

Introduction: *Innovative Female Fiction Writers*



Stacey Gottlieb

Welcome to *ABR* 23.5: a spotlight on innovative female fiction writers. As guest editor, I helped to conceive our focus du jour, though one of the only questions I've wrangled with in drafting this introduction is whether or not such gender-specific roundups are even needed any more. I use "needed" here to mean: For the Cause or To Raise Awareness, and "any more" as in: *Now?* Over 30 years after full-out legalization of the pill? After we got hip to that adage about fish not needing bicycles?

OK, so I was just beginning to crawl in 1972, but I heard about those landmark moments. I was raised on them, by them. And yet—. And yet a certain lack of surety remains. Yes, women have amassed a great deal of currency over the past three decades, but I certainly can't say that obstacles to parity, in publishing or any other field, don't remain.

That said, examining a group of fictions solely because they emanate from a particular subset of *writer*, i.e., "female," as opposed to a subset of *writing*, i.e., "innovative," has always seemed to me a rather meaningless exercise. This belief stems from the suspicion that whatever commonalties or differences such a group might be found to possess are, at best, largely arbitrary. And still—. And still as soon as I've articulated *that* stance, it feels somehow equally arbitrary or lacking in sense.

***Does a quality like gender
(or race or socioeconomic class)
necessarily inform one's writing?***

But there's only so much waffling one can do before a middle-of-the-road compromise seems like the smartest call. In this case, that's

meant deciding that maybe such exercises *can* serve a purpose. That maybe they *are* needed to highlight underexamined work or, when an attribute common to the writers is combined with an attribute common to the writings, these roundups can simply create another window through which to view a group of texts.

Perhaps female fiction writers still fall into the category of the underexamined, though I'm not sure, exactly, how to tell. (I do know that for all our early gains in reproductive rights, health companies in this country cover women's contraceptive prescriptions only about 40% of the time.) At the very least, I don't think such examinations can do much harm as long as their editorial claims (as with anything that tries to categorize the uncatagorizeable) are taken with a proverbial grain of salt.

Of course, this begged a question about what, if any, such claims this *ABR* focus might be trying to make.

In the name of this query, numerous calls were placed to friends both male and female, to writers and non-writers alike. This highly scientific survey was peppered with questions like: "Does a quality like gender (or race or socioeconomic class) *necessarily* inform one's writing?" and "Think of the most important books you've seen published over the last decade. Now tell me about the diversity of that author pool." Most often, people's answers were proffered only after a protracted discussion about how I was defining the word "gender" or "important" or, for that matter, "book." Needless to say, I was reminded of how our best efforts towards objectivity can exponentially extend the length of nearly any debate, but I also discovered that I don't really feel comfortable making unifying

claims about either a group of writers or their collected writings. Still, I have found that, like the majority of the patient souls with whom I spoke, I harbor the basic belief that *who* someone is, and/or how they define themselves in the world, shapes both their life and their art to a significant degree. In other words, for all my uncertainty about where the influence of gender “belongs” in the constellation of factors considered when one *reads*—in the foreground or the background or off the page altogether—it is, undeniably, still *there*.

And what does that mean? Read on!

Focus 23.5 consists of five reviews and one essay, all of which discuss works of innovative fiction authored by women. The writers doing the discussing are also all female, and many of them write innovative fiction as well. They are, these authors and these contributors, an impressive and engaging bunch. Any other connections I’ll leave for you to make.

Stacey Gottlieb is a writer who lives in New York. One of her innovative fictions appears in the Winter/Spring 2002 issue of the Sycamore Review.