

The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness. Kim Chernin. *New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981. Pp. 206.*

The Obsession is an outstanding book. In fact, it is the kind of book that makes me green with envy that I didn't write it! It is eloquently written, almost spellbinding in style and content. More importantly, it is ground breaking. The theme of woman, food and the body is one of the most fundamental yet neglected issues underlying female oppression. Chernin herself comments on this neglect very briefly in the prologue:

Just as we considered rape unmentionable, and abortion shameful, and the subject of domestic labor boring, we have always thought of problems with food consumption as insignificant. (p. 2)

As should be true for any academic work, but all too frequently is not the case, the prologue summarizes her argument quite succinctly:

This is a book about our veiled and often disguised obsession - with our right to be women in this culture, with our right to grow and develop ourselves and to be accepted by our culture in a way that ceases to do damage to what we are, in our own most fundamental nature, as women. (p. 3)

Chernin weaves her elaboration of this thesis beautifully, with an eclectic mixture of autobiographical anecdotes, anecdotes about intimate others and a wide range of relevant research references. But most important for me, and what gives the book its compelling quality, is the fact that she begins at home. *The Obsession* is an immensely personal book - both for her and the reader:

Ultimately, the success of this work must depend upon my success as a listener to those almost silent murmurings of my own

inner life, and to those utterances, frequently whispered, of the women I interviewed and of those to whom I spoke more casually. (p. 1)

Her book is adamant testimony to the fact that she is indeed an excellent listener:

My attention was vaguely focused upon my body, which was filling me with a sense of extreme dissatisfaction. Now, I reverted to a fantasy about my body's transformation from this state of imperfection to a consummate loveliness, the flesh trimmed away, stomach flat, thighs like those of the adolescent runner on the back slopes of the fire trail, a boy of fifteen or sixteen...I don't know how many times this fantasy of transformation had occupied me before, but this time it ended with a sudden eruption of awareness, for I had observed the fact that the emotions which prompted it were a bitter contempt for the softness, the awareness of plentitude and abundance, which filled me with disgust and alarm, were actually the qualities of a woman's body. (p. 17-18)

In addition to the powerful personal impetus underlying her book, Chernin has done an excellent job of pulling together just the right amount of germane secondary research that is directly applicable to her more personal reflections. She discusses at length Hilde Bruch's classic writing on anorexia nervosa, Bruno Bettelheim's work on disturbed children and their sexuality and even relevant medical literature dealing with the whole question of obesity and health. She presents a wonderful attack on the medical metaphor of fatness by collating research which reveals that our standards of fat have little to do with health and much to do with aesthetics and sex role stereotyping. Similarly, she does a nice job of putting together some rather simple statistics relating to the fat industry, e.g. enumerating the various diet organizations, the number of diet

books on the best seller list (*Reduce with the Low Calorie Diet*, 25 printings since 1953; *Dr. Atkin's Diet Revolution*, 3 million copies in print; *The Doctor's Quick Weight Loss Diet*, 5 million copies sold; *the Cheater's Diet*, 500 million purse books sold) and various other pop culture indicators of the extensiveness of the tyranny. In short, she demonstrates her competence at traditional positivist analyses, as well as deeper symbolic ones. And of special interest perhaps to a Canadian audience, she makes wide use of Canadian novels in which heroines explore their relationship to their bodies and consumption, specifically the works of Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood. Speaking of Marian, in the *Edible Woman*, who is beginning to reject food, Chernin writes:

She is eager to please, self-effacing, submissive, and eventually anorexic. Thus her body will have to express whatever uneasiness she feels about her life...(p. 66-67)

Then, as Marian begins to eat again, after breaking off her engagement to Peter:

For Marian, as she begins to chew and swallow, is symbolically reclaiming her hunger and her right to hunger. By eating up this cake fetish of a woman's body she assimilates for the first time her own body and its feelings. (p. 71)

Chernin moves deftly from *Edible Woman* to *Lady Oracle*, and thus exposes the deeper meanings of both books so definitely that I am sure that Atwood herself was unaware of the closeness of their connection:

The sisterhood between the gaunt and the obese becomes dramatically apparent when we place next to Marian another heroine of Margaret Atwood's...*Lady Oracle* through her gluttony lets us in on the secret strategy of being fat. (p. 72)

The obese woman, like the anorexic one, reveals fear of sexuality, fear of men and her general powerlessness. Such assertions are wholly consistent with the only other piece that I can think of on the topic of women and consumption, Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, which is also referred to by Chernin. The latter, though an excellent attempt to pinpoint the problem, is basically a therapeutic 'how to' book rather than a thorough analysis of the issue.

In sum, *The Obsession* is a profound and wonderfully integrated work. It is an excellent example of the sort of wide ranging personal and systematic perspective that is much needed in the area of Women's Studies. Finally, if there is such a thing as feminist scholarship in a methodological sense, I would like to think that this is it.

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The Lost and the Lonely: Homeless Women in Montreal. Aileen D. Ross. *Montreal: The Canadian Human Rights foundation, 1982. Pp. 105.*

Aileen D. Ross, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at McGill University, has undertaken to inform us about "a new social problem," namely that of homeless women in our cities. In this case she portrays the plight of approximately 500 women who during 1977 and 1978 came to two "shelters," Chez Doris and Maison Marguerite, situated in two Montreal Skid Row areas. In separate chapters she describes the shelters and the surrounding area, the main problems of the women, the depths of their misery, the lack of community resources, and the hopelessness of efforts at "rehabilitation." This is a pioneer work in the study of Canadian urban life, its underclass of disaffiliated or "unjoined" women, and the disorganization of our social welfare institutions. It is important as a beginning rather than as a definitive statement on the situation of homelessness for women.