

Condom non grata

Oregon Health Division's AIDS information campaign has got off to a halting start.

On the one hand, AIDS activists have decried the lack of material directed at the population most at risk for infection: in Oregon, homosexual and bisexual men. Gay leaders also fear that the pervasive message of fear and self-defense in the ads — "Protect yourself" — might lead to anti-gay violence. However, even the sanitized ads that dismay activists have proved too salacious for such stolid organs as the *Oregonian*.

Apparently, Gov. Neil Goldschmidt, who promised that the ad campaign against AIDS would not be "a shy one," himself shied from several ads, one of which might, if you squint long enough, be construed as gay-oriented. The poster featured a comely young man dressed only in a rain coat, and read "Good boys always wear their rubbers." Goldschmidt nixed it himself. Another rejected ad showed a roll of highly colored condoms, with the caption "Lifesavers."

Other ads did pass Goldschmidt's muster. The black and white "AIDS is a killer. Protect yourself" seems direct and banal enough on its own, on the back of a bus. But when this text is joined on TV by an image of a hand loading, then firing, a handgun, the subtext of anti-gay violence becomes so obvious that only a politician could deny its message. How do you protect yourself? With a handgun. Against whom? Guess.

The state's ad campaign is not so much anti-gay, as anti-humor; it aims not to inform the people at risk, as much as not offend those at no risk; it is designed not to educate, but to frighten.

If you think Oregon has problems with its AIDS education program, consider the problems facing the banana lobby. Public Broadcasting Service's AIDS education documentary "AIDS: Changing the Rules" (to be aired Nov. 6, 10 p.m. on Oregon Public Broadcasting) will feature "frank" talk about AIDS and AIDS prevention from such luminaries as Ron

Reagan Jr. One segment uses a banana to demonstrate how to put on a condom. The International Banana Association is angry: in a letter to PBS a banana spokesperson stated, "The banana is an important product and deserves to be treated with respect and consideration."

Well, for that matter, so do penises, and the people they belong to. Such squeamishness about advocating condoms masks a disregard for the people whose use of them might prove life-extending. The banana lobby and Fred Stickel would change their tunes if a latex sheaf were, for some reason, needed to protect bananas from disease. The problem begins when other fruits begin to use them.



W.C. McRae
Feature Editor

Montana born and bred, Bill was educated widely in the UK and Europe. Despite preoccupations with bridge, visual art, opera and pretentious cookery, he aspires to eventual full-employment.

Am I thy child's keeper?

"We seem to have kids on our minds these days" reports Boston columnist Ellen Goodman. As the baby boom generation moves into its 40s, families are suddenly in vogue and the two-career household is now the two kid home. *Baby Boom* is a popular film, everyone talks about the kids on thirtysomething. But in the competitive self-conscious 1980s, kids are more than just members of a family: they have become essential commodities, and hence politicized.

More to the point, behind the happy families of *Parenting* magazine, the energies formerly engaged in discussions for or against feminism now vitalize debates over day care and working mothers. Debbie Nathan, in the *Village Voice* (9/29/87) discusses the sudden spate of child abuse cases alleged to be occurring in the nation's day care centers.

Traditionally, charges of child abuse have been leveled against male adult family members who violate male and female children. However, the *Village Voice* article explores a flip side of conventional child abuse cases: increasingly, in what Nathan calls "mini-McMartins," charges of sexual abuse are being leveled against the female staff members of day care centers. And the charges don't stop at sex abuse — allegations of Satanism, involvement in child pornography, and animal torture have also been thrown into the pot.

Of course, the charges may be true. But short of a nation-wide infra-structure of Satanic volunteer child-care providers (as some prosecutors have advanced), it is difficult to understand how we have come to the point where — almost wholesale — white, middle class parents suspect the white middle class women who tend their children of sex abuse. While the spectre of Freud and his Seduction Theory wafts by, Nathan notes that "the weaker the family gets, the holier is its image. . . . If the private family is sacred, the public child care center is profane." The guilt our culture places on a mother who works is displaced onto surrogate

mothers; the guilt is expressed by prosecuting the women who tend children in her stead.

