

Book/video reviews

State of Struggle: Feminism and Politics in Alberta. Lois Harder. Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2003; xix + 227 pages; ISBN 0-88864-401-9; \$34.95.

This book presents a comprehensive account of feminist activism in Alberta from 1970 to the late 1990s. Actually, Harder prefers the term "claimsmaking" to describe the activity of making claims on public policy and institutional structure. The provincial focus is welcome because so much has been written about the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and its struggles with Ottawa. After all, the provinces have jurisdiction over the actual implementation of policies that matter to women.

Harder pins the rise and fall of feminist claimsmaking on the price of oil. When the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was released in 1970, the price of oil was on a tear. As the price of oil increased to a peak of \$44 a barrel in 1981, the Alberta economy boomed, and the provincial state expanded. While other governments struggled with stagflation, the government of Alberta enjoyed remarkable affluence, and hence social consensus. Parallel with events at the national level, an Alberta Action Committee on the Status of Women was established in 1971, but feminist demands were absorbed into the big comfy couch of Alberta's one-party state. Claimsmaking was further complicated by antagonistic relations with Ottawa. If Ottawa established institutional infrastructure and semi-official status for NAC, a contrarian streak meant that the Alberta government balked at creating parallel infrastructure.

According to Harder, a window of opportunity opened when the price of oil fell to \$10 a barrel in 1986. While the rest of the world prospered from the low price of oil, Alberta fell into a recession. As social consensus deteriorated, government sought out women's organizations as a means to legitimate itself. Claimsmaking reached its

peak of influence during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, a sympathetic and progressive cabinet minister - Nancy Betkowski - contested the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1992. Her defeat at the hands of Ralph Klein marked the end of institutionalized collaboration between the provincial state and women's organizations.

This book notably includes an account of the origin of the right-wing, anti-feminist backlash in Canada. In 1981, the Alberta Federation of Women United for Families emerged as a rival to feminist groups, and later formed the basis for R.E.A.L. Women.

Harder has worked almost exclusively from primary documents to provide a solid, comprehensive history. Nonetheless, Alberta's distinctive political economy is less than complete as an analytical explanation. The price of oil is an important context, but did it really drive a distinctive path for the women's movement in that province? Feminist organizations reached their peak of political influence in the late 1980s and early 1990s throughout Canada; in Alberta whose economy suffered from the low price of oil, and, in the rest of Canada whose economy prospered from the low price of oil. Logically, if the price of oil was so crucial, the outcome should be different in two different parts of the country. But it wasn't; the history of feminist claimsmaking in Alberta is less distinctive than might be expected from Harder's analytical frame.

Louise Carbert
Dalhousie University

Fleeing the House of Horrors: Women Who Have Left Abusive Partners. Aysan Sev'er. University of Toronto Press, 2002; ISBN 0-8020-8521-0; \$24.95 (paper).

Aysan Sev'er interviewed thirty-nine women, each of whom, having experienced extensive abuse by her male partner, managed to leave the abusive partner. All of the women had been away from the former partner for at least

six months. In *Fleeing the House of Horrors*, Sev'er performs the formidable job of putting together excerpts from these women's stories and of providing context and analysis. She has done so with sensitivity and sagacity. It is a difficult book to read, but it is a very important book.

The interview material is set out in five chapters which are the heart of the book. They are painful, riveting and insightful. Sev'er discusses the stories of the thirty-nine women in relation to a number of cross-cutting issues, including the type of abuse inflicted (physical, psychological, sexual and economic), children as witnesses and as targets of abuse, strategies of survival, social support systems, and women's own aggression. Sev'er does a good job throughout in pointing to class and economic issues as critical, but non-determinative, factors. Her recognition of economic abuse as distinct and warranting its own discussion is significant. Feminists have tended to shy away from exploring the often troubled relationships abused women have with their children, relationships that are nonetheless central to these women. Sev'er discusses this topic sympathetically, but without downplaying or justifying the tensions and abuses that haunt many of these mother/child relationships. Similarly, she thoughtfully examines women's strategies for survival, including those she labels as self-defeating.

It is clear from the stories presented that the participants talked to Sev'er openly, honestly and fully about their complicated lives. And Sev'er presents them openly, honestly and fully - with their strengths and weaknesses, their limited options and poor choices, their suffering and their gutsiness. She portrays them without apology, without judgment, without romanticization, but with critical understanding and heart-felt respect. Sev'er has deftly negotiated a difficult path in creating a book that "celebrate[s] the lives and the sheer determination of the thirty-nine survivors without making any attempt to hide their ongoing difficulties and human frailties" (70). In this Sev'er provides a wonderful model of feminist research practice.

