

BOOK REVIEWS

Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire

Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, eds., Indiana University Press, 1980, pp. 192, \$9.95.

Sheila McIntyre

When feminists do not laugh at sexist jokes, they are accused of lacking a sense of humour. Implicit in the charge are two beliefs: men, not women, define what is funny; and feminists are fanatical, unbalanced, morbid, and unhealthy. So are their politics and so is anyone who associates with them or shares their perspective.

When feminists laugh at sexism, they are accused of lacking political seriousness. For instance, when Mark Breslin reviewed this book for the *Globe and Mail*, he sneered that publishing a book of feminist jokes for feminists makes about as much sense as printing a book of P.L.O. humour. Implicitly, he is saying, "Women — even feminists — are so illogical, and their politics are so immature, so silly. . ." The *Globe's* male editors select a male comic to review feminist humour and evaluate feminist politics. We can just hear them chuckling, "You tell them, Mark." And then Breslin gets to sign his piece, "Mark Breslin. . . is a reader of *Playboy*." If you do not laugh, you are probably one of those crazy liberals, fanatical, morbid, unbalanced.

Sexists, like the *Globe's* editors and Mark Breslin, still think women should behave like sycophants in a court presided over by egocentric and autocratic patriarchs. Women should laugh when men

laugh or frown when they frown. If we fail to do so, we brook official disfavour. Similarly, if we want male approval, we must aspire to tailor our politics to theirs. The assumption, of course, is that women desire and need male approval.

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When dancing is the only game in town, few women choose to be wallflowers. What Breslin and other anachronisms either fail or refuse to understand is that, today, there are other games in town and there are worse fates than spending Saturday night with the girls. The threat of male disapproval and mockery has lost its edge.

Breslin *et al.* also fail to understand what distinguishes feminist humour and politics from their own. Feminist politics do not aim at the overthrow of patriarchy so that women can assume all seats of power and oppress men in their turn. Similarly, feminist humour does not ape traditional wit based on putting other people down or laughing at them once they are down. The straightforward (are you listening, Mr. Breslin?) and

primary objective of feminism is equity: equal rights, equal opportunity, equal pay, equal status, and equality before and under the law. This means the sharing of power, resources, insights, joe-jobs, and responsibility. One vehicle of articulating as well as accomplishing this objective is feminist humour, which is, and has always been, a humour of shared wisdom, pain, insight, and anger.

For over a decade, feminists have devoted a good deal of their time together telling jokes, swapping retorts to sexist insults, laughing at old fears, and treating patriarchy's solemn shibboleths to a healthy dose of irreverence. The bonding afforded by this shared laughter has been rendered difficult by the inaccessibility of much feminist humour. Circulated primarily in small journals, newsletters, backroom cabarets, and mail-order records, it has been hard to get hold of except via photocopiers and word of mouth. Now, at last, some of the classics are gathered in one volume, grouped under such unorthodox subjects as menstruation, breast size, and "Here Comes the Bridle."

Although there are bitter and angry pieces along with catchy one-liners and lampoons throughout *Pulling Our Own Strings*, these jokes are not at the expense of men but at sexism and its really laughable by-products. For instance, one of the grimmest entries is Jane Field's savage satire on the intra-penile device, an umbrella-shaped contraceptive inserted and then opened inside the penis. Its merits? It does not interfere with female sexual pleasure, it can be inserted without an

anesthetic (in any soundproof doctor's office) and in tests on 1,000 goats, it has been proven statistically safe:

Out of every hundred goats, only two died of intra-penis infection; only twenty experienced painful swelling. . . sixteen developed cancer of the testicles; and thirteen were too depressed to have an erection. . . . Only one out of a thousand goats had to have a radical penectomy. . . . But it is too rare to be statistically important.

Hardly a side-slappper but hardly anti-male either, this joke mocks the ludicrous logic of male-centred science.

The bulk of the cartoons, prose pieces, and epigrams in this collection fall into two general categories. The first cluster are consciousness-raisers that mock sexist institutions: "Madison Avenue has braless mannequins to demonstrate how to wear clothing over bare breasts"; sexist reasoning: "If women were drafted they might make *love* to the *enemy*. . . . I suppose it would be worse than killing them"; or sexist prejudices: Gloria Steinem speculates that if men could menstruate they would "brag about how long and how much. . . . Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea. . . and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation as proof that only men could. . . be priests and ministers (how could a woman give her blood for our sins?). . ."

The other general class of jokes draws laughter from shared experience — the often crazy demands of mixing motherhood with paid employment, the impossibility of making sense of the instructions in a Tampax box, the infinite social disasters possible with padded bras, and the world of prescription medication for housewives' syndrome: "Next thing I know, she's on (speed), and that was pretty good. She was a little jumpy — the dishwasher would go on and she'd

scream — but all in all, she said she felt better than she had in years."

