

## Polyfidelity: A Pleasure Guide Was a Gift to Our Relationship

**Polyfidelity: A Pleasure Guide for All Women Whose Hearts Are Open to Multiple Sensualloves' or. How to Keep Nonmonogamy Safe. Sane, Honest and Laughing' You Rogue!**

Celeste West

Reviewed by Karen Starr and Elizabeth Hansen

For the past 10 years a shadow has hovered over our relationship. We've discussed it and suppressed it; we've tried couples counseling; we've cried and complained and considered breaking up. But nothing really helped us resolve the conflicts raised by nonmonogamy in the context of our long term relationship--until this book appeared. Somehow nonmonogamy, once the talk of the lesbian nation, became a taboo topic. We became increasingly isolated within our own community as we struggled with this issue. Raising children, adoption, same sex marriage, commitment ceremonies, and domestic partner benefits are now the topics of the day. As the only socially sanctioned discourse, they are suffocating. In the stampede to assimilate during the past decade, critiques of the nuclear family got left behind.

The effects of being silenced, in fact closeted, only served to compound the roller coaster of emotions we were each experiencing: jealousy, anger, guilt, possessiveness, betrayal, a sense of being trapped and unable to be who we are. Just as the topic was coming to a boil again, something like a miracle happened. Elizabeth recently spent a week in Syracuse, a pretty dismal destination in April. An excursion to the women's bookstore, My Sister's Words, was intended to brighten the week, but it far exceeded expectations. A stack of Celeste West's book, *Lesbian Polyfidelity: A Pleasure Guide for All Women Whose Hearts Are Open to Multiple Sensualloves' or. How to Keep Nonmonogamy Safe. Sane, Honest and Laughing' You Rogue!* was prominently displayed. A wordy title, but a wise and wonderful volume. At \$15, this book is a bargain. The cover art alone is worth the price, although it does not literally depict the author's message. In 300+ pages West answers every argument, question, and

paradox we've faced--and then some. She treats the difficult and delightful aspects of polyfidelity with respect, humor and care.

West has a definite bias to be sure--one that may offend some. What a pleasure in an era when people often say nothing at all after editing themselves to offend no one. Even for those committed to monogamy, this book can engender a good, healthy respect for those choosing other styles of love relationships.

West defines polyfidelity as, "... the ongoing relationships of a lesbian or bisexual woman who is romantically and/or sensually involved with more than one person concurrently, while being honest with all her lovers." She explains how polyfidelitous relationships can provide security and freedom, intimacy and inclusiveness, as well as depth, diversity and excitement. She begins with a convincing summary of the history and pitfalls of monogamy, terming it a socially sanctified cultural construct. Her 50-woman survey and interviews with many polyfideles demonstrate the range and success of this way of loving. She distinguishes polyfidelity from nonmonogamy. Lesbians are famous for serial monogamy, which West calls an oxymoron as serial polygyny is more accurate. Nonmonogamy is commonly used to transition from one temporarily monogamous relationship to another. These are the agonizing scenarios that leap to mind when nonmonogamy is mentioned. By reframing to a positive perspective, polyfidelity broadens our vision of what is possible. Various configurations of polyfidelitous relationships are examined and she reviews ways to prevent conflict with guidelines, schedules, negotiation, respect and love. While never pretending that polyfidelity is easy, West takes the histrionics out. She guides us through the range of emotions which can surface with practical ways to deal with them. Therapy is not highly regarded by West as a method for dealing with polyfidelity issues. Therapists, in her experience, tend to be judgmental when it comes to polyfidelity since an unstated agenda of most therapy is social

control. This has certainly been our experience--it was much more productive to go out for a meal and spend time together than to wrestle with a lesbian therapist who had no insight into our issues.

