

INTERVIEW

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tions in the advertisement: "Are you a faggot because you hated gym class? Are you a dyke because you can throw a football?" The answer to both is "not necessarily." We seem to occasionally take on the stereotypes that have been placed upon us. There is as much variety in gender behavior among lesbians and gay men as there is among anybody else. I think it's really important that we allow ourselves that range.

What the book is about is looking at these categories of male and female and seeing that the categories are so huge and diverse that they have almost become meaningless. It's a difficult subject to look at because so often our identities start with the fact "I'm a girl," "I'm a boy."

In reading *Gender Shock*, I quickly came to the realization that it's not just for gay men and lesbians.

You're correct. The target audience is anybody who has ever questioned gender training, or the idea of being male and female. Or anyone who is asking themselves what the truth is about these categories. You're right. That can be anyone who is gay or lesbian, anybody who is basically anything. Anyone could read this book. What I have found is that depending on who is reading the book, they see different things in it. My lesbian and gay friends who read the book focus very much on Gender Identity Disorder in childhood. They look at the case histories.

I think we do that because we can identify. I certainly did. I played with girls and Barbie dolls. As a boy, I so often acted in a manner inappropriate to my gender. So much of the section on behavior and GID in childhood rang true to me.

Right. That seems to be very powerful with gay and lesbian readers alike. The lesbian readers, when they read "Becky," are infuriated and identify very strongly. Now, it's not like there aren't lesbians who are very femme, or there aren't gay men who are totally masculine, but those among us who are penalized are the ones who are gender inappropriate as children. Those are the children who are brutalized. There's a special emotional impact.

Do you think being a lesbian gave you a leg-up on a book exploding the myths of male and female?

Well, I actually think that lesbian and gay people have had to question notions of gender for most of their lives. We've been taking less for granted for a longer time. And so, in that sense, I do feel that we are in a unique position to look at what the realities are. As a lesbian, I know that the range of women that is possible is just as vast as the range of men that is possible. I don't have any questions like, "Oh, she's not a real woman because she's a leather dyke on a bike." I'm like, "Wow, some woman!" [Laughs]



Phyllis Burke

Do you think that gay men and lesbians veer more naturally toward gender independence?

Yes. Yes, I do. How many gay men do you know who send out for somebody to cook dinner for them? How many lesbians do you know who send out for a man to come and build a bookshelf? We don't live like that.

We need to achieve mainstream gender independence.

Absolutely. The penalties we experience for adhering to these rigid gender roles are amazing: domestic violence, physical illness, depression in women, early death and coronary heart disease in

men, eating disorders, obsession with appearance in both men and women. And then, really importantly, sexual dysfunction. A lot of times when we're in those boxes, in those roles that aren't completely natural to us, and we're leaving something out, we don't function as well sexually.

The thing that really amazed me in the research was the issue of creativity. Back as far as the '40s and the '50s, they knew that the man who had more femininity, and the woman who had more masculinity, had much more creative power. They knew that, but they were so afraid of it because they were afraid that it meant that they were bisexual, that they had half-male, half-female in them. It's interesting. Not so much in the

lesbian/gay world, but in the straight world, if you see a woman doing something that is typical of a man—like driving a truck—there's a suspicion that there's something male inside her body. And if you see a man doing something like holding a baby in a very cradling way, in that very nurturing, protective way, oftentimes that man will become suspect: "Oh, he's got something female running through his body." And this is one of the most incredible myths. A person who really helped me at the very, very beginning of this project, three years ago, was [transsexual author and activist] Kate Bornstein. [Laughs] She blew the door open for me, so to speak. And I'm very grateful to her for that.

What are your hopes for the book?

Well, what I really hope is that people will read this book, that it will give them some kind of a lift, or confirm for them something that they've always known, and that they'll be able to suggest or bring the idea of gender independence into situations where it is sorely needed. This is the beginning of a dialogue. I think that the subsequent chapters have to be written by the reader. So I'm hoping that that's what's going to happen. That we'll start this dialogue and break open the fact that these roles are not coming out of our bodies because we're male and female. We know it. We have to give gender independence a chance.

What did you learn from writing *Gender Shock*?

The most important thing I learned from writing the book, personally, is that I am enough for my child. I don't have to go out and find someone—based upon the fact that he is a man—to bring into my child's life for my child to develop fully. That is something I am absolutely certain of, and I really want to bring that to gay and lesbian parents who are wrestling with that subject. They are enough. I saw Gloria Steinem on this show recently, and they asked her, "Well, can a man mother?" She just looked at them and said, "Yes." And of course, [ABC's] John Stossel looked at her like she was crazy. But she was right. She was right. But we've been trained. We've been raised as boys or raised as girls. We have to sort of get over that.

You've written fiction, a memoir, investigative nonfiction. Which do you prefer?

I can't say. They're all very different challenges. But I can guarantee you, absolutely, that I am working on a novel [tentatively titled *Seven Days*] right now. It's going to be a lot of fun. I've done all the investigative journalism I need for a while. I'm going to be focusing on this romantic, comic novel set in San Francisco so that we can all have a good laugh. [Laughs]

Gender Shock by Phyllis Burke. Anchor Books, 1996; \$23.95 cloth.

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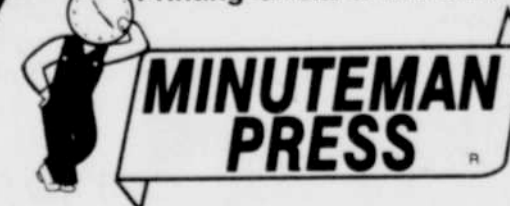
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