



But Are They Any Good?

True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School

Edited by Susan Gubar

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As a teenager in rural Oklahoma in the 1970s, in the days before the Internet, I had limited access to news of the women's movement, and when I studied philosophy in-state in the late eighties and early nineties, it didn't strike me as odd that most of my professors were men, and that none of my classes assigned books by women authors. In 1984, when I entered the graduate program in English at the University of Virginia, I was woefully ignorant of women's history and writing, ignorant even of my ignorance.

During registration my first semester, I met a fellow grad student who complained that when she told her adviser she wanted to study eighteenth-century women writers, he had said "Are there any eighteenth-century women writers?" She told him that of course there were, and he scoffed, "Well, are they any *good*?" Even though I couldn't have named a woman who was writing before Jane Austen myself, I shared my peer's indignation over this sweeping dismissal of women's competence, and I grew eager to find out more about the areas my education hadn't covered. This was my first academic consciousness-raising moment, and it certainly wasn't my last.

At that time, in the mid-1980s, feminist scholarship and the growing number of Women's

Reviewed by Audrey Bilger

"I met a fellow grad student who complained that when she told her adviser she wanted to study eighteenth-century women writers, he had said 'Are there any eighteenth-century women writers?'"

Studies programs around the country were dramatically changing the academy. In English, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) was well on its way to becoming a classic, and their co-edited *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), published the year after I started my graduate studies, answered both questions posed by that skeptical University of Virginia adviser. Gubar's latest contribution to the feminist knowledge base, *True Confessions*, assembles stories by the women who helped get

Women's Studies off the ground. Gubar describes her selections as "idiosyncratic microcosms of the unprecedented entrance of women into higher education." These first-person accounts provide both back stories—how feminist professors came to be the scholars they are—and histories of individual struggles.

Many of the writers included in *True Confessions* were among the first feminist critics I ever read. Because there was no course on feminist theory in the early years of my graduate study, some junior faculty and graduate students organized a reading group, and we shared photocopies of essays by Nancy K. Miller, Tania Modleski, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Hazel Carby, Annette Kolodny, and other emerging scholars, whose writings energized and inspired us. We met in classrooms, lounges, and living rooms, with a rotating roster of facilitators who selected the readings for each session. Jane Gallop's account of discovering feminist studies in the 1970s, in "Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment," her piece in Gubar's anthology, perfectly describes my experience a decade later in the South: "Feminism was as new for our teachers as it was for us. We were all reading and being changed by the same books."



In Gubar's view, the adventurous spirit present at the beginning of Women's Studies has faded, taking with it the energy and vitality of those earlier times. "Truth to tell," she writes,

I had become a tad bored reading conventional feminist criticism and theory, but also

alarmed that so many of the students, colleagues, and acquaintances whom I encountered in classrooms, at parties, or in supermarket lines assumed that "no one cares about feminism any more" or "feminism is passé."

Her simultaneous boredom with the current state of feminist scholarship and anxiety over feminism's perceived obsolescence were relieved when she received an outpouring of interest from authors who wanted to be in the book. They looked both forward and back, Gubar writes:

A number of the email correspondents who became contributors seem to have been animated by a sense of wonder at what has been achieved in their lifetimes, but also a poignant awareness that their work, at least their institutional work within academia, is coming to a close....Perhaps the electronic avalanche I received was prompted by a shared intimation of mortality, the need to catch the present moment before we and our cohort disappear.

Thus, there's an urgency to many of the pieces included in *True Confessions* that is at odds with the cheeky salaciousness of the title. These scholars aren't revealing shameful or titillating secrets; they're making sense of their own feminist projects and reminding us of why their work still matters.

Dedicated to Carolyn Heilbrun, whose suicide at the age of 77 in 2003 sent waves of shock and sadness through the Women's Studies community, this collection foregrounds memory as a political act. By "telling stories out of school," the authors convey the sense of what they have endured and why feminist work must endure. Most have enjoyed long careers and international reputations within the academy, so it's a bit surprising to read in Gubar's introduction that, "[t]o a greater and lesser extent, a number of the contributors to *True Confessions* share an alienation from normative

scholarly languages which has come to feel, as Leila Ahmed [a contributor here] once put it, 'almost like a prison.'" Autobiography, according to Gubar, frees the writers to "attend to the specificity of their experiences":

For, when embedded in anecdotal particularity, insights about gender and about race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and the nation seem to arise with more tonality and flexibility, a resonant timbre and honesty, with less reductive generalizing, than they do when cramped under the theoretical rubrics usually used to engage them.

