

BOOK REVIEWS

Sinister Wisdom, A Journal for the Lesbian Imagination in the Arts and Politics, 53 Summer/Fall 1994, Old Lesbians/Dykes.

Reviewed by Annette Hug.

Bing Concepcion



Sinister Wisdom, a journal from California that produces treasures for lesbians not only in the United States, has come up with a new issue written

and edited by old lesbians/dykes. It is a pleasure to read the short stories, reflections and poems. Being 24 years of age I felt encouraged, inspired and joyful about the possible perspective of living a long life as a lesbian.

A number of texts look back to the decades of struggle that old lesbians went through. Del Martin and Phillis Lyon write,

"Lesbians of our generation who have survived to old age have lived through the McCarthyism of the '50s, purges of homosexuals from the U.S. State Department and the armed services, police raids of Gay bars and private parties, release of names and addresses of those arrested to newspapers and employers."

A good number of life-stories recount homophobia, insecurity, hiding and then coming out with the women's movement in the '70s and '80s. But we also learn about heterosexual marriages and then radical changes women underwent in

their fifties to seventies. We read stories of young lesbians in a time long passed. Stories of young women and girls creating, imagining their lesbian world with no lesbian movement to look to for inspiration and support.

Pat Pomerlau wrote the enchanting short story 'Amelia Earhart Didn't Cook', a description of the world of the girl Patsy through her own eyes. The girl's favorite place is up the fig tree at the back of the house and she shares this place with her two favorite friends: Amelia Earhart, the fascinating woman who one day disappeared in an airplane but who comes back secretly to visit her little friend in the fig-tree, "Amelia Earhart wore trousers, cut her hair short and had a man helper, and she wasn't his wife."

Her other favorite guest was Eleanor Roosevelt herself, even if Eleanor was despised by Patsy's family and neighbourhood for her alleged control over her husband. Patsy writes, "It was just another reason why FDR wasn't a good president. That Eleanor!

... When the local people were upset with Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath and they piled up copies of the book and torched them, [my] Grandmother Dick, who read only the headlines in

the papers, thought it was another of FDR's crazy programs inspired by Eleanor. She threw down the paper. 'Buck!' she yelled at my father. 'Look at this! There will be no raisins this year! They're burning the grapes!' That Eleanor!" Grandmother Dick and the family would not have liked to know that Eleanor was a frequent visitor to their fig tree saying to Patsy, "Let me tell you, though you may not think so just now, everything will be all right. You needn't think about husbands and babies and trying to figure out when peas should go on the stove if they are to finish at the same time the fish does..."

African American writer Grear Greene focuses on the central issue of family and acceptance in one's own ethnic community. In 'Friends of Dorothy' she describes how burial ceremonies can maintain the invisibility of old lesbians or how they can become expressions of a community living respect for lesbians and for old women. She describes a funeral of a friend,

"Lots of wailing and crying about the loss of the family in general, very little said about the woman as a viable, loving person with an intimate personal life - a life far above the heavy emphasis the family

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chose to place on the woman having been a good daughter and a hard worker. No one acknowledged that the woman was also a lesbian in a fifteen-year relationship with a loving companion and friend - a woman, incidentally, not invited to attend the funeral."

There had to be another ceremony, a memorial service where the dead woman could be remembered as a friend, a lover, a member of the lesbian community.

This text is also about struggling for a self-defined role in the family. For the author, that meant shedding off the family-assigned role of a 'single' professional and therefore financial milking-cow for any family member in need of money. Liberating herself from this burdening role and the implied feeling that this role is the only way to be accepted in her family was a painful struggle,

"The mark of oppression lies heavy on my shoulders: homophobia on one side and racism on the other. At age sixty, I am mastering walking the middle line and have tempered my mettle to deal with the oppression on both sides of me."

Short but important are the texts by **Joan Corbin**, **Kate Rosenblatt** and **Rosemary Hathaway** celebrating the sexuality of old lesbians. They defy the strongly entrenched stereotype of the sexless post-menopausal woman and give joyful expression to the pleasures of old womens' bodies in sensual union.

The affirming message of these poems and stories is repeated in several accounts of women describing the joy of old age as they experience it. **Elizabeth Freeman** writes,

"Luck, genes, food, exercise and sex have contributed to my good health. For me old age has been the best of times."

Shevy Healy's contribution to the journal is sparkling with energy and drive and driving is what she and her partner **Ruth** are doing. The two lesbians are cruising in their mobile-home all around the United States. Part of their touring is active organising work for **OLOC** (Old Lesbians Organising for Change). **Healy's** account is a rich panorama of lives of old lesbians in the US. The two envoys on the road meet groups, organise discussions, forums, get to know hundreds of women and help wherever they can in setting up a new section of **OLOC**. They talk about ageism in its many forms and homophobia. Again we read,

"Neither one of us ever dreamed, even in our wildest imaginings, that in our seventies life would be so rich."

Not all old lesbians can afford to buy a mobile-home, or even a place to live. Several writers experience the economic hardship faced by many old lesbians. They don't fit the stereotype of the married woman or widow that underlies social-security systems, and their pensions often leave them living their lives below the poverty line. These texts make me think about old lesbians in

countries where there are no social security networks to speak of, except the family. Where do old lesbians fit in there if they resist - like **Grear Greene** - living their life in the corset of an old-spinster-stereotype or as a dependent aunt who 'missed her trip', as they say in the Philippines? If they don't fit, how do they survive?

It is impossible to talk about old age and not mention death. Two unfinished letters of **Mary Flick** who did not survive to see her work appear in this issue of **Sinister Wisdom**, give a factual account of the stages of a long struggle with cancer. And yet, this chronology of operations, recoveries and new testings expresses the pain and the courage of a woman struggling for life. Reading the text I felt the paper behind the print was becoming alive to tell me a story that did not fit into the limited space of words.

In 'A Day in the Life of One Old Dyke', **France Lorraine** describes how she is living with death everyday and living life to its fullest. She is working as a massage volunteer at **Coming Home Hospice** where she cares for dying people, often decades younger than herself. She writes,

"Living thirty or forty years beyond what some of the young people will ever know makes me more appreciative of whatever years I have left. I want to give something back to them, even if it is just love. Or simply loving touch."

Walking home after a day of caring for people dying of

AIDS, **France Lorraine** is

"in a familiar altered state, floating about an inch above the sidewalk, drained but exhilarated, seeing everything around me in brilliant color, hearing sounds, but in a calm, serene place inside myself. This doesn't happen every time I leave the hospice, maybe one in four, but when it does I am all loose limbs and rippling muscles, feeling totally relaxed and inexplicably elated."

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