

BIG SISTER: HOW EXTREME FEMINISM HAS BETRAYED THE FIGHT FOR SEXUAL EQUALITY

Neil Boyd
Toronto: Douglas and MacIntyre,
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**REVIEWED BY MEG
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In his controversial book, *Big Sister*, Neil Boyd, a professor of Criminology at Simon Fraser University, claims to bring to light the “dark side of feminism” plaguing North American society. His book aims to engage reasonable discourse about radical feminism, which he calls “Big Sister,” and how “Big Sister” is underhandedly taking over the feminist movement within North America. Radical feminism, claims Boyd, has become an intrusive and oppressive pro-censorship movement, which has limited the freedom of males while it has distorted male and female relationships.

Separated into five chapters, Boyd’s book identifies key social phenomena that are increasingly under the scrutiny and control of “Big Sister”: discourses surrounding pornography, sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, and tolerance. Boyd claims that Women’s Studies departments in academic institutions are a fad of the past, no longer a necessary entity to the feminist movement. He goes on to say that these departments not only fail to produce decent scholarship, but actually perpetuate and indoctrinate a negative image of feminism and man-hating in the students who take the classes. He states that Women’s Studies departments are full of extreme radical feminists who are not at all interested in producing research, but rather are preoccupied

with pursuing a political agenda. The problem with Boyd’s statement is that though it is entirely possible that some Women’s Studies departments have a high concentration of radical feminists within their faculty, could this not be true with any social science department? Could a political science department not have a disproportionate number of right-leaning conservatives? It is entirely unfair to assume that faculty teaching these courses would use the opportunity to further their own personal agenda rather than educating their students.

Boyd claims in his introduction that “there is no systematic exclusion of women from the halls of higher learning or from any other important avenue of social or intellectual life in North America.” Looking at the demographics of Simon Fraser University faculty, where Boyd is employed, yes, women are nearly equally represented in the university’s faculty. In taking a look at Statistics Canada, however, “full-time men continued to make up a majority of faculty at all levels” (<http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/000808/d000808a.htm>). According to Stats Can, in a 1998-1999 survey, there were 24,861 full professors who were male within Canadian universities compared to 8,804 females. Furthermore, Canada’s recent federal election clearly outlined that women are not equally represented at all in our federal political sphere. A study conducted by none other than Simon Fraser University indicated that the number of female candidates in 2000’s federal election was only 373, down from 1997’s election of 403, down again from 1993’s elections with 476 female candidates (<http://www.sfu.ca/~heard/elections/women-elected.html>). This year’s federal election boasted a marginal increase in female participation to 391 candidates, versus 1294 male candidates. It would seem that there are indeed areas of systemic exclusion within the social and intellectual life of North America.

So begins Professor Boyd’s long

polemic against “Big Sister,” or extreme feminism. His own extreme views may be challenged in each chapter of the book; for the sake of economy, I will focus on but two.

Boyd’s first chapter examines pornography and censorship as he engages the work of radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. If a fresh approach is what Boyd was after, then choosing targets like Dworkin and MacKinnon was probably not the way to go. His discussion about pornography and the censorship of it is not entirely untrue, but critiques of the position of Dworkin and MacKinnon prevail within feminism itself. The abiding influence of Dworkin’s and MacKinnon’s work may well be disputed in our contemporary third wave, sexually tolerant climate. Boyd argues, like many before him, that the naked female body is an “important element in sexual attraction.” Further, Boyd challenges the equation that has admittedly been made far too easily between the consumption of pornography and imitative violent behaviour. However, what is strikingly absent is a discussion of the social consequences of the proliferation of violent images of sexuality, commodified for fantasy, instrumental sexuality, and the representation of women as predominately passive—consequences perhaps not in terms of potential behaviour of individuals, but rather in terms of the actual reality within a society which permits the brutalization of women, often in strikingly racist and heterosexist terms, to flourish in the name of freedom of expression. As Andrea Dworkin puts it in her film, *Pornography*, “The Asian woman hanging from a tree is a real Asian woman hanging from a tree.” While censorship might be a blunt instrument for the removal of such images, that should not close the question that feminists, Dworkin and MacKinnon included, raise: “Do we want to be a society that allows such images of women to go unchallenged to the point that these images are

daily, literally, at our fingertips and in front of our noses?" That image can and does perpetuate racism and violence against women, because it *is* violence against women and racism, and it is today more ubiquitous than MacKinnon and Dworkin could have ever anticipated in their earlier days of anti-pornography activism.

