

## **‘Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics’**

Jennifer Baumgardner

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The dust jacket for ‘Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics’ breathlessly claims that this book is, ‘Part memoir, part pop-culture study, part feminist theory. . .’ and therein, in my opinion, lies the main problem. This tome is really a little bit of everything, but not much of anything – the gestalt is significantly less than the parts.

Jennifer Baumgardner is a feminist author and activist who spent much of the 1990s working in New York for ‘Ms.’ magazine, founded in 1971 by feminist Gloria Steinem. By the 1990s, the magazine was much less of an influence on American feminist thought than it had been in its heyday. Baumgardner refers often to her time working at the magazine, and even quotes passages from her diary when only 22 years old. ‘Ms. is fucking cool. The office is 75 percent lesbian. I am in the minority as a straight midwestern girl.’ We are then treated to the details of her first sexual liaisons with other women who worked in her office, and to her coming out as a bisexual woman. While this is occurring, she charts the rise of visible homosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality in America in the 1990s.

She goes on to give her opinion of what ‘bisexual’ means, and gives a history of sexualities, alluding heavily to Freud and Kinsey, but, as in much of the book, she also pays gushing attention to pop culture and to modern (American, of course) icons, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche, and the bisexual singers Meshell Ndegeocello and Ani DiFranco (the latter is almost anointed to sapphic sainthood by the author).

Baumgardner then spends some time talking about her relationships with men and how they differ from those with women. She seems to have difficulty reconciling her feminist ideology with her social and sexual experiences with males and spends some time trying to explain how, for her, relationships with men are very different to those with women. We are told, at length, how different men and women really are, but she reverts to jaded stereotypes in order to do so. Baumgardner spends a chapter describing the tensions between straight and bisexual (and lesbian) women in the feminist movement in America and this gives some interesting historical asides.

Overall, I was disappointed with this book. It promised so much more – an exploration of bisexual politics – but in the end it was really about a woman who only describes a goldfish bowl view of bisexuality, and indeed of the world. A world of middle-class, college-educated New York women exploring their sexualities with each other. There are some interesting passages about the history of feminism in the USA and of the rise of bisexuality in American modern culture, but the rest of the book is somehow too personal a view to really hold the reader’s interest.

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