

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Find Courtney: A Psychological Thriller*** by Melissa Clark  
(Bridgehampton, New York: Bridge Works Publishing Company,  
2004), 221 pp., \$15.95.

*Find Courtney* is a gripping, highly readable mystery filled with jaw-dropping revelations. The novel's main characters, Bret, Fanoy and Courtney, each have deep layers of secrets that Melissa Clark unveils at a steady pace. In *Find Courtney*, Clark explores the ideas of identity and manipulation in relationships to craft a suspenseful and sinister tale of secrets and deception.

The novel's narrator, Fanoy, is a drab, financially-strapped college student in her mid-twenties, living in Miami Beach. One of Fanoy's classmates, Courtney Armorault, approaches her to rent the smaller bedroom in Courtney's otherwise luxurious beachfront condo. Courtney is attractive, affluent and narcissistic. Shortly after Fanoy moves into the condo, Courtney disappears while on her morning jog. The callous and self-absorbed Fanoy pays no attention to Courtney's disappearance observing that "it never occurred to me that Courtney's welfare was in any way my business" (14). Instead, Fanoy indulges in Courtney's amenities including her lavish bedroom and widescreen television commenting that, "I deserve this" (17). Several days after Courtney's disappearance, her concerned father, Bret, arrives at the condo searching for his daughter. Fanoy is immediately attracted to the commanding businessman. He instructs her to accompany him to report Courtney's disappearance to the authorities and interrogate her acquaintances. Subsequently, Bret convinces Fanoy to go along with him to his secluded Italianate villa in the Florida marshland and the two become romantically involved. In addition to the main plot of the novel, Clark seamlessly weaves in Fanoy's own story about her difficult relationship with her father.

Manipulation in relationships is an important theme of Clark's novel. For example, Fanoy's father exerted control over her through verbal and sexual abuse. Similarly, Bret casually informs Fanoy that he exacted a dreadful concession from Courtney in exchange for paying for her private school education, plastic surgery and beach condo. It turns out that Courtney and Fanoy are not passive victims and each woman resists her respective father's control. The theme of manipulation serves a number of purposes in the novel. First, it emphasizes the menacing nature of Bret and Fanoy's father and effectively reinforces the novel's ominous atmosphere. Second, although Courtney and Fanoy have some unpleasant traits, the treatment each receives at the hands of their fathers along with their resilience evokes sympathy for both women.

Another important idea of the novel is identity. Characters' identities are concealed, changed and falsified. For example, Fanoy partially conceals her own identity by referring to herself only by her last name which is symbolic of the

secrets that she is concealing. During her first evening at Bret's isolated villa, Fanoy notes that sleeping at his house could somehow transform her identity: "Why had I not seen the recklessness of this? If I ever dared to fall asleep in this storage house of cast-off identities, wouldn't I wake up as someone else?" (127). Fanoy's musing about identity foreshadows future, disquieting events in the novel. This concept of identity is mesmerizing and it keeps the reader speculating about the characters' past lives, and in particular, Courtney's fate.

Clark cleverly brings together the concepts of identity and manipulation in Bret and Fanoy's interactions. For example, Bret manipulates Fanoy into forging Courtney's signature and, in effect, she temporarily assumes Courtney's identity. On another occasion, Bret tries to maneuver Fanoy into going overseas with him and buys her an airline ticket in Courtney's name, a plan to which Fanoy strongly objects. The linking of these two ideas with respect to Fanoy and Bret achieves several objectives. For example, it highlights the emerging psychological battle between these two characters. Furthermore, it intensifies the tension in the novel and propels the story towards its dramatic climax.

Clark's novel is a memorable one. It has the essential ingredients to be an effective psychological thriller: it is enthralling, unpredictable and unsettling. In addition, the book is replete with interesting characters trying to mentally outmaneuver one another. For readers who enjoy an exciting, spine-chilling novel, *Find Courtney* is a worthwhile read which will keep them glued to its pages right through to its stunning conclusion.

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***Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*** by Jessica Valenti (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 267 pp., \$15.95.

