



Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present

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A classic of its kind, this fascinating cultural history draws on everything from private correspondence to pornography to explore five hundred years of friendship and love between women. *Surpassing the Love of Men* throws a new light on shifting theories of female sexuality and the changing status of women over the centuries.

Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present Details

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From Reader Review Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present for online ebook

Meri Elena says

This is an interesting and informative book about the history of intimate relationships between women in Western Europe and (later) the USA from the 1500s to the 1970s. It is definitely a long and a dense read, but well worth the time, I thought. I will say that it is overflowing with the author's opinions. I learned a lot of historical facts, but I had to read everything through a very thick filter of Lillian Faderman's interpretation of everything and everyone. I found her perspective intriguing, but having her present her thoughts as gospel truth got old fast. Despite that frustration, this was still a good book.

Isabelle says

I'm not quite sure how to rate this, but I'm extremely pleased I've FINALLY finished it

Vitani Days says

Davvero un ottimo, interessantissimo saggio che prende in esame la storia delle "amicizie particolari" femminili dal Rinascimento ai giorni nostri. Molto ben documentato, ricchissimo di esempi, aneddoti e consigli di lettura, offre un quadro completo ed esauriente di come si sia evoluto il concetto di "lesbica" (o meglio, di "donna che ama altre donne") nel corso dei secoli, e di quanto il giudizio e la dominanza maschili abbiano influito sulla percezione del ruolo della donna all'interno della società.

Ampio spazio è dedicato al XVIII e al XIX secolo, e sono affrontate da più punti di vista tematiche come le romantic friendships, il travestitismo, la femme fatale, il Boston marriage, passando poi al Novecento e alla rivoluzione sessuale.

Un saggio che induce alla riflessione e che è illuminante per quanto riguarda la storia della sessualità femminile da un punto di vista strettamente sociologico. Soprattutto, fa capire quanto della nostra mentalità sia frutto di una scientificità che si è affermata solo nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento, incasellando in via definitiva la sessualità umana all'interno del binomio "etero-omo", e quanto certi preconcetti dati proprio da tale mentalità siano errati e, a tutt'oggi, duri da scalzare.

Ricchissima tra l'altro la bibliografia.

Lettura assolutamente consigliata!

Emi says

I loved this book because it dispels the notion that lesbianism is just an invention of modern society.

Faderman's intention in writing the book was to create a lesbian history outside of medical records accounting for perversion, and she succeeds. While Faderman has faced ample criticism for underplaying sexuality in romantic friendships, I think that regardless, the book is incredibly valuable. I cried when I read

it! Through her excerpts of diaries and letters, she does a wonderful job of creating a narrative that for once, lesbians control. For further reading and a more modern approach, I recommend Martha Vicinus's *Intimate Friends* or Leila J. Rupp's *Sapphistries*.

Sabrina says

The first two thirds of this book, dealing with "romantic friendship" between women in the 16th-19th centuries, are brilliantly done. A fascinating examination of lesbian history and women's history. The final third, dealing with the 20th century, is weaker in comparison, particularly due to Faderman's advocacy for what are now seen as outdated concepts (e.g. political lesbianism). However, all in all, it's a valuable and enjoyable read. Maybe consider stopping reading once you get to the second wave feminist movement.

Erica Freeman says

I read this in college, and even with my unreasonably long list of "to-reads," I can't wait to read it again. Validating and fascinating. Not just about lesbianism, but about intellectual, "fraternal," and even sensual (not necessarily sexual) love, respect, and affections between women.

Carlos says

This book was interesting if a bit long. Faderman has an amazing ability to recreate the pre-Freudian world of the 17th and 18th centuries when the idea of romantic friendships between women were not yet contaminated by the baggage of the "sexual invert". She highlights how in at a time when women were ignored by men and society in general they found the best company among their own members. While she takes pains to make sure that the reader does not assume that all of these intense friendships were what we would call today lesbian relationship, she does try to highlight how women who loved women were able to do so more openly at this time. Faderman then continues her story documenting how the rise of feminism and Freud's sex theories created a backlash against these relationships. They were now suspected of encouraging deviant behavior and actually undermining society (!). Faderman follows this trend through the countless novels that started shifting from depicting the "pure" love of two women to the pathological seductions of murderous lesbians. While I felt that the author goes a bit overboard in trying to follow this change of heart in the literary tastes and its reflection of society as a whole, the book was still an interesting read that illustrates the counterintuitive rise and fall of women's relationships from when women were thought of as asexual to when they were suspected of being deviants.

