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REVIEW

READING BETWEEN THE (BODY) LINES

Jillian Bartlett and Cathi Joseph (eds). *Bodylines: A Women's Anthology*, Women's Redress Press, 1991, \$13.95, ISBN 1 875274 07 3.

The lines of and on a body tell a story about that body, that body's person, the person in that body, about that person. Age spots or melanotic "beauty" spots, scars or stretchmarks, laughter lines or facelift tightness — all these are the body's lines, story lines, storing lines of a body's history. For some time feminists have been concerned with women's bodies as a problematic site (sight, in-sight, incite) of inscription, whereon patriarchy engraves and inscribes women's position. Have you ever noticed the hunched, tight lines of a woman's shoulders as she walks past a group of wolf-whistling men? The lines engraved on an adolescent girl's shins after she has inexpertly tried to shave away the innocent hairs on her sharp-edged legs? The lifelong lines of terrorised constriction in the abdomen of a woman who has survived child sexual abuse? Have you seen these bodylines? Perhaps not, for these body and story lines are not so much the province of the spectator/specular/speculator — they are lines of experience, lines which are felt and lived. It is precisely this shift of positions in which the anthology *Bodylines* engages. This bristling and fascinating collection presents bodylines not from or for the observer, but from and for the subject. The bodies themselves are speaking here — women's bodies which have historically been talked about but not listened to — and it's not surprising that several pieces are concerned with the difficulty of finding a voice.

Women's Redress Press editors, Jillian Bartlett and Cathi Joseph, have done an admirable job of collecting a diversity of women's embodied voices. Voices which range from the banal to the bizarre, the confronting to the familiar and, most often, to a confronting way of understanding the familiar. The bottom line of reading a review is the question — "will I buy the book?". Well, I have no hesitation in saying

“yes, buy it”. I’ve already bought several copies to give to family and friends, and that’s a high recommendation given the scarcity of cash currently earmarked for bookbuying in my household. What made me want to give it to others? Well, mainly that it covers such a huge range of common issues and problems. If you have ever experienced adolescence, anorexia, a feeling of being too hairy or too fat, sex with either women or men, menstruation, pregnancy, fear of pregnancy, being a mother, having a mother, looking at a penis, listening to beauty industry advertising, a nervous breakdown, scarring, self-mutilation, kissing ... then there will be at least one piece in this book which will move, interest and absorb you. I guess that reading this collection will inevitably depend upon the particular bodylines of the reader. As a body who recently experienced childbirth I found Anna Maria Dell’oso’s “Harvest Day” — about giving birth to a daughter — the most powerful and moving piece. But I suspect that a body who has recently experienced epilepsy would feel the same way about Susan Hawthorne’s “Falling Woman” poems. And similarly for the three separate texts written from the perspective of the “artist’s model” (note the revealing possessive apostrophe). These three women are not voiceless, they are not simply some artist’s model/object, they are women whose bodylines are instrumental in the making of art — and yet whose profession is inscribed with all kinds of other connotations :

I really wanted to be considered an equal partner in a creative process — like my work means something; not just for me and him, but as a form of cultural expression I explained to him that I had a tendency to put on weight in short periods of time he said that didn’t matter because he could paint me as he wanted ... and that extra bits could be painted in or out. I felt like my femininity and everything else about me was about to be reconstructed, and that I, myself, my body, didn’t count for much except in the context of his ideas about art and maybe women’s bodies generally He also seemed to like the idea of my European background. It seemed to have exotic value and that worried me

because of the mythologies and the contempt for ethnic women's sexuality

They assume you have no dignity, and you know their work's going to be stuffed. I really don't understand why they paint women, if they hate us so much. I personally wouldn't want to contribute to the glut of bad art.

(Still Life Models p.127-128)

As Linda Carroli's essay shows, these pieces make for provocative reading, and should be mandatory for anyone attending life-drawing classes — be it as artist or model.

Also compelling and thought-provoking is Sari Hosie's "Cover/girls" which combines narrative with analysis in an exploration of the ethos of training little girls to be polite, compliant bodies. She juxtaposes this exploration with a story about the attempted abduction of a girl at the beach, with questions about stripshows, the ever-decreasing age of magazine covergirls, and the ever-present question of women's safety. This is a complex piece, so well-crafted that I found it resonating in both mind and body for some weeks :

The policewoman on the beach said,
she took real good care of herself. She
asked him who he was. She rattled him.
She didn't cooperate. He had to drag her.
Even over the barbed wire fence. You can
be proud of her. She didn't cooperate.

