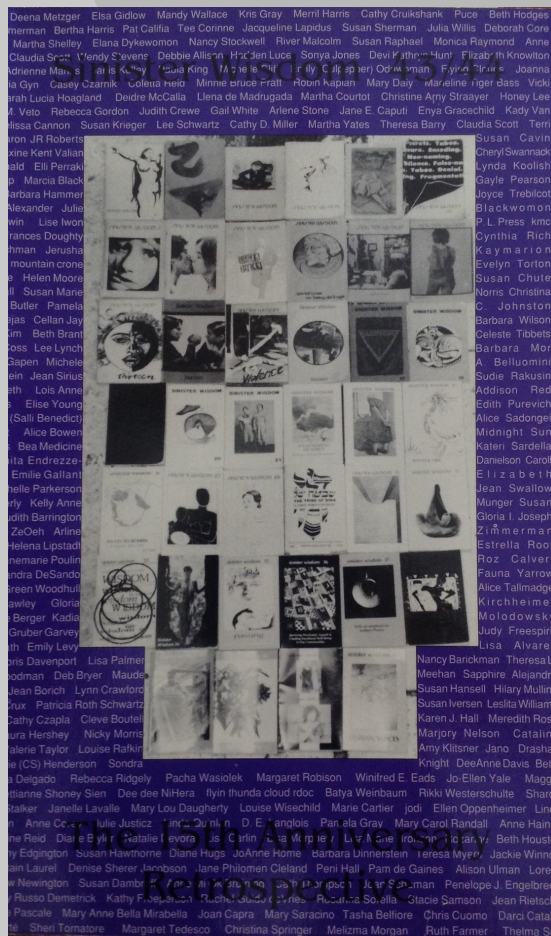


SINISTER WISDOM READING GUIDE:

Sinister Wisdom 43/44: The 15th Anniversary Retrospective

SUMMARY

Sinister Wisdom 43/44: The 15th Anniversary Retrospective, published in Summer 1991, features work documenting lesbian herstory from the first forty-two issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. This issue considers what it means to be a lesbian, privilege and discrimination within the lesbian community, being silenced and closeted, cross-cultural lesbian love, aging lesbians, violence against women, the lesbian body, and lesbian mental and physical illness. Notable lesbian writers included are Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Julia Penelope, Barbara Grier, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Achy Obejas, Marilyn Frye, and Elana Dykewomon.



HISTORY OF *Sinister Wisdom*

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal that began in 1976 and publishes three to four issues per year. The journal started in Charlotte, North Carolina with Harriett Desmoines (Ellenberger) and Catherine Nicholson as its editors. *Sinister Wisdom* is still published today, and its contents have evolved alongside lesbian identities, politics, theory, and aesthetics. Some issues, such as *Sinister Wisdom 49: The Lesbian Body*, are organized by a theme, while others are open issues that feature writing and art across themes.

THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

What it means to be a lesbian:

- “What is a Lesbian?” p. 10-12 is a compilation of the various definitions of what it means to be a lesbian provided by past contributors.
- “From a Cursory and Percursory History of Language, and the Telling of It” by Julia Penelope p. 13-14 explores the feminist movement, why it happened, and what it meant for lesbians.

The detriments of silence and closetism in the lesbian community:

- “Lesbians and Literature” by June Arnold and Susan Griffin p. 17-21, an MLA conference panel.
- “From Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by Julia Penelope, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich p. 39-49, an MLA conference panel.
- “From Anonymity and the Denial of Self” by Michelle Cliff p. 106, an essay.
- “Power and Helplessness in the Women’s Movement” by Joanna Russ p. 146-154, an essay that discusses why it is important for lesbians to speak up and write about their experiences, and the consequences of being silent.
- “From Neither Profit nor Salvation by Barbara Grier” p. 35-38, the keynote speech at the 1977 Women’s Week Festival at San Jose State University, defines closetism and articulates the importance of coming out.

Lesbian labels and stigmas:

- “Mariam” by Pat Suncircle p. 50-56 is a story that demonstrates how the term, ‘dyke,’ has been used as a label for the lesbian community.
- “In America they call us Dykes: notes on the etymology and usage of ‘dyke’” by JR Roberts p. 71-79 is another discussion on the usage of the term ‘dyke’ as a lesbian label.
- “Don’t Call Me Crazy” by Rebecca Ripley p. 299-300 addresses the detrimental effects of labels and stigmas in lesbian culture
- “Therapism and the Taming of the Lesbian Community” by Joan M. Ward p. 301-308 responds to the labels and stigmas placed on lesbians because of psychological assault and institutionalization.

