

Catherine Millet. *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* [2001], trans.

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Early on in *Promiscuities*, Naomi Wolf writes, "women's ... sexual histories are often tapestries stitched around great areas of silence." In exploring the cultural definitions behind women's sexuality, Wolf goes on to state that women need to continue speaking about their sexual lives "and write that way again and again, until the taboo loses its power."

With the sexual revolution well and truly over, and debates between pro-sex and sacred-sex feminists still highly topical, the line between 'good girl' and 'bad girl' is shakier than ever. While programs like *Sex and the City* suggest women's sex lives are up for public consumption, there is still a negative connotation attached to women who speak openly about their sexual histories, particularly if they reveal a voracious appetite for 'fleshly love.' Here, the term 'promiscuous,' and its colloquial bedfellows, 'slut' and 'whore,' remain debasing insults, underlining what is and isn't acceptable for particular people (usually women and gay men) to do with their bodies. Despite the saturation of sexed up bodies in the media, the ethic of Victorian Puritanism continues to monitor sexual boundaries and certain forms of desire.

It is in this climate that Catherine Millet's *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* has emerged. In stark contrast to the popular messages of a brave new HIV/STD world, *Sexual Life* defies the contemporary idea that sex should be based solely on intimacy and monogamy, and that a woman cannot engage (and indeed enjoy) a life of sexual pleasure without becoming shackled in heterosexual slavery.

Posited as an autobiographical account, *Sexual Life* is a painstakingly detailed and at times shocking exploration into the darkest terrain of one

woman's sex life, focussing in particular, on her guiltless unabashed participation in group sex. The more salacious elements (and there are many) of the French art critic's memoir are by now well known. As a young woman in 1960s and 1970s Paris, Catherine Millet was introduced to group sex at the age of 18, some weeks after her first sexual encounter. Finding the cumbersome pawing of teenage love offensive, she spent her 20s and 30s pinned down by a total of more than 5000 men in a series of anonymous orgies. The text recounts her experiences in graphic detail, complete with locations (sex clubs, parks, ovals, car bonnets, cemeteries, woods); activities (multiple penetration, anal sex, oral sex, outdoor exhibitionism, straight sex, occasional gay sex, licking, sucking, caressing); and partners (faces, penises, nipples, orifices, likes, dislikes, preferred positions and sexual styles).

It is a sexual tour de force of exhausting proportions, written in unaffected prose, and devoid of flowery observations and romantic nuances. Hers is not the story of a woman searching for love: "I wasn't very sentimental. I needed affection, and I found it, but without feeling any need to go and build love stories out of sexual relationships" (56). This is the seldom-told tale of a woman who engaged in extreme sexual sports not for love, but rather, for self-discovery. Millet writes herself as an anthropologist of sorts, clicking through the numbers (and men) who have starred in her 'unusual' sex life. Taking an almost scientific approach, the author records the life of her body with mechanical detail, adopting the cool, detached voice of a researcher monitoring a subject. Only here, it seems that Millet herself is the experiment. Like a lab rat, she is 'done to', poked and prodded. Early on in the book she writes: "The uncle would get me going and the two brothers would give me a good shafting" (40).

It is this detached, passive style that represents one of the most troubling and confronting elements of the text. Having rejected the art of seduction and flirtation as a dishonest sexual language, Millet says she has never solicited or initiated her sexual exploits. She is simply available "at all times and in all places," ready to be penetrated by any number of men (32).

I would almost always stay on my back, perhaps because the other most common position, in which the woman actively straddles the man's pelvis, is less adapted to intervention from several participants ... On my back I could be stroked by several men while one of them...would get going in my vagina. (13)

For many brought up in the aftermath of post-Greer feminism, sections like this make for uncomfortable reading. At times, the shock and awe tendencies seem so extreme that one wonders the extent to which the author has

relied on hyperbole to garner effect. While Millet is at pains to state that she has never been coerced, or indeed harmed, the extreme physicality of the encounters, coupled with the almost absolute passivity on the author's behalf is, at times, difficult to comprehend. It is part porn, part poetry. Lines like "men who are into orgies really like shooting their load in a cunt that's already lined with cum" (14) nudge up against "I hold the hub still and gravitate my whole head round it, distributing gentle strokes from my cheeks, my chin moistened with saliva, my forehead, hair and even the ends of my nose" (149).

All of this makes for an often compelling, occasionally banal, and yet entirely confronting reading experience. For here is a woman who has willingly parted her legs and her mouth to thousands of readers in a bid to speak the story of her body. Sex and penetration become mere metaphors for the act of reading and the process of dis-membering the author herself. As readers, we penetrate Millet's mind to see how much flesh we can handle. Millet writes:

[I]mage and language are in cahoots. It is so stimulating to look in a mirror and measure – to the nearest centimetre – the amount of flesh that your own flesh can swallow, and this is because the show gives rise to words. (157)

Although Millet is referring to oral sex, she could just as well be discussing the games her text plays with the reader: "If the vocabulary is crude and limited, this is less to do with a desire to provoke each other by upping the obscenity stakes than a need to be accurate in our descriptions" (157). Indeed, it is as though Millet is subtly rebuking those who would deplore her explicit language, reminding them that this is sex in all its sweatiness and baseness.

Critical accounts have likened the *Sexual Life* to the *Confessions*, yet, unlike Rousseau, this book does not profess a need to explain or deconstruct the 'self.' Rather, it is an attempt to give voice to the lived experience of a history of 'non-normative' sex while, at the same time, questioning the social construction of permissible sexualities. More than anything else, this book, by virtue of its material, asks the reader to consider what makes for 'normal' sex. What constitutes a woman's sexuality, and, what are the boundaries between private and public inter(dis)course?

The desire to psychoanalyse the writer, to explain away her behaviour by reviewing her upbringing (she slept in her mother's bed until she left home and lost her brother, to whom she was very close), is tempting. Certainly, as cultural participants we are trained to believe that a woman who behaves like this must indeed have something 'wrong' with her. Yet, I

would argue, this desire should be resisted for it is exactly what Millet herself is contesting – that is, the traditions passed down by Freudian philosophy which treat women's sexuality, particularly the non-reproductive kind, as a medical condition.

The Sexual Life of Catherine M is mottled with contradictions, paradoxes and complexities. On the one hand, this shy, awkward woman says she is most comfortable with her clothes off, being penetrated, yet hates wearing revealing clothes; she holds down a 'respectable' day job, however, she claims that the greatest compliment to her is to be told she gives "the best blowjobs" (149); and writes of her voracious desires, all the while claiming that until the age of 35 she "had not imagined that my own pleasure could be the aim of a sexual encounter" (166). Yet this is what sex is about – contradiction. Sex is complex and it is transgressive, and our sexual lives, in relation to our own identities, are not always immediately compatible. For sex is an organic personal performance that morphs according to participants' changing selves.

In an age where too much information has become the order of the day, Catherine Millet's book could have easily have slipped between the cracks as an irrelevant and smutty 'reader's wife story.' Elegant language and a powerful position as one of France's top intellectuals has, however, insured against that. Whatever the view about the quality and function of the work, one thing Millet's book reveals is that in the aftermath of Bataille and de Sade, writings about sexuality still have the power to subvert and challenge, and to force us to reconsider the validity of our own sexual moralities. This, I would suggest, is the triumph of this book.

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