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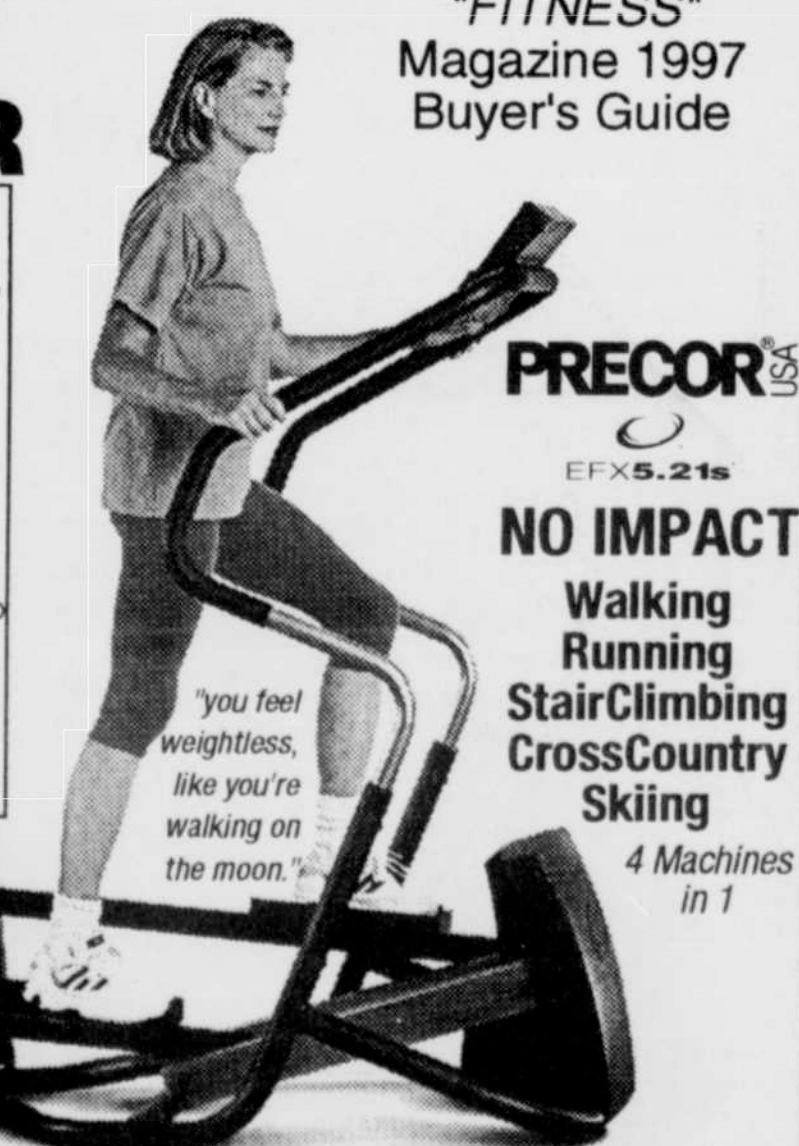
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INTERVIEW

AIRING VIEWS

The queer discussion of class comes out into the open in an unconventional compilation of essays

by Gip Plaster

The queer movement needs to clearly articulate who we are, state that anyone who self-identifies as queer is welcome, and then—here's the tough part—not freak out when the drag queens and kings, the trannies and the high femmes arrive in full force. Or full drag, which may be even scarier.

That quote from Joanna Kadi's essay in *Queerly Classed: Gay Men and Lesbians Write*

Books

About Class refers to the great divide between the classes within the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans communities.

That is part of what *Queerly Classed* is about, but that's not all. The book is a collection of writings by lesbian and gay writers that explores the class systems into which we are born and from which we sometimes attempt to flee.

Susan Raffo, the collection's editor, has worked as a park ranger, a waitress, a taxi driver, a writer and a salesperson, among other things. So she knows something about differences in class.

The book, which she says sprang from a call for essays at a periodical she edited, is intended to explore individual lives by talking about the personal ideas of lesbians and gay men about class and the political implications of class on U.S. society.

Gip Plaster: Let's be direct. Why would *Queerly Classed* be of interest to the average lesbian or gay reader?

Susan Raffo: Such an interesting question—it immediately makes me wonder who the "average" lesbian or gay reader is. This book is of interest to anyone who wants to know about the range of lives lesbians and gay men live. It is of interest to those who are curious to learn more about their community.

Are people really concerned with class? Is it something people think about?

People think about class all the time. Every time they panic about money, bills, work, the future of Social Security or whatever—they are thinking about class. People are concerned about class when they talk about education and its role, when they talk about inflation and the changing economy. The problem is that we don't have any political language—let alone a sophisticated political language—for talking about class.

