

The Mistress Condition Catherine
Breslin. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976.
Pp. 248.

"The Mistress condition" is a phrase coined by Catherine Breslin to denote the life style of those "independent, nondependent women who currently find themselves living--by choice or by circumstance--outside the traditional haven of marriage." The word "mistress" is defined as a woman who has the power of controlling or disposing of something at pleasure, who has authority and is therefore mistress of herself and of her own life. Since more and more women are choosing this life style of are being forced into it by their own or their partners' unwillingness to endure an unsatisfactory relationship, this topic is an important one and the book promises to chart previously uncharted waters.

In many ways, the book fulfills its promise. It gave this reader a renewed sense of vigour and enthusiasm for the single life. Even though more women are choosing to live alone and the single life is now acknowledged as a real and interesting option for women (vide television's presentation of Mary Tyler Moore, Rhoda, Phyllis, et al.), it still is true that we live

in a society oriented towards couples and families; marriage is still considered to be the ultimate in happiness and personal fulfillment, especially for women. At times, therefore, it is difficult for the single woman to avoid feeling unusual, abnormal, perhaps even neurotic and unhealthy if she chooses not to fit herself to that particular mold. The Mistress Condition is reassuring in that it states unequivocally that it is "ok" to want to live alone. Not only is it "ok"--it is exciting, growth-producing and full of potential.

A Mistress is a woman who puts herself first, who lives her life according to her own interests and desires, who takes control over her life and accepts the consequences of her own actions. Freedom is the cornerstone on which the life of the Mistress is built and so her life tends to be one without commitment to anyone or anything except her own development. Generally the Mistress is unmarried (and may have been catapulted into the mistress condition by the break-up of a marriage); she is likely to be childless; she makes no absolute commitments to a career or institution; and while she is certainly involved with men, her sexual relationships tend to be open-ended and multiple. The freedom which is the mainstay of her life is an exciting and heady thing, often difficult to cope with. Another reassurance which this book provides is the realization that many other women



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are experiencing these situations and are finding ways of turning obstacles into challenges.

One of the best chapters in the book is the one in which Ms. Breslin discusses the mental garbage that we all carry and that needs to be combusted before true freedom is possible. Garbage: the myth that the White Knight, the perfect man, will someday come along to provide happiness and security; the idea that marriage will make life better and solve one's problems; the belief that having children is a woman's greatest fulfillment, or that parents know best because they've been there; the notion that you're really in love when you can't eat or sleep; and perhaps most pernicious of all, our hang-ups about sex: jealousy, anxiety about our bodies, performance fears. Our understanding of female sexuality is limited by myths and mis-information; even the current burst of interest in women's sexuality sometimes threatens to overwhelm us with new ideals to live up to (like the one about the multi-orgasmic woman who keeps coming and coming until she finally stops from sheer exhaustion). The Mistress needs to be constantly on the alert for these beliefs, to prevent them from determining her behaviour and to test them against the cold hard facts of reality.

The Mistress Condition is an entertaining book--perhaps too entertaining, since the entertainment value is pur-

chased at the price of slickness and superficiality. "Zip, boom, bah--three cheers for the single life"--is the tone throughout. Although the book is liberally laced with quotations, snippets of conversation and anecdotes from interviews with 200 Mistresses, there is no in-depth presentation of any of them. Her examples, meant to represent a broad range of lifestyles and career choices, in fact end up making the women sound strangely alike. The actual process of becoming a free and independent woman is glossed over; we are shown only the end product, and even that in its more superficial aspects. Two chapters illustrate the main problem with the book: "The Big Three: Money, Power and Sex" and "And Ultimately--the Men." "Ultimately, the men" in a book that purports to be about self-actualizing women controlling their own lives and feeling fulfilled within themselves? What is going on here? And are the big three in fact money, power and sex? Perhaps Ms. Breslin is too much a product of her own society. She seems to have bought the capitalistic, male-oriented world view holus bolus; as a result, the composite portrait that emerges of the mistress is of a woman who is fairly wealthy, who has a glamorous job (photography, ski instructor, writing, free lance editing), who travels a good deal and who has many male friends. In fact, too much of this book deals with the relationship of these women to the men in their lives, while little is said

about the Mistress's relationship to her parents, to her women friends and finally to herself. How is self acceptance achieved? How does one learn to live alone? How does one combust all that garbage in the head? We will not find the answers to these questions in The Mistress Condition.

What we will find is a quick shot in the arm, an exciting uplift, but little real nourishment to sustain us in the actual process of living and coping as a single independent woman in this world. It's a bit like getting a petit four when what you really wanted was a thick steak.

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But Can You Type? Jill McCalla
Vickers and June Adam. Toronto: Clarke,
Irwin, 1977. C.A.U.T. Monograph Series.
Pp. 142.

Years ago, when I was a working single parent with a high school diploma and no marketable skills, "Can you type?" was a question I frequently encountered. I could not type: I spent years at a series of low paid monotonous jobs. Then I moved into personnel work and the other side of the desk. Women came to me for jobs and I asked them, "Can you type?." Most of them

could and did, including those with a B.A. or an M.A. or even an M.B.A. That was ten years or so ago. Since then I have been mostly in the academic world and had assumed things must have changed out there. They haven't--at least not for many of us. Last week I was asked, "But can you type?." (I still can't.)

It hasn't changed enough for us in the universities either, as many of us know from years of attending conferences where our colleagues have presented study after study demonstrating that women are discriminated against in Canadian universities, as students, as faculty and as support staff.

The authors of But can you type? document the existence and the extent of the discrimination, "practised daily and on a nationwide scale." The study was done by Vickers of Carleton and Adam of Calgary for the C.A.U.T. series on the place of the universities in Canadian society. General series editor Naomi Griffiths comments about the series briefly and usefully in this volume. This particular monograph is outstanding by reason of its clear discussion of a useful selection of disturbing statistics, as well as by its subject.

Adam and Vickers argue that it matters that women are discriminated against in the universities because these institutions have a "virtual monopoly on the field of professional and higher