

Book Corner



by Lorena Russell

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. Between Men--Between Women: Lesbian and Gay Studies. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. \$29.95, 373 pp.

This book by Lillian Faderman represents the most recent addition to a series on lesbian and gay studies edited by Richard D. Mohr. Faderman maintains that social attitudes toward intimate relations between women have affected the expression of that intimacy as well as the identity of the participants themselves. In the nineteenth century, for example, "romantic friendships" between women were socially accepted institutions. These intimate, ostensibly non-erotic relationships are more fully explored in Faderman's earlier work, *Surpassing the Love of Men*. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman states that such relationships are socially accepted only briefly at the beginning of our century, vestiges of a less sexually conscious, pre-Freudian era.

It was in the 1920s that the experts, the sexologists, offered the theory that lesbians were in fact "sexual inverts," men trapped in women's bodies. The majority of women accepted this explanation, identifying themselves with a masculine gender. Thirty years before, intimacy between women was a sign of

feminine expression, but in the twenties it was seen as decidedly male. Today most lesbians would reserve the description of sexual inverts for transsexuals, again identifying themselves as fully female.

Faderman traces such changes in an interesting and perceptive analysis. Her historical journey leads us through the Harlem of the 1920s, World War II, and McCarthyism, including a discussion of the legacy of fear it inspired, to the more recent Lesbian Nation utopian longings of the 1970s. Faderman's findings are carefully researched. Alongside of traditional documents and authorities she relies on a number of interviews, a technique which adds an interesting and revealing personal perspective.

I found the book consistently engaging. I was sometimes concerned that her emphasis on lesbian identity as a socially constructed phenomenon diluted the meaning of the word. Her conclusion that "The only constant truth about The Lesbian in America has been that she prefers women" (308) is not particularly revealing or profound. Nevertheless her

approach makes sense when one takes into account the inconsistencies and diversity of lesbian identity through the years.

Another problem I had with the text was the uneasy feeling that the portrait of our 1990s community painted in the final chapter of the book is a bit too glowing. Faderman places a discussion of political dogma and faction fighting in her chapter on lesbian feminists of the 1970s. After reading the descriptions of the recent National Lesbian Conference in the last

issue of *Community Connections*, I question delegating such problems as "the liberal's basic ineptness in dealing with other classes and races" (243) or "bitter skepticism and rebellion against p.c. dogma...." (231) to a place in our past.

But then this is the charm and curse of history, with its patterns and repetitions. I highly recommend *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*: entertaining and insightful. ▼

Court Rules Against Lesbian Lovers Use Hotline to Protest

After seven years of struggle in and out of court, Karen Thompson learned April 24 that she is not to be the legal guardian of Sharon Kowalski, her partner of several years who was left with severe brain damage after a car accident. In a ruling which outraged advocates of both gay and physically-challenged rights, Judge Robert Campbell granted guardianship to a friend of Kowalski's parents, a woman who had indicated a plan to move Kowalski to a nursing home which Campbell himself had ruled inadequate for Kowalski's needs. Kowalski had deteriorated significantly while in nursing homes into which her parents put her in the years immediately following the accident.

Campbell alleged that Thompson had outed Kowalski against her wishes, even though Kowalski indicates she is a lesbian

to anyone who asks. Kowalski had indicated her desire to live with Thompson, but Campbell denied Kowalski's ability to make this decision.

Thompson was the only person who had petitioned the court for guardianship. Medical and psychological experts testified overwhelmingly in favor of Thompson being chosen as guardian. Thompson wanted to bring Kowalski home; instead, Kowalski is to remain in a nursing home.

Thompson has appealed. Meanwhile, a hotline has been set up to urge Minnesota governor Arne Carlson to intervene and appoint Thompson guardian. For \$6.25, a portion of which goes to the Karen Thompson Legal Fund, people can call 1-800-3256000, ID #9860, to pressure the governor. --*Windy City Times*, 6/6/91; *Sojourner*, June, 1991 ▼



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