

SISTER MY SISTER

If you thought *Basic Instinct* was a lesbian psycho flick, you haven't seen this offering out of the United Kingdom, now on video.

Sister My Sister is a film that gets better after a second viewing, once you've gotten past the shock value. Wendy Kesselman adapted for the screen her own play *My Sister in This House*, which is based on a notorious 1932 double murder in Le Mans, France.

The Papin sisters, working as maids for wealthy Madame Danzard and her daughter, Isabelle, began carrying on a love affair with each other and eventually violently killed their employers. Although actual events remain unclear, *Sister My Sister* explores what might have led to this crime.

Joely Richardson (daughter of Vanessa Redgrave) takes a marvelous turn as Christine, a quiet, dedicated maid. She is the sole servant in a large house, but when her younger sister, Lea, is ready to leave school, she obtains a position for her there as well.

Christine has an obsessive preoccupation with Lea and a hatred for their mother, who separated the sisters when they were children. Director Nancy Meckler allows occasional boarding school flashbacks, which subtly suggest lesbian sexuality.

Meanwhile, the Danzards appear to live in a complete vacuum, hardly going out and basically playing house as a way of living. The meals and their attire are proper, day in and day out.

Their boredom is satiated by talking about the sister servants, often right in front of them in the third person, as if they are pets. Christine and Lea's resentment at their station in life and with their rich, idle employers grows with every passing day, matched by their growing attraction for each other. Apprehension builds when Christine suspects Isabelle is going to leave the house and take Lea with her and when Isabelle suspects the relationship between the sisters is more than sisterly.

Sister My Sister moves slowly and carefully, building up an incredible tension rarely found in modern film. It's set almost entirely in the dark and shadowy Danzard home, creating a stifling mood, and Meckler is expert at examining the cruelty and effects of extreme classism.

You spend an hour waiting for the bomb to drop, and the director doesn't disappoint. The final moments of the film are mesmerizing.

—LB

BUTTERFLY KISS

If you have trouble with any of the difficult themes of *Sister My Sister*, best skip *Butterfly Kiss*. Michael Winterbottom, who insists on

making the most depressing films of our time (did anyone catch *Jude*?), leaves subtlety by the wayside in this road film about two dykes on a killing spree in search of...themselves? Each other? Love? It's hard to tell, but an interesting journey.

Amanda Plummer, who you'll remember as the cafe-robbing Honey Bunny in *Pulp Fiction*, is Eunice, a wayward, somewhat schizophrenic masochist who wanders in and out of gas stations, desperately searching for someone named Judith. Saskia Reeves plays Miriam, a gas station attendant who—as Eunice so aptly points out—is not Judith but a likable substitute.

Never-been-kissed Miriam takes Eunice in and is overwhelmed and thrilled by her attentions—if a little concerned about her erratic behavior, not to mention her chest full of piercings and bruises from wearing heavy chains. Eunice runs away, and pathetic Miriam chases after her, convinced “there's no such thing as a bad person.”

As Eunice begins to kill people whose paths she crosses along the English countryside (usually after some kind of sexual liaison), Miriam continues to justify her actions. Eunice's explanations and her observations about herself in general are largely biblically referenced; she invokes Judith from the Bible, who, she says,



Amanda Plummer (left) pays a lot of attention to Saskia Reeves

“killed for the sake of others.” She is also unconcerned with being found out, desiring to be punished because “punishment is all I understand.”

Miriam's love is blind, and she continues to cover up Eunice's gruesome work, exclaiming, “You must have had your reasons.” Miriam insists she can make Eunice good, but Eunice warns her, “I'll make you evil before you make me good.”

This movie has gotten a lot of criticism: Dykes and S/Mers seem crazy and/or violent, Plummer embarrassingly overacts, neither character is sympathetic, Eunice's religious rantings are contrived. Call me crazy, but a lot of this stuff is what makes the movie likable.