Although some young men and women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century argue that the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s completed the mission for women's equality with their male counterparts, many women still contend feminist principles and practices are necessary. Refuting the notion that we live in a post-feminist era, author Jessica Valenti acknowledges how feminism can benefit young women today. *Full Frontal Feminism* uses humor and sarcasm to introduce feminism to a young, liberal female audience. Organized in 14 chapters that highlight issues pertaining to women's bodies, pop culture, and society at-large, Valenti explains "not only why feminism is so necessary and relevant, but

also why it's so damn cool" (3). Overall, *Full Frontal Feminism* provides an in-your-face look at contemporary feminist topics. While the sarcasm included throughout the book may catch the attention of a young readership, it may ultimately turn away others interested in feminist concerns.

*Full Frontal Feminism* begins by clarifying the stereotypes that feminists are ugly, anti-male, dead, or simply old white ladies. Moving beyond the expression "I'm not a feminist, but..." Valenti attempts to convince the reader that feminism still exists. As such, the book provides readers plenty of feminist topics to feel passionate about and react against. Beginning with the theme of women's bodies, Valenti discusses the limitations placed on women's sexuality. She writes, "women are taught that we're only supposed to have sex under these bizarre arbitrary guidelines: only if you're married; only if it's for procreation; and only with another girl if guys can watch. So unless you're going to do it the way other people want, just don't" (20). A discussion follows on the sexual double standards that exist between men and women. The media, political culture, and religious organizations are criticized for promoting a contradiction in their messages on sexuality. The talk (or silence) about sex and sexuality leads into the topics of Chapters 4 and 5: violence against women and reproductive rights. The frightening statistics, coupled with recent cases of violence against women and victim-blaming, make these all-too-real issues difficult to ignore. Valenti's sarcasm subsides long enough to discuss the seriousness of gendered violence and women's lack of reproductive control.

The media and popular icons are blamed, and rightfully so, for promoting unhealthy and potentially harmful images of women and their bodies. *Full Frontal Feminism* presents an updated version of *Killing Us Softly*, and uses television shows such as *Girls Gone Wild* and *The Girls Next Door* as current mediated examples distorting perceptions of how girls and women should look and behave. The bottom line is an enormous contradiction between what our schools, religious organizations, and conservative politicians teach us versus what the media show us. The media influence our distorted perceptions of beauty, as well as our understanding of relationships. Valenti points out the limited representations of non-heterosexual relationships depicted in the media: "somehow, in the fantasy world presented to us—beyond the white horses and princes and happily ever after—there are no gay people. Like, at all" (136). In addition to critiquing the lack of gay representations in the media, *Full Frontal Feminism* addresses the traditional, heteronormative practices involved in today's marriage ceremonies. Valenti opines, "For the life of me, I will never understand why a woman today would change her last name. It makes no sense whatsoever. You want future kids to have the same last name as you and your hubby? Hyphenate, bitch!" (146-147). Yet, Valenti recognizes that 81 percent of married women disagree with her.

A discussion on gender and the workplace reveals the ever-present wage gap and myths surrounding women's choices to work and/or to become

parents. The fact that mothers earn less with each subsequent child will make readers begin questioning their own choices, or at least question the impact of the decisions that are chosen for them. Moreover, the discussion highlighting existing inequities in the workplace will shock readers who believe the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which included the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) ended all forms of workplace discrimination.

Finally, in her promise to not say “herstory,” Valenti provides a brief description of feminist history. The argument that feminist history is important gets overshadowed by the notation that women’s movements were “all white, middle-to-upper class women all the time” (168). A few noteworthy women are included in the text (e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Betty Friedan, Angela Davis); however, Valenti believes “the more important question is about how we move forward” (167). Suggestions are provided for how women can partake in feminist practices. In addition, Valenti acknowledges men should participate in feminist movements. Afterall, she writes, “we need male allies” (192) to help alleviate the resurgence of boyhood in contemporary pop culture.

