

OITM Review: Chloe Plus Olivia

Chloe Plus Olivia, an anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present
Edited by Lillian Faderman
Viking, 1994.

Moirá

I would be remiss not to comment on Lillian Faderman's newest anthology of lesbian literature without first mentioning the origin of her title, *Chloe Plus Olivia*, taken from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. In one of Virginia's lectures, of which her book is composed of two, she proposes a 'what if?'. While reading Mary Carmichael's first novel, *Life's Adventure*, Virginia discovers the challenging sentence "Chloe liked Olivia." Perhaps more than the simple structure of subject and predicate is the enormity that for the first time in literature a woman simply liked another woman. Friends. With all the potential intimacies that one statement could contain, she saw the brilliance. What if, she proposes, women had been given the representation that our fictional male characters have had? What fullness would the female character have if she were allowed? In this simple sentence, she saw all the intricacies that Mary Carmichael was suggesting. It is in light of this grand moment that this title was taken.

The anthology itself unveils a great variety of writers, some familiar and some obscure, from the seventeenth century to present day. I took the book

with me to bed for most of the summer and fall and still have not read all of it. The collection is over 800 pages of fiction, poetry, journals, letters, and even a play. Combined, they paint a rich canvas of words and sing of love lost, love gained, love shared. Love between women.

In the preface, Faderman clearly states, "Lesbian Literature has been in constant metamorphosis, reflecting the social attitudes of the eras in which it was written, the timidity or power of women's voices at a given time, who felt free to write, and who and what would be published." She reinforces this belief in a series of introductions which coordinate with her chapter titles: I. "Kindred Spirits: The Literature of Romantic Friendship"; II. "A Man Trapped in a Woman's Body: The Literature of Sexual Inversion"; III. "Carnivorous Flowers: The Literature of Exotic and Evil Lesbians"; IV. "In The Closet: The Literature of Lesbian Encoding"; V. "Amazons: The Literature of Lesbian-Feminism."

The chapters are also in chronological order, marking each piece of writing in both a literary and historical context. Through the decades of search, Faderman defines lesbian literature.

In the first chapter, I was delighted to read several letters written by Emily Dickinson to a woman with whom she obviously had a romantic friendship.

Most biographies of Miss Dickinson have tried to find an understanding of her reclusive nature by linking her to men with whom she was supposed to have had a failed romance, shedding little light on the images and meaning in her allusive poetry. Seeing Dickinson within Ms. Faderman's illuminations brings clarity to her poetry. Faderman shows the common language in Dickinson's beautiful and much quoted, "Wild Nights! Wild Nights!" with a letter written to her dear friend, Sue Gilbert. These insights and letters complete the puzzle of Miss Dickinson. Among other familiar writers in this chapter are Christina Rossetti and Sarah Orne Jewett known for her Boston marriage with Annie Fields.

The following chapter highlights the next generation of lesbian writers such as Radclyffe Hall. Her novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, was and continues to be a herald of the female introvert. The novel chronicles Hall's life and much publicized love affair with Una Troubridge, although in a somewhat fictional manner. Even though the novel was banned in England when it was published, it has subsequently become the most read lesbian novel of all time. Included in Ms. Faderman's collection are selections from letters that Hall wrote to Eugenia Souline, a nurse whom Hall hired while Una was ill. The letters reveal the passionate affair between the two women as well as a glimpse inside the author.

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