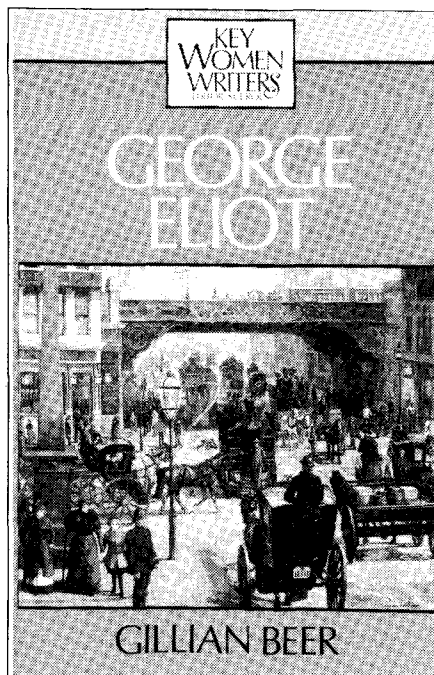


George Eliot's treatment of women in her own fiction and in the writings of other women, and Eliot's complex relation to the women's movement of her time. Rejecting Ellen Moers' "flat assertion that George Eliot was 'no feminist,'" Beer sees no corresponding "need to convert her into a radical feminist: it would be pointless to pretend to do so." In exploring the flexible space between these two equally inappropriate labels (no feminist vs. radical feminist), Beer demonstrates that she has learned from George Eliot's own work, which she repeatedly presents as subverting and undermining fixed polarities and stereotypes (including those of gender); in place of restrictive categories, Beer argues, Eliot's writing expands outward, making new connections and discovering new ways of knowing.

Beer's study addresses not only George Eliot's abiding concern with "the nature of women" and the social constraints under which they have been forced to develop. It considers as well — and this is one of the book's most impressive contributions — the various ways in which George Eliot's novels were engaged with many of the same issues that were currently being raised by the women's movement, often adopting the vocabulary of contemporary debate. Beer reminds us, too, that almost all of George Eliot's close women friends from the mid-1850's were active in the women's movement, and that Eliot subscribed to their periodicals, even if she did not contribute to them. But Eliot consistently chose to show how women's problems and issues were part of the texture of human problems and issues, frequently, as Beer notes, making the woman's situation stand as the representative one for both men and women. She chose to emphasize "likeness," "not dif-



ference, which was taken for granted and used to circumscribe women."

Beer's readings of the novels often gain focus from her consideration of now-forgotten works by Eliot's women contemporaries that offer situations we notably do not find in Eliot: studies of female friendship, resolutions that present "an image of a woman happy in her own resources and independent." Through these intertextual readings which enable us to "see the text as containing and resisting other writings by which it was surrounded," Beer argues that Eliot's interest in interdependence rather than independence, in the relations between women and men, was not unconsidered but deliberate; and she distrusted the "bland pastoralism" of fictional resolutions that "disguised [the] appalling loss" of "sexual love."

In her fiction George Eliot regularly confined herself to representations of the ordinary lot of women. She was not prescribing, but describing. An exceptional woman herself, "George Eliot early recognized that the exceptional changes nothing...it is the ordinary case that tests the true state of affairs." (As we may still observe: Mrs. Gandhi's many years as powerful Prime Minister have had no bearing on the continued practice of burning alive young widows on their husbands' funeral pyres in India today.) Through her multi-textured writing, with its comprehensive range and its masterful control, George Eliot achieved a fullness and fulfillment that is denied to her characters and that we, the readers, may temporarily share as we participate in the writer's privileged vision. On the level of our participation in the plot, however, "We are not exonerated from ordinary conditions."

