

than a more general challenge currently facing feminists. For many working against gendered violence, this book should start some good, hard conversations.

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SCARS

Cheryl Rainfield
Lodi, New Jersey: WestSide Books,
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REVIEWED BY ANDREA MEDOVARSKI

Cheryl Rainfield's young adult novel, *Scars*, is a must-read for feminists of all ages, and for anyone who desires greater insight about the tremendous impacts of incest, sexual abuse, and self-harm. The novel's literary value, however, extends well beyond the pedagogical. Rainfield has also woven an amazing story, and the beauty, passion, and power of her writing are evident in every page. *Scars* is an explicit and emotionally difficult read, yet the intensity of both the story and the writing make it difficult to put down.

At the heart of the story is Kendra, a fiercely intelligent and compassionate fifteen-year old girl who is also a talented artist. Throughout the novel, the pressures on her life mount as she copes with both the ordinary trials of teenage life, as well as the extraordinary circumstances of her childhood sexual abuse. Deeply repressed memories of her abuse have only recently begun to surface, and she is unable to remember the most important detail: her abuser's identity. Kendra becomes increasingly fearful for her life as her abuser clandestinely stalks her, sending her threatening messages in various forms in an attempt to keep her silent. The healing progress Kendra is making with her therapist, Carolyn, is threatened by her mother's



insensitivity and self-absorption, and by her family's financial instability, which may necessitate that Kendra stop attending therapy even though it feels like her only lifeline. In addition, she faces homophobia both at home and at school, sometimes in the form of physical threats or unwanted sexual advances from the boys in her class.

As a way to cope with all of these pressures, Kendra regularly cuts her arm with a utility knife in an attempt to manage her emotional pain. Rainfield skillfully narrates the rawness and edge of Kendra's emotions: her gritting teeth, her dissociation, her uncontrollable desire to scream, that accompany her desire to cut herself. Kendra struggles to move through the everyday world as she deals with so much trauma. Although academically inclined she is reluctant to be in school, saying, "I wish I didn't have to be here. What does biology or algebra or sonnets have to do with anything I'm going through?" The urgency of her query will likely resonate for teenage readers who face similarly traumatic experiences. Rainfield's writing is keenly attuned to the complexity of human relationships, and, through her protagonist, she offers profound emotional insights in only a few short lines. For example, Kendra's self-awareness is revealed in one of her first reflections about her

therapist: "I want to accept her caring, to gather it in, but I'm afraid to. I'm afraid of how much I need it—and how much it'll hurt if she stops."

Readers unfamiliar with the complex nature of self-harm may find parts of the narrative surprising. For instance, when Kendra first reveals her cutting to her therapist, Carolyn does not immediately want her to stop. Instead, she first encourages Kendra to take care of herself by cutting hygienically and by cleaning and treating her wounds properly, and suggests that they can gradually work on developing different and less damaging tools and outlets for her emotions. Their exchange reveals that, for many trauma survivors, developing self-care is extremely difficult, and the journey to move beyond self-harm is often a long, slow process that must be mindfully facilitated.

Cutting is not Kendra's only form of release. She is also able to express herself through her bold and emotionally-driven artwork, which she pursues both personally and through art therapy. Painting offers her a voice; as Kendra tells readers, "I need painting almost as much as I need cutting maybe more. Because if I couldn't paint I'd be a girl without a mouth. I say things through painting that I couldn't say any other way." Art provides Kendra with an important medium of communication, one particularly important to survivors of trauma, since words can sometimes be a painful trap that re-traumatizes as they attempt to narrate their experiences. For Kendra, cutting and art often blur; she says, "paint or cut, they both help me survive." This parallel is reflected in the narrative structure. The first time in the novel she contemplates cutting Kendra is at school and she takes an exacto-knife from the art room. The first time she actually cuts in her bedroom, she looks around and takes solace in the scattered art supplies that surround her.