*Full Frontal Feminism* is a fun, enlightening, and interesting book on contemporary feminism and feminist issues. Yet, it does not come without limitations. The book is clearly written for young women (under the age of 30) who hold liberal values. Valenti excludes the ability for Republicans, Christians, academics, and at times men, to hold feminist positions. Having earned a master’s degree in women’s and gender studies, Valenti professes, “academic feminism is not for me. I like activism” (175). This dichotomy is disturbing. Many feminist scholars introduce feminism to students in the classroom while simultaneously working as feminist activists in their community. Furthermore, Valenti provides an essentialist view of Republicans, perpetuating the already too divisive political climate. Moreover, her condescending approach to Christian organizations may turn off readers who value both religion and women. While the book does cite many recent examples and statistics without reading as an academic text, it may only draw the attention of young women who already adhere to feminist values. Overall, Valenti does a nice job highlighting important feminist issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; however, I feel she fails to be open-minded to alternative insights into the multiple perspectives and positionalities on contemporary feminism.

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***From the Closet To the Courts*** by Ruth Simpson (Washington, D.C.: Take Root Consulting, 2007), 176 pp., \$16.00.

*From the Closet To the Courts*, first published in 1977, is a historical account of the lesbian rights movement in New York City. At its core, the book challenges the myths and stereotypes of homosexuality and demystifies what it means to be lesbian. Much of the hostility and bigotry toward lesbians and gays stems from beliefs perpetuated by the church, psychiatry, and the media that homosexuality is a perversion or mental illness. The self-serving myths of our heterosexual, male-dominated society considers lesbianism a character flaw of maladjusted females. Ruth Simpson systematically dismantles each misconception and offers a humanizing look into the lives of women whose personhood is too often scarred by those who have no understanding of lesbianism. And just as importantly, she makes a cogent argument for the necessity of all oppressed minorities to work together to advance human rights protection for all people.

Simpson believes that underlying our institutions and laws, and the treatment of lesbians and gays, are misconceptions about homosexuality. If change is to occur, then it must begin by dispelling the inaccurate information that defines homosexuality. Misconceptions about sexual identity and the meaning of healthy same-sex relationships abound among homosexuals as well. "The scars which so many lesbian women currently carry are not because of their homosexuality; they were caused instead by the abrasive values the microcosmic family has inherited from our macrocosmic society." Identity, family, culture, social and religious mores, and political institutions form an intricate web of influences that shape our sense of self and relations with others. The fight for human dignity must take place on many fronts.

While some states have decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults, Simpson considers the battle for equal protection under the law to be the most difficult hurdle to overcome. Lesbians and gays are extralegal; therefore, they often have no legal recourse when subjected to discriminatory and unfair treatment. When cops routinely harassed the members of the Daughters of Bilitis (D.O.B.), initially a social club for lesbians, only later adopting a more political focus, the women were helpless against the intrusions. To whom do you complain to when the agents of the state misuse their power? Separately minority groups are powerless to change the laws. Simpson argues that it is only when minorities recognize that they share in a goal common of all oppressed people, a desire for freedom, that their combined power will overcome their outsider status.

As part of a larger human rights movement, lesbian activism intersects and overlaps with other groups seeking fair treatment and justice. And yet, as Simpson's account reveals, natural allies in the fight have not always been supportive of the lesbian movement. Over the years lesbians have contributed

to the causes of other oppressed groups, but their efforts have not always been reciprocated. The National Organization of Women came out in support of lesbian rights, but its New York chapter refused to endorse a law that would have made it illegal to discriminate against homosexuals in New York City. Simpson observes that the hostility between heterosexual women and lesbians goes both ways. Lesbians have been treated “as a subclass within the class of women” and lesbians have responded negatively to this treatment. As president of the now defunct New York chapter of D.O.B, she was witness to the internal group struggles led by misguided individuals that undermined the efforts of lesbian activists to organize. She attributes the demise of D.O.B. to conservative women who thought that the group was becoming too political and to the infiltration of “two government agents.” As the group splintered, it also cut its ties with the Gay Activist Alliance because some claimed that they were chauvinistic.

