

The Persistent Desire, A Femme-Butch Reader

by Joan Nestle. Alyson Publications: Boston, 1992.

Moira

I know you can't judge a book by its cover. This cover actually scared me at first. I used to go into our local bookstore, over to the lesbian books section and just look at it. It raised the hair on my neck. Those four legs entwined, on the ground. One set in seamed stockings, a slice of bare skin under a lacy slip. The other legs covered, in creased slacks, heavy soled boots sunk into the tall grass.

It took me a year to buy the book. As we would leave the store my partner would say something like, "didn't you want the book?" I would shrug it off. I was uncomfortable with the butch/femme image, embarrassed by my desire around it. As I thought about my own reactions I became aware of the tremendous prejudice toward femme woman, even from other lesbians in the community. There was always a sneering if I wore anything "too" feminine, or looks, or questions about my sexuality. How could I be a real lesbian with lipstick on? I was not a tomboy growing up. I had dolls. But I had always liked girls. It was this swarm of misunderstanding and inner confusion that led me back to buy the book. Of course they were out of it, and I had forgotten the full title. But with the friendly help of a woman and her computer I picked up my copy that week.

The book is a wonderful collage of words from both butch and femme women. The writing covers a wide time span, from Radcliffe Hall to Pat Califia, selected from a variety of genres. Some of the voices are familiar ones, some are more obscure, or unpublished before this.

The editor, Joan Nestle, writes in her introduction, "I wanted new speech from new speakers. I wanted disclosures and explorations of fragile things like need and discrepancy, stance and erotic self-creation. I choose not to edit wherever possible. Contradictions, differences, problems become very clear in a variety of voices and forms." The book is clearly not a debate over the validity of femme/butch. It is instead a space made holy by those women who answer fully in those roles. I found myself devoured by their explorations and frank revealing essays, stories and poems. Included in the collection is a poem by Madeline Davis, a woman familiar to the movement for many decades.

OLD FEMME

I know what I am
when I look at old pictures long, wavy hair, eyeliner, mascara
demure and mysterious.
I know what I am
when I wander on my lunch hour to sample new fragrances and
linger near lace lingerie.
I know what I am
when I paw through these letters still warm with old passions
held firmly in wide rubber bands.
I know what I am
when the sight of white t-shirts and the smell of Old Spice can
still make me shiver and smile.
I know what I am
in the dark when you fill me your hands and your mouth in the
heat of the heart of my center
I know what I am.

The book is a tapestry of women loving women. It is also a careful, intimate study of gender: butch women pushing the boundaries further for us, in their images of body, of loving, of desire. The poetry of Lee Lynch speaks for many.

STONE BUTCH

Who is more womanly than the stone butch? who knows better how to deny her own feelings, how to feel good only when she's made another to

Who was better taught, learned more thoroughly? Who practiced giving with more ardor?

To kill her own need she'd stop breathing before her body felt

They said she denied her womanhood, when she was their ultimate woman, knowing only giving, giving only good, only good when giving: womanly: stone butch.

The butch/femme rigid roles of the 30's through to the 50's were fed by decades of secrecy. There was a harsh oppression, a fear that many write about in their stories, or in their photos, included in the collection. One can also hear a fierceness, a daring, in their natures that led to the Stonewall resistance in 1969. There is an obvious need for recognition of these butch women and the femmes who stood with them that brought about much of the equal rights movement.

The Persistent Desire asks us to look anew at these women. Can it be that femme/butch is a choice to make even in the 90's? Without an argument, the book resounds with yes! Yes, these are not roles of oppression, but born in one's nature. To love freely, this possibility is necessary for some lesbians. It is up to us as lesbians to allow each other to fully examine, and come into our own ways of being, of loving, of holding what is dear to us. Joan Nestle writes,

"We, of all people, must be able to cherish the woman in the stereotype and the cunning in the transformation of gender restrictions into gender rebellion. Marriage is not what this society means by marriage when two women do it: passing women are not men, thought their survival might depend on others that they are; a woman poppa is a creation of her, of our, own .. I subtitled this anthology *A Femme-Butch Reader* to herald this new voice in identity politics and break the traditional rhythms of the phrase and image."

For any lesbian this is an important book to read. This collection will make us question, and re-examine our own images and what we maintain prejudice about. For those of us lucky enough to have a partner that compliments our desire, this book is an affirmation. For those still looking, it is the reassurance of love songs written for decades that yes, yes she's out there. I leave you with the last stanza of *Scarlet Woman's Poem*, titled the same,

Roll me over in the morning
lover
and make me a rose. ▼