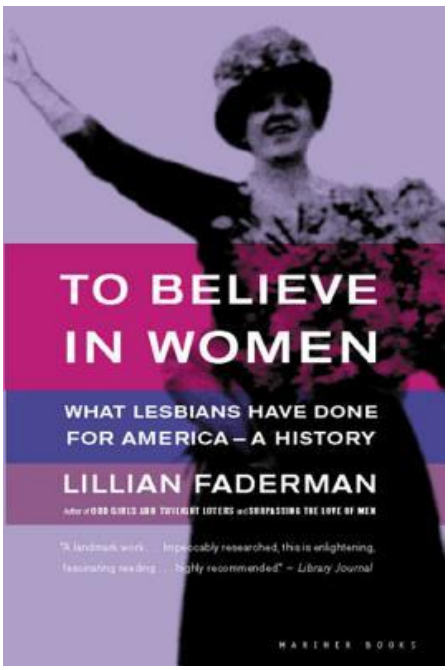

To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done For America - A History

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This landmark work of lesbian history focuses on how certain late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century women whose lives can be described as lesbian were in the forefront of the battle to secure the rights and privileges that large numbers of Americans enjoy today. Lillian Faderman persuasively argues that their lesbianism may in fact have facilitated their accomplishments. A book of impeccable research and compelling readability, TO BELIEVE IN WOMEN will be a source of enlightenment for all, and for many a singular source of pride.

To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done For America - A History Details

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From Reader Review To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done For America - A History for online ebook

Nikki says

This isn't really a review so much as just thoughts.

I swear, every single introduction to any academic lesbian text is so damn apologetic for using the term 'lesbian.' Even when it is partially tongue in cheek and poking a bit of fun at the ridiculousness of being unable to use the term in academia, it still comes across as a bit apologetic. (Literally, once you have read so many of these texts it's a little maddening how they tiptoe around other academics.)

This one though: "I might have subtitled this book, with greater accuracy, "What women of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, Whose Chief Sexual and/or Affectational and Domestic Behaviors Would have Been Called 'Lesbian' If They Had Been Observed in the Years after 1920, Have Done for America.""

It's astounding how exhaustively researched this is.

Amanda says

I am so glad I found this book! It was as amazing and eye-opening as others have said. Faderman finally presents us with a full history of some of the most admired American women. I devoured this - it's scholarly but compulsively readable. Footnotes aren't digitized well, at least not in iBooks - it's hard to find what you want when you are reading.

One gripe: Faderman has something against stay-at-home moms. That's fine when she's railing against the housewife mystique of the 50s, but she is incredibly condescending toward women of the 90s who chose to leave lucrative careers to raise a family. She passes it off as luxury, as a new kind of gilded cage, and that's not fair to the women who choose to stay home. Plenty of families scrimp and save so that a parent can be home while the children are young because it's their belief that it's best for the kids. She looks down on these women, and it is undeserved.

I don't have kids, but I think there are merits to staying at home as well as putting kids in more independent-minded care facilities. No idea what I'll do when my hypothetical kids are born, but I'd like to have my choice respected, whatever it will be.

Kellee says

Amazing read. So many women we hear about as heroes all the time (such as Susan B. Anthony!), with lesbian inclinations, and we never hear about them. I never get to hear their history which is so affirming for me. This book is incredibly important.

Morgan Dhu says

Liliian Faderman's book, To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America - A History, examines the contribution of American women we would now identify as lesbians to various areas of endeavour, including the women's suffrage movement, the settlement house movement, the establishment of higher education institutions for women, and the entry of women into the professions.

It is difficult to look back into the past and determine with absolute certainty the sexual lives of many of the women Faderman describes as lesbians. Certainly there is a long history of women forming "passionate friendships" and "Boston marriages," as such intensely intimate emotional and domestic relationships were variously called, and it is only reasonable to assume that many of the women in such relationships were romantically and sexually involved as well. But this style of intense friendship was also found between women who married and lived traditional heterosexual lives, and it is quite conceivable that unmarried heterosexual women would seek friendship and convenience in non-sexual domestic arrangements. However, Faderman chooses to assume that most if not all the unmarried women in these various movements, and particularly those who formed households with other women, were what we today would call lesbians.