Eunice is a frightening character, dyke/bi or not, and her sadomasochism has more to do with her need to be a self-flagellating mar-

tyr than a member of the leather community. She knows what people enjoy about sexual punishment, but she isn't exactly “safe, sane and consensual” and never is presented as any kind of role model for any kind of life.

This is no Hollywood treatment of mentally disturbed lesbians; it's more of a character study of one woman's illness and another's loneliness. It's also darkly comic, which Winterbottom uses to invoke a sense of nonliterality.

Plummer does chew the scenery, but it doesn't ruin her effect. She's certainly unforgettable, and she has the skilled ability to make lines like “Evil is in the heart; if you don't go out, you'll never get away from it” and “Sacrificial victims always go to heaven” more ominous than silly.

It's completely true that neither character garners sympathy, but Winterbottom hits you with that at the end of the film, reinforcing the contrast between basic horror and disdain for the most part and sudden sadness in the final scene. *Butterfly Kiss* isn't for the faint of heart, but it leaves a mark on you that's worth having. P.J. Harvey and the Cranberries offer a hip soundtrack.

—LB

LISA BRADSHAW is a Portland free-lance writer.

ELS DEBBAUT is a free-lance writer and staff member at *In Other Words Women's Books and Resources*.

LYNN THOMAS is a Portland free-lance writer and musician.

SHY GIRL

by Elizabeth Stark. Seal Press, 2000; \$12.95 softcover.

“There was a girl in Alta's bed when the phone rang, a girl all red-haired and fair-skinned and fleshy, which is to say, nothing like Shy.”

With this smooth opening scene, Elizabeth Stark's pleasant debut novel glides into existence. We soon come to know it as a concise, yet accurate, introduction to Alta Corral, a stereotypical biker butch with shaved head and matching tough attitude.

This bulldyke's quirky San Francisco night life proves to be strictly gendered, honoring a rigid butch-femme division. Fellow butches pat Alta on the back while envying the luscious femmes incessantly flocking around her. Alta's surreal personality temporarily is mitigated with



ironic, familiar statements such as, “The so-called lesbian community is a damned small place to move around in, especially if you've slept with half of it.”

The absent Shy girl from the opening lines leaves Alta seething with restlessness stemming from myriad unanswered questions. Along with this goes a painful sense of loss. Why did this secret lover—Alta's first—elope with Alta's \$200 and no explanation? Why was there no

goodbye nor warning? When will she return? Will she ever return?

Ultimately, Shy's comatose mother forces the bolting runaway to reappear in San Francisco and face her demons. This, of course, includes Alta, still entangled in Shy's unresolved past. The new Alta-Shy encounters allow for a slow, sensual reacquaintance,

rendered with exquisite amounts of erotic tension.

Stark's narrative deals in a touching way with a lot of powerful and delicate issues: the deep friendship and initial love between two girls involving undying patience and unconditional acceptance; the affecting story of the hardships of survival in the face of an intolerant, homophobic world; the pursuit of honest identity, embodied by Alta, and presented throughout as the preferable alternative to a life of lies; the staunchly mapped sense of the universal ambiguity of various relationships and of life in general.

In light of the above, then, it is a bit disappointing that Stark opted for Shy's enigmatic mother to boost the story with an additional sense of mystery and suspense. Unfortunately, the plot ends up feeling a bit forced and even awkwardly premature. *Shy Girl* needs to convince if it wants to impress.

—Els Debbaut

PURRRRRRR-fect
Purrrses!



THE FUTURE • 1015 SW WASHINGTON • 503-241-0875
WWW.THEFUTUREINC.COM

Did You Hear the News?

We carry Flint River Ranch Food

Healthy Pets
Northwest



The Natural Alternative to Pet Foods and Supplies

1408 SE 39th
(39th & Hawthorne)
Portland, Oregon 97214

(503) 236-8036

All Natural Foods • Herbal Remedies
Homeopathic Remedies • Pesticide Free
Books • Treats • Toys

Store Hours: Tue - Sat 10 - 6, Sun 12 - 6