

## ART &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## BOOKS

## Sexual arrangements must be altered in a revolutionary way

## THE MERMAID AND THE MINOTAUR: SEXUAL ARRANGEMENTS AND HUMAN MALAISE

By Dorothy Dinnerstein  
Harper and Row, 1976, \$10.95

When Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1969 it was a book of its time, a call to action that belonged to the fire and rage of the women's movement in its most heated early days. It proved unsettling to even the most militant women.

Many feminist works have been written since Firestone's but none that so dramatically reflects the development of feminist theory during the past eight years as *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* by Dorothy Dinnerstein. It took ten years to produce and is as visionary and subversive as Firestone's "case for feminist revolution." It represents the careful fleshing out of ideas born in the intense apocalyptic energy of the late '60s—ideas that needed time and perspective to mature.

Dinnerstein's implicit criticism of the early stages of the women's movement is that (like other movements of the '60s) it moved too fast, and fostered the illusion that conscious awareness of the societal problems would bring solutions overnight. Now, ten years later, we are faced with the recognition that sexism, the problems of romantic love, and the failures of the nuclear family require deep and often painful personal transformations to resolve and must be matched by equally staggering cultural changes as well.

Dinnerstein (a psychologist at Rutgers) says that her work is not "scholarly," but she's wrong. With this book Dinnerstein brings feminist theory back into

the mainstream of philosophical thought.

Because her argument is subtle, moving through many levels of reality, it is difficult to synthesize. Essentially, she centers the entire developmental history of the human species around the relationships between mother and child, and between adult men and women. She builds her central thesis on Freud's perception that one of the great strains on the development of personality is the fact that the primary presence in infancy and early childhood is a female who provides the child's "initial contact with humanity and nature."

Female-dominated childrearing and existing sex roles, says Dinnerstein, focus a profound and destructive ambivalence on the mother. She must provide all love and nurturance, and as a result she receives both the child's love and hatred. To the infant's mind the mother is indistinguishable from the self (a problem even more complex for the female infant). The father becomes the Other, the sole representation of the adult (or outer) world. To grow, the child must complete its separation from the mother and move into this adult world. But this traumatic break provokes profound and culturally sanctioned anger and resentment toward the mother and women in general.

Dinnerstein does not end her analysis with the child. "The early mother's apparent omnipotence, then her ambivalent role as the ultimate source of good and evil, is a central source of human malaise." The adult, unable to overcome either the childhood needs to be taken care of or the fear of being controlled, continues to act out this ambivalence in all relationships—an insight doc-

umented with great perceptivity throughout the book.

Most significantly, the existing sex roles—the "rules of gender" as she calls them—serve a reactionary function in the culture. They perpetuate a deep ambivalence towards adult freedom and responsibility. They hold us back from actualizing our potential and keep us stuck in the "familiar," fearful of social change. This conservatism has its most devastating effect on women. "The universal exploitation of women is rooted in our attitudes towards early parental figures, and will go on until these figures are male as well as female."

The short range solution to this problem is to extend the responsibility for child-rearing to larger family units that will enable primary parent-child bonds to be diffused among many adults and to work towards a "shared early parenthood" in which men will assume an equally intimate relation to the child from birth.

Dinnerstein predicts nothing short of disaster if these and other "sexual arrangements" are not taken seriously and transformed. She analyzes why men hate women, why women often hate and resent each other, why men fear women, and why the culture as a whole, experiencing nature as "she," will continue to rape the land of its resources until destructiveness towards women is dealt with as a societal problem.

Her conclusions, if somewhat apocalyptic, are not fatalistic. The human social system, unlike any other system in nature, she tells us, is capable of averting "chaos, stagnation, and self-annihilation," by consciously envisioning the consequences of its actions and providing alternative



methods. To transform the "lethal symbiosis" between men and women we need to "understand as deeply as possible the phenomenon that we wish to change."

In both her method and her conclusions she demonstrates that the women's movement must reevaluate its original premises and achieve expanded psychological understanding and a rethought plan of action.

Dinnerstein is rooted in an intellectual tradition that includes Freud, Marcuse, Melanie Klein, Norman O. Brown and, most significantly, Simone de Beauvoir. Although she recognizes that Freud has been rightly attacked by women for taking male development as the norm and viewing female development as an aberration, she doesn't let this keep her from using what she calls "the revolutionary conceptual tool" that Freud has put into our hands.

Like de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* builds on work already done and adds innovative information

and vision to already existing psychological thought.

The power of Dinnerstein's work is that however one may try to resist its conclusions, one finds on each page basic truths about human relationships that we know through our own experience to be correct. We may question her data or the immediate viability of her solutions, but it is impossible not to be deeply moved by the scope of her vision, the passionate intensity of her argument and her ability to present complex levels of reality in a poetic and accessible style.

