
BOOK REVIEWS

Tom Digby, ed. *Men Doing Feminism*. NY: Routledge, 1998. 359p.

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Can/should/do men “do” feminism? This is the basic question addressed in the collected essays in *Men Doing Feminism*, and the quick answer is yes. It is like asking if men can, should, or do teach novels by women in a literature class and present students with feminist literary perspectives, and the obvious answer is yes. But like contemplating the title itself, which several of the contributors do, the interpretations are more varied and more complex than anyone’s first response. And no, the collective “we” did not get these issues settled and done with nearly three decades ago.

What these essays particularly confront is the problem of definition, and by extension, the problem of all categorization. What is meant by “men” is opened to question, both in theory and in reality, as is made abundantly clear in Henry S. Rubin’s essay “Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man” and C. Jacob Hale’s “Tracing a Ghostly Memory in My Throat: Reflections of an Ftm [Female toward male] Feminist Voice and Agency.” Even distinguishing between biology and social construction of gender does not adequately cover the extent of the difficulty of defining “man” or “woman.” “Doing” becomes more ambiguous than “accomplishing”; when men publish “feminist criticism,” what is the degree of their attachment/detachment? Can men “be” feminists, or merely “act” or self-define as pro-feminist? (Or should that be “profeminist,” or “progressive male standpoint,” as two of the essayists use?) And as for the word “feminism,” or the currently more frequent use of the plural “feminisms,” one person’s own definitions (and degrees of engagement) change with startling frequency, so trying to summarize everyone’s definitions is a difficult task. As the writers confront such on-going problematic issues, they remind us that it is worthwhile — and imperative — to do so, even though the answers are complex and far from being agreed upon.

The essays do all agree that men need to be more aware of contemporary feminist issues and to make changes not only in their own lives but to work to change other men’s actions and to reconceptualize the social mythologies of what it means to be a “man .”

The anthology is divided into two sections: "Feminist Theory *from* Men's Lives," and "Feminist Theory *in* Men's Lives." The essays are presented as eighteen "Chapters," perhaps to convey a sense of the progressive development of these two topics. Four of the essays are written by women, who provide commentary on moving men toward more egalitarian action and developing male feminist subjectivities; all four are supportive of such moves for the sakes of both women and men. In a "Foreword," Sandra Bartky points out that including the essays by women gives "the collection as a whole a dialogic quality" and also shows that "there is important, even compelling, work that women can do in theorizing the increasing participation by men in feminist change" (xiv). The fourteen male authors include those who self-identify as heterosexual, homosexual, or transsexual, white or black. All contributors except one are identified as currently teaching in American universities (and one in Canada). Eleven teach in Philosophy departments, and one of the interests in the reading is observing stylistic differences between writing in that discipline compared with, say, literary criticism. (The philosophers here tend to organize essays as though developing their thought processes in considerable logical detail, complete with introductions that summarize the material at length and conclusions that re-summarize.) Many of the eighteen essays are made more lively and convincing by inclusion of autobiographical experiences.

Editor Tom Digby, who teaches philosophy and feminist theory, states in his "Introduction" that "I still consider feminism to be the most important defining characteristic of my philosophical and personal life" (5) after tracing various personal experiences that contributed to his understanding that "sexism damages men themselves" (5) as well as women and society as a whole. Several other writers also address the origins of their feminist development; my favorite is Thomas E. Wartenberg's comment in "Teaching Women Philosophy (as a Feminist Man)": "through the influence of a number of my friends and colleagues, I had been reading feminist literature of various sorts since the early 1970s. (I think that the first feminist text of any significance that I read was Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.) I thought that feminism had important things to tell all of us, both in personal and intellectual terms" (132).

The reading of feminist literature by anyone always strikes me as hopeful, to paraphrase Sandra Bartky's words in her "Foreword." She concludes her comments on this collection of essays by writers struggling toward a more just social order by saying: "*Men Doing Feminism* gives me hope" (xiv). ✱