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Those who help themselves: Women readers of self-help books

Simonds, Wendy Susan, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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**THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES:
WOMEN READERS OF SELF-HELP BOOKS**

**by
Wendy Simonds**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York.**

1990

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES: WOMEN READERS OF SELF-HELP BOOKS

by
Wendy Simonds

Advisor: Professor Barbara Katz Rothman

My interest in self-help reading began several years ago when disparaging and snide assessments of bestselling psychological manuals for women started to appear in the popular press. I was convinced that journalists' reviews of these books and their thoughts on their effects left out a crucial side of the picture: those who actually bought and produced the books were rendered invisible by dismissive reviews. (Authors were largely depicted as simply out to make money peddling what journalists saw as superficial advice.)

I have conducted in-depth interviews with 30 readers and with several editors of self-help literature. My methodology in conducting and evaluating these conversations draws on ethnographic and feminist traditions within sociology, and reader response criticism within literary theory. I have also read every bestselling self-help book published since 1963, listed on The New York Times bestseller lists (beginning with Friedan's The Feminine Mystique). Thus, in this project, I combine various "readings" of the cultural phenomenon of self-help books addressed to women, exploring their meanings from all sides of what Wendy Griswold terms "the cultural diamond"; Griswold holds that no analysis can be complete without a consideration of all four "corners" of this diamond: audience, creators, object, and social world.

In Part One, I focus on the female audience for self-help books, by

discussing readers' assessments of the appeal, meaning, and effectiveness of self-help literature as an aid in solving problems and shaping their world-views (in Chapters One and Two, "Reading Between the Lines: How and Why Women Read Self-Help Books," and "Shrinking God: Psycho-Religious Self-Help Reading"). Readers talk about why they think this cultural commodity has become especially appealing to women in recent years. They compare self-help books with other ways of gaining advice or assistance. Participants -- who read a wide range of self-help material -- discuss the intersection of self-help reading with formal therapy, traditional religion and New Age philosophy. In Chapter Three, "Readers Write In: Letters to Betty Friedan and Robin Norwood," I explore readers' spontaneous and immediate responses to their reading (discussions "untainted" by the interview process).

In my chapter on editors and authors of this material (Part Two), I begin by evaluating editors' assessments of the books, and their descriptions of their work to publish marketable products. I evaluate authors' written descriptions of the meaning of, uses for, and defenses of their work.

Finally, in Part Three, I give my own reading of what these books mean in terms of the American ethos, and specifically for women in an age which has been termed "post-feminist." I begin by discussing self-help books written for a generic audience: self-improvement manuals, religious or inspirational self-help, and sex-manuals -- all of which paved the way for the sub-genre of self-help books focusing on relationships, which are geared primarily to an audience of women. In my final chapter, I evaluate self-help books for women in terms of the socio-political terrain these books reflect and, indeed, shape.

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Mary Cunnane provided me with names of editors, and her name helped me get in to see them. I want to thank the editors who made time for interviews: Sydney Miner at Simon and Schuster, Joann Davis at Warner, Judith Riven at Avon, Toni Burbank at Bantam, and Joelle Delbourgo at Ballantine.

My study group at the Graduate Center -- Susan Farrell, Marcia Lifshitz, Sharon Sherman, and Jessica Bloom -- offered valuable comments on the earlier stages of this work. Randy Malamud read repeatedly and carefully along the way, and provided a wonderful example of how to write a dissertation quickly without going crazy.

The Schlesinger Library has allowed me to quote from the letters Betty Friedan received in response to The Feminine Mystique, which are housed in the Betty Friedan Collection, Series 3, Box 19, Files 679-706. I am grateful to the staff there for their assistance.

Finally, I thank the readers in this study for their time, interest, and insights. Obviously, I could not have done this without them.

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introduction

THE STUDY

Since mass market paperbacks were first introduced in the United States in 1939 by Pocket Books (Davis 1984), self-help books directed specifically at an audience of women have gradually gained a significant place within the trade and mass-market book publishing industries. Books offering advice about managing or improving relationships and on achieving psychologically "healthy" modes of behavior are bought by the millions today.