Boyd's fourth chapter on domestic violence is possibly the most troubling of the book. He insists that society's definition of "battered" is far too broad. He insists that only severe beatings and physical violence should fall under the category of "battery." Boyd's position fails to take seriously the findings of many clinical studies of domestic violence which observe that it is not so much the severity of individual assaults that characterize woman battering, but it is often the pattern of coercive control in which women's mobility and choice becomes ever more restricted by her male partner. In most cases it is the degree of entrapment rather than the severity of individual incidences of assault that is determinative of the level of danger a woman is in. Without networks of support, she is far less likely to leave a situation of abuse alive.

The other problematic argument in this chapter is Boyd's discussion of the mandatory pressing of charges in domestic abuse calls. The truth is, however, that spousal/domestic abuse is a crime. It is not up to the victim to press charges against the aggressor. A murder victim, or rather the family of the victim, does not have the option of pressing charges; that is up to the Crown. So why would we place this kind of pressure on the wife or partner of an abusive spouse? Would fear not shade her decision? Taking the decision out of her hands does not infantilise her, but rather frees her from guilt and fear of a vengeful husband.

Boyd never quite defines radical feminism, nor does he offer an account of a more "acceptable" form of feminism. His book is filled with caricatures of feminism, choosing less

than moderate feminist theorists as his primary partners for dialogue. Yet all those feminists who work toward a safer life for women bear the brunt of his uneven polemic. What I found immediately problematic about Boyd's book is that, although I agreed with most of what "Big Sister" was advocating, I would never even remotely define myself as a radical feminist. And while Boyd was critiquing the radical movement for accusing anyone who challenged it as heretics and traitors to the fight, and for generalizing and taking over the mainstream feminist movement, he himself managed to over-generalize and also silence and label anyone who does find validity in the position that "Big Sister" takes on certain issues.

The concluding chapter reiterates the points Boyd makes throughout the book. It remains unclear if one who opposes Boyd's thought falls into the "Big Sister" category. More than a network of evil radical man-hating extreme feminists out to turn society into a matriarchy, or a gynocracy, it is more likely that society is over-compensating for gender discrimination in a patronizing, better-safe-than-sorry fashion. It would seem that agreeing with some or any of what "Big Sister" is fighting for, simply choosing to be "mushy-headed" or placing too much faith in our justice system, makes you a radical. The good news is that Boyd states he is just trying to start a dialogue with this book. If that is the case, certainly there will be many people who will want to continue the dialogue.

FUTURE GIRL: YOUNG WOMEN IN THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY

Anita Harris

New York and London: Routledge,
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REVIEWED BY SHERRILL CHEDA

Covering politics, citizenship, and employment, Anita Harris, lecturer in sociology at Monash University in Australia, explores the idea of "the new girl," explodes the myth of "girlpower," and describes how girls are actually participating in society from a global perspective. In fact, the pressures on young women today may be more difficult than aging. "This book explores the idea that in a time of dramatic social, cultural and political transition, women are beings constructed as the vanguard of new subjectivity." Power, opportunity and success are all modeled by the "future girl." There is a process of creation and control at work in the act of regarding young women as the "winners" in a new world, for by holding them up to this standard, we also construct them to perform this role. The author defines late modernity as complex global capitalist economies with a shift from state support and welfare to the private provision of services. So, the world these girls have inherited sees the disappearance of full-time jobs and only short-term, part-time, temporary contract work. As collective ties and longstanding social relationships fall away, girls do not have any fixed place or identity and must face risks as they negotiate the world individually. Not all young women live lives that match this model of success. "In the move to cultivate young women as the new success story of our times, the struggles, disappointments and barriers experienced by many young