

THE LESBIAN HEALTH GUIDE

Regan McClure and Anne Vespry, eds. Toronto: Queer Press, 1994.

by Lesley R. McMillan

The *Lesbian Health Guide* is written from the perspective that there is more to the issue of health than the lack of illness; women must strive for general well-being. This is an important and empowering position. The *Guide* gives informative details about all aspects of health (ranging from physical illness, addictions, and relationship issues, to dealing with social institutions). The premise of the *Guide* is that we must begin to take our health into our own hands and one thing that women need in order to be able to do this is access to more resources. It is a useful addition to every woman's bookshelf. My criticisms of the *Guide* have been on the following criteria: content, language, visual presentation, and organization.

While I heartily endorse the *Lesbian Health Guide* as a comprehensive and informative resource, it could be more user-friendly.

Not only is the collection a health guide for lesbians, it also functions as a "how-to-be" guide. Some of the section titles illustrate this ("Low-cost Healthy Food the Lesbian Way" and "Lesbian Foodways"). One may get the impression that this is how all "good lesbians" ought to do things: that if a woman is not eating "these foods," prepared "this way," she is not a "real lesbian." Renaming these sections and the *Guide* itself are not enough to get around this problem. A more self-reflexive acknowledgement of the diversity that exists among gay and bisexual women is called for. There are more stratifications within "women's communities" than class, age, race, and education.

There is a lack of recognition of bisexuality in the *Guide*. For example, there are several references to homophobia, but none to biphobia. By directing the *Guide* only at lesbi-

ans, through both the title and majority of the contents, the text becomes exclusive. There are fewer than twenty references to bisexual women. This is particularly frustrating given the generally comprehensive scope of the guide in other areas (well-researched discussion of disability, racism and classism, to mention only a few). Why have the editors excluded bisexual women? In the Preface they make reference to the need to examine the reality of the diversity of the lesbian community. Such examinations of the lesbian community must include a consideration of bisexual women's lives and biphobia. This issue requires examination for future editions. Why not call it the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Guide or the Queer Woman's Health Guide?

The *Guide* could be made much more accessible by the addition of an index. While there is a section on disability in general, for example, there are several references to disability issues in other areas of the book. Few of us purchase "help guides" and read them from cover to cover; indexes are crucial to making "help guides" helpful. While constructing indexes is a time-consuming and expensive endeavour, it only makes sense to include one in a health guide. This would definitely be something to include in future editions.

Each section recommends further readings. This is a strong component to the *Guide*. If a woman has a particular concern, she could look in the *Guide* for information in this area, then find other resources. The *Guide* is useful since the resources that are listed are current.

Similarly, sections of the *Guide* would benefit from a system of cross-referencing. In the chapter on Lesbians and Cancer there is a segment on "Coping with the loss of a partner or friend," which should be cross-referenced with the earlier section "A Just Woken Woman." This would assist readers in accessing all the areas of the health guide that are relevant to their topic of interest. The information is excellent; it seems a shame that readers may miss sections which they

might find particularly useful.

Another problem is in the organization of the *Guide*. The organization of the main chapters is well-done, coherent, and clear. However, the logical ordering of sections within each chapter is often lost. An example of this is in the "Emotional Health" section. The editors organized the subsections into: Stress, Stress Test, A Just Woken Woman, Suicide, Breathing, Starting a Support Group and Finding Counselling. It is very unclear as to the rationale for the organization of the chapters. There is no obvious reason why the book begins with body-image issues. It may be that the editors need to include (in future editions) a brief introduction in each chapter, which would outline the logic of the chapter's organization.

The personal viewpoint included in the *Lesbian Health Guide* plays a large role in what makes it an essential resource. There are numerous areas where women voice their own options and experiences. There are five roundtable discussions on issues ranging from body image, living with HIV, and poverty. The roundtables allow for a diversity of experiences to be heard. Also, five sections are written from an insider's perspective, narrating "this is what I experienced." There is also the inclusion of an open letter from one woman to another, discussing difficulties with addiction and racism. Rather than focusing on women complaining about what has happened to them, each woman told her story and related how she overcame the barriers that she faced. The different coping strategies employed by the women involved are not only visible, but also illustrative of their utility. It is both informative and empowering to hear how other women deal with some very tough issues.

