

**Book Review** Out From Under, An insightful look at the road to sobriety

Out From Under: Sober Dykes and Our Friends, edited by Jean Swallow, San Francisco: Spinsters, Ink, 1983, 256 pp. \$8.95, paper.

by Marianne Milton

When I first read Out From Under, I was barely two months into sobriety and beginning to learn that living sober demanded more than not drinking. I had read nothing prior to that point that described the difficult and long process of recovery, particularly as it related to being a lesbian, except the chapter on Sex and Sobriety in JoAnn Loulan's Lesbian Sex --- a good start, but short and limited to sexuality. I had heard that lesbians and gays may be especially susceptible to alcoholism because our socializing often revolves around bars, but I had been drinking much longer than I had identified myself as a lesbian and only occasionally had spent much time in bars. Besides, that kind of information only explains why we may start or continue drinking; it may be useful to someone trying to analyze us, but it does not help much in learning how to cope with stopping.

My friends were as supportive as they could manage---often telling me warmly how wonderful they thought it was that I had stopped drinking; when I frequently would only respond with a discouraged and desultory "uh huh," some of my friends would probe and ask if I was finding sobriety hard. I was. But, as is the case with many newly sober alcoholics, I did not know what I was feeling. My friends seemed neatly divided into two groups: those who had never drunk much and those who were still drinking. Neither group could help me learn what I was feeling or offer guidance about where to go next.

My first reading of Out From Under opened up a new world for me. Recovery was a real and identifiable process, and other lesbians could tell me what they had

felt during this time.

"No, this is not about drinking. And it's not about dying. This is a book about living and recovery. It is about how we do that and what happens when we try to do that. This book is for those times we are alone in our recovery; we can pull it out and say, for once in our lives: oh yes, yes, I am in the right place, this is what is supposed to happen."

"Recovery from alcoholism and drug abuse is about recovering memory and reality and vision. It is about recovering the balance we always should have been able to have. It is about discovering emotions. And then it is about what you do with those emotions once you know what they are. In some sense, recovery isn't just getting something back so much as it is beginnings; it is about learning how to grow up. It is about learning how to love each other and ourselves. Recovery is about making community and so is this book." Introduction, p. xi

This is not a book of statistics, although the statistics are there. This is not a book that separates emotional recovery from physical recovery from the political forces that want to keep us drugged and drunk. This is a book that wraps the reader in a complex and vivid cloth woven of the experiences of over thirty lesbians in different relationships to recovery from alcohol and drug abuse. Included are contributions by alcoholics, drug addicts, para-alcoholics, ACOAs (adult children of alcoholics), co-alcoholics, and healers of the above. All the pieces are engaging. None are removed or abstract --- as is much other literature on alcoholism. The contributions take the forms of narrative, poetry, journal excerpt, song, interview, essay, letter, novel chapter, and script. The contributors could have been more diverse: the majority of women included live in California, and women of color seem to be under represented, as do working class women; most of the contributors' biographies are frustratingly unspecific on these points, so I am unable to get an accurate sense of representation. There is bibliography of references "gathered during a year's worth of unguided, informal and unscientific reading," which seems useful despite the disclaimer. I was annoyed, however, that only the initials of the first names of authors and editors were given instead of their full names, thus obscuring gender.

On reading this book a second time in order to write this review --- six months into

recovery --- I focused on different common threads running through many of the articles than I did when I first read the book. I notice now, with mixed relief and frustration, how many authors discuss recovery in terms of 2 to 3 years. I read those statements the first time around, but I had not really believed that it would take me that long to begin to feel balanced again.

An important aspect of this book is that women have written from all different stages of recovery. Consequently, this book is a resource for lesbians at any stage of sobriety and will remain a resource to be consulted again and again as recovery progresses. I suppose that when I have reread this book again --- perhaps a few years into sobriety --- the pieces that discuss recovery as a life-long process will have more meaning for me and I may heed more angrily those articles that discuss the politics of our addictions.