The book is divided into two sections, one emphasizing "personal views" and the other "professional vistas." Family life, religious upbringing, and childhood memories led some of the contributors down the path of feminism. Writers examine the texts of their personal stories for clues about their later academic preoccupations. Patricia Yaeger, for example, narrates how, in reading about female maladies in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, she learned things about her own body-image issues and eating disorder that brought her to feminism. Neferti Tadiar introduces us to the young women domestic helpers who worked in her childhood home in Manila, and explains how their stories became entwined with her own and ultimately with her production of transnational feminist scholarship. Speaking of life as a graduate student in the 1960s, Lillian Faderman talks about how she and her female friends suffered from a lack of women faculty role models, and how it became "incumbent on us to figure out, with little help, how a woman conveys 'professorial.'" She also exposes the homophobia of that period. Even as Faderman began to come out to herself as a lesbian, she—and her professors, as she later learned—was forced to be closeted, because coming out professionally at that time would have been career suicide. She would go on to establish herself as a leading feminist authority on lesbian writing and history.

I had a vague sense, in my graduate school reading group, that the women professors faced challenges in the workplace, but we tended to stick close to our texts, and I didn't get to hear their stories. Here, a number of the authors chronicle the discrimination and overt hostility they faced at the outset of their careers. Kolodny provides raw testimony about her suffering and isolation during her three-year lawsuit charging that sexism and anti-Semitism played a role in her denial of tenure by the University of New Hampshire in the late 1970s (she was awarded a large settlement). Martha Nussbaum discusses the sexual harassment she witnessed as a young academic and recounts how she finally learned to escape from being a "prisoner of politeness" when she was able to express anger in a "tough feminist talk" she delivered to the American Philosophical Association in 2000.

For women of color, the academy has been a particularly hostile place. Tey Diana Rebolledo shares,

As a Chicana professor, I have learned that you have to prove yourself, over and over.... You constantly have to remind your department, your colleagues, and particularly your administration that you are a viable and important presence in the university.



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And Ann DuCille describes black women academics as “a kind of endangered species.” She sees a pattern in the early deaths of black feminist scholars who started out in the late 1960s and early 1970s and helped to create the field of Women’s Studies: Sherley Anne Williams, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, June Jordan, Nellie McKay, VéVé Clark, and others. She points to the “hyper-visibility, super-isolation, emotional quarantine, and psychic violence of our precarious positions in academia” as potential contributing factors to health problems suffered by black female intellectuals. Her observations ought to give us pause. “I was not born a feminist,” she writes, “but I will die one. And it may be feminism that kills me.”

Among the stresses faced by feminist scholars, as reported in these stories, the dismissive treatment of the work of older women by some younger scholars seems the most senseless of all. Frances Smith Foster writes, “Being recognized and categorized as an African American woman is not new, but being ‘not young’ is a perplexing, irksome thing that I’m still trying to get a grip on.” Young scholars at her home institution, she says, want to study with “real women’s studies PhDs,” not with a scholar who helped lay the groundwork for those PhD programs. “Maybe I have been helpful as a foremother,” Foster says,

but as some women’s studies students and younger faculty have hinted, I’ve served my

purpose, and the sooner I relinquish my tenure line and high salary to the newest wave of women highly trained in theory and devoted to making women’s studies the respected discipline it should be, the better.

Jill Dolan, who helped develop the field of feminist performance studies, laments what she sees as the increasing disparagement of lesbian identity in Queer Studies. “I wish we could respect and incorporate our own histories,” she pleads, “instead of building reputations by dismissing one another and our various investments.”

Summing up the meaning of a life lived in the service of feminism, Shirley Geok-lin Lim reflects that she was able to be a “pioneering” (a word she interrogates) scholar on Asian American women because of the women who came before her. She laments the current “fear of mothers and the rejection of older feminist generations by younger women,” delighting, instead, in imagining her own feminist foremothers as vibrant, living beings:

Reading their texts and about their lives, I imagine them working through bouts of doubt, beaten by fatigue, days expended on netting sentence after sentence together, unraveling and unstitching to follow those partial glimpses of thought and to tie down those feelings that were never intended for speech.

Her solidarity with these earlier feminists fortifies her. “If I am an Asian American feminist pioneer,” Lim concludes, “it is only as one infinitesimal point among the starry hosts by which the dark night that is the condition of our existence is lit.”

True Confessions ultimately makes a case for valuing feminist accomplishments and for conveying the ideals of feminism to those who are “out of school.” Gubar explains that the authors included “provide an appreciation of the abiding relevance of a feminist perspective, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the need to make that relevant perspective persuasive inside and outside the academy.” She expresses a desire “to revitalize prose for a general readership,” and these jargon-free, frequently intimate essays could very well appeal to a nonacademic audience. In so doing, they may help to ensure the continuance of feminism as a respected intellectual tradition with the highest possible aspirations, a future that doesn’t repeat the mistakes of the past, and a world in which women matter. 📖

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