In this book, Faderman tells the stories of some of the American women she identifies as lesbians who were involved in these significant areas of American political and social action. She proposes the theory that disproportionate numbers of lesbians were leaders and key supporters of these movements because they were free of the obligations of heterosexual marriage - taking care of husband, home, children - and instead had the opportunity to form relationships with women who were either supportive of them, or who actively worked beside them. She further argues that without the leadership and example of lesbians, who needed the greater freedom demanded by the suffragettes in order to support themselves without the help of men, heterosexual women alone could not have won, or held onto, the freedoms gained by the movement.

One thing I find myself wondering about in reading Faderman's book is whether this heightened presence of lesbians in social activism in the 19th and early 20th centuries is a universal phenomenon or something peculiar to American life. I'm not aware of any similar research that has been done, say, in Canada or Britain, but I do know that where Faderman can name scores of unmarried women leaders in the American suffrage movement, I can only think of a few Canadian women suffragists who remained unmarried (Agnes MacPhail being one such) and the only out lesbian who comes to mind is Charlotte Whitton. However, that could well be a result of a lack of research on this point.

In recounting this narrative of the pre-eminent role played by lesbians in the advancement of women's rights, Faderman also looks at changes over time in attitudes toward and acceptance of "manly" women and intimate relationships between women. She notes that before the work of theorists such as Freud and Kraft-Ebbling, such relationships were not stigmatised, and she paints a picture of whole communities of high-status, activist lesbians acknowledging their relationships within the communities, vacationing together, visiting each other as couples, providing emotional support when separation or death left one of their number in distress.

However, Faderman argues, as psychological theories of inversion and sexual pathology became widely known and adopted, disapproval grew and women involved in relationships with other women began to internalize feelings of being psychologically lacking. Many engaged in self-denial that they were lesbians

like those described in medical literature, or made attempts to conceal their relationships from the public eye.

This growing awareness and stigmatisation of lesbians, "inverts" and "manly women" provoked fears among high-status males that there would be no women left to raise their children and keep their houses: "but who will bake the pies?" As well, penchant for eugenics that was common in upper-class, predominantly white circles in the early 20th century led to alarms over the higher marriage and birth rates among uneducated, black and immigrant women, raising fears of "race suicide" among middle and upperclass educated white women. Psychiatric theory that posited heterosexuality and conspicuous femininity as the natural expression of psychological health and maturity led to the perception of the educated, single or working woman as unnatural, unhealthy and immature. These developments, Faderman suggests, had the dual effect of limiting the influence of lesbian leaders and pioneers in the professions, and discouraging heterosexual women from even considering any future other than marriage.

Thus, after almost a century of strong female leadership (often by lesbians) in suffrage, labour, social welfare and women's education movements, the 1920s and 1930s saw a decline in women in positions of power and authority in these areas. Further, higher education for women was redefined, returning to the concept of educating women to be wives and mothers, not professionals.

"Women steadily lost ground in the professions. By the 1940s, as a statistician for the U.S. Women's Bureau observed, more than three quarters of the women who were listed in the census of occupations under "Professional" were in the lower-prestige, lower-salaried jobs of teachers and nurses. "The traditional learned professions of law, medicine, and theology," the statistician wrote in 1947, "accounted for almost 24 percent of the men grouped as professional and semi-professional workers, but the proportion of women in these fields was relatively so insignificant (all of them together less than 1 percent)" that she could not show them separately in her statistical summary."

It is my strong feeling that Faderman, whose other work on the history of women who chose to have intimate emotional and romantic (and in some cases certainly sexual) relationships with other women I have enjoyed and admired, overstates her case in this book.

Again and again, Faderman suggests that only unmarried women could possibly have done the kind of pioneering work in the suffrage movement and in the professions that the women she writes about did, and that most of those women who resisted the "heterosexual imperative" of marriage must have been lesbians. Setting aside the fact that for most of this period, there was no true sense of sexual identity as there is today, this argument is gainsaid from the start by Faderman's own inclusion of statistics that show that significant percentages (though rarely if ever majorities) of women in the suffrage movement and in the professions were married to men.

Further, Faderman neglects the fact that even in the mid-1800s, there were men who embraced the thought of women in the professions, and women in political life. Not many, but enough that some married women might well have had the active support of their male partners. Others might have been given grudging permission - "I don't care what you do as long as supper's on the table on time every day." Married upper and upper-middle class women, if they were committed to a movement or a career, could well have found the time to devote themselves outside of the house by relying on paid labour to care for house and children. And, just as they did in England, married working class women could surely have made the sacrifices necessary for a cause they believed in. It's not just a black and white choice between marrying and being a housewife with no time or energy to study and work, or turning one's back on all heterosexual expression and becoming a lesbian.