The sins — freedoms — of feminism have been visited on our children.

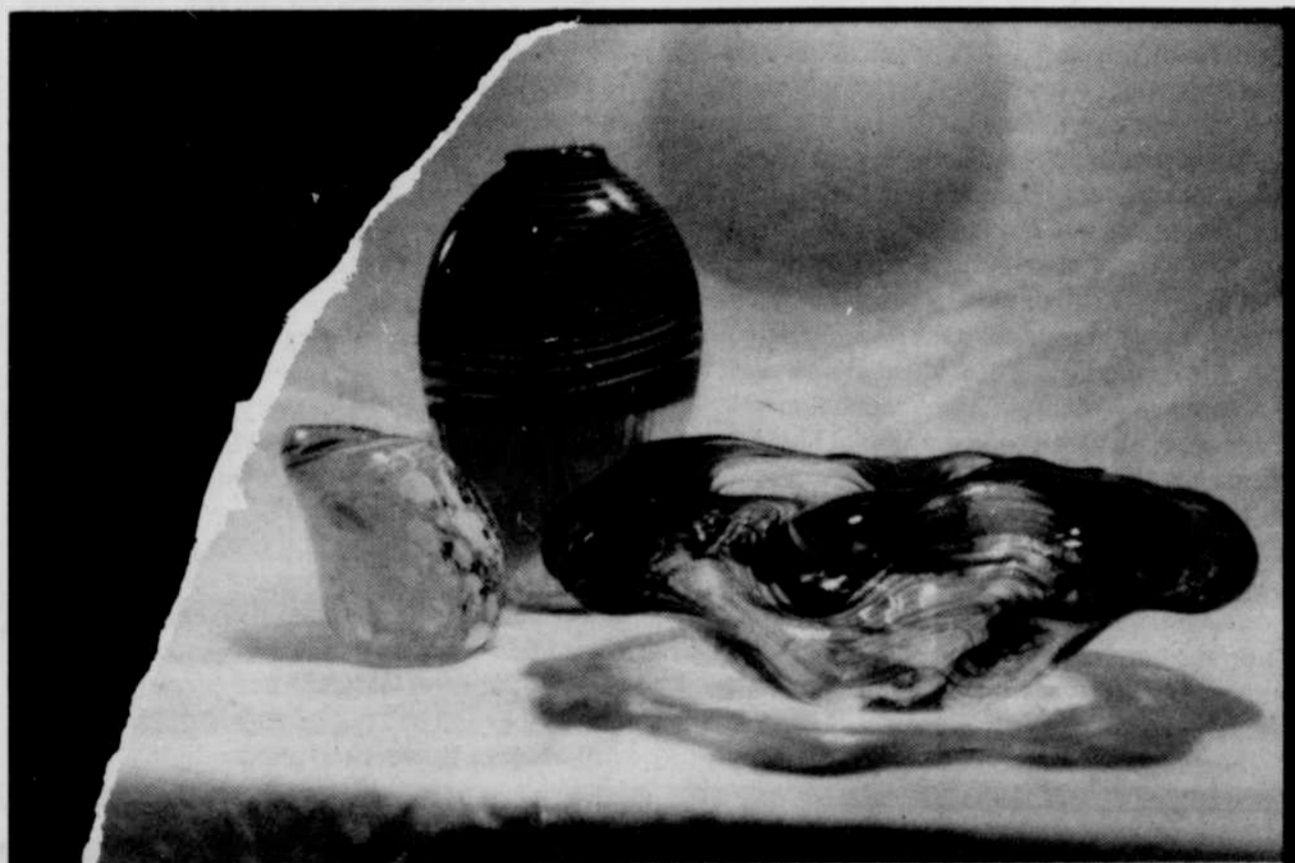
And unfortunately, the generalized apprehension about gay people in our society will almost inevitably be refocused into the realm of childhood, and emerge as accusations of gay child abuse. New Hampshire and Massachusetts' legislatures have passed laws forbidding gay people from becoming foster parents. Although Mass. Gov. Michael Dukakis vetoed the bill in that state, he had already taken the politically supererogatory step to procedurally bar gay people from serving as foster parents.