Beer's book is rich in knowledge and insight, exploring the familiar novels and the less familiar essays and poetry with equal assurance. She has something fresh and enlightening to say about everything she discusses. The imaginative skill, for example, with which she relates George Eliot's use of metaphor and generalization to her distinctive way of knowing and teaching, her discussion of Eliot's narrative voice(s) or the meaning of *Antigone* for Eliot's imagination, are some of the many high points of this rewarding book. Beer is equally adept in pursuing literary critical, biographical and historical approaches, and in integrating the insights gleaned from each. Our experience of reading — and rereading — George Eliot will be the deeper for this book, as should our thinking about men and women, writing and history.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A RE-READING

Judith Okely. London, Virago Press, 1986.

By Pat Desjardins

This book is very original in both its intent and methodology. Judith Okely has set out to explain Simone de Beauvoir's inspiration for women of *her* generation to women of *my* generation. She does this through a method of 'personal anthropology,' a method which I feel justifies a 'personal book review.'

Okely begins the book with a chapter called "Epoch and Inspiration." In it she describes her personal situation in the

early 60s, first as a young Englishwoman studying in Paris, and afterwards as a member of a women's college at Oxford. Because of her white, middle-class, English boarding school background, she was incredibly inexperienced and naive about men, her options in life, her privileges and disadvantages. She provides such a description "to show the kind of soil upon which de Beauvoir's words were to fall." Through the remainder of the book we catch glimpses of a committed feminist growing from seeds sown by de Beauvoir. Okely uses her personal experience, and those of friends and other "devotees," to recreate that epoch, stating that such experience "is not simply idiosyncratic; its very minutiae can help us to throw light on a specific class of women at a certain

epoch."

Okely realizes that a younger generation of feminists, women now in their twenties, do not respond to de Beauvoir in the same way as did women of her generation. On this score I am definitely part of the audience that Okely intends her book to reach. While I enjoyed de Beauvoir's fiction, I had little patience with the *Second Sex*. I found de Beauvoir to be Eurocentric in her outlook and full of urban, middle-class biases. I recall being genuinely confused because I could not reconcile de Beauvoir's reputation as a major feminist thinker with much of what I read in the *Second Sex*. According to Okely, it is "perfectly correct to scrutinize and reject some of her [de Beauvoir's] arguments in the light of subsequent condi-

tions," but she would like to see this coupled with an understanding of de Beauvoir as a woman in a specific time and place, and as an inspiration to thousands of women.

The methodology of the book is a re-reading — a "then and now" movement. In this manner, Okely depicts changes in feminism over the last twenty-five years, and changes in the response to de Beauvoir's words. One of her primary sources of data is her own 1961 copy of the *Second Sex*. She has examined carefully what she underlined, and in some instances, failed to underline then but would do so now. Also, she uses notes, and letters which she wrote to family and friends. In my opinion, the technique succeeds well.

Although I have laid emphasis upon the presence of the author in the book, there is much else. In the second chapter, "The Making of a Pioneer," Okely looks at de Beauvoir's childhood, chronicled in her *Memoirs*, as a "rich source for the study of gender construction and the making of a woman 'pioneer'." The final chapter, "The Pioneer in Practice," deals with de Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre, and her isolation from other women and the ensuing political limitations. The book is, in fact, part of a series on women pioneers that includes Eva Peron, Queen Victoria, Eleonora Duse, and a dozen others, some already published, some forthcoming. Thus the portrayal of de Beauvoir as a pioneer in these two chapters is in keeping with the theme of the series.

Okely uses psychoanalytic theory, offering explanations for de Beauvoir's attitudes and actions, loves and crises. For example, she has a long interpretation of

de Beauvoir's feelings toward Olga, who was her pupil and then engaged in an intense relationship with Sartre. According to Okely, Olga "unconsciously represented her [de Beauvoir's] younger sister, who in turn once threatened a tabooed fantasy between the young Simone and her father." She makes her argument by drawing evidence from the "different Oedipal experience of male and female infant in being nursed by the female parent," from de Beauvoir's *Memoirs*, and her autobiographical fiction *She Came to Stay*. I admit that I found it difficult to follow Okely's analogies between people and relationships from de Beauvoir's childhood, into her adulthood, and in her fiction. De Beauvoir herself rejected any kind of psychoanalytical dimension. Consequently, several times I wondered how Okely felt as an author writing a tribute to her "sister/mother/mentor," while employing a perspective at odds with de Beauvoir's philosophy. De Beauvoir was still alive at the time Okely wrote her manuscript and so could have read it.