I certainly do not dispute that in general, women who were unmarried for whatever reason would have had fewer demands on their time than most married women, and further that they would have been aware of the need to find ways to support themselves - but it is undeniable that some women did take up the cause of suffrage, or engage in the professions, while married to men, and even while having children.

Nor do I dispute the idea that a significant proportion of the unmarried women who were active in these areas were what we might now classify as lesbian or bisexual - but it is not appropriate to identify as lesbians all unmarried women who found women to share their work and homes and aspirations and emotional lives with. Ours has always been a homosocial society - women and men, married or unmarried, have largely found emotional, intellectual and social satisfaction in the company of members of their own sex. It's cheaper and more pleasant to live with someone, and many people do so for long periods of time without being sexually involved.

Faderman further suggests, in an uncomfortably patronising fashion, that heterosexual women would not have entered the professions at all if lesbians had not taken the responsibility for "elevating" all women to the consciousness they had achieved: "Lesbian professional women continued to recognize what was at stake if they could not elevate the status of women. However, they lived in a very different world from that of heterosexual women, who generally did not have the same motives to spur them in the arduous struggles toward a profession."

Indeed, by Faderman's account, it was not until the mid-60s, with the beginning of second wave feminism in response to a growing climate of support for civil rights, that heterosexual women were finally able to follow their lesbian sisters out of the home and into the world: "By making gender discrimination illegal, the 1964 Civil Rights Act helped to herald a new mood with regard to women. Thus the space created many decades earlier by the lesbian pioneers—where women might assume what Stearn scoffingly called "active role[s] in outside affairs"—could finally begin to be inhabited by a broad spectrum of American women."

Faderman concludes the book with a summary of the advances made by women since 1964 in politics, the professions, and in challenging a sexist society. While she acknowledges that these advances have been accomplished by lesbians and heterosexual women working side by side, she repeats the argument that it was lesbians - and, it seems, only lesbians - who made it possible. "But over the past two decades, American women have resumed the progress that was put on hold for a half-century, taking up where the lesbian pioneers left off. The ambitions of the pioneers have spread to large numbers of heterosexual women."

Faderman ends with several comments on reclaiming lesbian history and establishing lesbian heroes and role models that I heartily agree with. The "disappearing" of queer people of all kinds and their contributions to the panorama of human history is a trend that must be reversed, and Faderman has done much solid work to bring this about. Certainly, some of the most enjoyable passages in this book are the stories of women who were almost certainly lesbians whose accomplishments were significant and profound. However, in highlighting the undeniable influence of these women on the long struggle for women's liberation, it seems to me that Faderman has constructed a narrative of bold lesbian pioneers and easily cowed and manipulated heterosexual women that almost reverses the situation, creating an argument that, if followed to its logical conclusions, "disappears" the heterosexual women who also fought for women's freedoms.

So... Lesbians in the forefront of the struggle (alongside married and unmarried heterosexual women)? Of course. All women in the struggle as lesbians? Not bloody likely. Lesbians having an easier time finding energy and emotional support for the struggle? Quite possible. All other women just giving up because the demands from husband and family were too great? Demonstrably untrue and rather insulting to those heterosexual and bisexual women who for whatever reason married.

Holly says

Great book! Hard to put down if you enjoy stories of smart women going against the grain. Provides an ancestry to lesbian and bisexual women and an eye-opening historical account to anyone who grew up learning the straight-washed version of American women's history. Highly recommend!

Allison Thurman says

library

Graciela says

This book contains a lot of good "unknown" information regarding same sex relationships which most suffragists involved themselves in. There's a lot of excerpts from original letters written by Susan B Anthony among others - directed to their loved one. After taking a class about Women's history in America - I realized that women in the 18o0's were encouraged to participate in same sex romantic relationships. This of course was a result of the division of spheres 1. men 2. women. The women sphere had to create a network composed of women only - Mothers, sisters, friends, neighbors, cousins etc. Men and women were kept separated and were not to mingle until they were unionized by marriage. Women began to attend colleges and were forced to move out of town in order to attend. Older women students would take care of younger female ones, often ending up in romantic relationships. Such relationships lasted a lifetime, marriage didn't stop the letters from coming. Romantic relationships were useful for these women - it was only when such relationships seemed sexual that they were looked at as a problem.

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ael says

i know this is stupid, but i mostly enjoyed this book for celebrity-spotting (so is it just accepted knowledge nnow that Eleanor Roosevelt was a dyke?)and sentimental claspings of hands beneath moonlight caresses. I'm a sucker for womyn-loving-womyn Anne of Green Gables styleee.

