

CULTURE

Latex Conquers All

A revised compendium of the curses and clichés that beset modern feminism

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SHARE AS GIFT  SAVE 

For all its comically bad prose and cloying eulogies to female anatomy, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was in its day a solution to women's problems. In our own day it *is* the problem. First published in 1970, in a cheap offset edition by twelve Boston friends who sought to free their sex from dependence on doctors and husbands, it became an icon of the age. Now published by Simon & Schuster and 600 pages longer, this women's health classic has become a compendium of the curses and clichés that beset modern feminism—curses and clichés that feminism must discard or else render itself obsolete.

Take the attack on beauty with which the new edition opens. Couched as it is in the analysis of magazine ads, it will strike anyone who has visited a typical freshman composition course as darkly familiar. "Look at this *Calvin Klein* ad of a woman in a classic submissive pose," we read in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*: "Her fingers cover her mouth, another sign of submission ... Her eye make-up is so dark and heavy that her eyes seem bruised ..." She is simply "an object to be used," a creature for the "male gaze." As, indeed, is any woman who looks attractive or dresses agreeably; after all, according to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "the main reason that women try to 'improve our appearance' is to attract and win the approval of men."



This is the opposite of what Judy Norsigian, the collective's executive director, implied at a workshop last May. In a discussion of cosmetic surgery she lingered over the tale of a young man who'd begged her for advice on how to dissuade his girlfriend from buying breast implants. Far from seeking silicone to appeal to her man's sense of beauty, the young woman was defying him in order to appeal to her own—and to that of her sorority sisters, she told him. Right or wrong, this is what women do regularly. That women's interest in their appearance lies largely in wanting to please men is a myth, and one that should be retired without further ceremony. In the same way that women decorate a dorm or a dining room, they decorate themselves. As the painter Friedensreich Hundertwasser contended, any artist's first canvas is himself—or herself. We have, he claimed, "three skins: ... our natural skin, our wardrobe, and our house." And if we have any aesthetic instinct at all, we attend to each one. To argue, like the authors of the book, that "men look (active), and women receive their gaze (passive)" is to mistake the female sex. The majority of men take little notice of their girlfriends' finer aesthetic improvements—the fresh manicure, the dropped dress size, the new halter top. Women notice more than men do, and they often appreciate the same things that men do.

I would wager that most women, if they were honest, would say they like the Calvin Klein model in *Our Bodies*. She looks vulnerable, to be sure—but we cherish vulnerability in our fellow creatures. What is more affecting than a picture of a sensitive cowboy or a doe-eyed street kid; what sells calendars faster than a forlorn kitten?

It is not freedom *from* beauty that needs defending but freedom *for* beauty. How often we hear academics say of a female colleague behind her back, "How can she expect to be taken seriously if she dresses like *that*?" In feminist circles "pretty" is a term of insult. It is as though one had to choose beauty *or* truth, style *or* substance.

Which brings us to another myth propagated by *Our Bodies, Ourselves*: female solidarity. In many cases women have more to fear from other women than from men. This is a truth strenuously resisted by feminists who pretend that all women are compassionate, supportive, and united against men. It is a truth resisted by the surpassingly hokey and misleading use of the word "us" throughout *Our Bodies*, as in "Some of us may not have our full clitoris intact due to clitoridectomy." If we thank the book's "tone and voice editor" (one Zobeida Bonilla) for such anomalies of speech, we also thank its ideologues for assumptions like the one that women make friendlier doctors than men—or more generous lovers. Such sentimentalization is really a form of infantilization—akin to caricaturing indigenous people as "noble savages" or destitute people as "the virtuous poor." We frequently attribute greater goodness to people we consider less sophisticated than the norm. It's how we compensate them for our essential condescension.