The *Guide* offers analysis of many issues and possible strategies for dealing with them. Entire ranges of Canadian options are listed to assist the reader. The "Smoking" section provides an apt example; the *Guide* does not judge women who smoke (it in fact outlines many reasons why

women smoke and numerous handy tricks to help women quit smoking). The "better than" philosophy endorsed in the *Guide* is very good. It outlines that altering our lifestyles is not easy; it takes time to change our ways. The *Guide* suggests practical advice for breaking unhealthy habits and for moving towards a healthier lifestyle.

The *Lesbian Health Guide* is a volume of common sense, complemented by valuable advice, information, references, and insight. The language is practical and easy to understand. It is not full of academic or technical jargon. When medical terms are used they are clearly and carefully defined. The *Guide* can assist in striving for well-being in all aspects of our lives. Even with its weaknesses, it is a valuable reference, which highlights many areas that go unaddressed in other guides. In the final analysis the *Lesbian Health Guide* is more than worth the cover price.

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HIVERNALE

nathalie stephens. Toronto: Éditions du Gref, 1995.

par Marguerite Andersen

Achévé d'imprimer un six décembre, édité avec soin et un grand souci de l'esthétique par Alain Baudot, dans sa belle collection Écrits torontois, le recueil *hivernale*, de nathalie stephens, tombe gentiment mais avec force dans le domaine de la littérature lesbienne. Et le très beau frontispice de Carrie Leavoy (sans titre, aquarelle et encre sur papier) pourrait, si jamais nathalie stephens devait figurer dans une œuvre d'art telle que le *Dinner Party* de Judy Chicago, y représenter fièrement l'auteure de *hivernale*.

Nous rencontrons dans ce livre une écriture au rythme calme et mesuré, étonnant pour un premier ouvrage, où l'on dévoile d'habitude ses passions tumultueuses dans un style qui ne l'est pas moins. Écriture étonnante, donc, venant d'une très jeune femme que la révolte aurait pu emporter. Cette écriture fait penser à celle de Jean-Paul Daoust, dandy de la poésie québécoise.

hivernale est un texte canadien de par son titre, de par le rôle que l'auteure accorde à la saison de l'hiver. Une des amantes du recueil a "le cœur/ trempé dans l'hiver/ qui l'a colonisé" (11), la fenêtre de sa chambre est... "transpercée/ par un soleil de glace" (10). De plus, nathalie stephens situe ses poèmes carrément à Toronto, même si, parfois, elle manifeste un peu de nostalgie pour Paris.

Et elle se situe dans la ville, citadine par excellence qui marche "...au rythme des/ gémissements du métro/ qui font tressaillir les entrailles de la ville" (18). La plupart du temps, c'est la ville de la nocturne des bars enfumés, rappelant par ce thème *Les Nuits de l'Underground*, de Marie-Claire Blais.

Évidemment, nathalie stephens est féministe. Faut-il le dire? Y a-t-il encore des femmes qui, au plus profond de leur être, ne le sont pas? Dans *hivernale*, les corps de femmes sont

conjugués, les femmes abîmées, leurs "désirs retranchés" (63).

hivernale est un grand poème d'amour qui conte et interprète la rencontre en même temps passionnée et sage de deux femmes. nathalie stephens se sert d'une écriture érotique parfaitement discrète pour parler de cet amour où "deux mains s'effleurent" et "l'amour est déclenché" (14). Une seule ligne sur une page, "ses doigts sur ma joue" (28), en dit suffisamment pour traduire la tendresse, l'excitation et l'infini de la passion.

Les métaphores employées par cette jeune auteure sont saisissantes, elles aussi. Le verre dans lequel les amantes versent le vin est un "verre sans fond/ débordant de douloureux regrets" (22); une d'elles "...allume une cigarette/ pour [se] couper le souffle" (33); alors que

s'amassent dans un cendrier
les mégots de rêves
abandonnés

au profit d'un avenir
anticipé

Quelques petits jeux de mots,
comme dans le joli quatrain

je compose des poèmes
sur le cadran de l'appel

et deviens
sonoriste

sont peut-être un peu agaçants, mais comme ils sont peu nombreux et révèlent un plaisir du verbe prononcé, on pardonne vite ces taquineries linguistiques.

Sans aucun doute, *hivernale* est un ouvrage remarquable. Il annonce une écrivaine de talent, une carrière à suivre.