Progress has been made on some fronts since the book was first published thirty years ago; however, many of the same myths, stereotypes, and prejudices remain. It is with evident pride that she notes in her “Afterward” that the Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays organization has made real progress in recent years increasing support for lesbian and gay offspring, siblings, and friends. There is now greater awareness among activists who fight for human rights that their cause is interconnected with all oppressed people and that change can only occur when they band together to form a majority coalition. Pointing to a variety of TV shows, talk show hosts, and movies, Simpson observes that more and more homosexuality is depicted more positively. But her discussion of contemporary domestic and international human rights trends serves to remind all that human dignity is still denied to many today. Even though Vice President Dick Cheney admitted that he believed his then pregnant lesbian daughter would be a good mother, this administration’s war on terrorism raises serious human rights issues in its treatment of suspected terrorists and in its violation of privacy rights. And the criminal mistreatment of homosexuals and racial minorities continues to be all too common in the United States and Islamic countries. Simpson blames orthodox religion for society’s intransigent attitude that homosexuality is against nature and immoral. She holds the Republican Party responsible for the movement to deny lesbians and gays the right to marry. What can be done to change this reality? She suggests that persistence is the answer. Get to know the people within your sphere. Follow politics and vote. “But what mostly works best is never accepting others’ negative image of you and rather, with pride and minority smarts, show people what a good person you are.”

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***Hidden Passages: Tales to Honor the Crones*** by Vila Spider Hawk (FL: Spilled Candy Publications, 2006), 292 pp., \$17.95.

In *Hidden Passages: Tales to Honor the Crones*, author Vila SpiderHawk celebrates women who are considered crones, as well as the other phases of women, through a collection of eight short tales. Mima Po, a Holocaust survivor who is considered an outcast in her community, connects with a little girl and teaches her to celebrate rather than fear individual differences. In "Nanu's Story," Tichu, a young woman is cast out by other members of her tribe after the death of her infant child. Tichu wanders into the realm of Grandmother Spider, who bestows Tichu with the knowledge of weaving. Tichu returns home and brings wisdom to those who will hear it. In a series of three tales, the reader encounters, Cara, Donnata and Heraulta (daughter, mother and grandmother) as young Cara comes of age. The three tales each tell the events of Cara's experience from a different perspective. Cloaked in myth and magic, essential life lessons are shared with the reader. Woven within the texts, the author tackles social justice issues across the many cultures giving voice to those often silenced in the margins of society.

Each of the crones act as a wise guide, passing on the secrets of the sages. Two tales in particular had a powerful effect on this reader. "Nanu's Story" and "Gita's Journey" both brought up a sea of emotions. As a woman who is still a new mom (my daughter is 20 months, so to many I guess that isn't new any more), I found those tales brought emotion that I was not expecting. I actually cried outright in the middle of a public park while reading about the acute pain of a mother's loss as Tichu held her dead babe. While reading about Gita, I had to go in to the nursery and reassure myself that my own daughter was still safe in her crib. Spider Hawk captured the emotion in such a lyrical yet raw juxtaposition of words and images, that the reader has no choice *but* to feel. Each of these tales was able to muster a visceral reaction from this reader.

There is an element of romanticizing the female experience such as in the coming of age tale of Cara. There is a glossing over of the true difficulties that come with adolescence. Instead Vila Hawk wraps the entry into adulthood in fable and symbolism through a brief spirit journey with animal guides. Granted, it is not an easy journey, but there remains a simplistic understanding of what it means to become a woman. This romanticizing of women continues in the representation of each main character. These are not "everyday" women who eat fast food and let laundry pile up until the weekend. Each is highly spiritual and epitomizes the archetype of female as they bake bread, bear children and tend the home. Even the contemporary female figure portrayed in "Gita's Journey" is to be admired in her dedication to mourning her deceased daughter.

While I could only see bits of myself as a reader in each tale, the lure of the story pulled me in. The text deepens the understanding of what it means to

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be a woman and provides a lens with which to better view the stages of growth as we grow from maiden to mother and finally crone.

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