Any cultural activity in which millions of people participate merits the attention of scholars of culture. When this activity involves how women think about themselves and their lives -- how they view and work to change their general position in society, and their specific domestic and work relationships -- it is a grave error to dismiss such a cultural trend as a simplistic backlash against feminism, as a reflection of general unhappiness on the part of women, or as an enormous proliferation of "drivel," as articles in the popular press have portrayed the most recently-published group of best-selling self-help books (Bolotin 1987; Lawson 1986). These books may, in part, be all these things; however, they are so varied in style, content, and ideological grounding that cursory evaluations which ignore the experiences of readers cannot do them justice.

Self-help books are a distinctly American phenomenon, which has grown out of seventeenth-century Puritan notions about

self-improvement (Starker 1989, pp. 13-15). In Tocqueville's 1840 treatise on American morality and methods, he outlines the qualities which he thought coalesced to form the democratic spirit of self-help:

The inhabitant of the United States experiences all the wants and all the desires to which a high civilization can give rise, but . . . he does not find himself part of a society expertly organized to satisfy them; consequently he often has to provide for himself the various things that education and habit have made necessary for him. . . . [I]n his mind the idea of newness is closely linked with that of improvement. Nowhere does he see any limit placed by nature to human endeavor. . . (pp. 403-4)

Tocqueville might see the current success of self-help books as testimony to a distinctive American go-getting urge fueled by a consumeristic self-reliance, and encouraged by an inexpertly organized society.

Philip Rieff's more recent description of the self-indulgence of post-Freudian Western capitalist culture can be applied toward an understanding of the self-help trend:

In a society with so many inducements to self-interest, self-realization seems a noble and healthy end. The least valuable competitive position is to be self-defeating. The therapeutic cannot conceive of an action that is not self-serving, however it may be disguised or transformed. . . . The self, improved, is the ultimate concern of moral culture. (1966, pp. 61-2)

Neither Tocqueville nor Rieff, who both concentrate on the ethos governing the behavior and thought of the quintessential American man, supplies reasons to explain why women have flocked to bookstores, seeking prescriptive literature. Many of the readers I have interviewed

agree that the self-help movement is a reflection of American selfishness, an extension of what they commonly refer to as the "me generation," despite the fact that most readers turn to self-help in order to solve problems they are having in their relationships with other people. The questions arise:

Is everyone, men and women alike, becoming increasingly self-involved as we head into the twenty-first century? What do self-help books have to teach about the "quest for individualism"? Are self-help authors encouraging their readers to become people who are competitive or caring? Isolationist or socially conscious? How does the notion of independence for women change over time as portrayed in self-help books?

Do self-help books, as a prime example of the mass communication of advice, reflect the spirit of this nation, as it twists slowly away from the days of social reform and experimentation -- a time out of which the popular psychological movement grew -- and heads ever nearer to reactionary solutions to social problems?

Prior to the existence of the current wave of self-help books, which began in 1963 with Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, students of culture had been predicting and proclaiming a large-scale movement toward introverted self-involvement in the United States. This line of commentary grew more vehement as self-help books proliferated. (Bellah et al. 1985; Lasch 1979 and 1984; Riesman 1950; and Toffler 1970, are a few examples -- several of these were bestsellers themselves.) Certainly, the floods of self-help books published in recent years can be interpreted as a manifestation of -- or a tribute to -- self-interest, but do they necessarily indicate that cultural

prescriptions and proscriptions regarding women's "selves" have changed?

Self-involvement, after all, cannot be the same activity for women and men in this culture. Women are caught in a curious web of ideology concerning "self": we are labeled narcissistic for employing strategies (such as lavishing attention upon physical appearance) which we've learned can lead to success in a society which prescribes specific versions of heterosexuality and femininity -- a system in which women lack power to begin with. We are taught to nurture and connect with others, and to help carry the emotional baggage of men, especially; and we may also learn not to expect reciprocity from men. It is not surprising, within such a context, that women would look for ways to find nurturance through vehicles that encourage self-reflection. Nor is it suprising that women would -- as several readers I interviewed did -- dismiss their own activities of self-nurturance or self-reflection (such as reading self-help books) as self-indulgent or narcissistic.

