex; State, Private Life and Political Change edited by Lynn Jamieson and Helen Corr; Negotiated Care: The Experience of Family Day Care Providers by Margaret K. Nelson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Stinson</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement by Linda M. Blum; Pay Equity: The Labour-Feminist Challenge by Carl J. Cunio; Just Wages: A Feminist Assessment of Pay Equity edited by Judy Fudge and Patricia McDermott; Just Give Us the Money: A Discussion of Wage Discrimination and Pay Equity by Debra J. Lewis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane L. Wolf</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>Male Bias in the Development Process edited by Diane Elson; Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour edited by Sharon Stichter and Jane L. Parpart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>219</td>
<td>United States and International Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>225</td>
<td>About the Contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>229</td>
<td>Notice to Contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Thanks to Reviewers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Watching publishers' series is a good way to follow new scholarship. The University of North Carolina Press has established the scholarship series Gender & American Culture as a place to publish new studies which combine feminist scholarship and American social history. The studies in this area call attention to gender in action. They challenge us to look more closely at all American experience and to use a variety of documentation, public, private and literary, to broaden conventional understanding.

A look at three recent publications reveal the thrust of this series. Elizabeth Faue's study *Community of Suffering & Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* looks at how expectations about gender shaped the course of the American Labor Movement. Faue argues that for the major part of the 20th century women workers were either ignored or alienated by a labor movement that failed to acknowledge the connections between productive and reproductive labor and the importance of women's work to the family economy. Her focus on the labor movement within a specific community during a tumultuous period leads her to suggest a new social history of the 20th century, one that sees the economic crisis of the 1930s not as an aberration in American progress and growth but as a period which fundamentally altered the relationships between man and woman, labor and capital, citizen and state.

Paula Rabinowitz also looks at the 1930s but through a little-known group of novels written by women who were literary radicals. In *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*, Rabinowitz challenges the common understanding that feminism as an ideology disappeared during the decade of the 1930s. She surveys more than 40 novels, reading them as cultural history, and concludes that the radical women's writing of this period did elaborate female subjectivity. For Rabinowitz, this genre rewrites women into the history of labor and workers into the history of feminism.

One of the most recent titles in this series analyzes poor women of the North Carolina Piedmont during the Civil War. Victoria Bynum's *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* focuses on women marked as defiant, those who protested domestic abuse in the courts, those who engaged in illegal sexual relations, and those who protested the policies of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Bynum became acquainted with these otherwise obscure women by searching local and state court records, public documents, and manuscript collections. Her examination of the effects of these women's social and sexual behavior on the dominant society shows the ways in which power flowed between the public and private spheres. Whether wives or unmarried, enslaved or free, women were active agents of society ordering and dissolution.

---Linda McKinney
The following lists the other titles in the series Gender & American Culture.

**The Limits of Sisterhood: the Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Women's Sphere** by Jeanne Boydston (1988)

**Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century** by Susan Coultrap-McQuinn (1990)

**Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South** by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

**Second Stories: the Policies of Language, Form, and Gender in Early American Fictions** by Cynthia S. Jordan (1989)

**Ladies, Women, & Wenches: Choice & Constraint in Antebellum Charleston & Boston** by Jane H. Pease (1990)


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**FORTHCOMING**

**Made from this Earth: American Women and Nature** by Vera Norwood (1993)

**Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems** by Susan Dyne (1993)

---Linda R. McKinney
Waiting to Exhale, 1990

**Waiting to Exhale** by Terry MacMillan was one novel which I could have waited longer for. Compared to her first two novels, *Mama* (1986) and *Disappearing Acts* (1989), MacMillan did not provide her readers with her usual quality material as expected. It seemed to me the more characters which she involved in her books, the worse they are depicted.

Based on her prior works, MacMillan has had a flair for accurately portraying the "African-American experience," which is difficult to accomplish. However, in *Waiting to Exhale*, she did not offer her readers an original view of the hackneyed storyline of black women complaining either about being used and abused or just totally neglected by good black men. She basically gave superficial descriptions of each character, only scratching the service of what they really are all about. She attempted to illustrate this scenario with four main characters: Bernadine, Robin, Gloria and Savannah. The reader had to distinguish which one of the four main characters was the narrator, which fluctuated from chapter to chapter. Yet, they remained one dimensional paper dolls, never actually being transformed to genuine black Barbies.

*Waiting to Exhale* lacked in-depth character description, among other things. MacMillan disguised these flaws with prolific profanity and sexual dialogue. She briefly touched on sensitive issues in society, such as the AIDS epidemic, racism at the workplace and dependency on public assistance, which directly pertain to black women. Her direct humor is still one of her better trademarks but it could not carry the entire book. The family pressures she really dug deep into were divorce, how to keep your teenager in check, and the consequences of interracial relationships.

The theme of sisterhood seemed like it was forced throughout the book. It was hard to believe that these "sistuhhs" got along so well with each other, yet they found it so hard to have a relationship with any man on their same level, both mentally and financially. I wished her book was about the insecurities of black men which hinder them from developing fruitful relationships with black women, instead of simply reminding black women, such as myself, that we are in competition for a nearly extinct species: decent black men.

Terry MacMillan managed to write an excellent story about the strength of the black woman. She portrayed both extremes; the one who will always forgive her man because he's a "super lover," and the one who cannot attract a man, because "she could stand to lose a few pounds". MacMillan practically glorified black women as though they are invincible, able to overcome any obstacle thrown their way. Perhaps this was her point in *Waiting to Exhale*, but how true is it today? Not to put down the black woman, but we must remember that this is a work of fiction, and until MacMillan gets the facts straight, I'll be "waiting " for her next novel.

---Rachel Walden
Class of 1996
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---David Givens
Only help her to know --
that she is more than this dress on the ironing board,
helpless before the iron.

—Tillie Olsen, 1954