There are many specific, helpful suggestions in this book that I really only attended to on my second reading. Now that I am more certain of my desire to stay sober, I notice the articles that address rebuilding the parts of me that atrophied while I was drinking, and the articles in Part 2: The Healers Among Us - offer specific and detailed advice about how to begin this renewal of my emotional, physical, intellectual, and sexual selves. Celinda Cantu, a Chicana, discusses how cultural imperialism can get in the way of this renewal for women of color:

"The family, self-identity, cultural celebration, how we dance, what we eat, some very basic kinds of things are all things that in recovery can be stepped upon or dismissed or listed as taboo, like you shouldn't have those kinds of connections because everybody is drinking in your culture or whatever. That's bullshit. So how I dealt with it was that I basically began to question the need for alcohol, as opposed to what's wrong with my culture." In Sobriety, You Get Life, p.88

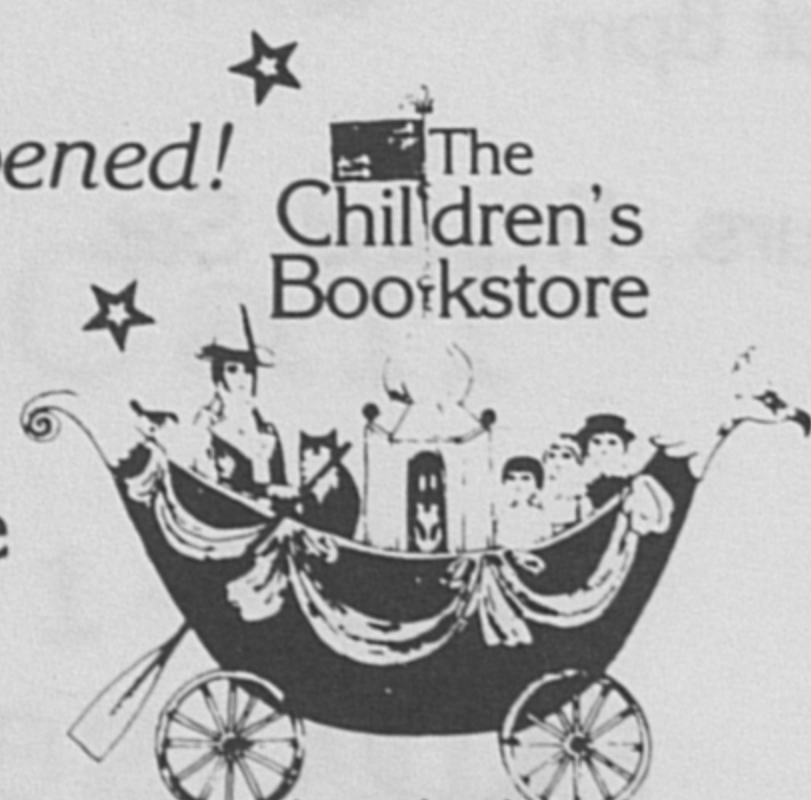
And Margot Oliver, an Australian woman, writes about the very deadly way that our "friends" can deny our addictions and thus short circuit our path to renewal:

"[They often deny] that the addicted woman has in fact got an addiction problem at all, often becoming quite literally unable to 'see' the addiction. After all, if you can't see someone else's behavior, you don't have to look too closely at your own: 'Yeah sure she drinks (etc.), sometimes too much, but then so do I/so does everybody else/it's not really her problem' and you can go on to provide her with the same sort of rationale you provide yourself: need to unwind/just feel like it/go crazy if I don't/I had a horrible life/under a lot of stress, etc, etc, etc. Denying another woman's addiction is potentially fatal to her (denying your own may be potentially fatal to you, but at least that's your responsibility)." Killing Us Softly, pp.139-140

This book creates the possibility for all women in the lesbian community to become more aware of the dynamics of addiction and recovery so that the kinds of fatal denial described by Margot Oliver need never occur again. If we are sincere about creating community and not just interested in mimicking the communities around us, we all need to become more sensitive to the ways that the "normalcy" of our substance use may be killing us and depleting our strength as a community.

CHASSMAN & BEM  
BOOKSELLERS  
BURLINGTON'S  
MOST COMPREHENSIVE  
BOOKSTORE

15,000 titles—  
the very best books—always!

Just Opened!  The Children's Bookstore

Vermont's Complete Bookstore For Children

Visit Us...  
one church street marketplace  
Burlington • 862-IDEA

This issue of *Out in the Mountains* is, as you may notice, a combined July and August issue. We will be going back to a regular publication schedule beginning in September, but we needed to take a bit of a summer break. Unfortunately, many production problems (both technical and human) delayed publication. Our apologies for any problems it may have caused. (Subscriptions are still for a full twelve issues.)