In general, the success of a book of humour can be measured by how much it makes us laugh or how long it takes us to stop telling its jokes. This book rates high on both scales. Its real virtue, however, is summed up in the introduction by Gloria Kaufman:

The world is always humor-poor. There is never enough of it. Yet, without humor we cannot survive. Our world is too relentlessly cruel, too callous, too uncivilized, and feminists who contemplate it will die of depression or lapse into cynicism or inaction without our humor. By joking, we rehumanize, revitalize ourselves. By joking, we remake ourselves so that after each disappointment we become once again capable of living and loving.



Daughters at Risk

Stephen Fenichell and Lawrence S. Charfoos, Doubleday, 1981, pp. 303.

Ursula Hegi

In 1974 when Anne Needham was twenty, her uterus and 80 per cent of her vagina were surgically removed. Diagnosis: Adenocarcinoma, a rare form of vaginal cancer, virtually unheard of in the young. Anne's symptoms leading to the diagnosis were severe abdominal pains, heavy discharge, and rashes on her face and upper body.

Twenty years earlier Anne's mother, Mary Needham, had miscarried twice after her first two children. When she became pregnant again, she went to a new gynecologist who "wrote out two prescriptions, one for a prenatal vitamin, the other for a new kind of pill. He said, 'This will keep you from losing the baby.' " She

took diethylstilbestrol (DES) in good faith, as did over two million other women between 1947 and 1971.

Sales of DES, which was marketed under approximately seventy registered trade names, reached a peak during the early 1950s, when researchers attacked DES because it seemed not to prevent miscarriages and was dangerous. Drug manufacturers suppressed the information. In 1971 Dr. Arthur Herbst linked DES to vaginal cancer in teenage girls and young women. The Food and Drug Administration, slow in responding, let the drug remain on the market for several more months.

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In their research, authors Fenichell (a journalist) and Charfoos (the attorney who represented Anne Needham in her suit against White Laboratories) go back to the 1920s when estrogen, one of the female hormones, was first used to relieve symptoms of menopause. Despite early experiments which warned that estrogen produced cancer in rats, estrogen was marketed. But it was expensive. Research continued to develop a synthetic estrogen (DES) and by 1947, despite insufficient testing, it was prescribed to women whose pregnancies appeared threatened by hormone deficiencies.

In the early 1970s seven patients between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one were treated at the Vincent Memorial Hospital in Boston for vaginal cancer. The one thing they had in common was that their mothers had taken DES during pregnancy. By 1978 over 400 cases were known. For some the diagnosis came too late — they died.

Anne's mother, Mary, felt tremendous guilt for having taken the drug that caused her daughter's illness. To have children had always been important to Anne, and the fact that she could no longer have them was as disturbing as the fear that the cancer might reoccur. It made her feel less of a woman. She did not want others to look at her as someone different.

Yet five years after surgery, when her suit against White Laboratories came to trial, Needham found herself in just that position. On the witness stand she answered humiliating questions about bladder control and discomfort with a synthetic vagina. Though the jury awarded Anne Needham \$800,000 in damages, she lost her case on appeal in 1981 and her lawyers appealed to the Supreme Court. The case is still in the courts.

In the meantime other DES suits throughout the country came to trial and received a great deal of media coverage. Research began to focus on the DES daughters who did not have cancer. In 40 to 90 per cent of the young women, benign aberrations in the vagina were detected which, eventually, could develop into malignancies. Many of these women also ran the risk of stillbirth, premature birth, and miscarriage.

Research on DES sons has shown genital-tract and semen abnormalities. Since most of them have not tried to have children, the effect of DES exposure on fertility is still unknown.

The book is not without flaws. The writing at times is weak, because the authors portray individuals with details such as "Mary loves her Mustang" and Anne has "always been crazy about (greeting) cards." At the Mayo Clinic Anne perceives the doctors as "sweeties," "real nice," or "real jerks." Many similar details, giving the impression of a passive and shallow young woman, contradict the picture that emerges during the surgery and trial — that of a sensitive, courageous woman.

Daughters at Risk is at its strongest where it deals with facts, and the facts certainly are powerful. The authors have written an alarming, well-documented book about one young woman's fight against cancer and against one of the irresponsible drug companies. But, not Anne's story alone, the book is about all the other DES daughters whose lives are still being affected by a drug that should have never been prescribed for their mothers.



The Burning Bed

Faith McNulty, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, \$16.95.

Judith Posner

The Burning Bed is the terrifying but true account of Francine Hughes, who endured more than a decade of abuse before she finally rid herself of her violent husband, Mickey. After four children and numerous futile attempts at separation, she burned down her own house while her husband was still in it. Though the conclusion to her story is extreme, her situation is typical of wife abuse in general. Mickey Hughes was an insanely jealous man.

'When he would hit me it wasn't just the pain of the blow that hurt. It was the emotions that flooded over me. My chest would hurt. My heart ached, tears came pouring out. I couldn't stop them. Usually Mickey stayed angry till I quit crying. . . . Then he would begin to feel sorry. Little by little he'd apologize, saying that it would never happen again. . . . I wanted to believe him so badly.' (p. 61)

For those of us who might have difficulty justifying the taking of a life, and more especially the horrible manner in this case, this simple, surprisingly unsentimental

and unsensational journalistic account is particularly instructive. The book relates in tedious detail the events that led up to the fire and Francine's subsequent trial. More important, author Faith McNulty attempts to explore Francine's extenuating circumstances.