Okely discusses at some length de Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre. The issue of how much space to give to Sartre is a dicey one. On the one hand, de Beauvoir's work has suffered because of Sartre's limelight — "her autobiography is not read for its own sake, but raided for yet more information about her celebrated male companion Jean Paul Sartre." On the other hand, Okely knows the interest for feminists in de Beauvoir's unconventional relationship with Sartre — one which rejected marriage and had room for "contingent loves." She deals squarely with de Beauvoir's intellectual and emo-

tional dependence upon Sartre. She asserts that:

de Beauvoir's example demonstrates that women cannot by lone, individual endeavor escape the general conditions of subordination, material and psychic. De Beauvoir was for the most part free of the economic subordination of marriage, yet other dependencies remained, despite her denials.

Judith Okely's book on Simone de Beauvoir is a testimony and a tribute. It documents a specific class of women at a certain epoch — a class of women who have played a major role in shaping aspects of today's feminist movement. It is a tribute to de Beauvoir because many women, Okely included, have modelled their lives upon her pronouncements. They have rejected marriage, maternity, and monogamous relationships. I think women of my generation feel sceptical about following someone's program for living, especially an intellectual mentor's. There is real doubt that one person can tell us truth, or a way of life. The feminist movement which we now work within has so many facets — race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference. Hence, the pluralism makes it impossible that any one person or program could encompass the movement. Whether she is aware of it or not, the *kind* of book Okely has written is a further indication of her experience, and a depiction of her generation. I do not think that women of my generation would write this kind of book. However, through reading the book I have gained a measure of respect for de Beauvoir, and an understanding of Okely's generation of feminists.

DIFFICULT WOMEN — A MEMOIR OF THREE: JEAN RHYS, SONIA ORWELL AND GERMAINE GREER

David Plante. London: Futura, 1983.

By Anne Innis Dagg

This is an obnoxious book. I bought it because I wanted to know more about its subjects, all connected in some way with literature; two have written a number of books, while Sonia Orwell was married to George Orwell. What I learned was mostly negative bits of information which would better have been left in archives until a definitive biographer decided to write the lives of these women, two of whom are now dead and cannot complain of their treatment here.

The author, who has written a number of other books, apparently decided that his friendship with three famous women would make good copy for yet another work. He spent a great deal of time with his subject/prey, and they more or less reciprocated with friendship in return. He has repaid them by describing their private and personal idiosyncracies in detail.

Plante pursued one of these women relentlessly, hoping to have some part in an autobiography she was unable to write herself. He describes her as bizarre-looking, alcoholic, forgetful and ungenerous. One night after they have been drinking to excess, he writes about how he helps her to the toilet where she becomes stuck and urinates in her knickers.

He invites one of the other women for a holiday to his place in Italy, although there is little reason to believe, then or later, that

they enjoy each other's company. He notes "It occurred to me that _____'s most constant temper was ill-temper."

Plante watches another feed her cats. He describes how she reaches into her refrigerator and pulls out some testicle (presumably from a bull). She puts it on a chopping block and cuts it into pieces with a knife. The cats eat it willingly. What symbolism.

Plante is as obsessed with his own behaviour as he is with that of the women. He worries that he is a "cunt teaser" because a friend has told him he hugs and kisses women without delivering anything further in a sexual way. He wonders if women are "difficult" in reaction to himself; he suggests that he has made them that way by something he has said or done. It is easy to believe.

In keeping with the assertive role he