The material from the interviews is preceded by the "obligatory" chapters providing definitions, statistics and theories about violence against women and a description of the methods of the study. While much of this is probably necessary, I think it detracts from the power of the book and from the women whose stories are told. For anyone who works in this area, there is not much new in these introductory chapters, which are somewhat dry and academic. There are some interesting methodical questions (such as Sev'er's surprising - to me - decision not to ask the participants questions relating to their race, ethnicity or religious affiliation, despite her recognition of the importance of these issues to the women and how they are treated) but these questions are not discussed and are lost in the descriptive details of means and ranges and N='s.

The last chapter discusses prospects and provides a model for post-violence adjustment. I am not personally drawn to models and I found the assessments of future prospects a bit troubling. But these or similar problems are perhaps inevitable when one is exploring what helps women move out of abusive relationships and what helps them stay out. Preliminary, tentative and fraught as Sev'er's insights in this regard might be, this is the point of the book, this is why the participants opened themselves and their lives to her, and it is extremely important that she venture into this difficult terrain. Others will critique and build on what Sev'er has done here, new work that will be a testament to the significance of this book at this time.

Sev'er refers at a few points to donning her "sociologist's cloak" and restraining her feminist activist self. This split was readily apparent in the book and reflects an ongoing feminist dilemma. It raises questions of audience, credibility and objectivity, as well as questions of passion, involvement and agenda. These are issues that vex, sometimes prostrate, feminist scholars. I sympathize with Sev'er's decision at times to write in a traditional academic mode, but I found the writing of her feminist activist self so much more powerful and effective. I am left debating with myself whether and how we might better integrate

these different academic selves or if we should renounce our traditional disciplinary selves altogether and at what cost that might be done. I would dearly love to discuss these issues with Aysan Sev'er - she is clearly someone who would be wonderful to talk and share ideas with and from whom I could continue to learn.

Diana Majury
Carleton University

The Girl From God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Film. Kay Armatage. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003; 351 pp; ISBN 0-8020-85423; \$32.95 (paper).

When Kay Armatage was writing her PhD dissertation on Gertrude Stein there were only a few of Stein's works in print, but by the time she finished there were at least five major Stein biographies. How could a culture be so fascinated with Stein's life in the absence of her work? "This phenomenon," Armatage says, "seemed to capture exactly the problematic of women artists - they were more interesting as personalities than as artists." Armatage's work on Nell Shipman, a Canadian-born woman and one of the pioneer film makers of the 1920s, brings together these two divergent forces.

Part biography, part film history, and part theory, the subtext of *Nell Shipman* is "modernity," the decline of a pre-industrial, artisan system of production and the subsequent development of a large corporate structure with a new complex, hierarchical division of labor. Nell Shipman (1892-1970) belonged to the earlier era; she raised the money, wrote the scripts, directed the films, acted in them, edited them, and peddled them to New York distributors. Stunningly beautiful, an accomplished actress, ambitious, hardworking, she had no reason to doubt that she would be successful. And she was. She was eventually defeated (and died nearly destitute), not by her declining energy, fading beauty, or a loss of creativity but by the new Hollywood studio system and the mass production of mass culture.

As the novelty of movies wore off and unions were leading the studios into heavier and heavier debt, Hollywood became more and more a caricature of itself, while a new era of post-modernism was emerging and displacing it. The new organization was a mix of large and small-scale production, along with a deconstruction of canonical texts. No one understands the transition and the contemporary period better than Armatage, a professor of film studies and a film maker herself who has for many years introduced audiences of Toronto's film festival to a new generation of women film producers and writers, women creating a new paradigm in the context of post-modernism.

The change was too little and too late for Shipman, whose personal lifestyle had a certain affinity with Scott Fitzgerald's women - light headed and careless, living for the moment. Shipman's imagination was tougher, closer to Jack London, and like London she was drawn to "the call of the wild." London, a socialist, was shocked by the exploitation of men seeking gold and cared little about the aesthetics of his stories, while Shipman viewed the North as a site for strong, fearless women who drove dogsleds, rescued injured men and nurtured wilderness animals. She defined a new feminist consciousness and anticipated contemporary environmentalism. It is this two-tier analysis of Shipman, who was both the victim of social change and the voice of an emergent feminism, that Armatage handles so well, adding brilliantly and immeasurably to our knowledge of gender and film and how to analyze them.

Thelma McCormack
Professor emerita, York University
with the assistance of Naomi McCormack, film maker

Ni vues ni connues ? femmes, VIH, médias. Maria Nengeh Mensah. Montréal: remue-ménage, 2003; illustrations; appendices; 221 pages; ISBN 2-89091-207-8; \$19.95 (paper).