Alice says

Even if you disagree with some of Faderman's 1981 conclusions (especially about more contemporary events — the section on feminism and women 'choosing' to be lesbian as a feminist statement made me do some facepalming), the amount of research that went into this book — PRE-INTERNET, mind you — is staggering.

She traces the history of romantic friendship from the 1500s to the 1970s, and gives an excellent overview of lesbian literature while doing so. She has stated in recent times that she regrets the Anne Lister diaries not having come to light when she was writing this, but that is one missed example among tens that she did find.

I read *Diana Victrix* by Florence Converse because of this book. I know more about Gertrude Stein; I am looking forward to reading the poetry of Amy Lowell; I'm trying to get my hands on the letters of Geraldine Jewsbury and Jane Carlyle; I'll be reading 'A Description of Millennium Hall,' as well as 'Lesbia Brandon' by Swinburne and 'Ormond' by Charles Brockden Brown.

It's been a fantastic experience.

Freyja Vanadis says

This book took me forever to read; not only because it's long, but because it's full of (too much) information. And while Faderman doesn't exactly use a dry style of writing - she's very readable - she does tend to repeat the same thing over and over and over. She had countless examples of female couples through the centuries, who all did the same things and acted the same way. Pretty soon they all blended together and I had a hard time keeping track of who's who. It's like the people were all the same, just the names changed.

Linda says

Lillian Faderman's book is a summary of society's views toward love between women over the last 400 years. That's a rather ambitious project. She's got a lot of ground to cover and covering that ground takes a while. That can make the book a bit slow at times, but it's definitely a worthwhile read. Much of the history she discussed was totally unknown to me and while dry, it was interesting.

It seems likely that her goal for the book was to show that society didn't view love between women with through the same lens as many in society do today. To summarize the book in a sentence or two is a disservice but Faderman argues that until the end of the 19th Century, society not only tolerated but encouraged love between women (what was known as "romantic friendship") at least so long as the relationship wasn't perceived as sexual or neither woman was trying to either pass as a man or usurp a male role. Only with the advent of psychiatry and the first studies of human behavior was a friendship between women that went beyond simple friendship seen as disordered.

She uses letters and literature of the periods to make her case and also shows how the modern myth of the lesbian as a vampire-like creature had its origins in 17th Century French literature. Given how little literature dealt with lesbian themes, these early works were often the basis or inspiration for much of what followed, even into 20th Century America.

The modern debate about whether same-sex love is genetic or caused by environment is also shown to be a debate that dates back to the early psychiatrists.

If you want a book that provides some insight into how society came to be in its current form, this is a good start down that path.

??rika Kosciuszko says

Vycerpavajuca antologia, za ktorou je poctivy kus prace! Autorka sa sustreduje na vzťahy medzi ženami za posledných 400 rokov- cerpa z romanov, poezie, odbornej literatury, dobovej tlace. Detailne zachytáva ako sa menilo vnímanie lesbických vzťahov v priebehu storočí a čo konkrétne malo na tieto zmeny vplyv. Okrem toho prináša jednotlivé osudy žien/parov, ktoré sa aj napriek dobe, ktorá im nepriala, rozhodli ísť vlastnou cestou. Ťažké citácie, ktoré ale stojí za to namáhať prelúskat sa do konca.

catharine says

Weighty, but a fascinating read on the history of relationships between women and, more interestingly, the drastic changes in perception about physical and intense emotional interaction.

Within 20 years of 1900, having a close female friend as the center of your emotional life went from completely normal and expected, to being the sign of a diseased mind.

Amazing stuff - it totally reframed Anne of Green Gables, Little Women, and My Antonio for me.

Melvina says

Very interesting. I got impatient with some of the chapters; it seemed repetitive at times. As I read it, it became more clear to me that romantic friendships haven't gone away, they're just called something else. In many of the examples, these women were not "romantically" involved with several friends, these were exclusive relationships. These friendships involved two women who were totally in love with each other, or exclusively attached to one another. The Boston marriages, for instance. By the end of the book, I was convinced there is no such thing as "romantic friendships". They are now just called same-sex relationships or same-sex marriage. Our current culture doesn't have a problem with two women being exclusively attached to each other (well, for the most part; we've come a long way, but it's still not perfect).

I love the history in this book and there were so many great examples of real women as well as literary characters. I recommend it for the history AND the scholarship.

ael says

I'm getting really tired of Lillian Faderman's "all lesbians are nice ladies who hold hands as they walk down the beach" thing, also of the trans-invisibility thing (all inverts were just dykes? really?), but I know she's just coming from a certain generation. That said, she certainly does churn out the easy-reading dyke history tomes.