Syndicated columnist William Raspberry recently wrote an editorial dressing down the American Civil Liberties Union for arguing the case of a bisexual man whose sexual orientation led to his rejection as a Big Brother. Raspberry's veiled argument — that a gay Big Brother would be likely to sexually abuse a child, that a gay Big Brother would be a poor role model — is gratuitously induced as an inevitability due to the stereotyped "nature" of gay men. Can the fire storm of NAMBLA be far behind?

While abuse of children by adults occurs all too often, to fixate solely on alleged abuse by gay men is craven, since the majority of childhood sex abuse is committed within families by straight men. Raspberry is merely refocusing his adult homophobia onto the realm of children, thereby representing as "wisdom" what would otherwise be labelled intolerance and prejudice.

When increasingly-family-prone America chooses to play out its homophobia by accusing gay men of abusing its children, do not be surprised.

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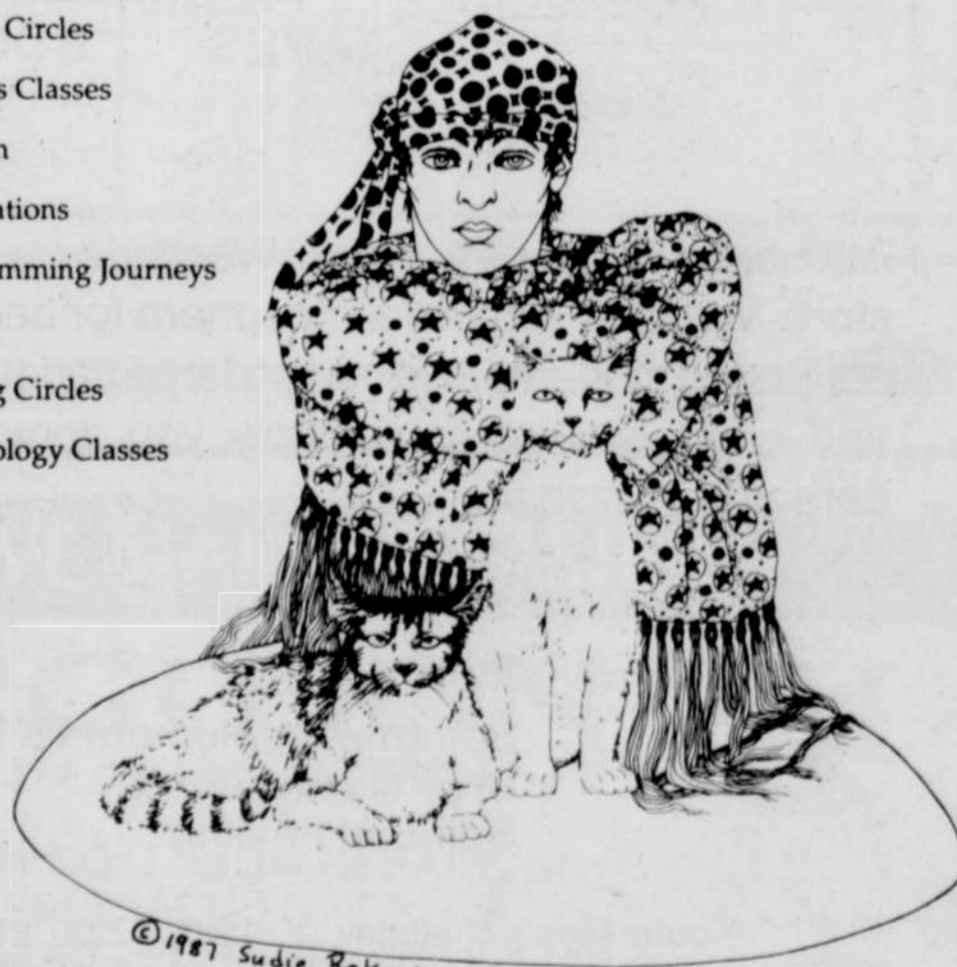
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