Linda says

Lillian Faderman appears to be specializing in books with long titles. This one continues that trend with "To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done For America - A History". This covers a period of time from the middle of the 19th through the middle of the 20th century and looks at the women who were the driving forces in women's suffrage, education and in professional and academic work.

Sadly, it contains a lot of names that we've never heard in a history class. The only two likely exceptions are Eleanor Roosevelt and Susan B. Anthony. In reality, it took the efforts of thousands of women but what may

come as a surprise is how many of those women lived their lives in committed relationships with other women. Today we would call the lesbians or gay, but, for the most part, these women didn't identify as lesbian. Indeed, many of them lived in a time that predated the concept of a lesbian identity.

The history is fascinating. Faderman makes the point that since most women were pressured to marry and stay at home to raise a family that the women most likely to need to support themselves were those who had no interest in marrying men. And, even if a woman did want to marry a man, she was expected to subjugate her own desires to her husband's career meaning that while economic circumstances may have forced her to work, she rarely had a true career.

After reading this, I have a better handle on some of the attitudes that still linger today in the business world toward professional women. And, it's thanks to the efforts of these women and the countless others that assisted them that all American women have the opportunities we have today.

Philly Aesthete Brown says

I borrowed this hefty tome from the library when it was originally published in 1999, and recently bought myself a copy now that it's out in paperback. The awkwardly wordy title may give the impression that this book is one of those rather shallow surveys that tries to cram decades upon decades of historical information into a slight volume. It is not. Nor is it one of those corny 'great and little known facts & contributions books'. What it is is a scholarly and exhaustively researched (mostly from primary sources) account of the lives of dozens of late 19th and early 20th century women whose eschewal of compulsory heterosexuality allowed them to pursue college and graduate /professional degrees and eventual careers. Resisting the "cult of true womanhood" allowed them to fight for the inclusion of women in heretofore all male institutions and professions like medicine and law. It allowed them to found and to sustain colleges for women like Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr and Spelman. It allowed them to fight for women's suffrage, for better working conditions for women and ethnic minorities, for the end of illegal child labor, for decent health care for poor women and children and for other social reforms. Faderman uses extant letters and journals of women on the vanguard of suffrage and anti-slavery, education, law, medicine, social work etc. to prove that many were unmarried and living in romantic/affectional and sexual relationships with other women. Faderman argues that the freedom from the duties of wife and mother in the traditional sense that these women enjoyed was key to them being able to make significant contributions to American life. We benefit from their labor today. A few of the women chronicled in the book are: Bryn Mawr's first female president M. Carey Thomas, Mount Holyoke president Mary Woolley, suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Anna Shaw, social reformer Jane Addams, medical pioneer Emily Blackwell, among others. Faderman is a fantastic social historian here: she avoids overanalyzing things, but does a great job of giving the reader a clear sense of the cultural, political and historical elements bearing down on the women about whom she writes. Her prose style is scholarly, yet still highly accessible. Honestly, this is one of the more reader-friendly history books I've encountered. There is, though, a paucity of information about women of color. There is some mention of Mary Mcleod Bethune, Rebecca Jackson and NAACP attorney Paule Murray, but none of those portraits are in-depth. I don't think this was some kind of purposeful exclusion, though. Faderman relied heavily on letters between friends and sweethearts and on written journals. If the primary sources weren't left behind or made available, then Faderman couldn't include the women. Faderman talks at length about how common it was for potential historical subjects to destroy any written documents that might out them to the prying eyes of future historians. If white women were doing that, then for sure black women did the same but to the nth degree. Farah Griffin, in her text Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends (2001), writes about a mid-19th century romantic/affectional relationship between two African American women, Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown.

Griffin's book relies heavily on Addie's letters to Rebecca. None of Rebecca's letters to her beloved could be found, and Griffin notes that they were likely destroyed because of their content. In any event, read both Griffin's text and Faderman's text. They are both deeply rewarding. The Faderman book (being the more expansive of the two), in particular, is so rich with buried history and stories heretofore improperly told that it warrants several re-readings.

Tina says

This is one of my favorite books. When I was growing up, you never heard of the women in this book. Yet they played prominent and integral roles in our history.

Thorn MotherIssues says

So many fascinating little tidbits (Didja know Spelman was founded by a white lesbian couple? Huh???) and a fascinating overarching narrative. I really enjoyed it.
