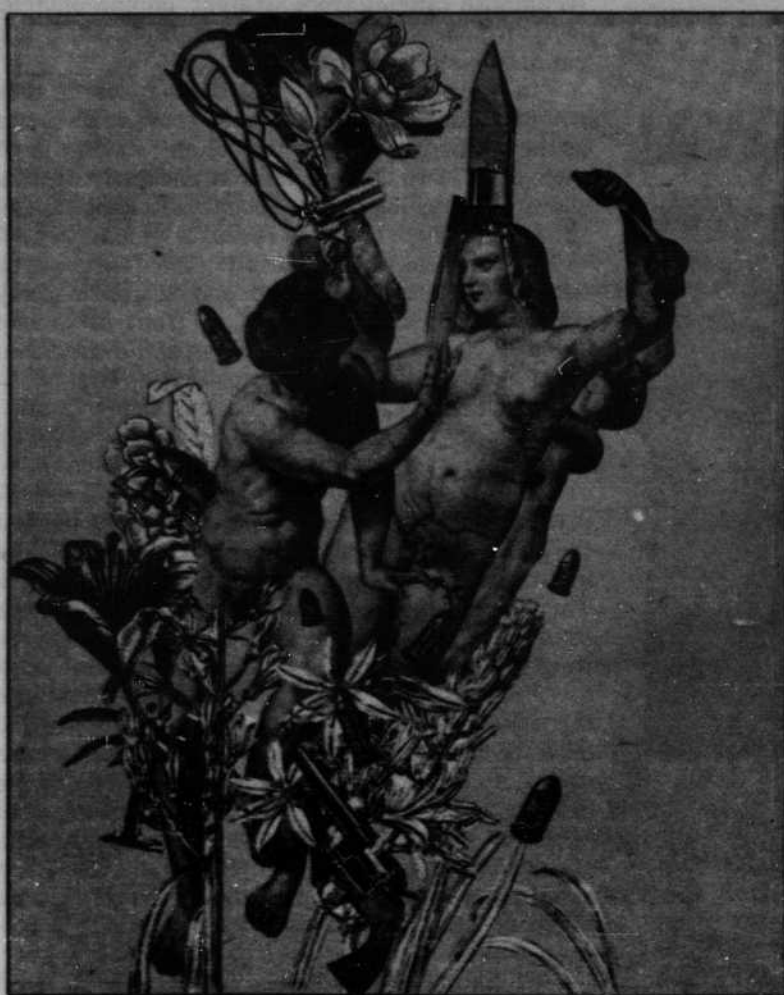


Review of the Arts

Books



Combat in the Erogenous Zone
Ingrid Bengis
Alfred A. Knopf 1973
\$6.95

Ingrid Bengis is to women's literature what Joni Mitchell is to rock lyrics: she has dignified the confessional.

The women's movement has elicited a variety of literary response, ranging from Millett's doctoral thesis to Alix-Kate Shulman's fictional, soap-opera *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. Ingrid Bengis has done something different. She has published a new collection of essays, *Combat in the Erogenous Zone*, and it is original not only in the intelligence of its content, but in the form it takes—a combination of essay and anecdote, autobiography and observation.

All kinds of fiction may leave you surprised and sad but it is unusual for a collection of personal essays to have the same effect as an old-fashioned romantic novel. Maybe this non-fiction book is a new romanticism. It is certainly as strong as a gothic plot, gallantly dashing to the ground the old ways and simultaneously drawing up blue prints for the new. And while it is almost impossible to separate objectively the success of Ingrid Bengis' book from my personal entanglements with its themes, I can't help but feel that it is an unusual book, one which will stay with me as long as many of the finest pieces of fiction I have ever read.

Combat in the Erogenous Zone is filled with the ramblings of a woman whose obsessive search for the perfect lifestyle, evidently unfinished, comes stumbling out of her 28-year old analytical mind like the passionate sobs of a kid who has just fallen while skipping rope. She structures what amounts to an autobiography around several major themes, buttressing her arguments with anecdotal evidence of the aches and pains she has experienced herself and witnessed among her friends, all of them striking out in search of

the perfect job, the perfect place, and most important, the perfect man to complement this whole beautiful new world.

I can't claim that the book doesn't seem overly insistent and self-consciously intense at times, but my reaction to it is so positive and complete that I feel there must be something universal and human about what she describes, something which goes beyond my own involvement with the intricacies of her argument. To read this made me aware of things I could only begin to speak about before, and as a result I have been converted to a consciousness which no other piece of "women's" literature ever managed to inspire.

The subjects which Bengis chooses to attack are sprawling and abstract: love, marriage, sex. Taking some amount of pride in her ability to tackle things passionately, Bengis details a rush of impressions and memories; the result is a dense compression of feelings familiar enough to establish the beginnings of a great new awareness.