Rainfield's painful and difficult narrative is punctuated by vividly

narrated moments of sheer joy, such as Kendra's excitement about her first gallery showing, at which she sells some of her paintings. There is much beauty and tenderness in her blossoming relationship with Meghan, who is dealing with her own trauma at the hands of a physically abusive and neglectful alcoholic mother. Kendra also finds peace through her support network: Carolyn, Sandy, a family friend who facilitates her artistic pursuits where her own jealous mother, an artist herself, can only criticize, and Mrs. Archer, her compassionate and encouraging art teacher. The end of the novel also leaves readers hopeful. A heroic and dramatic confrontation with her abuser reveals the depth of Kendra's strength and courage. Kendra also witnesses some developments in her relationship with her mother, but her ultimate ability to form a reconstituted family through her support network is what allows her to feel loved and safe.

At the end of the book, Rainfield includes an open and honest author's note, in which shares some of her personal experiences of abuse and self-harm, and an annotated bibliography of web resources for queer teens, survivors of incest, ritual abuse, and self-harm. These make the novel an incredibly useful pedagogical tool. But the most important work that *Scars* does is to reveal the importance of bearing witness to trauma. After Kendra's sexual abuse is revealed to everyone in the narrative, she says, "I'm not afraid. And I'm not ashamed either. I just feel a lightness now, like I can breathe easier. And I don't think that's going to go away." Kendra's is a profound narrative of survival. Yet through her strength, she is able to do more than merely survive; as Sandy tells her: "you, my girl—you're going to thrive." This might well be the most powerful message of *Scars*, and the most important one for anyone seeking to find solace and encouragement in its pages.

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TRANS/FORMING FEMINISMS: TRANS-FEMINIST VOICES SPEAK OUT

Krista Scott-Dixon, Ed.
Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006

REVIEWED BY EMILY VAN DER MEULEN

Krista Scott-Dixon's *Trans/Forming Feminism: Trans-Feminist Voices Speak Out* is an insightful introduction to the complicated and often contentious union of feminist and transgender/transsexual theories, politics, and lives. The editor and contributors challenge feminists to build bridges with trans communities and activism though an exploration of transfeminism.

An interesting theme of the text is the significance of language and a critique of the usage of certain terminologies and classifications. Scott-Dixon draws on bell hooks' definition of feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression but chooses the plural 'feminisms' in both the title and in the introduction to point to the varied history of the movement and the term itself. Likewise, the text employs the term 'trans' to refer to "the many forms of crossing gender boundaries." This transgression of gender boundaries and engagement with non-normative gender expressions, according to Scott-Dixon, can be located in one's behaviors, identification, and/or experiences. The contributors' thorough exploration of gender binaries effectively destabilizes the conventional categories of man/woman, male/female, his/hers.

The text is divided into four themed topic areas: *Narratives & Voices*, *Identities & Alliances*, *Inclusion & Exclusion*, and *Shelter & Violence*. The first section begins with writings rooted in the contributors' lived experiences and day-to-day realities. The essays in this section draw into question determinist 'ways of know-

ing' and critique overly simplistic assumptions and theories about gender, sex, and sexuality. As Darryl B. Hill's essay demonstrates, debates on the origins of gender (essentialist vs. constructionist) do little to encapsulate trans peoples' perspectives and lived realities.

In the second section, aptly titled *Identities & Alliances*, the essays focus on the complications of building solidarity and alliances across multiple, and often fragmented, identities. Reese Simpkins' particularly compelling chapter makes the argument that trans and feminist struggles can ally themselves based on the shared aim of disrupting normative gender-based discourses and oppressive systems of gender coherency. I am persuaded to agree with Simpkins' argument that "trans politics are key to feminist politics" and am simultaneously sensitive to Kyle Scanlon's critique of the feminist/queer co-optation of trans identities and the importance of true trans allies.

Possibly the two best known examples of the barring of trans peoples from feminist activities and organizations are the focus of the third section, *Inclusion & Exclusion*. The essays center around Kimberly Nixon's expulsion from Vancouver's Rape Relief and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's womyn-born-womyn only policies. The politics of "women only spaces" are hotly debated and (mainly) critiqued as unjustifiable. Most interesting is Lara Karanian's chapter that advocates for the development of more complex and nuanced legal arguments that are not based on exclusionary strategic essentialist positions.

Building on the examples raised by the previous contributors, the essays in the final section, *Shelter & Violence*, reveal the impacts of transphobia and violence on trans peoples' lives. The contributors discuss trans-specific violence and barriers that trans people face when trying to access services. Wolfgang Vachon argues for the importance of developing trans-inclusive shelter