How, then, do self-help books addressed specifically to women encourage us to develop our "selves"? When is lavishing attention on self-development (including, at one end of the spectrum, reading sex manuals) held as commendable, as "feminine"? When does self-attentiveness spill over into egocentrism? What kind of behavior is seen as appropriate for an ideal, self-possessed woman now, as we move into the 1990s, and how has she evolved over time? As self-help books have come into their own, so has the feminist movement grown, splintered, and changed alongside them, fueling the genre in many ways. (This study itself is a result of that movement, and of feminist developments within academia.) What evidence do self-help books give

about the dissemination of feminist and anti-feminist ideologies into popular culture?

Self-help books must be studied as objects of cultural commerce, for they are linked both with the proliferation of buyable therapy (in which assistance comes to be seen as a purchasable commodity) and the increasing volume of the marketplace -- as Kowinski documents in The Malling of America (1985). In the suburban area outside of Miami -- where I grew up, for instance -- most of the smaller lots that stood vacant in my childhood are now filled with little strips of shops, while the larger empty areas have been transformed into enormous malls. (There are now four such malls within a ten minute drive of where I lived, and three more within walking distance.) Because of malls, chain bookstores have spread across the nation. And because of chain bookstores, it is now possible to document which books people buy in B. Dalton's and Waldenbooks stores in Peoria, Albuquerque, New York, and Kalamazoo. One need not even go to a bookstore anymore to buy books; a variety of bestsellers is available in most supermarkets and drugstores. One result of these factors which have made books more visible is that bestselling self-help books are omnipresent in the marketplaces of the country. The history of self-help books is enmeshed with the development of consumerism, and its hegemonic permeation of culture -- as the forms of decision-making, selection, marketing, promoting, and advertising utilized in the trade and mass market book publishing industry to sell self-help books indicate.

The question of influence arises repeatedly throughout any consideration of cultural consumption. Here I am concerned with how a particular commodity -- self-help books -- achieves success in the

marketplace: how do people become convinced they need this product of culture? Do women read self-help books because they have problems which are not addressed in other ways, or does the existence of -- even the reading of -- self-help books convince them that they have problems that must be addressed? Do self-help books mirror cultural values or create them? Have the feminist movement, the "sexual revolution," the changing nature of families, created an atmosphere in which self-help can flourish, or, conversely, did the proliferation of such books somehow enable these developments? There are no black and white answers to these questions; rather, the answers lie somewhere in between, and ought to be dialectically constructed (by avoiding chicken-and-egg explanations of causation); As Berger and Luckmann write:

The history of legitimating theories is always part of the history of the society as a whole. . . . [T]his does not mean that these theories are nothing but reflections of "underlying" institutional processes; the relationship between "ideas" and their sustaining social processes is always a dialectical one. It is correct to say that theories are concocted in order to legitimate already existing social institutions. But it also happens that social institutions are changed in order to bring them into conformity with already existing theories, that is, to make them more "legitimate". . . . Definitions of reality have self-fulfilling potency. . . . What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives. (1966, pp.117-18)

Reading may seem like a very personal activity, a "symbolic universe" which individuals create and a singular act in which members

of a culture participate mostly in isolation from each other. Yet it is, on a deeper level, as Mannheim writes, "an act of sociation": "We conceive meanings . . . not only in communicative acts, but also in solitary moments. We perform an act of sociation already in an isolated state of contemplation" (1956, p. 65). The sociology of knowledge, according to Mannheim, attempts to study the group culture as it has been absorbed and integrated into "individual" thought: "[M]ental processes have a social dimension and hence the sociology of the mind is but a systematic attempt to articulate the social character of mental processes" (p. 51). And so I take as my starting place the experiences and views of the readers of self-help books, whose voices helped me to shape my own construction of this unique cultural genre and its meaning for women living now in this social world.