Bengis has glorified ambiguity in *Combat*, identified it as basic to her approach to herself and to others, made it comprehensible to her readers. (How often have you fallen in love with looks and hated yourself for bothering, judged a woman by the way she dresses and hated yourself for caring?) Bengis has got these tensions down on paper. She writes:

Believing in marriage, I have never risked it. I am occasionally attracted to men exclusively on the basis of their sexuality, but am appalled when they are attracted to me on the basis of mine. I care about affection and doubt my capacities for it . . . I say friendship is superior to passion even as my throat is locking with the effort to suppress the effects of my latest passion. I long for liberation and don't know what it is.

What she does know is a great deal about those who have been caught in the badly coordinated cultural transition between late fifties and early seventies. She understands what it is to be spoiled and sorry for oneself and to realize, for instance, that one hates communes, five months after deciding communal life is the answer to all America's problems. This is precisely the kind of impatience Bengis articulates, with none of the apologies and all of the passions of an exceptionally interesting person.

Combat is a woman's book because nowhere do we see evidence of one man who is all good things; there are instead aspects of different men who appear variously throughout the book. Women, on the other hand, are real and whole and we want to meet all of them. It is a woman's book because it doesn't stop short of expressing total, uncompromised, female bewilderment—if Bengis weren't so articulate and if she didn't manage to convey such remarkable depth and sensitivity we would be offended by her bewilderment, wondering how anyone could ever expect to find perfection in this crazy world. Instead, her out-cries, so insistent, and so, so impatient, seem painfully familiar and the result of emotional highs and lows which most of us would prefer to ignore.

While I was living in San Francisco, that paradise for the mobile and the liberated, I was frightened by the recklessness of those around me; I was scared, too, when I recognized my own thoughtless impulses in others. Eventually I fled the city, hoping to leave behind all the confusion, the identity mix-ups, the sexual anarchy, the fears and misgivings of that unholy society. But the mix-ups are basic to being alive right now, and they are real and powerful and hardly unique to the Bay Area. Now that someone else has gone through the agony of articulating them, I feel as if they can be dealt with in an authentic, lasting fashion. In a sense, after reading this too, I'm beginning to feel free to discard all the old ideals, to establish a new romanticism. Now, at last, we can sweep into the decade with real style.

Debby Baldwin

Women and Madness
Phyllis Chesler
Doubleday, 1972 331 pp.

A recently married woman dreamed she was in a line of young women like herself, and as she looked ahead to where they were going she saw that as each came to the head of the line she was decapitated by a guillotine. Without any fear the dreamer remained in line, presumably perfectly willing to submit to the same treatment when her turn came.

Enter the oracle, doctor, master, priest — psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Henderson — who was so proud of his clarification of this dream he included it in his essay, *Ancient Myths and Modern Man*. "I explained to her," said Henderson, "the dream meant she was ready to give up the habit of living in her head; she must learn to free her body to discover its natural sexual response and the fulfillment of its biological role in motherhood . . . she must now change herself into a more submissive type of woman."

I dreamed I was impaled on the Empire State Building, doctor, I dreamed seven vampire snakes slithered over my naked body, binding me down, leaving me pale, wet and gleaming.

Ah, mental health at last, my child, all is well and go in peace: you are finally becoming a woman.

That is not it at all says Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness*. Chesler attempts to reclaim women's dreams, reinterpret our visions, redefine our capacities — invent a new standard for what is, in us, mental health. And for her multi-faceted analysis she uses many voices: "I speak as a psychological researcher, theoretician and clinician, as well as a literary and philosophical person, a lover of poetry and myths," says she.

Almost in spite of herself she is largely successful in this monumental undertaking. I've never been so moved by a book that is so poorly written. In places the ugly, stilted language obscures her meaning, overwhelms any reader even moderately sensitive to

language use. There are a painful number of sentences like: "Our society does not overly like old age." What she probably intended as sarcasm marched from her pen as pomposity.

Often she sounds like she didn't ask herself what she really wanted to say, but instead pasted what she hoped were elegant or at least educated phrases together. She speaks of a "rather fatal allegiance" and a "rather incomprehensible turn of events."

Occasionally she pitches wildly past meaning, like for example: "Demeter was grieved beyond and before reasoning," and "In America, the world's 'richest' country, more non-white women of all ages die than do white women." (Some of us white women are immortal, maybe?)

Her worst writing appears in her retelling of ancient myths, a subject she plunges right into in the introduction, "Demeter Revisited." Completely stilted and overwritten, it will discourage all but the most determined from reading further.

But those who are determined and continue reading will gain a great deal. First, Chesler offers women who are dealing with both private and public psychiatric institutions insights which will help them survive that experience.

"Perhaps one of the reasons women embark and re-embark on psychiatric careers more than men do is because they feel, quite horribly, at home within them," says Chesler. Mental asylums caricature the female rather than the male experience within the family.

It is probably for this reason that Erving Goffman in his book *Asylums* considers psychiatric hospitalization more self-destructive for its inmates than criminal incarceration. "Like most people," says Chesler, "Goffman is primarily thinking of the debilitating effect — on men — of being treated like women (as helpless, dependent, unreasonable — as 'crazy'.) But what about the effect of being treated like a woman when you are a woman?"

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