Anna says

I found this book wholly fascinating and compelling, yet sad. It tells the story of love between women and how perceptions and prejudices have shaped it across the centuries. As it was first published in 1981, the subtitle is no longer accurate. The lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s is the last trend described and it is salutary to compare this to the situation today. The book begins with the notion of 'romantic friendship', which reached its height of popularity in the 18th century. Faderman's examination of romantic friendship demonstrates powerfully how changeable cultural norms are, in an area (love and sex) often blithely treated as immutable. Certainly, you have the trend today of framing so-called masculine and feminine behaviours as biologically fixed, as challenged in the excellent *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*.

A major theme that I felt ran through the book was how sexuality is currently seen as a matter of desire and attraction, rather than behaviour, whereas this has not always been the case. Romantic friendships were a loving behaviour between women which did not tie them to a particular identity, sexual or otherwise. In the 18th century, though, it was widely assumed that none of these romantic friendships could have a sexual aspect, as a) women were assumed to have little or no libido, and b) the men whose writings on the topic have survived did not know how two women could have sex! There is thus a bittersweet tone to the initial chapters on romantic friendship. Undoubtedly their bonds brought a lot of women much joy, companionship, and deep love, however this was within a deeply oppressive patriarchal society. When it became possible for women to be financially independent from men, romantic friendships became suspect.

Thus, the chapters on the 19th century are saddening, as they recount how romantic friendship became pathologised, exoticised, and condemned. Women who had been happily emotionally involved with one another were now treated as sick, in need of psychotherapy, and a threat to family life/the children/society in general. The sexologists, especially Freud, were at the vanguard of this. In short, the patriarchy attempted to ruin the emotional bonds that women had developed in part as a way to survive misogyny. Faderman examines the fictional depictions of women loving women (by then labelled 'lesbianism') that promulgated these negative ideas. I was amused by her palpable scorn at the decadent movement's voyeuristic lesbian stereotyping. For example, 'The emphasis in most of Verlaine's other lesbian poems, as in Baudelaire's, is on sex and sin - but of course the women are always young and lovely and arousing as they shuffle off to hell'.

In Faderman's opinion, only the feminist movement of the 1970s has been able to rehabilitate love between women. I didn't previously understand what feminists of that decade meant by lesbian, as it seems to differ significantly from the assumed definition today. Lesbian-feminists of the 1970s apparently made a decision to focus their important emotional relationships (which could be sexual but might not be) on other women. Their lesbianism is thus defined by choice and behaviour, whereas today it is assumed that a lesbian is a woman who is sexually attracted to other women whether she likes it or not. In a way, this shifting definition powerfully demonstrates that in the 21st century, there is an assumption of compulsory sexuality. Thus, behaviour is presumed to follow attraction. Lesbians are women who are attracted to women and therefore have sex with them. Whereas Faderman is at pains to point out that romantic friendships seems often to have been sensual, maybe even sexual, but that was by no means the most important thing about them. Love today is so defined by sex. All serious non-familial relationships and emotional attachments are assumed to have a sexual component. I seem to recall that Freud even claimed that all platonic friendships have sexual attraction buried at their core. Freud has a lot to answer for, really. Even as his theories have been academically discredited, their influence on Western popular culture continues.

‘Surpassing the Love of Men’ reminded me that as women in Europe and the US have gained more sexual freedom, this has brought new constraints and novel forms of sexism. The idea of sexuality as being innate, something you’re born with, counters homophobia by denying the possibility of medical rehabilitation. On the other hand, it also tends to exclude the freedom to choose your sexual and emotional behaviours and aims to neatly categorise everyone. I can imagine the hostile confusion that would result today if you came out as a lesbian, on the basis of not wanting emotional relationships with men whether or not you are attracted to them. Women’s bodies are still generally presumed to be sexually available to men. Moreover, any attraction is generally assumed to be sexual, despite the asexual community’s efforts at subdivision (sexual/romantic/sensual elements, etc). And as sexual attraction is treated as the most important and irresistible component of love, non-sexual relationships are deemed unimportant. This is why I felt a sense of loss when reading about romantic friendships. I love my close female friends very much, however none of them are my 'girlfriend', so these relationships are trivialised. In the media, there are very few depictions of female friendships that are recognisable to me. Female characters in films and on TV are so often rivals for a man's interest, rather than having emotional attachments to one another. Since the 18th century women's lives have improved immeasurably, but not without some losses. We still live in a misogynistic world, though I'm well aware that as a white, middle class woman I'm insulated from the worst of it.
