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## SURPRISE, YOU'RE BISEXUAL

Virtually everyone is, according to a new book by  
Marjorie Garber, toast of the talk shows

by Richard D. Mohr

In *Vice Versa*, her just-released book on bisexuality, Harvard English professor Marjorie Garber repeatedly reminds the reader that her previous book, *Vested Interests*, on cross-dressing, landed her on the television talk-show circuit. Geraldo cast "Dr." Garber in the role of an "expert" brought in to determine whether her transvestite couch-mates were normal. Her answer: "rare, but normal."

Given bisexual chic's current status as a talk-

show staple, Garber's important new book may cast her again in the same role. But when asked whether bisexuals are normal, her answer will be that they are more than normal: Virtually everyone is bisexual and society will be better off for acknowledging this fact.

### Books

A sprawling book, in equal measures fascinating and frustrating, *Vice Versa* is the first major cultural study of bisexuality. The book is an instant classic in that future discussions of the subject—and there will be many—must take it as their point of departure.

The book rummages through virtually every dimension of 20th-century Anglo American culture for traces and sightings of bisexuality and fights the numerous cultural forces that try to erase, belittle, suppress or recategorize bisexuality out of existence. Garber examines and chronicles newspaper clippings, song lyrics, novels, movies, plays, psychoanalytical treatises, science journals, diaries, vampire legends, celebrity bios and, yes, talk shows. We are treated to—sometimes swamped by—dozens upon dozens of capsule biographies and plot summaries. Ultimately, Garber is more successful in finding bisexuals than in explaining what bisexuality is.

But the findings are impressive. Most of the Bloomsbury group, for example, turn out to be bisexuals. The economist John Maynard Keynes is a star case—a man who had profound and openly acknowledged affairs with men, including the artist Duncan Grant, but who in later life married and lived happily, sexually and long, with the ballerina Lydia Lopokova.

Many of Garber's reclamations to bisexuality are reclamations away from perceived gay status, even from canonized gay status, as in the case of Oscar Wilde. Though Wilde launched gayness as a cultural style, the facts of his life are more accurately described as bisexual than homosexual. Garber acknowledges that these reclamations could easily be read as fronting an anti-gay agenda. But her sensitivity to lurking homophobia is so acute in so many cases (she trashes the movie *Orlando* for it) that she absolves herself of this charge.

Or almost does. For one of Garber's strategies to get everybody under the big tent of bisexuality is to count as bisexual any man who marries a woman, even if his sexual desires are always exclusively directed toward men. For Garber there are no sham marriages.

Other big-tent strategies are equally dubious. Garber counts everyone in a mixed-sex ménage à trois as bisexual, even if every sex act performed and desire expressed by the trio is of the boy-girl

variety. The reason: the very idea of the sexual triangle is itself sexy and the triangle contains both sexes.

Garber also counts as bisexual any male who has ever admired a male movie star. The reason: Even the butchest of movie stars has a feminine side (Garber's one example is Sylvester Stallone). And any student who has ever had a crush on a teacher is bisexual. Her views here will give principals and deans hissyfits. She holds that to be good, teaching must be eroticized: The student must be sexually attracted to the teacher and vice versa. And further, to successfully foster the love of learning, this reciprocal attraction must not be articulated or acknowledged. However, widespread homophobically enhanced sexual abuse in the Boy Scouts suggests that eroticism when unacknowledged between mentor and apprentice is a recipe for disaster.

The book has many analytical failings. In keeping with fashionable academic skepticism about science, the book holds that bisexuality must be a product of choice, not nature, because in it one can fulfill one's sexual drive differently in relation to two different types of objects. But take the case of the lung fish. It seeks out the same thing (oxygen), from two different sources (air and water), in two different ways (through gill and lung), and yet no one would suppose that this state of affairs is



anything but genetically caused or that the fish's vacillations between air and water are the product of choice. Garber also claims that because bisexuality is a phenomenon that falls across a spectrum (some bisexuals are more same-sex directed than others) it cannot be a subject of scientific investigation. But light is manifest across a spectrum and its study is the subject of several sciences—chromatics, optics, quantum mechanics.

On the practical side of things, the book helps dispel various bisexual stereotypes—that bisexuals are unstable, immature or confused. So the book may well help in the formation of bisexual communities, perhaps even serve as a banner for them, though this is not Garber's aim. Indeed she is skeptical that bisexuality should develop as a social or political identity. Garber is not a bisexual liberationist.

On the conceptual side of things, even after 600 pages of rummaging, Garber fails to give any positive definition of bisexuality. She steadfastly denies that bisexuality can be interpreted as an overlap of homosexual and heterosexual desires, but offers no alternative account. In the end she punts—claiming that bisexuality confounds sexual categories, is unbounded liquidity, is contradiction. But these claims are just to say that there is nothing to say. A predicate that excludes nothing, asserts nothing. The book's richly detailed case studies, though, should provide the ground from which others who wish to brave questions of bisexual definition, classification and meaning may begin to build a better theory.

*Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* by Marjorie Garber. Simon & Schuster, 1995; \$30. Richard D. Mohr is an author and professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois-Urbana. His most recent book is *A More Perfect Union: Why Straight America Must Stand Up for Gay Rights*.

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