Not that our Boston authors do any of this deliberately, of course. Indeed, they don't seem to realize, for example, that by overdramatizing petty problems involving "sensitivity" they trivialize far greater problems. An alien reading *Our Bodies* would conclude that exclusion from a restroom because of one's "trans-gender" identity is a far greater tragedy than, say, dying because America is the only industrialized country without universal health care—or than suffering from an affliction such as quadriplegia or bladder cancer. "*I have been surprised*," declares a woman who must wear a bag of urine attached to her abdomen, "*at how little most men I have sex with are bothered by my urostomy*." "It is fun," says a quadriplegic young woman, "to be part of an education process aimed at challenging [the] perception" that being a quadriplegic in any way constrains one's "ability to enjoy and participate in sex." If the severely ill or injured make light of their troubles in these pages, the same cannot be said for the mildly marginalized. "*Everybody talks about surgery*," complains a man who had an operation to become a gay woman, but "*no one talks about the mental difficulties faced ... after ... the transition ... Like being banned from places like the Mountain Moving Coffeehouse in Chicago*." It is in the wake of this particularly stirring testimonial that the editors issue their call to arms: "Those of us who are heterosexual," they intone, must "use their privileged status to challenge" such forms of sexual intolerance.

The editors' "charity afar," to adapt Emerson, "is spite at home." That is, the exaggerated sympathy they try to solicit for minor and often self-induced troubles—from the trials of overeaters (who are encouraged to "take pride in being fat") to the tribulations of persons who would, if they could, exercise the "right" to determine their gender—comes at the expense of attention to larger afflictions. In the real world we must choose our causes. If we are perennially petitioning for entrance to the Mountain Moving Coffeehouse, we have less time to petition for fair access to health care. That is a shame. It may even be a crime.

The world we encounter in *Our Bodies* is so strongly politicized as to be nearly fabricated, and therefore worthless. Except, of course, when it is worse than worthless, as is the case when the authors plunge into disquisitions about sex. There are, to be sure, useful factoids about birth control and women's anatomy. But such factoids are easy to come by in our day, and they could be contained in a few pages. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective gives us a few *hundred* pages, most of which are far more repellent than enlightening.

If George W. Bush wanted to start a wave of abstinence in America (and he does), he couldn't do better than to place a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in hotel rooms across the country. Between the book's chirpy-cheery trivialization of sex (diagrams of

genitalia with arrows that say "Find Your Orgasm Here!") and its fanatical medicalization (long lists of plastic products we are intended to reach for at the smallest caress), there is little room for passion. Add to this the editors' assumption that everyone wants to have sex all the time, and the whole enterprise starts to sound tragicomic. Witness the following passage about "oral sex on a woman." It "carries some risk," we are told, "especially if the woman has her period or [a sexually transmitted illness] with open sores." Tempting?

For maximum protection, cover your partner's vulva and anus with a dental dam, a cut-open latex glove, a non-lubricated condom, or non-microwaveable plastic wrap ... To turn a latex glove into a barrier, wash out the powder, cut off the four fingers, and slit it up the side, leaving the thumb intact. Try lubricating the side that touches your partner. Be sure to keep the same side against her vulva, and keep track of which side is which so you don't touch the body fluids you are trying to avoid.

All this sounds like a macabre combination of high-level surgery and elementary art class. Little could be less appealing—and less romantic. Here we have two people presumably trying to get close, and to do so they don the equivalent of a trench coat, gas mask, and full combat gear. Is this, one might legitimately ask, love, or is it war?

"Sexual intercourse," wrote the late and radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, "is not intrinsically banal, though pop-culture magazines ... would suggest that it is. It is intense ... the internal landscape is violent upheaval ... the skin collapses as a boundary ... there is physical immersion in each other but with no experience of 'each other' as separate entities." Dworkin may be among the most unlikely defenders of intercourse—which she wrote a book to condemn—but there is something deeply right about her description of sexual union. It is by definition violent, disorienting, compromising, and intimate. Sex and death, eros and thanatos, are linked. To G-rate sex is to destroy it.

And this is exactly what feel-good feminists like the members of the Boston Collective do. They talk of "fun" and "safety," and they sink us in banality and boredom. Provocative truths, such as the braidedness of man and woman and of love and sacrifice, are replaced by dull lies, such as female solidarity and "safe sex." *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a comforting book—even a soporific one. But it represents the end of honest inquiry and the end of curiosity. It represents the death of passion.



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