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Mar. 24 - Mexican Riviera. *Gotham* with *Sharon McNight*.

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Changing reality

Sonia Johnson's way is an elitist vision, plausible for women with marketable skills, resources, national renown and grown children

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Wildfire: Igniting the She/Volution. By Sonia Johnson. Wildfire Books, 1989. 282 pages. \$10.95

Once upon a time, Sonia Johnson was happily married, a mother of four children, an earnest member of the Mormon Church. Then her support of feminism and the ERA collided head-on with church doctrine. Johnson was excommunicated from the church in 1979 and lived not only to tell about it, but to document the event in a book titled *From Housewife to Heretic*.

Books

Then Johnson went further. She came out as a lesbian. She got spiritual in ways the church fathers never considered. She published her second book, *Going Out of Our Minds: The Metaphysics of Liberation*. Her latest book picks up where that volume left off and carried its theories to their passionate extreme.

The thrust of *Wildfire: Igniting the She/Volution* is an argument for women to "disengage psychically and emotionally from patriarchy and all its institutions." Johnson means this literally, arguing that resistance only strengthens and lends credence to the system one is trying to resist.

Her theory rests on two premises. First, she tells us, reality is an internal construct. We create and perpetuate what is real by believing in it. Second, when enough of us (women, that is) begin to believe differently, reality will change. Just like that.

Those notions aren't new to feminism or other types of progressive thought (the Hundredth-Monkey theory has long been used as an analogy for peace work), and they're certainly arguable, but readers must swallow them without flinching if they want to follow Johnson on her heady new path.

What she advocates is no less than a wholesale withdrawal from society as most of us know it. Stop buying things, she urges. Stop voting. Stop subscribing to Time Magazine. Stop lobbying, writing to Congress, demonstrating for abortion rights, attending PTA meetings. Don't reinforce the patriarchy by fighting it.

The she/volution heralded in *Wildfire* boils

down to a kind of "power of positive thinking" on the large scale. How large? Johnson never states exactly what "critical mass" of women will need to change their beliefs before worldwide transformation can occur; she only implies that we're getting closer to the necessary number.

Certainly the notion of transformative belief has value. Thinking can have a tremendously liberating effect. But I question whether thought alone — without education, without changes in laws, without economic upheaval — can effect the kinds of broad global change Johnson describes.

The book does contain a cogent analysis of 12-Step programs and New Age philosophies, demonstrating how each is based on a template of patriarchy. And at its most concrete, her advice makes sense. Live today as you would like to live, she says, suggesting that we shun acquisitiveness, recycle, conserve resources, walk and bicycle more, listen to other women, eat correctly, laugh often and break our addictions to destructive substances.

But when applied on the large scale, Johnson's urging to live as we would like to live seems simplistic and politically naive.

"If we want a future world in which women are not afraid — of rape and poverty and humiliation and other male violence — there is only one way to create it and that is by being unafraid now," she writes. To suggest that violence against women can be solved by "being unafraid now" removes responsibility from the perpetrators of that violence. The onus rests just where patriarchy placed it — on the victims.

Suppose, though, that we do not argue with Johnson's premises, that we accept her notion of a free and loving world created by our fervent belief in it? If we agree to follow her argument, where will it take us?

In the final chapters of *Wildfire*, Johnson does answer this question. Johnson's vision consists of small communities, without money, without barter, even — communities in which everyone "does what they want to do all the time" and freely offers their talents and services to others as gifts. In the end, Johnson reveals herself as the most rosy-eyed of idealists. "This society works," she writes, "Because everyone respects everyone else, everyone cares about everyone else, everyone desires everyone else's happiness and health as much as they desire their own and everyone

understands the interconnectedness of their well-being with that of others and of all living things."

My objection, finally, is not just that Johnson's bottom line is so squishy. It's that her argument is so rigid as to condemn any woman who can't follow along. If you're still lobbying the school board and protesting aid to the Contras, you're wasting your time, she preaches. Forget all that and come do it my way.

Her way — what worked for Sonia Johnson — is really what this book is about. And it's an elitist vision, plausible for a woman with marketable skills, resources, national renown and grown children. Some women can afford to pack up and move to small communities where they freely donate their talents and goods to each other. But most can't.

Even Johnson must contradict her own advice by putting her theory between two covers and peddling it for \$10.95 a copy. (Not to mention her taped speeches for \$9.95 and a Sonia Speaks video for \$29.95. So much for gift-giving.)

Johnson delivers some provocative thoughts in *Wildfire*. We can learn from examining our beliefs about patriarchy, challenging our own thoughts about what is "natural" and what is constructed to benefit men. But the book's tone — both dogmatic and full of breathless hyperbole — left me less willing to hear the message.

Johnson's passion is evident, but it's the passion of thoughts that flash across your mind at 1:30 am, in the middle of a great conversation with your best friend. In that flash, you truly believe you Have the Answer; you're intoxicated with your own beliefs. That kind of experience feels wonderful, but doesn't always translate.

The power of Johnson's first book lay in its ability to make other women identify — women who might not call themselves feminists, but who could understand the clash between integrity and church doctrine and, like Johnson, opt for the former. With this book, she risks losing that audience of women who could see themselves in her experience.

Indeed, Johnson has come a long way. From housewife to heretic to an idiosyncratic and risky vision, spoken from way out on a limb. "Let us command the fierce powers of earth and ocean, sky and fire to be with each brave band of us as we become one more flame in the wildfire of femaleness that is blazing through the universe," she concludes.

At times, the picture Johnson creates in *Wildfire* sounds beautiful, even poetic. But it may leave most of her intended audience standing in the middle of their daily lives, scratching their heads and wondering just what it all means.

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