



In the Company of Radical Women Writers

Rosemary Hennessy

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In Rosemary Hennessy's immersive book, seven singular authors are analyzed in terms of their unconventional lives and literary works.

Drawing social crisis parallels between the 2020s and the Great Depression, this book unearths the creative output and activism of women writers who were suppressed and blacklisted because of their ties to the Communist Party. It first covers four Black writers who worked in Harlem, advocating for domestic workers and pressing party leaders to consider gender and race issues. Their work proves fascinating: Marvel Cooke exposed the Bronx "slave market" for domestic workers; Louise Thompson championed the case of the Scottsboro Boys, who were accused of raping a white woman, with brilliance; Claudia Jones's advocacy for Black women's rights was uncompromising; and Alice Childress's extensive, multi-genre oeuvre criticized all political factions of undervaluing Black women's work and lives.

The book then shifts to cover Midwestern writers Josephine Herbst and Meridel Le Sueur, who wrote about the exploitation of the environment and Indigenous people. And New York City native Muriel Rukeyser wrote about love as an essential, life-giving, creative force; these themes ran through her poetry, activism, and personal life.

Its concepts complex, this feminist, Marxist work discusses how the concept of race evolved as a "cultural institution invented to protect the accumulation of wealth" and demonstrates how whiteness and patriarchy evolved throughout American history. Both were used to protect the political and economic power of elite white men, Hennessy shows, contradicting ideals of equality and democracy. Her book is also compelling in deconstructing interpersonal tensions, as between immigrant groups; between Black people and Jewish people; and between factions of the Left.

In the Company of Radical Women Writers is significant; it covers 1930s literary history, the civil rights and women's rights movements, and the under-heralded work of seven powerful writers.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (July / August 2023)

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