

***Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* by Dr. Lauren Rosewarne: A Review**

by Lynda L. Hinkle

Western culture is obsessed with the inside scoop. We want to see what the Congresspeople are having for lunch via Twitter, what Hollywood actors are sleeping with one another, and what complete strangers are thinking in their innermost selves.

I am no exception. I, too, am deeply curious about what goes on behind the scenes. So when I picked up *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* by Dr. Lauren Rosewarne of the University of Melbourne, I was considerably intrigued.

In a way, the book is little more than a revenge blog written in academe-speak. Dr. Rosewarne, (or can I call her Lauren now that I've gotten to know her so intimately via this book?) is broken hearted, angry, and set on shining her intellect on how it all happened. She writes of an affair with a married man who calls himself a feminist, and about its affect on her and on his partner and she broadens it to incorporate the issue of infidelity and the Other Woman from a feminist perspective. What follows is a deeply personal, deeply political look at the issue of feminism in heteronormative relationships, sprinkled with pop culture and media references that is so Third Wave I can almost hear the crest.

The problem with the book is that Lauren doesn't always see herself as clearly as the reader can. She, too, is caught up in what she identifies as machismo...the man is focused on his pleasure, absorbed in his need for ego stroking and the pleasure of having more than one woman desiring him. But what about the Other Woman and the Wife? Are they not also caught up in viewing the man as a possession, seeing him as an object over which to argue or compete? I desperately wanted Lauren at times to stop placing this man at the center of her diagram of infidelity, and realize that another view of it is that each one of them was the center of their own need to have their ego satisfied, to be "chosen" and "accepted" by the object of their desire. Was this man really so great? Even she admits that he was not. Even he probably knew that. But the need, the ever-pressing need, to be the one he picked motivated both her and his wife to put aside their feminism, their desire for emotional self-preservation, in order to engage in this battle.

Is feminism, first, second or third wave, adequate to help us understand who we are when we become involved in the bitter tug of war of infidelity or the dark forest of being in a relationship with someone who doesn't care about us or isn't good for us? Most of us, no matter what our sexual identity, have faced that 3am moment, lying prone on our lonely beds weeping over some person we have focused our desires upon who simply can't be counted on to return the affection. It's bittersweet. It's pain. It's beauty. It's the stuff that poems are made of. But also it is the stuff that therapists make their money from. Lauren concludes after much self reflection that "I suspect I simply made a decision that reflects *my*

feminism. I decided that for me, no amount of political righteousness could dilute how much I love him and how much I want to be with him.”

But really, let's be honest. Is it love? Although Lauren is careful to define her terms in most cases, she doesn't make an attempt to define this bugaboo. I don't blame her. Defining love is clearly more than most academics can do in a lifetime or two. But it's a word that is all too often, in my opinion, thrown out to justify what is really a selfish desire to possess. Possession is the center of our cultural definitions of love and affection, but it is also the impetus behind the horrors of our civilization when it is taken too far: domestic violence, prostitution (I own her for an hour), human trafficking, child abuse....

The book doesn't explore the issue of possession deeply enough, but it does explore the dynamics of an unsatisfying relationship that mimics the sort of stereotypical infidelities so often found in suburbia all over the world. The lover is a standard issue middle aged cad, cavalier in the way he manages multiple relationships and lies to his wife about them, cruelly, while sharing them in detail with his lover, also cruelly.

Lauren, Dr. Rosewarne, you can do better than this self-absorbed, woman-hating teen trapped in an adult body. Because you see, I've come to admire your moxie.

Cheating on the Sisterhood, although imperfect, is a celebration of intelligent reflection on “ouchie” relationships. Lauren demonstrates that she understands the complexity of how relationships sometimes separate ourselves in action from ourselves in principle when she writes,

For a long time, intellectually I was able to exonerate my own involvement; emotionally, however, I felt regular pangs of fear that I was not doing the right thing; that I was a bad person. When my proposal for this book was being reviewed by publishers, one of the anonymous referees inferred that women readers might find my writing “alienating” if not “infuriating”, particularly those who have been betrayed themselves. It appeared obvious to me that the referee assumed I wasn't a very nice person. Having internalized the good woman image, I already knew this and knew I needed to compensate, to be likeable in whatever ways I could. I continued to inquire about his partner, to provide him advice about how best to handle his situation (which routinely made my situation worse), and I continued to be steadfastly committed to not resenting her. I wanted to be a good person. Of course, doing some nice things when most of your actions demonstrate being not nice has minimal effect. Similarly, it is equally important to separate wanting to be a genuinely good person from feigning goodness to win him over or to justify your behavior. (120)

The Third Wave of feminism sometimes wanders away from the simple idea that the Personal is Political, but that fact is highlighted in this book as a personal story is explored through the idea of cultural and feminist politics. It's a writing

that took some courage: the courage to expose not only her complicit role in infidelity against another woman, but also her deep feelings of betrayal and pain over this lover and to also turn a mirror on the sides of herself she may not be as proud of. This is the kind of honest struggle and self reflection that we all must do in order to collectively birth the next wave of feminism, the wave that will go beyond the external politics and change the way women deal with one another and what they are willing to accept from men, society, and themselves. Although we may, too, reach conclusions like "I love him and I want to be with him..." when it is decidedly a Bad Idea, we may also find that we learn through the practice of applying feminism and intellect to our personal experiences that we can eventually move past the stuck places that our culture has created for us.