Violence:

- “Violence, Victimization and Violation” by Sarah Lucia Hoagland p. 139-142 discusses why lesbians are subject to violence.
- “Women and Violence” by Melanie Kay/Kantrowitz p. 80-84 addresses the violence lesbians face.

Illness:

- “Pelvic Mass Etiology” by Barbara Ruth p. 285-287, a poem.
- “A/Part of the Community” by Naja Sorella p. 288-292, an essay about how Environmental Illness and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in the lesbian community received less attention than AIDS did.



THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

Ageism in the lesbian community:

- “Do You Remember Me?” by Barbara MacDonald p. 85-89 explores the ageism that lesbians encounter.
- “Surviving and More: Interview with Mabel Hampton” by Joan Nestle p. 90-94 documents the issue of ageism within the lesbian community.

Lesbian herstory:

- “An Interview with Joan and Deborah of the Lesbian Herstory Archives” by Beth Hodges p. 95-105 covers the importance of documenting lesbian herstory.
- “Culture Making: Lesbian Classics in the Year 2000?” by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz p. 107-111 discusses current and future issues that surround the documentation of lesbian herstory.

Racism:

- “Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics” by Elly Bulkin p. 114-135 discusses homophobia and racism.
- “Who is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism” by Paula Gunn Allen p. 224-236 articulates the lack of support for Native American identities.
- “Class” by Caryatis Cardea p. 293-294 is a poem about white feminists and class privilege.

Vulnerability between lesbians:

- “Vulnerability and Power” by Sarah Lucia Hoagland p. 155-157 explores the importance of being vulnerable with other lesbians.
- “Llorona” by Achy Obejas p. 158-159 is a poem about crying and vulnerability.

Lesbian separatism:

- “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power” by Marilyn Frye p. 176-177.
- “Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?” by Adrienne Rich p. 178-179.
- “Responses to Adrienne Rich’s ‘Notes for a Magazine’” by Barbara Smith, Sidney Spinster, and Lois Anne Addison p. 180-183.

The lesbian body:

- “A Spoiled Identity” by Martha Courtot p. 211-216 is a sponsored speech delivered at Sonoma State University in 1982.
- “Menu for an Unassuageable Hunger” by Jennifer Green Woodhull p. 240-244 comments on body shaming that some lesbians face.
- “The Real Fat Woman Poems” by Elana Dykewomon p. 245-253, is a poem that explores how body shaming is inherent in the lesbian community.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What visions of lesbian identity are offered in this collection? How do these visions resonate with your experience?

2

How has the dynamic of the lesbian community changed through the years? Is the lesbian community the same now as compared to what is offered in this publication?

3

What history does this retrospective issue document? Have you encountered other places that have documented aspects of lesbian history? If so, where, but if not, why not? What other minority groups often do not get documented in history books? Why is it important to document and record history from minority groups? Why, specifically, is lesbian history important?

4

What pieces in this issue speak to you the most? What emotions and memories do these pieces cause you to think about?

5

What is a retrospective? Why would a journal compile a retrospective issue? How do editors select which writing to feature?

RELATED ISSUES:

Sinister Wisdom 70: 30th Anniversary Celebration (Spring 2007)

Sinister Wisdom 70 dedicates, invites, celebrates, and appreciates with love to the thousands of Lesbians whose lives have been touched by the journal.



Sinister Wisdom 100: Anniversary (Spring 2016)

Sinister Wisdom 100 celebrates the fortieth anniversary of *Sinister Wisdom* in 2016.



KEY WORDS

Closetism

a word coined by Barbara Grier to convey how LGBTQ people are not always 100 percent ‘out’ (fully reveal their sexual identity or gender expression to everyone all of the time); for instance, they may be out to some friends and family but not to other family members or their employers.

Coming out of the closet (coming out)

a metaphor for members of the LGBTQ community for when they disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Dyke

a slang term for ‘lesbian;’ can, depending on the context of its use or affirmative, be offensive.

Herstory

history written from a female and feminist perspective in order to emphasize history from the point of view of women.

Homophobia

the strong dislike, fear, and discrimination of homosexual people.

Lesbian separatism

Marilyn Frye defines it as a “separation of various sorts of modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege – this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women” (Frye 176).



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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

To see other *Sinister Wisdom* Reading Guides, go to: sinisterwisdom.org/readingguides

To request a free reading set of *Sinister Wisdom* 43/44, 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 43/44 Reading Guide created by Zane DeZeeuw, June 2017 and edited by LB Johnston, July 2017