*The number of times we said
DON'T. Stop being rude. Don't answer
back wear a dress for me honey nanna likes
it don't be rude to the service station man
he only touched your face and said hello
sweetheart do smile so look a little less
sulky ... come on let's be nice. (p.9-10)*

Not really such a *nice* piece, but one with powerful body.

Probably if you're a body with female lines you'll find this book more ineluctably interesting than if you have male bodylines. I couldn't help feeling that if Freud were around today with his silly question, "What do women want?", this is one book I'd definitely put on his reading list. If nothing else, it would at least problematise his implicit assumption of women's homogeneity. This anthology convincingly presents our heterogeneity, especially in our experience of being female bodies. And that's so important, because traditionally (and patriarchally) it is our bodies which have been represented as being homogenous, *the* constant which determines our essential being. Yet here is a book which problematises that notion, presenting the incredible variations in women's experience of their biology. As I'm not a male body, I can't be certain about the heterogeneous responses of men to this anthology. I am certain it would be salutary reading at times, but that's not necessarily a strong selling point. Yet if you're a male who enjoys female company and would like to understand more about women's experience of the world (do you have a mother, or a daughter, or a sister, or a woman-lover?), then this anthology will provide you with some of the same kinds of experiences it gave me: insights, challenges, emotional resonances and more than a few good laughs (see especially Nan McNab's "Penis Envy — An A-Z") — albeit these responses may be evoked by different lines in the book.

I do want to emphasise the wit and humour of many of these pieces. Women have always used laughter as a tactic of survival and subversion, and the women writing in this collection are no exceptions. The opening piece by Tina Muncaster on "Getting Wet" combines powerful images with theoretical analysis, in a sharply witty exploration of the complex of taboos about wetness and bodies:

"nice girls don't spit and BIG BOYS DON'T CRY"

"Little girls ... less wet, less threat"

"Shiny is not the same as wet" (p.1-3).

Another amusing piece is the de-frocking fantasy "A Poem Undressing Women", by Caroline Cleland, which contains the wonderful lines "years of frightful frockings / racks of frugal, frumpy, frigging frocks", lines which reminded me wryly of my mother's efforts to frock me properly on a low income, when all I longed for was a pair of Levi cords.

The inevitable experience of anthology-reading is that some bits will be disappointing and inaccessible. It did come as a surprise though

that the writing on lesbian experience fell into this category. There is so much excellent writing by lesbians available at present (Susan Hampton's and Mary Fallon's work spring to mind) that I wondered how the editors came to choose such relatively uninspiring works as Barbara Pepworth's "Homage/femage" and Joyce Hungerford's "What a Waste of a Lovely Body" to represent this particular female experience. Like many other texts here, these combine theoretical and experiential material. But where others successfully manage this synthesis throughout, to create thought-provoking and sensation-evoking work (see "Hystory" by Susan Hawthorne), Pepworth and Hungerford both seem to lose direction, producing somewhat patchy, unsatisfying pieces.

Is this review a bit fragmented? Most of the pieces in the anthology are too. Don't open it expecting the equivalent of the seamless magazine model's body — don't expect a body of nice neat short stories and metrical poems. These women are finding their voices through experimentation with form, and most of them experiment very successfully indeed, shaping their words effectively, eclectically, strongly.

The anthology also contains eight visual works — a very welcome inclusion. Three of these, by Jillian Bartlett, Angela Bailey and Keryn Lock, didn't achieve anything more than numerous drawings and photographs of women's bodies created by men — and I find that disappointing. However, the other five are images to which I will return with pleasure because they present something different, views of women's bodies which have a distinctive feeling, which communicate deeply with my own bodylines. Among these delights are Annie Taylor's strong and cheerful "Mermaid", Elizabeth Turnbull's ebullient "Joy", and my absolute favourite, Jane Maree Taylor's "Untitled Photo Montage", which involves a witty and bizarre image of woman and washbasket — and many's the time I've felt myself to be a complete basket case when hanging out the washing.

So, if I'm to put my critical washing on the line, I'd say that most readers concerned with their bodies, as well as the politics of bodies, will find this a satisfying anthology. At times I found it quite confronting (see "Dancing the Red" by Jane Meredith) but I feel that is a good thing — so much of what happens to our bodies just happens without our thinking why or how or should it? In this way *Bodylines* makes a very valuable contribution to the debates — political, ethical, economic and psychoanalytic — which currently revolve around women's bodies. But this is not a book which only appeals to the head. It has sex appeal, heart

appeal, belly-laugh appeal. In fact it is appealing in a very full-bodied way. It is voluptuous, vulvaceous and astute. As wine reviewers say — this one has a lot of body — and it definitely wins my bouquet.