I begin by focusing on members of the audience for self-help books, drawing on interviews I conducted with thirty readers. In Chapter One, "Reading Between the Lines: How and Why Women Read Self-Help Books," I discuss these readers' perceptions of their reading. They speak about why they are attracted to this particular genre, and how they "read" the cultural phenomenon of self-help books. Readers discuss the genre as it compares with other reading material they enjoy, and speculate on its significance for women in general.

The women I interviewed spoke unanimously of their search for "answers" to problems both practical and sublime, and read books which ranged from traditional religious dogma to the more "mainstream" and mass-market popular-psychological manuals. An analysis of the interrelationship between religious and secular therapeutic self-help

reading follows in Chapter Two, "Shrinking God: Psycho-Religious Self-Help Reading." Readers assess the therapeutic value in books which range from the secular to the spiritual in their quest for answers.

Chapter Three, "Readers Write In," is an analysis of letters written to self-help authors Betty Friedan and Robin Norwood, following the publication of their respective works, The Feminine Mystique (1963) and Women Who Love Too Much (1985). Readers' letters show what direct, immediate responses to self-help books can be like, and reinforce participants' assertions that reading self-help can have a strong impact on women's lives.

Next, in Chapter Four, "Making it Readable," I shift my focus to concentrate on the role of creators of self-help books, discussing interviews with editors and authors' written discussions of their motivations and goals in writing self-help books.

Finally, in Chapters Five and Six, I explore the cultural messages offered by bestselling self-help books over the past 25 years, beginning with unisex self-help and sex manuals in "Shelf Life, Part One: Paving the Way," and in "Shelf Life, Part Two: Self-Help Books for Women," this sub-genre's treatment of gender relations is examined. Authors' prescriptions for attaining success in heterosexual relationships are discussed in conjunction with other cultural forms which offer women advice.

THE PARTICIPANTS

I have conducted in-depth interviews with thirty women readers of self-help books. Colleagues and friends circulated approximately 200

copies of a preliminary questionnaire about reading in general (see Appendix, pp. 287-89) in various work and social locales. Respondents who indicated that they read self-help or self-improvement books and who volunteered their phone numbers were contacted. (Only two of the women I reached from this group did not participate in the interviewing phase of this research.) Several of the women I interviewed suggested other readers they knew who might participate; thus, the sample snowballed.

The women I spoke with provide telling commentary about their reading which can, I believe, enable us to understand better the phenomenon of self-help reading in this country, regardless of whether or not these women are statistically representative of self-help readers in general. (For specific demographic data about all of the participants in this research, see Tables 1 and 2, pp. 292-93.)

The women who talked with me about their reading may be more eager proponents for self-help books than those who read them and decided not to volunteer to continue in the research. This is the case in nearly all investigations; those who feel most uncomfortable or uncertain about their own behavior, or those who are uninterested in the research issues, are least likely to volunteer to become involved. Those who feel the issues being studied are important or interesting are most likely to volunteer their time. Indeed, several of the women I interviewed told me how excited they were to have the opportunity to talk about their reading. Many said that they were simply interested in my topic, glad that they could be of help. (Research participants, of course, cannot and should not be selected in some way which renders them all equally invested -- or not invested -- in whatever project of

which they become a part.)

The majority (22) of the thirty readers I interviewed were white; five were black, two were Latino, and one woman defined herself as half white, and half American Indian. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 57; the mean age of women interviewed was 37, and the median age was 36. Six women were Protestants (including Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Baptist); eleven were Catholic, eleven were Jewish, and two wrote "none" under religion. Of the women who said they read religious self-help books, two were Protestant, and three were Jewish (but one of these Jewish women did not read specifically Jewish works). Five others said they read New Age literature. (The impressions of these religious and New Age readers are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.) The other participants said they did not connect religious or spiritual quests with their readings within the self-help genre.

