

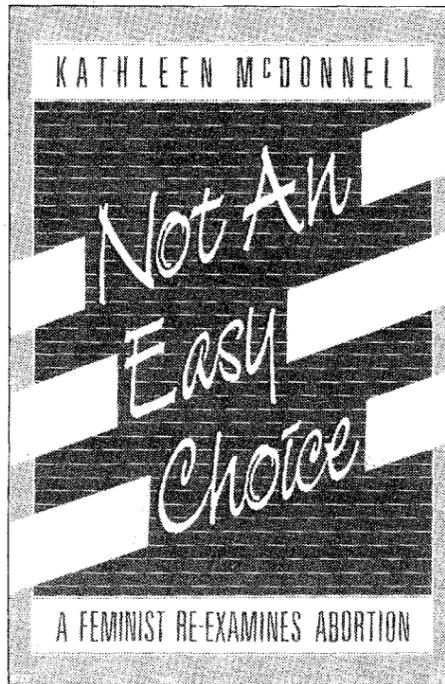
Choice Is Not Enough

Reviewed by Eve Zaremba

Not An Easy Choice, A Feminist Re-Examines Abortion, by Kathleen McDonnell. Toronto: Women's Press 1984. \$8.95

"...the feminist commitment to the absolute right of women to choose abortion is...radical, as is the notion that women should control our own bodies. There is no way to soften the impact of that radical demand without diluting our stance on what is a bedrock issue of modern feminism. But can we perhaps search out new ways of talking about the abortion issue, add new dimensions to it... (p.21)."

In the past few years, conflict over abortion rights has escalated all over this continent. In the States, abortion clinics are systematically torched while federal law officials, well aware that the Boss approves, make no move to treat this as they would other kinds of terrorism. In Canada, our man with a fetus-fetish, Joe Borowski, threatens assassination and tries to close down Manitoba's women's magazine, *HERizons*, for daring to support abortion counselling. Hysterical crowds attack Dr. Morgentaler, the man who has made a crusade of abortion clinics, who has faced four juries and will probably face a few more on this issue. His clinic in Toronto has been constantly harassed by demonstrators, some of whom at times give the appearance of having been hired by the hour for temporary help agencies. Fundamentalist Ken Campbell allies himself with the Catholic Church to confuse well-meaning humanitarians and pressure reluctant politicians. Slogans like



"Abortion will not triumph. Life will," and not-so-veiled anti-semitism like "Morgentaler, the Prophet of Profit" are examples of the depth to which the anti-choice campaign will sink.

With such a polarized situation, with all we have worked for constantly under attack and the future of women's reproductive self-determination hanging in the balance, it may seem an unlikely and inappropriate moment to re-examine the abortion issue.

In *Not an Easy Choice*, Kathleen McDonnell argues persuasively that this examination is not only timely but necessary. Without at-

tempting to summarize the arguments presented, suffice to say that McDonnell deals very adequately with the pros and cons of the notion of 'Choice,' is interesting on the real experience of abortion, and useful if brief on the anti-choice movement. In my view, the real heart of the book lies in her analysis of the problems with the current clinic-centred strategy which "does not question the medical control of abortion." Tactically, the establishment of free standing abortion clinics has to be supported by the claim that they would be, (that they are) as safe as hospitals. This implies that lay abortions are dangerous. "Is it possible that supposed 'danger' of non-medical abortions, like non-medical childbirth, could be more ideological than real?" asks McDonnell. (Here it must be stressed that there is a difference between illegal, back alley abortion and lay abortions.)

McDonnell makes the point that regardless of what happens ultimately with abortion clinics, we will sooner or later have to organize seriously to reclaim all aspects of reproduction from the medical profession "because of modern medicine's tendency to assume control of every aspect of life it touches." The same is true of the State. Its role in contraception, birth and abortion is crucial. "Be fruitful and multiply" is surely a political (rather than a religious) commandment. Interests of the State determine in which direction coercion, or more politely 'incentives' to increase or decrease the birth rate, are applied. Worries about the falling birth rate have surfaced recently in Canada (we need a bigger market; another baby boom would be good for business, etc.) while in the

Third World, population growth is seen as a problem. In either case, the drive is for population strategy decided and determined by the State. "We have to make clear that our right to control our reproduction shares nothing with a population control ideology that legitimizes control and exploitation of women's reproductive capacity in the interest of perpetuating an inequitable political and economic order."

I agree that this is a timely book. These issues will be with us after the passing of Morgentaler and Borowski, after the current battles about abortion clinics are history. The long term struggle is for women's right to the conditions for sexual and reproductive choice. And that struggle has barely begun.

Not an Easy Choice is short (139 pages), clearly written and well designed. It is intelligent in what it covers, while clearly not attempting to be exhaustive. On the subject of the moral aspects of abortion there is nothing new or profound. McDonnell is not an ethical philosopher. Anyone who wants to explore in depth contemporary ethical (Christian-based) thought about abortion might be interested in Beverly Wildung Harrison's *Our Right to Choose*. It "aims to make it harder for anyone to speak of abortion as 'a moral dilemma' without giving women's well-being central standing in the discussion." Harrison's book is rather 'technical'; not for the general reader. McDonnell, however, has produced a book which anyone can read with profit and interest. Everyone should do so if only because it is where all future feminist discussions in this country will have to begin.

