

Book Corner

by Lorena Russell



Two books of special interest for the literary lesbian or gay man, (or really for anyone in literary theory or gay studies).

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990. \$24.95.

Sedgwick focuses her discussion on the emergence of the homosexual/heterosexual distinction at the turn of twentieth century western culture. She is primarily concerned with gay male identities in literature, although many of her introductory points are equally applicable to lesbians.

As the title implies, she challenges the privilege of heterosexual perceptions as the only way of knowing. Furthermore, Sedgwick argues that the centrality of homophobic oppression in the past hundred years "has resulted from its inextricability from the question of knowledge and the processes of knowing..." (33-34). She identifies the closet as "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century," a "curious space that is both internal and marginal to the culture: centrally representative of its motivating passions and contradictions, even while marginalized by its orthodoxies" (71, 56).

Several of the chapters are concerned with specific literary texts, including a discussion of works by Hawthorne (*Billy Budd*), Wilde, Nietzsche, James and Proust. Even though I was not familiar with several of the texts discussed, I found the application of her theory and the contrast between "straight" and more inclusive readings interesting. I was particularly fascinated by her observations in Chapter 3 on "the Sentimental Relations of the Male body" and the related discussion on kitsch and camp.

This is obviously not a book for every taste and is by no means an easy read. I approached the book with a strong interest in literary theory and gay studies. Although at times I felt confused by some of Sedgwick's more profound observations, not to mention her incredible vocabulary, I found her writing style engaging, and never felt lost in a void of abstractions. While many books that tackle such dense philosophical subject matter seem to lose their author in an erudite style, Sedgwick manages to make her presence felt. Her humor and directness combine to make *Epistemology of the Closet* an eminently worthwhile reading experience for anyone with an interest in gay studies or literary theory.

Jay, Karla, and Joanne Glasgow, eds. *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*. New York: New York UP, 1990. \$16.95

This is another important book for gay literary theory. Jay and Glasgow have put together a diverse collection of essays united by the principle that "Gendered experience is simply not the same for lesbians as for nonlesbians" (3). The specific experience they have in mind here is that of reading and writing. Like Sedgwick and other gay theorists they ask questions designed largely to help us to move beyond our heterosexist bias, to actively engage us in the act of re-vision. Their essays are concerned with understanding the relationship between author, text and reader when at least one of these categories is identified as lesbian.

They make the point that "Reading as a Lesbian" (Jonathan Culler) is a worthwhile approach to many texts, and an approach that is not limited to women who identify themselves as lesbians. (4). This claim for a lesbian perspective is made in awareness of the danger of homogenizing the lesbian experience, that such a perspective must allow for diversity.

The essays can be divided into three sections. The first group is concerned with issues of authorship and readership. The second section provides an overview of literary criticism from the point of view of the reader, while the final essays deal with texts that are overtly lesbian, including works by H. D. and Adrienne Rich.

Once again, this is a book I would highly recommend for anyone interested in literary theory. In general, I found the book more accessible than *Epistemology of the Closet*, though the density varies from essay to essay. And while some of the essays are quite specific in their focus on a particular author, others speak quite broadly to any reader. Lee Lynch's essay "Cruising the Libraries," for example, addresses the scarcity of texts with positive or even identifiable role models for the lesbian reader, and how this struggle has affected her as a writer.

The book has an excellent bibliography which helps to compensate somewhat for what Jay and Glasgow acknowledge as a regrettable "underrepresentation of lesbians of color" (8). Despite this shortcoming, *Lesbian Texts and Contexts* is worthwhile and highly recommended. ▼

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