She adds one more layer to a growing body of feminist theory that provides precisely what we know needs to be done: the careful reevaluation of cultural and human relationships from the perspective of women. And she presents a challenge to the imagination to integrate these perceptions into a vision of a new society transformed by a restructuring of economic relations in ways that reach the deepest levels of human consciousness.

—Carol Becker

## Smedley on Chinese women

## PORTRAITS OF CHINESE WOMEN IN REVOLUTION

By Agnes Smedley  
The Feminist Press: Old Westbury, NY  
Paperback, \$3.95

Agnes Smedley is one of America's unknown literary giants.

Her books were removed from many libraries during the anti-Communist hysteria of the early 1950s and her books of eyewitness reportage of the Chinese revolution have not been as widely read as Edgar Snow's in this period of new interest in China. Now the Feminist Press has issued a new work by Smedley: a collection of short pieces culled from books and magazine articles, aptly titled *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*.

Some of these women are unfortunate victims of changes seething in China in the second quarter of this century. A young wife, her feet crippled from early

binding, pathetically asks Smedley to teach her to dance to American phonograph records, so she can compete with a Russian dance hall girl her husband fancies.

Some, like the treacherous Hwa-chuan (in a story ironically called "The Martyr's Widow") use all the traditional feminine wiles in a time of constant power struggles to further their own position, no matter who dies in the process. Some, like Mother Tsai or the mother in "Shan-fei, Communist," use the traditional ways of women to further new struggles: Mother Tsai to help the Red Army; Shan-fei's mother to help her daughter escape forced marriage and become a modern educated woman.

In all the stories, Smedley manages to show women embedded in the shifting social context, to convey how the changes in the great world of politics are played

out in the lives of individuals, and how those individuals, like Shan-fei, can become part of a force that changes the great world.

We see how women's needs and those of a revolution sometimes mesh, sometimes clash. Most of all we see what Westerners often find missing in reports on People's China today: real human beings and how they feel about their lives as they swirl in the tide of history.

Decades before New Journalism, Smedley knew how to mix her own subjectivity with her subject matter. She describes the combination of pantomime and picture-drawing she used to communicate with militant women silk workers in Kwangtung. Her Chinese male interpreter was so disgusted by these independent women who refused to marry and went brazenly to the cinema together, holding hands yet, that he refused to accompany Smedley.



Photo by Agnes Smedley

She went alone and got the story anyway.

At another point she compares the Chinese miners to those she grew up among in Trinidad, Colorado. She says of her own work, "I leave the miners feeling once more that I am nothing but a writer, a mere onlooker. I look at their big, black-veined hands, at their cloth shoes worn down to their socks or bare feet, at their soiled shoes. I know there is no chance for me ever to know them, to share their lives. I remain a teller of tales, a writer of things through which I have not lived."

Smedley is too modest.

Her novel, *Daughter of Earth*,

ought to be part of every class in the American novel, and perhaps soon it will be. The Feminist Press rescued and reprinted this fine semi-autobiographical story of a miner's daughter who struggles to get an education and escape the lot of the women around her but who is torn by conflicts because she refuses to turn her back on her roots. It's a great proletarian novel, squarely centered in a woman's experience of growing up, love and involvement in social movements. To date, thanks probably to the growing network of Women's Studies courses, the reprint has sold 30,000 copies.

—Judy MacLean



## THEATER

## A funny thing happened to them on way to success as stand-up comedians

## COMEDIANS

By Trevor Griffiths

Directed (on Broadway) by Mike Nichols  
Published in paperback by Grove Press,  
\$2.95

A little after eight, as the theater audience is settling down, six working-class Manchester lads come straggling into their night school class. They are studying to be comedians, stand up pub comics, under the guidance of Eddie Waters, their honorable old mentor.

Waters has been teaching them that comedy, like every other art—like all meaningful work—must be based not only upon fine technique, but also upon some underlying moral purpose. Their comedy has to be about something that matters.

This evening is the night of their final, a pass or fail performance at the local pub, which will be judged by a visiting examiner from the national comics guild. He will offer a professional engagement to those that make the grade.

As the men nervously rib each other we get to know, and, for the most part, to like them. And we quickly see how much it means to pass. For each of them it is the one way out of a dead end working class job.

Waters enters and puts them through their paces. They improvise on words, sounds or topics. He berates them for jokes that are racist or sexist; instructs them either to dump the facile humor or to bring out and examine the underlying hate.

In the course of the warm up exercises, it slips out that the examiner they are waiting for (a man named Challenor) is an old enemy of Eddie Waters'. Waters tries to play it down. The grudge won't carry over to the students. They're good lads. The best class he's ever had. They should just proceed with the routines they've been working on all term. But when Challenor finally arrives we learn that there's much more than a grudge between the two men.