Lesbian Novels: Truth or Trash?

The Raging Peace by Artemis OakGrove. Lace Publications 1984.

Triangles by Ruth Geller. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press 1984. \$10.75.

Reviewed by Maureen Phillips

In the context of literary history as a whole, lesbian fiction is a relatively young genre, and as a genre it reflects a struggle for identity. It must borrow form, styles, and value systems from the culture at large, while at the same time express something which that culture traditionally suppresses or distorts. More often than not, the focus in a lesbian novel involves the construction or claiming of a very specific identity; hence the preponderance of narratives that depict the process of "coming out."

Most authors choose one of two solutions to this problem and write either in the category of trash or in the category of social-realism. Most of the trash is pre-'70s and certainly pre-dates the existence of feminist and/or lesbian/feminist publishing houses. Trash might best be read as an indulgence of melodramatic tastes and it absolutely requires a complete suspension of even the vaguest pretensions to literary values. Perhaps writers such as Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor are useful for historical reasons; it is not unlikely that much of contemporary lesbian fiction with its emphasis on "positive images" is a direct response to the tormented excesses of the late '50s. The social-realist school, for all its apparent sensitivity to specific political values, often forgets that fiction can be complex, experimental, and imaginatively engaging. Reading, after all, is an interpretative activity and fiction need not always involve a direct and unmediated relation or representation of ordinary life.

Artemis OakGrove's *The Raging Peace* might best be described as a novel that contains something to offend all sensibilities, whether they be political, sexual, or literary. Perhaps paradoxically, this might be what makes it delightful to read. This book is highly self-conscious trash in a stylized form; there is no attempt made to depict the ordinary. The novel is shaped by seemingly unlikely combinations of conventional romantic patterns, sexual fantasies, and the occasional foray into the supernatural.

By the end of the first chapter (a mere ten pages) the frame, tone, and effusive prose style have been set. Leslie, one of the central characters, who by day is the Serle of Rhinehart, Benson, and Serle, an all lesbian legal

firm in Denver, by night is known among the bar crowd as the Ice Princess. One night in the bar, we're told, "out of the corner of her eye, she saw her. A lanky, dark-haired woman in a leather jacket. The sight made Leslie lose her balance. Her brunette partner caught her deftly and continued dancing, oblivious to the shock wave that seared through Leslie." After a brief recovery period of two paragraphs and a second look, our heroine reflects: "There, directly in her sights, was what her soul recognized as her destiny, and her heart recognized as the lost longings of her youth." To meet the soul's destiny in a bar, before so much as an introduction has taken place, is surely the first of many clues that we are entering the realm of the fantastic.

The dark stranger is Ryan O'Donnell, a hard-drinking biker and pilot, S/M top, complete with shoe fetish, and independently wealthy (thirty-two million, nine hundred and fifty thousand to be precise) as well. Rounding out Ryan's resumé and motivating most of her seemingly erratic behaviour is her involvement in a bizarre revenge scheme. Revenge is being sought by Anara, a three thousand year old goddess, murdered by the members of her all woman clan, of which Ryan, in a former life was a member.

The Raging Peace plays with types and stereotypes in so many ways that its enduring or redeeming value is somewhat dubious. In fact the Toronto Women's Bookstore does not carry the book because the portrayal of one character is deemed to be racist. However, it does succeed remarkably on the level of titillation, which surely must be worth something, and it contains the rather provocative suggestion that lesbian fiction is not always painfully earnest.

Triangles by Ruth Geller, on the other hand, is a firmly grounded exploration of themes related to the difficulties one encounters when trying to integrate various components of one's identity into diverse social and cultural contexts. Sunny Rosenthal must perpetually suppress important aspects of her character depending on her immediate environment. To a large extent, the novel is about Sunny's frustrating search for a place where she can experience even a minimum level of emotional safety and integrity. For example, her family is uncomfortable with her lesbianism, her lover is uncomfortable with and largely uninformed about the Jewish cultural traditions that are essential parts of Sunny's identity, and she is in the closet both as a lesbian and as a Jew at her place of work.

There is tension and conflict in all areas of

her life and this is further complicated by a serious emotional residue of the past that remains unresolved throughout most of the novel. As a whole, the novel fails to be engaging because no single area of conflict is presented in enough depth or detail; there is a relatively large cast of characters and their individual functions within the novel often remain obscure. Unmotivated details abound and the prose is mechanical. For example, "He meowed in response. She walked to the couch, sat down, and burst into tears. Whiskers sat there for a moment, walked to the couch, jumped up, and sniffed tentatively at the air around her face. This show of sympathy, or interest, made her cry all the more."

In striving to emphasize the significance that can be attached to simple, everyday occurrences, Geller forgets that the organization and structuring of this kind of material is essential if interest is to be sustained. When what we think of as realistic fiction works, it does so only if it offers a clarity of vision that allows for a shift from the banality of daily life to the imaginative possibilities which draw us into fictional worlds in the first place.

Maureen Phillips is an English student at U of T, works part-time in a bookstore, and is a member of the "Otherwise" collective.

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