If we do talk about class, then, what is it we're saying? What do we believe about class structures?

I believe that the principle class belief in the United States that affects all our lives—in a huge variety of ways—is the belief that if you work hard enough you can make anything of yourself or, at least, have a consumer-oriented, middle-class lifestyle. This ethic guides much political conversation, and it is used as a justification for many political changes and career moves.

Are there uniquely gay issues involved, too?

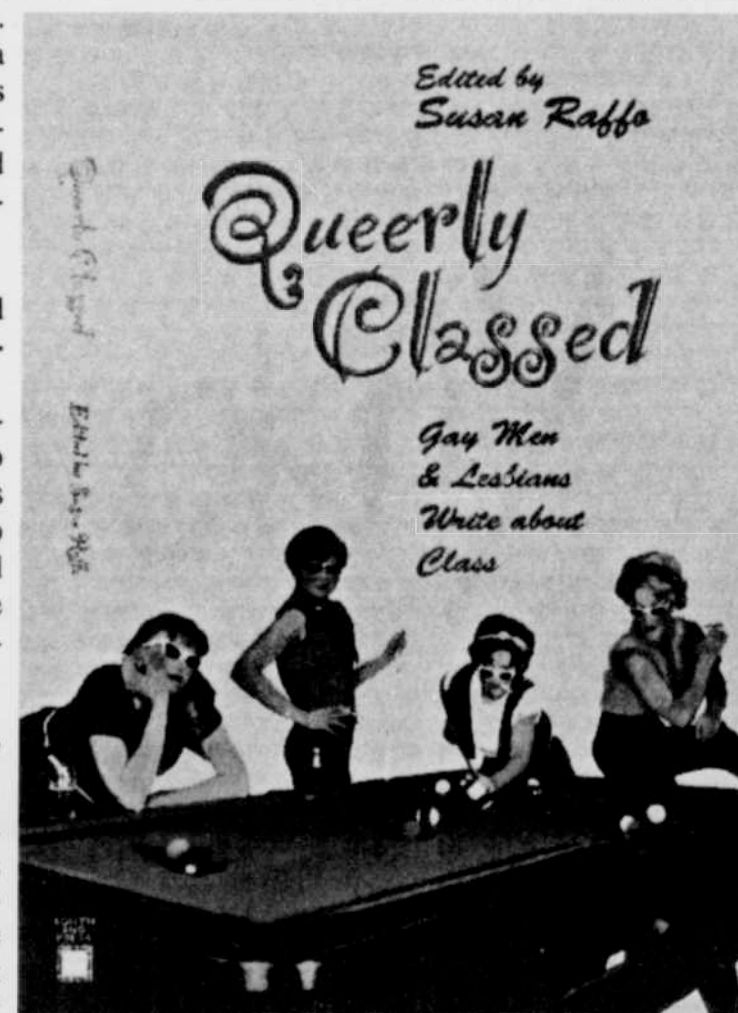
Queers are very concerned about class when they say we want to show the American people that we are just like they are; we are just like everyone else. The question begs to be asked,

Which "everyone else" are we like? The image usually offered is a particular kind of nuclear family—a middle-class, career- and consumer-oriented lifestyle. When gays and lesbians are embarrassed about other gays and lesbians who "act out" in ways they say will hurt the movement, we are having conversations about class. We are having a conversation that compares behaviors, one kind being appropriate and the other kinds being inappropriate or low-class or embarrassing.

What words do you consider synonymous with class?

I see class in two ways: one, as something that determines an experience of culture, and two, as a lens through which everything else gets focused. So for synonymous words, I would mention almost everything—status, champagne, Kmart, race, money, savings accounts, penny jar, doctorate—because everything is affected by class. Opera, country music, wage, career, rap, light-skinned, white trash, bath houses, public sex, dildos, sodomy laws, lesbian potlucks. The list goes on.

Why are some of the writers' contributions



in the form of poems? That's sort of unusual for a book like this.

Class systems are about rules of order and hierarchies. I'm simplifying it in the extreme when I say there is a class system around writing genres. Usually writing considered appropriate for political analysis is filled with facts and strong sentences. I like that kind of writing: It gets my blood up and gives me tools to work with. It makes me feel a particular kind of righteous. But I also like writing that makes me connect through my heart and body. I know that poetry starts with body and ends up at brain. I think our general political conversations would be a lot more interesting—and a lot more honest—if we let our spirits and hearts take part as much as our brains. Poetry opens different windows than analysis. Those windows need to be open too.

Queerly Classed: Gay Men and Lesbians Write About Class edited by Susan Raffo. South End Press, 1996; \$17 paper.