

culture

Bitch Is Back

Freshly transplanted feminist magazine reclaims a loaded word

by Julie Sabatier

Andi Zeisler's French bulldog, Oscar, greeted me at the top of the stairs when I visited the new digs for *Bitch Magazine*—a converted apartment above Bernie's Southern Bistro on Northeast Alberta Street. Though only a few empty boxes were piled in the corner and little art was hanging on the walls, her colleagues seemed remarkably settled in their new space after only two weeks.

Originally from New York, 34-year-old Zeisler, and the feminist quarterly she helped found, spent more than a decade in the Bay Area. When they decided it was time for a change, Portland, with its do-it-yourself work ethic and queer-friendly atmosphere, seemed like a logical choice. *Bitch* has always operated under the inclusive philosophy that gay issues and feminist issues are intrinsically entwined. (When I asked Zeisler about her own sexuality, she replied: "I'm married to a man. I don't really call myself anything.")



As we settled into the couch across from a shelf of archived magazines, Zeisler offered me a tasty treat from a box of Voodoo Doughnuts sent to the new office by an appreciative reader. I asked her about local media and the B-word while Oscar sniffed and grunted under the coffee table, hoping to score some chocolate crumbs.

Julie Sabatier: Why did you decide to move *Bitch* to Portland?

Andi Zeisler: I had wanted to move here anyway, but basically we were just kind of not making ends meet financially in Oakland. Portland has everything that we love about the Bay Area in the sense that it's politically progressive and there's a lot of DIY stuff going on and people have a real,

creative and entrepreneurial spirit. And, just simply put, it was a lot cheaper. I realize that people like us are kind of part of the problem, in terms of Portland becoming more expensive and gentrified and all that, but we really felt like, as an organization, it was either do something to lower our operating costs or not really be sustainable.

JS: The Bay Area, and San Francisco specifically, has this reputation of being a gay man's town, and Portland has in the past few years gained a reputation of being a really lesbian-friendly place. I'm wondering if you've noticed that in your short time here.

AZ: It's funny because we were in San Francisco for a while, but for the last four years we were in Oakland, which is sort of akin to Portland in the sense that if San Francisco is a gay man's town, Oakland is very much a lesbian mecca. It's more low-key, it's not super clubby. I actually see definite parallels [between Oakland and Portland] like

ingly offensive things in a sarcastic tone. What's your response to that kind of writing?

AZ: It can be difficult. Like [Willamette Week cartoonist John] Callahan—his stuff is legendarily sexist, and you can be aware of that and you can understand that that's his thing and *Willamette Week* [is] aware of that even as they publish him, but that doesn't mean that people have to just accept it. I'm just a big fan of people speaking up when they feel that something is offensive. So, my sense is if papers are going to put that stuff out there, they have to understand and be ready to engage with people who write in and are insulted or offended or just want to understand what the rationale behind printing that stuff is. I think as independent media producers, we all have to be aware of that.

JS: When people engage with and respond to *Bitch*, do you find that they have more of a problem with the B-word (bitch) or the F-word (feminism)?

AZ: I think on the surface, it usually becomes more of a problem with the B-word, but ultimately, having the word "feminism" on the cover has probably marginalized us more than having "bitch" on the cover. "Bitch" is really common parlance at this point in time. Definitely there are women—and many of them are from a slightly older generation—who have really taken issue with the name and have really felt personally hurt that they spent so much time in the 1970s trying to raise other people's consciousness about the word, only to have it reclaimed by these snotty, young feminists. But in terms of feminism, I think it's a more pernicious problem because it just has such an image problem. Even women who believe in equal rights and equal pay and that there should be a female president someday, those people, many of them are still really loathe to call themselves feminists because the word carries so much baggage.

JS: If you have queer women on staff, do you find that people respond more negatively because



Andi Zeisler helped found *Bitch* more than a decade ago in the Bay Area.

there is this stereotype out there about lesbian feminists who hate men?

AZ: You know what's really funny is the time in the magazine's history when we've gotten the most of those letters was the time when we had overall the straightest staff. We've rarely had photos of ourselves or information about ourselves, so people wouldn't necessarily know, but we've had content that's really queer-friendly...we've always had stuff on trans issues. I think that really does make people who think that there's a difference between a feminist magazine and a lesbian feminist magazine—I think it's really, given those people pause.

JS: Do you have a policy about the gender of people who contribute to the magazine?

AZ: No, not at all. We don't have that many male contributors, but we do have a few. We certainly have a staple of trans contributors, both FtM and MtF. I mean, really, it's just all about the sensibility. 10

Bitch magazine's "super" issue hit newsstands just after it left Oakland, and the "risk" issue will be produced this summer in P-town.

JULIE SABATIER is a Portland freelance writer and radio producer.

women's bookstores and restaurants and bars that seem to specifically cater to a lesbian crowd rather than a gay man's crowd.

JS: What do you think of the local media in Portland?

AZ: Well, it's been super responsive to us, and that's really nice. You know, I have been aware of papers like *Willamette Week* and *The Mercury* even before I moved here because we have readers in Portland that would often send us things that they found particularly annoying or particularly good about those papers.

JS: *The Mercury* is known as our most tongue-in-cheek publication, and it's said all kinds of seem-

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