

SINISTER WISDOM READING GUIDE:

Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being In Our Communities

SUMMARY

Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities (Winter 1988/89) focuses on lesbian-feminist responses to and testimonies about psychiatric assault, psychiatric institutions, and mental health within the lesbian community. The poems, essays, and stories in this issue document how psychiatric institutions treated lesbians in the 1980s and in earlier decades. Sinister Wisdom 36 contains essays by Joan M. Ward p. 33-41, Dee Dee NiHera p. 76-86, and Diane Hugs p. 94-99 about therapism, the capitalist roots of pharmaceuticals and psychotherapy, and the standards and ethics of lesbian/feminist therapy. The poems “Because of These Things” by Margaret Robison p. 9-10 and “In Her Voice” by Tryna Hope p. 11-12, along with the narratives “Don’t Call Me Crazy” by Rebecca Ripley p. 13-14, “Brain Damage” by Winifred E. Eads p. 16-17, and “The Story I Never Write” by Elana Dykewomon p. 64-70, chronicle experiences and emotions that result from being institutionalized.

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Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being In Our Communities

This issue also explores stigmas that surround mental health, diagnosis, and treatment. The poems “First Admission” by Mary Moran p. 15, “Holding On” by Laura Post p. 21, “to the women who weep” by Chia Heller-Zbloki p. 62-63, “Branded” by Janet Aalfs p. 123-124, and the narratives “I Used to Live in that House” by Feral Willcox p. 42-45, “My Mother Played the Accordion” by Bettianne Shoney Sien p.71-75 discuss the stigmas placed upon lesbians who have mental health problems. Katharyn Machan Ad’s poem “Jane Ann Dutton/Emely Dunton” p. 29-32 provides a perspective about what being institutionalized looks like from the inside versus the outside. Batya Weinbaum writes about the alternative, emotional healing spot at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in her article, “Oasis” p. 92-93. Firsthand testimonials p. 103-116 by women who have been institutionalized are a highlight of Sinister Wisdom 36. Sharon Sumpter, Kathy Moorhouse, Karla K., Bethany, Yvonne M. Moonstorm, Lynn Yamaguchi Fletcher, Ruta (Mazelis) Windstar, Cheryl Marie Wade, Linda Stalker, Louise Wisechild, Linda Marie, Janelle Lavelle, and Mary Lou Daugherty all offer testimonials of the lesbian experience of surviving psychiatric assault.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Do lesbians experience psychiatric assault differently from their heterosexual counterparts? How are these stories and testimonies particular to lesbians? How are they universal?

2

What stigmas did lesbians who had been institutionalized and/or had mental health problems have when *Sinister Wisdom 36* was published in 1988/89? What stigmas surround mental health now? Have the stigmas changed? How so?

3

What was the historical context of psychiatric institutions in the 1980s? What is the role of psychiatric institutions today?

4

How do poems in this issue convey psychiatric assault and being institutionalized? How do short stories in this issue convey those themes? Are there differences between how poems and short stories work in this issue?

5

How do testimonials of women who have been institutionalized document psychiatric assault? Do these testimonials resonate with contemporary lesbian experience? How can the testimonies be used as historical evidence?

6

Why was an issue of *Sinister Wisdom* dedicated to surviving psychiatric assault and creating emotional well-being in our communities? What are the stakes for the lesbian community to chronicle their experiences of psychiatric assault?

RELATED TEXTS

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

The Handmaid's Tale is a fictional, dystopian novel that has recently been made into a Netflix show.

Danforth, Emily M. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2012.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is a coming-of-age novel set in 1990s rural Montana. The book, which is being adapted for film, explores the practice of religious conversion therapy.

Millett, Kate. *The Loony-Bin Trip*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.

The Loony-Bin Trip is a non-fiction book that recounts Millett's time at an Irish mental hospital.

Yuknavitch, Lidia. *Dora: A Head Case*. Portland: Hawthorne Books, 2012. (fiction)

Dora: A Headcase is a retelling of a Freud case. Her character is reimagined as a young lesbian teen forced to go to therapy.

Sinister Wisdom 36 is published in 1988

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Following a campaign by Stonewall-era gay and lesbian activists, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM), the professional guidebook for mental illnesses. Even after removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, lesbianism continued to be stigmatized by mental health providers. Throughout the twentieth century, lesbians were stigmatized with labels such as crazy, deviant, insane, abnormal and aberrant. A psychological war against lesbian women's minds was waged at this time in order to enforce socially appropriate, heterosexual behavior for women. Lesbians were detained in mental institutions throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and experienced various forms of psychiatric assault.

KEY WORDS

Therapism:

a cultural ideal of mental therapy that attempts to relieve a group of responsibility by assigning motivation and blame to outside agencies, such as society or brain chemistry, which attributes actions to be outside the realm of moral agency.

Pharmaceutical:

a manufactured compound made into a drug for medicinal purposes.

Psychotherapy:

a form of therapy in which psychological problems are treated through communication between a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist, and an individual.

ABOUT A CONTRIBUTOR:

Elana Dykewomon



photo from:
<http://rainbowreader.blogspot.com/2013/07/beyond-pale-by-elana-dykewomon.html>

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Riverfinger Women. Daughters, Inc., 1974.

They Will Know Me By My Teeth. Megaera Press, 1976.

Fragments from Lesbos. Diaspora Distribution, 1981.

Nothing Will Be As Sweet As the Taste. Onlywomen Press, 1995.

Beyond the Pale. Press Gang Publishers, 1997.

Moon Creek Road. Spinster's Ink Books, 2003.

Risk. Bywater Books, 2009.

What Can I Ask: New and Selected Poems 1975-2014.

Sinister Wisdom and A Midsummer Night's Press, 2015.

Elana Dykewomon is a Jewish lesbian, activist, award-winning author, editor, and teacher. She is best known for her Lambda award-winning historical novel, *Beyond the Pale*. Her first novel, *Riverfinger Women*, is on the Publishing Triangle's list of *100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels*. She has also won the 2009 Duggins Outstanding Mid-Career Novelist's prize.

Elana Dykewomon was born in 1949 in New York City, where she lived until her family moved to Puerto Rico when she was eight years old. She studied fine art at Reed College and received her BFA in Creative Writing from the California Institute of Art. She now lives in Oakland and offers private writing classes and editing.

Elana Dykewomon was the editor of *Sinister Wisdom* between 1987 and 1994. Her poems and stories, which place lesbians as the central, active figures, have been widely anthologized. *What Can I Ask: New and Selected Poems 1975-2014* is the third title in the *Sinister Wisdom/A Midsummer Night's Press* Sapphic Classics series. Her narrative, "The Story I Never Write," appears in *Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities*. In "The Story I Never Write," Dykewomon briefly documents her struggle in writing about her time being institutionalized for being a lesbian, and she reflects upon the other women that she met in the institution.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about *Sinister Wisdom*, go to:
sinisterwisdom.org



To check out other *Sinister Wisdom* Reading Guides, go to:
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To request a free reading set of *Sinister Wisdom* 36, email Julie at sinisterwisdom@gmail.com with the number of books needed and the mailing address.

Sinister Wisdom is happy to provide, free of charge, classroom sets and reading group sets of journal issues. For people who are able to make a contribution to cover the cost of postage, we will provide an invoice; postage reimbursement is voluntary though greatly appreciated.



Sinister Wisdom 36 Reading Guide created by Zane DeZeeuw, June 2017 and edited by LB Johnston, July 2017

