

Fragile relationships survive self-discovery

Two lesbians in San Francisco face challenges to harmonious relationships in a demanding and dehumanizing society; alcoholism and childhood sexual abuse heighten the familiar plot.

BY KATHERINE WHITE

Leave A Light On For Me
by Jean Swallow
Spinsters/Aunt Lute Paperback \$8.95

Georgia and Morgan are coming unglued. Georgia's mother is dying; Morgan's friend is dying. Both are overworked, yet dissatisfied with their jobs. Both are haunted by an abusive

Books

childhood. And, after five years there is not enough sexual passion left in their relationship to hold it together under the weight of these pressures. The plot of Jean Swallow's new novel *Leave A Light On For Me* is familiar to many of us. We have lived it or are perhaps in the midst of it. Yet misfortune teaches us most of what we know of our capacity for strength, courage and integrity. As Georgia and Morgan confront their problems in the context of a demanding and often dehumanizing society they undergo such a process of self-discovery. Their challenge is to find a way to live their lives on their own terms. Swallow opens her book with a quote from Carter Hayward's *Our Passion For Justice* that eloquently expresses this theme. "If I had only a single line today, it would be to plead with you to remain human — in spite of all temptation."

Set in modern day San Francisco *Leave A Light On For Me* is the story of two women faced with very difficult choices. Georgia, a recovering alcoholic, must decide whether or not to reconcile with her alcoholic family. At the same time she agonizes between submitting to the degrading circumstances of her current job and the possibility of failing at a new job; and she questions whether her faltering relationship with Morgan is worth any more effort. Morgan, still suffering from the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, finds it difficult to commit herself sexually and emotionally. She is torn from her relationship with Georgia by her attraction to another woman, and by the demands of starting her own business.

Morgan must determine her priorities if she hopes to ever maintain a long term relationship with a woman. Both Morgan and Georgia choose to affirm their lesbian identity; a choice which costs them the friendship and support of important people in their lives.

The temptation in a dysfunctional society is to choose safety at the expense of freedom. When circumstances encourage us to reject our childhood, to submit to degradation, to deny our sexual identity, to dull our pain with alcohol, resistance is both physically and emotionally risky. Yet with every compromise we lose some of the larger freedom to fully blossom. *Leave A Light On For Me* aspires to offer some compelling insights into the dynamics of this struggle; but this is where the book

falls short.

The story is narrated by Georgia's best friend Bernice, in a partially credible Carolina dialect, to a group of women eating popcorn (laced with tamari and brewer's yeast) and drinking herbal tea. And so we begin:

There's a story here what wants telling. Get comfy now . . . Y'all got enough tea? Popcorn . . . It's one of those stories that's got a happy ending.

The insights Bernice ultimately offers are as simplistic as this cozy setting. She helps Georgia out of the depths of despair by asking her to repeat what she refers to as her 'morning witchery':

I am a child of the universe. And as such I got the rights of all children. I got the right to be alive. I got the right to have my own space in the world and the right to be happy. I got the power to make it through this day. I can get what I need and trust the universe works to take care of the rest.

Later Bernice relates the strength that Georgia finds within herself:

She turned to me, face like a child's desperate and asking. She looked at me and finally she said, "I got to make it myself, don't I . . . It's not some place you go to is it? . . ."

Although Bernice is the narrator, we do experience a great deal of the story from the perspective of Georgia, Morgan, and Morgan's lover, Elizabeth. What we see through their eyes is by far the best part of the book. They are strong and sympathetic characters. It is unfortunate that the continuity is interrupted by Bernice's folksy chatter.

Leave A Light On For Me is a book which I am reluctant to criticize, but at the same time I feel an obligation to do so. Jean Swallow has written the kind of novel many women want and need to read. She addresses critical social problems and creates characters with the strength to maintain their integrity under the weight of

these problems. Such optimism is refreshing after being inundated with literature that is thick with defeat. Yet, the serious reader looks for connections where none existed before; looks to enlarge their perspective of the world. I was disappointed to find that in this novel not only is the plot familiar, but so is the resolution.

— W. C. McRae



A guide to guidebooks

Reading a guidebook before you set out on vacation can provide you with valuable information, prevent you from dreaming too undisciplinedly about your destination, and be a source of pleasure in itself.

Not all guides are created equal. Before you invest (some are costly), be sure you are getting the information you want.

There are several gay guides on the market, each for different audiences. *Gaia's Guide* (self-published, revised yearly, \$9.50) is a great reference for women, containing an international listing of services, hotels, restaurants, businesses, and festivals that cater to women. Entries are listed by state and country, and some have individualized commentary — not just stars and symbols.

Places of Interest (Ferrari Publications, prices vary) are gay guides with a more pronounced commercial bias. Its four avatars, *Places of Interest to Women*, *Places for Men*, *Places in Europe*, and the general *Places of Interest*, provide addresses of businesses, hotels, bars, some services, and brief introductions to destinations.

However, at best the guides are a series of listings; at worst they are as anonymous and symbol-laden as the back of *The Advocate*.

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