

# REVIEWS



## Women's Own Culture

**Losing Out: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls**

Sue Lees

Hutchinson 1986£5.95 pbk.

'The war of the sexes' they used to call it, in the late 60s when feminists were starting to come out of the undergrowth. But relations between men and women today sometimes seem more like an occupation, one population living under a dictatorial yet intimate daily oppression by another.

For women it is the experience of being a second-rate kind of citizen with circumscribed freedoms, continually forced to refer to the ruling authority. It is having random identity checks on the street, being at the mercy of arbitrary abuse from any male of the lower ranks, knowing he will be exonerated by membership of the occupying forces.

And as in any occupation we have to fraternise with them - even marry them, for heaven's sakes - in order to have a pass-card to a half-decent life. There, however, the analogy ends. Because we are of course so tied up in the culture of patriarchy that we perpetuate it among ourselves. In Sue Lees' account of the lives of London teenage girls there is little evidence of a resistance movement.

*Losing Out* is based on interviews and group discussions with 100 girls of 15 and 16 in three comprehensive schools. It is a welcome addition to the relatively new genre of ethnographic studies of young women, helping to correct the balance tipped so heavily in favour of boys with a stream of studies by men of the street culture of 'the lads'. The trouble with those was that, though we had some privileged insights into the occupying troops

at play, we only saw the other half of the population through their eyes. Girls were commented on, in passing, mainly by reference to their component parts.

The suggestion in Sue Lees' book is that in adolescence, when males do not have the economic and political advantage they acquire in adult life, it is at the level of culture that the dirty work is carried on. Boys typify girls as either slag or drag. 'If you don't like them', as one girl puts it, 'then they'll call you a tight bitch. If you go with them they'll call you a slag afterwards.'

However to get the abusive designation of 'slag' a girl does not really need to be promiscuous. Anyone can label her, and there is no way she can prove her 'innocence'. Boys are in control of the information - did she or didn't she? - and they have the power to make a label stick, whether it is true or false. Reputation matters so much to girls, in a situation where they have little else, that it is the main cause of fights between them.

Double standard seems an understatement. Boys' respect for each other depends on pulling birds. Girls' reputations seem unwinnable - vulnerable both to being desired by boys and neglected by them. The ideology has an important outcome: it ties girls into steady relationships with boyfriends and ultimately into marriage. That is the only safe place - safe for reputations, safe against random abuse by passing males, and safe for an expression of your own sexuality. We all know, however, just what a dangerous place marriage turns out to be: who will protect us from our protector?

This all sounds very desperate, and unfortunately Sue Lees is not the only one to tell such a story. It sometimes seems that the relationship between the sexes has never been worse than it is among today's adolescents. Worse in the sense that so little real communication takes place and so few values can be shared.

Two things are missing from Sue Lees' account, however. One is an insight into what actually goes on between girl and boy behind closed doors. Qualitative research, be it ever so gently probing, cannot hear the pillow talk. Men exhaust and frighten each other, as well as women. When they dare to admit it, they want something that women's own world and women's friendships seem to offer. The trouble is that the quite ridiculously baroque form that masculinity takes in our man-made world deforms women's own culture, spoiling it for us and them.

The second thing one misses here is a sense that young women are in fact economically, legally and psychically better off today than they were. The very rawness of the conflict may be in itself a kind of fightback, a renegotiation of the relationship between young women and young men now that different, separate and unequal roles are no longer altogether taken for granted.

Cynthia Cockburn



## Only Half the Story

**A Passion for Friends**

Janice Raymond

The Women's Press £5.95 pbk

This book is both a philosophical treatise and a manifesto. It is subtitled 'Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection' and maintains a strongly polemical argument throughout. Its main thesis is that friendship between women has been historically ignored, distorted, indeed 'disremembered', because of the prime legitimating societies have given to the relationships of men and women and, importantly, men and men.

Janice Raymond's aim is therefore both to recover 'part of the history and vitality of women's friendships' with particular case studies and 'to speculate about the power of friendship in women's lives' in order to expand the range of feminist theory 'beyond women's subordinate relations to men to include women's sustaining relations with women.'

From this standpoint she is particularly concerned with examining and reworking definitions and introducing new vocabularies. Some key terms that she coins are: *gym'affection*, to indicate the crucial con-

nection between feminism and female friendship and meaning 'personal and political movements of women towards each other'; *hetero-relations*, which refers to all male-female relations ordained by men and to the sort of 'world' thereby created which she calls *hetero-reality*.

In such a schema, *gym'affection* is clearly the loser. Hence Janice Raymond's insistence on recovering from history such examples of all-women communities as the Chinese marriage resisters and Christian nuns. These case studies form the main bulk of the book and make an important contribution to the work of redefinition as she examines the women-hating responses female friendship has evoked from men.

In particular, she looks at the implications of male anger suggested in the term 'loose women' and shows how, as other radical feminist work has demonstrated with terms like 'spinster' and 'virgin', it actually has positive, women-centred connotations and has indicated failure and disgrace because of the predominance of a 'hetero-real' vision.

The concluding part of the book introduces a number of criteria for making friendship between women a positive, 'empowering' and happy choice and not

merely a means of escape from men. These criteria include reworkings of unfashionable terms like discernment, rationality, privacy, moral judgement and thoughtfulness which, Janice Raymond argues, actually promote passion, not diminish it, and they are issued against the grain of what she sees as certain sloppy and sentimental tendencies in the women's movement that highlight the confession and experience of 'feelings' at all costs.

I'm always powerfully persuaded by radical feminist theory and found this book saying what I'm always wanting to hear: about the wonderfulness of women in situations that are far from women-centred. But I'm once more brought up against a central area of bafflement: the problem of what might be called in this case, *heterol'affection*. Or in other words, why should women ever have anything at all to do with men?

To this question, radical feminists have tended to reply, either, this is not our problem, because our project is to be for women and establish women-centred cultures and traditions, not constantly displace our energies in 'going back to' or 'drawing attention to' men again.

Or there has been an acknowledgement

that much of the strength of radical feminist theory has, precisely, been its emphasis on patriarchy and its constant and necessary reminders of the power of men, so that any relationship women have with men is explained primarily in terms of men's overwhelmingly greater economic and physical powers over women.

Both positions are implied in Janice Raymond's book and, as she sees any man-woman relationship as basically coercive, to suggest any possibility of hetero/affection would surely mean for her something like 'false consciousness' whereby women have somehow misrecognised their feelings for men as 'love' or 'friendship'.

But without wishing to detract one jot from what radical feminists have said about the sheer and literal bloody awfulness of men in all societies, this cannot be the whole story about patriarchy. In a sense, it would be easier for feminist theory if it were. But any adequate explanation of why the potential and power of women together has been so constantly undermined will have to confront not only the oppressive awfulness of men but whatever constitutes their attractiveness to women as well.

Rosalind Brunt

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