ForeWord Reviews

WOMEN'S STUDIES

Sisters of the Extreme: Women Writing on the Drug Experience
Cynthia Palmer, editor
Michael Horowitz, editor
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“In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous, a plain sprinkled with coloured meteors, a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire gemming the foliage.” With laudanum-washed eyes, heroine Lucy Snowe swallows the incandescence of an inaudible nocturne in a moonlit park, as she withdraws from the garish streetscape of a night festival in Charlotte BrontÃ«’s Villette. Relieved of their embraced modalities, her senses surge with BrontÃ«’s literary swell, interchanging with sister receptors of sight, taste, and sound.

The impassioned writings of BrontÃ« merge with those of numerous other women in Sisters of the Extreme, a diverse amalgam of literary trips into the oft overlooked and misunderstood female drug experience. Ranging from recognized personas of modern culture to the distant figures of antiquity, Sisters shares the insights of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Louisa May Alcott, Billie Holiday, AnaÃ¯s Nin, Maria Sabina, Maya Angelou, and Carrie Fisher among others, exploring wondrous psychoactive journeys taken and occasionally, the treachery of footings lost.

Providing practical accounts of feminine drug use and its cultural integration into ritual and religion throughout history, editors Palmer and Horowitz fashion a trellis upon which myths and memoirs cling. Considering the relationship between women and drugs that was sowed with the ancients, Sisters reveals its synergetic climb that has been truncated with prejudice and misconception. Outlining the rift between the modern perception of drugs and their forgotten past, is a discussion of Taoist cosmology, where “women and drugs are yin, linked with nature, the earth, and the inner self: unfathomable, endlessly receptive, pleasurable.” In addition, Sisters toils to uproot the tradition cultivated by modern society, “that regards women as inferior to men, and drugs as dangerous substances and artificial paradises.”

Originally published in 1982 under an alternate title, the editors present new text, fresh illustrations, and a comprehensive bibliography that rounds out this enhanced second edition. By virtue of its diverse blend of voices and experiences from women of all professions including a

writer, an anthropologist, an actress, a nutritionist, a prostitute, and a physician, Sisters draws a wide audience beneath its mushroomed canopy of brilliant histories and literary excerpts. The book covers nearly all conceivable avenues to neural distortion, including opiates, laudanum, morphine, heroin; stimulants such as amphetamines and cocaine; the psychedelic reach of LSD, peyote, and psilocybin, as well as the relatively pedestrian stroll with hashish and laughing gas.

Saturated with psychoactive allusions, the literary excerpts that feed Sisters of the Extreme reveal the undeniably lush impressions of women who "have experimented courageously, lived dangerously, and written about it elegantly."

Karen Wyckoff