Challenor is the arch enemy of everything Waters stands for.

He gives the men a few helpful pointers before the test. "You must seek your audience's level—which is low." Don't use your platform to espouse any cause of your own. "No chips on your shoulder. Spread the barbs around." A black joke, a Pakistani joke, hit on the women's libbers. If they follow his advice "they may all hope at least to be Bob Hopes some day. (Hah, hah)"

With that the class adjourns to the local pub to be graded. End of Act I.

From here on the action is as inevitable and suspenseful as a classic like *Oedipus*. Each man is being asked to sell out the significance of his art for the opportunity to go on practicing it. The audience watches in horror as some do and some don't.

After the performance, they adjourn back to the classroom for their grades. The sell-outs pass; those with integrity fail. The end of the third act centers on a conflict that has not been set up till this point.

The most talented, intense and crazy kid in the class has substituted a new routine at the last minute, one that not only fails the Bob Hope test, but fails to impress Waters because he sees no love and no art in it. There ensues a battle between youth and age, art and propaganda, revolution and social democracy.

To Trevor Griffith's great credit, he gives each man his due without reducing the politics to a matter of psychiatry. Yes, the old man is worn down by time and loneliness. Yes, the youth has been brought up without love. But so what? Perhaps it's true that many Weathermen wanted to kill their parents. But that's not why they were wrong (if they were). And perhaps older liberals are now simply tired from isolation and defeats. But that's not what makes them wrong (if they are).

I saw *Comedians* twice and each time I thought a different side won the argument. That's probably because I'm 35. Exactly between their two ages.

One amazing fact: when the

play begins, the classroom clock shows a little after eight. All the action—lectures, contest, judging—takes place in the two and a half hours that follow. (The trips to the pub and back happen during intermissions.) There is no dramatic telescoping of time. And yet there is never the sense of things moving slowly. Once in a while your eye may stray to the clock; you notice how late it's getting; you're sorry because that means you won't get to know these men better before the examiner comes, or the janitor locks up.

*Comedians* is an incredible feat of writing.

—Barbara Garson

Barbara Garson is the author of *MacBird* and *All the Livelong Day: the Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work*, Penguin, \$1.95.



## FILM

## Freaky Friday: not for females

## FREAKY FRIDAY

Screenplay by Mary Rodgers, based on her book

Directed by Gary Nelson, Rated G

Starring Barbara Harris and Jodie Foster

*Freaky Friday*, starring Barbara Harris and Jodie Foster, is the latest bit of "family fun" to emerge from the Disney studios. It is a sadistic little number that panders to our worst values and stereotypes.

Normally this sort of picture is ignored by reviewers. But when a film grosses \$400,000 in its first two weeks of release, it is getting to a lot of viewers. It might be a good idea to look at what sort of swill the audience is being fed.

The story idea is amusing enough—and harmless. A mother (Barbara Harris) and a daughter (Jodie Foster, the teenage hooker of *Taxi Driver*) start out the day at loggerheads. The bones of contention are everyday family fare: messy rooms, junk-food breakfast. They each wish to be in the other's shoes.

Suddenly, the metamorphosis takes place—by magic. The humor and the conflict of the movie reside in the fact that neither mother nor daughter has the skills to fill the other's role. Annabel can't drive a car, but as her mother, must. Mrs. Andrews can't play a glockenspiel or march in the school band, but must as Annabel. This would be funny enough if the lives of each of them were not such empty stereotypes.

The film makers take it for granted that mother's role is to be exclusively at the service of husband and child. Never mind if Daddy expects her to single-handedly cater a huge buffet lunch for a large group of his business associates and clients. Never mind if daughter is expected to attend school classes, band rehearsal, have friends and also perform as star water-skier to entertain Daddy's crowd in the afternoon.

The men in the picture show that if they are tough and demanding the fliberty gibbet little

women will shape up and do their bidding. Even the boys look on both women as pure sex objects.

This isn't family "fun"—it is propaganda. It is propaganda for male/female roles that are rapidly becoming obsolete. It seems hard to believe that Disney's Hollywood suburbia could be so totally unconscious that there is a world out there a-stirring.

*Freaky Friday* may not have blood and gore all over the floor—qualifying it for general viewing—but it has plenty of psychological violence. In the end mother and daughter resume their own persons, glad not to have to live the other's life—but with no feeling of compassion one for the other. Neither realizes that her own life is pretty grizzly. No one would want to be a female after seeing this "hilariously funny" picture. It's the pits.

—Mavis Lyons

Mavis Lyons is a film editor in New York, and reviews films regularly for *In These Times*.

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