Beginning with a brief account of Francine's childhood, the story ends with a description of her prison experience and the trial itself. The bulk of the book, however, focusses on Francine's bizarre relationship with Mickey Hughes. Year after year, Francine endured atrocity after atrocity, but she remained with him.

In fact, the more one reads this gruelling account the more one wonders not why she killed him, but why she didn't do it sooner. Her passivity, her seeming self-imposed powerlessness, is indeed very frustrating. And herein lies the rub. The lesson here is what it has to say to educated middle-class women (like myself) who find it difficult to understand such a cycle of victimization. *The Burning Bed* is the account of a pervasive syndrome of domination and low self-esteem that is endemic to the life struggle of many women who find no shred of support in the social system. In short, it is hard to imagine how anyone could feel so entrapped in a relationship that homicide is the only way out. (Not that one feels any sympathy for her husband, Mickey.) In fact, what is most disturbing about the case is that Francine risks her own life by committing murder, in addition to adding guilt to the multitude of pain with which she already contends.

The greatest irony in the case of Francine Hughes is that the only means of her being acquitted of her crime was through a plea of temporary insanity, a plea which undermines the socio-political implications of her situation. It would make more sense to argue that the fire was the one sane moment in Francine's otherwise insane existence.

The Burning Bed, an enlightening though sad commentary on contemporary male/female relations, should be read by everyone. While there is an increasing amount of social-psychological research on abuse, incest, and other familial tragedies, *The Burning Bed* transcends statistics and generalities and gets to the heart of the matter through the careful delineation of one woman's experience.



No More Secrets: Protecting Your Child from Sexual Assault

Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay,
Impact Publishers (P.O. Box 1094,
San Luis Obispo, California 93406),
1981.

Sue Johanson

Of all the books that have suddenly appeared about sexual assault of children, this "how-to" book for parents is the most comprehensive, logical, and helpful, taking a rational, cool-headed ap-

proach to the taboo topic.

Sexual abuse of children is not new; the authors quote statistics from the Kinsey Institute which state "one child in four had been sexually assaulted by the age of 13." My understanding was that the statistics stood at one in three by age eighteen.

A large segment of the book is devoted to prevention; the next to how to know if it has happened when the kids haven't told you about it. An excellent section discusses "what to do if your child has been sexually assaulted."

The only area that appears to be neglected is in helping parents deal with their own feelings — fury and indignation ("how dare he. . ."), the feelings of revulsion, hatred, desire for revenge. One thing a child does not need is a hysterical mother crying, "oh, my poor baby" or an irate father who is going to "go for the gonads" of Uncle George. Sexual assault is just that, sexual assault; it is not pleasant, but it is not terminal unless we parents make it so. If parents overreact, of course the child will suffer some long-term psycho-

logical trauma that could affect her for the rest of her life.

One very short paragraph on nudity caused me problems: "As children get older, some seem to adopt modesty early. . . . Others persist past their parents' point of comfort with nude behavior. . . . Children who are 'too old to be running around that way' may need more information about what being nude means."

In my opinion the parents have the problem and should examine their feelings about nudity; why they are uncomfortable, why the child is behaving this way (attention-getting, etc.). Perhaps the parents could talk to the child about their own reactions: "When you streak to the john in the buff and we have company — I feel. . . ." It sounds like a value judgment to say that "children are too old to be running around that way." I would hope we are never "too old," but children need to learn what is appropriate behaviour.

This excellent handbook should be read before a crisis situation precipitates emergency reading under stress.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

In early 1983 the Saint John Human Development Council carried out a study of sexual assault in St. John, N.B., a city of 80,000, with a total metropolitan population of 120,000. Information was sought by two methods: agency referrals and a two-week anonymous telephone hot-line. The study concluded that "there are serious gaps in services in the Saint John area for victims of sexual assault." A steering committee is co-ordinating an improved service response. The results of the study are published in Patrick Flanagan's *Sexual Assault: A Study of Service to Victims* (Saint John Human Development Council, April, 1983).

For further information, contact Patrick Flanagan, Director of Research, Human Development Council, P.O. Box 6125, Station A, St. John, N.B. E2L 4R6.

LANGUAGE ALERT NEWSLETTER

A group of women in the Integrated Studies Programme, University of Waterloo, has started the Language Alert Newsletter. In it we shall publish short reviews of the language used in recent books or journals, pointing out primarily sexist language. These reviews will be sent to the author(s) and publisher, together with a set of guidelines for non-sexist language, as a consciousness-raising exercise. We welcome short reviews pointing out how the language used in a work is INACCURATE or MISLEADING. The first issue of Language Alert Newsletter will appear in July, 1983. Write us c/o the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1; (519) 885-1211.