

Book Review

The Sexual Life of Catherine M

Catherine Millet

Corgi Books, London (2001)

223 pp

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‘The Sexual Life of Catherine M’ is an autobiographical work written by Catherine Millet, at the time a 53-year-old Parisian art critic and editor. After the publication of this book in 2001 she became one of the most talked-about women in France, with her graphic tales of sex, all of which she says are true. This book is an extraordinary feat as such frankness about one’s sexual adventures combined with raw honesty, is not often presented to an audience of readers. Argument raged over whether this book represented pornography, erotica (pornography’s coy sister), or art, but however it was viewed it was a best-seller in her homeland and went on to notch up sales of well over a million copies in Europe. An English translation became available in 2002, causing more controversy, this time in the English-speaking world.

In ‘The Sexual Life of Catherine M’ Catherine is a woman who is fascinated by the pleasures of the body. She provides her readers with precise, prosaic descriptions of all sexual encounters that involve bodily parts being used and contorted for the ultimate sexual release. It is in the way that she writes about sex that makes this book a memorable read. There is no soft lighting or mood-invoking melodies that set the actors up for some tantalising sexual encounters, but rather SEX, which just screams off the page — sex in its most primitive, naked, and at times, messy format.

The sense of sexual, and one could also argue, psychological liberation that Catherine appears to reach through her sexual adventures, with both sexes, is at times confronting, to the point that a shade of crimson may pass over the readers’ cheeks. Catherine is a woman who greedily accepts sex and thoroughly enjoys her conquests, with no respect for societal morals or for ‘proper’ sexual etiquette. This makes her either a ‘nymphomaniac’ or, perhaps, just someone who can enjoy sex for its own sake.

What appears to go unsaid in the novel is the sense that Catherine, a daughter of French intellectuals, had built up her sexual appetite from her childhood feelings of emotional distance between herself and other family members. There is a sense of insecurity which weaves itself through the story. This becomes evident when Catherine describes her sexual activities through the eyes of the male recipient of her sexual advances. Her own subjective pleasure is often not described and it is only towards the middle of the story that Catherine actually talks about having her *own* orgasm. This leaves the reader wondering whether her sexual trysts

involve herself as a woman exploring her sexual nature or whether Catherine is possibly allowing herself to be just the ‘vessel’ upon which sexual nature can be explored. This distinction was made unclear to me as a reader.

Another criticism I have of this story is that I found the story line to be repetitive in that Catherine, throughout her whole story, describes only her sexual encounters, the settings behind these sexual interludes, the description of the bodies engaged in the sexual acts, and the climax and denouement of the sexual acts committed between the players. Although this is done in a very elegant yet frank manner of writing, it just leaves the reader with a sense of ‘description overload’ and a sense of voidness of any human emotions, apart from the finale, the orgasmic relief (if this could in fact be referred to as an emotion?).

In a sense there is a taste of sterility which solely focuses on sex and leaves out the other emotional responses that can occur with such activities. There is no sense of *mutual* pleasure, equality, warmth or respect, and most importantly, there is no understanding of oneself as a being who is able to both give and receive pleasure, warmth (or even love!) when sexually exploring with one or more partners.

Catherine lacks the ability to express or claim her status as a woman who is having all the sex that she wants and desires. Rather, her sexual encounters read as emotionless conquests in which at times she plays second fiddle to the men who know exactly what they sexually want and who make certain that they get what they want. This is often to the detriment of Catherine who seems only to be playing along with the (their?) game — she is just going along for the ride.

But then again it could be argued that by her becoming in at least some way a player in this game, that this is Catherine’s way of getting all that she wants sexually from her male partners without her having to feel that she may have compromised her integrity as a woman. Perhaps she happens to love sex and has found the freedom to defy the laws of monogamy and sexual fidelity.

I feel that this novel would be an interesting read to most people working in the area of sexual health as this story is honest, explicit, and sexually intriguing. It is certainly one of the best-written books that talks about sex and human sexual interactions in such a way. ‘The Story of O’, ‘The Happy Hooker’, and ‘Fear of Flying’ were all written by strong women, and talked openly about sex, but none of

them could match the Gallic style and verve of Catherine Millet. Whether you will actually *enjoy* this book is, however, another matter entirely...

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