Unfortunately, her chapter on sexually transmitted diseases was a jarring contrast to the rest of the book. She spends a good deal of time berating those of us who continue to have concerns about woman-to-woman transmission of HIV. We don't actually know of anyone who has suggested that much of what lesbians do sexually is high risk, but we do know a number of level-headed, knowledgeable, sexpositive dykes who are concerned that woman-to-woman transmission is being underestimated and undocumented because of researcher bias. Anyone who has followed the history of the epidemic knows that it has taken years of struggle with government agencies to implement changes such as broadening the AIDS case definition to include women's symptoms and opportunistic infections. An added risk is our inability to deal in any real way with the issue of injection drug use in the lesbian community because of our stereotypes and misconceptions about who injection drug users are. Our disappointment with this chapter is not that we disagreed with the author, but rather that she cites "science" that we don't think is all that trustworthy. The fact that we are aware of even a small number of lesbians who have been infected with HIV through sex with another woman is reason enough to use common sense and safer sex to protect ourselves as well as our lovers.

This book was a gift to our relationship and it is a gift to the lesbian community. You may find it every bit as exciting, affirming, and helpful as we did, or you may be affronted, confused, annoyed or defensive--but read it and then let's all talk about it!

To get yourself and your mends-lover(s) a copy you can ask Chassman & Bem or the Peace & Justice Store to special order it, you can contact any feminist bookstore (it is currently featured in their national catalog), or you can prepay a postage-paid order direct from the publisher: Booklegger Publishing, P. O. Box 460654B, San Francisco, CA 94146.

## Allen Fletcher Says...Kudos to the cast of *Earnest*

THEATRE FACTORY'S *The Importance of Being Earnest*, mounted at the Mann Hall Auditorium of Burlington's Trinity College this past month, suggests that the Queen City is in for a fine theatrical summer season. Director Candy Peate is to be applauded for a practical approach to Wilde's play: no frills and strictly within the capacities of cast and crew. The result was classy, stylish and certainly worth having seen. A dividend to those of us who love the work was the rare opportunity to enjoy Wilde's text in a responsible, not overstated reading. It is a charming, witty and brilliantly constructed comedy of manners, which engages its audience from beginning to end, with the exception of a short segment toward the three-quarter mark of Act II which invariably permits attention to drift briefly.

Subtitled "A trivial Comedy for Serious People," Wilde's play employs a variant of the mistaken identity device, whose lineage descends from classical antiquity through Shakespeare to the present day. When set in the late nineteenth century,

this particular framework provides more than ample opportunity for Wilde to satirize the social conventions and moral standards of his age, as well as the class structure which defended them. Courting and coupling, with all accompanying complications of family, finance and good form provide the specific sequence of events.

Sets and lighting for this production were simple, but not minimal - altogether adequate. Costumes and makeup were similarly serviceable (except for the butler in Act I, who looked to be a escapee from a CATS touring company). Theatre Factory's actors function well together, forming a more than effective ensemble. Standouts were Brian Torstenson (Algernon Moncrieff), Craig Bailey (Jack Worthing), and Aimee Loiselle (Cecily Cardew). Also appearing was Steven West A.K.A. Cherie Tartt. Therein lies an extraordinary performer, not of the quality of the aforementioned three, but nonetheless impressive.

Much was made of the West/Tartt casting as

soon as it was announced. Having seen and survived (in New Jersey, at that) a musical derived from this play, your redoubtable writer was fairly sure that he could survive a Lady Bracknell in travesty. After all, travesty has roots as deep as mistaken identity. But would Cherie Tartt be one's travesty of choice? There was the question. Surprise of surprises: only one of Cherie Tartt's mannerisms appeared in West's portrayal - that verry slowww, portentous wink. While his concept of the character seemed too much larger than life, even ponderous at times, Steven West's performance was a sincere theatrical effort, and not the bloated exercise one feared.

Thorough program notes observe that this production of *Earnest* was mounted on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Wilde's release from prison after his conviction for homosexual practices. Several other books, plays and films currently in production and preparation to honor the Author are identified. Kudos to all involved. Our Oscar would revel in such notariety.