

Big Rough Stones launch speech

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Intro: According to Ro's theory of relativity, having worked in a collective, shared two houses and worked on two books, Mag and I are some kind of sisters, definitely related.

It was a strange experience reading this book. I felt split. Between now and then. Between memory and reality. Between reality and fantasy, I felt a cleaving in my mind, to quote Emily Dickinson.

*I felt a cleaving in my mind as if my brain had split
I tried to match it seam by seam but could not make it fit
The thought behind I could not join unto the thought before
But watched it ravel of Sequence like balls upon the floor**

This is a book about us, a book about you and me. It is an unusual book because it's about a broad spectrum of life and also about the specificity of what it has been like to be a lesbian during this time: our choices, our politics, morals and ideology. It's about life. It's about death. It's about floods and farms and families.

This story is both hard and good to read because it strikes one chord after another, and some of those chords are discordant. They are discordant because they are true. The characters are not universally loveable.

(I recognise myself in the worst of it - Did I really do/say/think things like that? Oh Gawd.) It raises questions like: did we construct our ideology, tailor our morals to suit our hormones? What tit for tat went on, what careless neglect, what sins did we commit against each other in the name of non-monogamy? Ah non-monogamy always so much easier when you were the one who was non-ing.

Here's a thought I had about this book: It's a coming of age story. Not only are the protagonists growing up, but they are growing beyond up to becoming old and surely that is the REAL coming of age? That is the literal coming of age. I mean can you even apply the word age to someone in their 20s???

And if you never imagined you would live to 40 because there would be a nuclear holocaust, then this is a journey you were not prepared for, yet here after all, some of us are.

And the fantasies we did have about getting old – Chloe and I thought we would be two old ladies sitting on a park bench smoking joints and having carefree, mad flights of fantasy. I remember reading a lesbian short story that waxed lyrical about the joys of toothless sex. Seriously. Gumming it.

Mag says this book is about community, the pleasures of tribal life. It's not a romance, but it is about love. How we stay friends with exes, watch out for each other.

Lesbianism now seems to be old hat. But we were the rebels, the outsiders. These are the lives we invented, the lives that Mag has re-invented for us in this book. We fought for and created all sorts of things: women's' shelters, health centres, the Women's Studies Resource Centre, the Migrant Women's Centre, the title Ms, women's bands, dances, choirs, theatre troops. The Women's Art Movement, as in WAM. (Bam?)

The context: We did not want the lives our mothers had. Our post-war mothers who were forced to give up jobs, for the men home from the war. Vietnam, the 60s, Paris 1968

Situationism: Take Your Dreams for Reality." One of my favourite revolutionary slogans. We did seem to think we could do that. Re-invent reality.

It's not that we did any of this perfectly. Our zest for equality, our passion for fairness, also included in-fighting of every shade: the rad fem, rev-fem, anarcho-fem, separatist schisms. The Gold Star Lesbians who prided themselves on never having fucked a man. All passionately argued as if, in our little collectives, we actually had final control of the world. And how hard was this time for lesbian women with sons?

HOWEVER, the first lesbians I met impressed me because they were generous and enthusiastic about other women and their achievements, a phenomenon which I had never experienced before, I had never heard men or women speak like that. The lesbians liked women. Amazing. It felt strange. Good. Like the sun was shining on me, at last.

Solidarity. The sisterhood. We had to invent it. I remember Deborah McCullough telling me that as a femocrat, she never walked out of a meeting without some man sidling up to her and inviting her to criticise another woman who had spoken at the meeting. An invitation to gossip, undermine, discount something she had said or done. This observation made an impression on me. I started to notice it. It was true. There was this incredible power of naming things.

One of the great underlying strengths of us old hat lesbians, was that we took that solidarity with other women into every other struggle.

It's easy to forget now, but many in the women's movement were not keen to be tarnished by the image of lesbians. Those straight feminists wanted us to keep quiet about our sexual orientation for "the greater good." It made them look bad and it scared the men. Our mere existence engendered an eventually crushing media stereotype that turned feminism into a four-letter word via descriptions like – hairy-legged, ugly, fat, ball-breaking, bra-burning, man-hating, needs a good fuck, lezzos.

So, I really enjoyed Ro's white hot letter about the media depiction of women involved in Pine Gap as respectable.

"There is no point for me in saving the earth if we, as lesbians have to give up the struggle for our sexuality. And being tolerated within the women's peace movement is not enough if we are tactfully ignored when it comes to presenting a public image.

My lesbianism is directly relevant to my involvement in the movement. Both are expressions of my opposition to male power. I was not at Pine Gap because of my special bond with the

earth. I was there because it is the same patriarchal system that fears and hates women, that oppresses me as a lesbian and that threatens to destroy my world.

*And I oppose that system, and all the various manifestations of its power. I wish I had said (in more than a mutter): 'I'm not a grandmother, or anything respectable. I'm a LESBIAN, and that's why I'm here.'****

Amen, Ro.

All those struggles and initiatives that have been mothballed in my memory: collectives, house meetings, house books, women's land, women only anything, non-monogamy, 'multiples' and 'inter-states', language and the incredible power of naming things, including renaming ourselves with marvellous names like Zephyrine Barbarachild, Mystery Carnage, Silver Moon...

But Big Rough Stones is not a romp down memory lane. It is confronting and moving and feels real. It's close to the bone and you will feel sure that you know (or are) one of these women.

Her characters will make you squirm. They will make you laugh. You will love them and take them into your heart. Mag has given us a unique opportunity to see and love ourselves, our community. The space we made for ourselves in a world that was hostile. We made mistakes but we made the world a bigger place.

So read the book. Buy the book. Buy a few, give them away to friends and relatives. They know we are here now, but maybe if your family is like some of mine, they don't have much of an idea about how we live. Maybe they didn't and still don't want to know, but hey this is fiction. Not threatening, right? And perhaps they are more open-minded now and we are more quotidian: no longer proclaiming "I am your best fantasy and your worst nightmare." Just human.

* Emily Dickinson Poem #937

** Big Rough Stones, p 246-7