

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 32 Teaching Guide

Sinister Wisdom Teaching Guides

Sinister Wisdom 32: Special Issue on Death, Healing, Mourning, and Illness

Summary: *Sinister Wisdom 32* focuses on lesbian-feminist responses to death, healing, mourning, and illness. The poems and stories exemplify the ways that death and illness have personally affected lesbians and how they have lived through their losses. Pamela Pratt's story, "A Ringing in My Ears," and Laurie J. Hoskin's poems, "Release" and "Eulogy in Three Parts," document the pain one feels when their lover dies. The stories, narratives, and poems by Maia, Lynn Crawford, Norma Fain Pratt, Lauren Crux, Vickie Sears, and Marianne Milton explore the complex intersectionality of emotions people feel when they lose family members such as sisters, mothers, grandmothers, and fathers. This issue also explores the loss of good health through illness. Susan Hansell's poem, "The Wolf," discusses living with Lupus. Sandra Butler, Barbara Rosenblum, and Sandy Boucher all write about their personal experiences with cancer. "Questions," a poem by Amber Coverdale Sumrall, documents losing a leg and how to live without it. Writings by Hilary Mullins and Donna Allegra consider how one deals with witnessing a dead person. *Sinister Wisdom 32* demonstrates the universality of death; death is an experience no human can escape.

Historical Relevance: *Sinister Wisdom 32: Special Issue on Death, Healing, Mourning, and Illness* was published during a troublesome time for the LGBT community in the 1980s. The 1980s was a terrifying decade for the LGBT community due to the AIDS crisis. At the start of the 1980s, gay men began contracting and dying from AIDS, a disease that doctors knew little to nothing about at the time. The LGBT community felt helpless as their friends and family suffered and died. People were scared and uneducated about what AIDS was due to detrimental misrepresentation in the media such as in *The New York Post*. The country became polarized because people outside of the LGBT community were led to believe that AIDS was solely a disease that was created by and only affected gay men. People in the LGBT community were mourning the loss of people around them while also feeling helpless that nothing was being done to help understand and fight AIDS.

In 1987, the same year *Sinister Wisdom 32* was published, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) initiative was formed in response to the government's inadequate and slow response to the AIDS Crisis. Although the issue does not explicitly talk about the AIDS crisis, this special issue on death, healing, mourning, and illness expresses themes of loss and helplessness that the LGBT community faced at the time.

History of *Sinister Wisdom*:

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal founded by Catherine Nicholson and Harriett Desmoines in 1976. Since then, *Sinister Wisdom* publishes three to four times a year and documents lesbian experience through poetry, prose, politics, theory, and art.

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 32 Teaching Guide

Discussion Questions:

1. How do poems in this issue convey themes of grievance, mourning, and illness? How do short stories in this issue convey themes of grievance, mourning, and illness? How do poems convey these themes differently than short fiction and vice versa?
2. How does an author's identity and culture shape the work they write? Does lesbian identity make experiences of loss different? How are these stories particular to lesbians and how are they universal?
3. How and why does a journal decide to publish a thematic issue? What textual evidence informs how and why this issue was themed?
4. What was the historical context of the 1980s LGBT community? How did this context contribute to the formation of *Sinister Wisdom*?
5. Why is it important for a community, such as the lesbian community, to document their experiences with death, healing, mourning, and illness?

Unit Teaching Activity Ideas:

Poem or Story: Write a poem or a story about someone you have lost or fear losing.

Obituary: Write an obituary for yourself after you reflect upon how you want to be remembered once you are gone.

Booklet: Assemble a booklet of the poems and stories with other students who have written on the theme of loss, and then, as a group, market the booklet as a journal. Then, answer the questions: what is the purpose of the journal that you have assembled?, why should people read this journal?, what audiences are you trying to target with this journal?

Author Research: Research one of the authors in *Sinister Wisdom*. Find and read some of the author's works, research the author's life, and present your findings to the class, highlighting what you consider to be the author's legacy or lasting contributions.

About a Contributor: *Barrie Jean Borich*

Barrie Jean Borich was born in 1959 in the south side of Chicago. She received her MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop. Borich currently lives in the Boystown neighborhood of Chicago with her spouse, Linnea. She is best known for her creative nonfiction. Borich has won the Lambda Literary Award in Memoir and an Independent Publisher Book Award Gold Medal in Essay/Creative Nonfiction. Her work has been included in *Riding Shotgun: Women Write*

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 32 Teaching Guide

about their Mothers (2008), *Now Write!: Nonfiction* (2009), *American Tensions: Literature of Identity and the Search for Social Justice* (2011), *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction* (2012), and *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (2013) as well as in *Best American Essays* and *Best American Non-Required Reading*.

Borich was the first creative nonfiction editor of Hamline University's *Water~Stone Review* and is currently a member of the creative writing faculty of the English Department/MA in Writing & Publishing Program at Chicago's DePaul University, where she's developing *Slag Glass City*, a creative nonfiction and new media journal focused on sustainability, identity and the arts in urban environments.

Before getting her big break with her first book, *Restoring the Color of Roses*, Borich published poems, essays, and memoir pieces in literary journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*. Her poem, "The Disappeared," was published in *Sinister Wisdom 32: Special Issue on Death, Healing, Mourning, and Illness*. The poem, segmented into six, numbered stanzas, documents an act of loss which results in the fear of future loss.

Bibliography

Restoring the Color of Roses. Firebrand Books, 1993.

My Lesbian Husband. Graywolf Press, 1999.

Body Geographic. University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

Resources:

Before the 1980s, there was a divide between gay men and lesbian women due to conflicts in community ideas. However, the AIDS crisis united these two communities because they saw that the LGBTQ community needed to support each other in order to make social and political change happen. Brekke's "How Lesbians' Role in the AIDS Crisis Brought Gay Men and Women Together" discusses this shift in LGBTQ thinking.

"How Lesbians' Role In The AIDS Crisis Brought Gay Men And Women Together"

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/aids-crisis-lesbians_us_5616867ae4b0e66ad4c6a7c4

Bonnie J. Morris's "History of Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Social Movements" provides a brief history of the social movements of lesbian women and gay men.

"History of Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Social Movements"

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/history.aspx>

*Sinister Wisdom 32 Teaching Guide Created by Zane DeZeeuw June 2017
and Edited by LB Johnston July 2017*