Reading behavior in general, is, no doubt, reflective of class status; however, within this study, class status was elusive. Income level did not "predict" reading behavior or types of self-help books read (or vice versa). Most (18) participants reported a household income under \$45,000. Of these women, 13 reported household incomes under \$30,000. Household income was related to whether or not there were two earners in the family; married women typically reported higher incomes than never married or divorced women.

The women I spoke to were highly educated. Only one woman had not had any formal educational experience since high school; eight had attended some college or community college; six were college graduates; and fifteen had post-graduate experience. They held, among

them, master's degrees in education, social work, history, folklore, fine arts, and a doctorate in sociology. (In a non-random sample of this size, I believe it would be inappropriate to surmise that advanced education is specifically linked to self-help reading.)

All of the women interviewed for this project were employed outside the home, except for one retired teacher. Over half (18) of the women I interviewed worked in areas of the paid-labor market which are dominated by women: eight did secretarial or administrative work; three were elementary or secondary school teachers (the retired teacher mentioned above is included here); two were para-professionals (in teaching and nursing); five did counseling (of these, four had master's degrees in social work). Of the remaining twelve, three worked in managerial positions. None of the women worked as professionals in fields typically dominated by men, such as law or medicine, and none owned her own business.

Eleven of the women I interviewed were married, eleven were divorced, and eight were single. Of the eight single women, three were living with men at the time of our interviews.

All of the participants -- the thirty readers and the five editors -- were interviewed between May, 1988, and February, 1989. Interviews with readers typically lasted one to two hours; those with editors took approximately one hour. Three of the readers lived in South Florida (in the vicinity of Fort Lauderdale -- because once a scholar, one can never really go on vacation). The rest of the participants (27) lived in the New York metropolitan area.

THE METHODOLOGY

During the early stages of my research, I had a conversation with a friend of a friend, a psychologist, who said he had heard about my project and was very interested in it.

"What's your hypothesis?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "I don't really have a hypothesis. There are a number of things I'm interested in finding out about --"

"But you have to have a hypothesis," he interjected. "What do you expect to find?"

"I won't know that until I finish the interviews," I said.

"But you have to have hypotheses," he persisted, "to verify. Or how would you design a questionnaire?"

"I don't really have a set questionnaire. I have more of an interview schedule," I said, happy to have a name to tack onto what I was doing (which would, I hoped, help lead to the end of this conversation).

"I don't understand," he said. "You're asking everyone you talk to the same questions, aren't you?"

"Well, that depends on how our conversations develop. There are certain broad areas I'm asking everyone about --"

He shook his head, probably quite disgusted with the quality of social scientists they were turning out these days. He went on to ask whether my sample was random, and how I planned to achieve anything with my work if my methods made my results irreproducible.

My friend interjected, "Wendy's doing qualitative research. That's different from what you're used to."

Most works of qualitative sociology are prefaced with a quite

defensive defense of the work to follow. Those who are committed to qualitative work often frame this defense as a justification, which almost reads like an apology for why what is still -- regrettably -- seen as the high road in sociology was not taken: complex statistical analyses coupled with highly-controlled interviewing procedures. Included, usually, is a call for quantitative work within the area, often complete with a sketchy plan for what would be most useful in buttressing up the "findings" being presented: a call for the provers to move in and make it all really valid. I offer no excuses here.

I did this work the way I did because it seemed to me the most appropriate and the most interesting manner in which I could approach my subject. A detailed statistical evaluation of women readers' activities generated from a random sample would have obscured the issues which I believe can arise only out of a more sensitive, less structured approach to conducting research. T-tests and chi-squares may have shown, within a certain margin of error, which women among us would be likely to read self-help books, but would have taken no part in figuring out why such books are appealing, and what their readers are doing with them. I may have finished with more "answers" (and these answers may have been reproducible) had I chosen such a route, but where would I have been then, besides in a position to help publishers market their work? The more intriguing questions raised in long conversations with participants would have been bypassed, replaced by what may have been considered "evidence" in wider circles within the field of sociology, but probably not evidence of compelling sociological or political interest. Validity, I believe, does not grow only out of equations, does not lie hidden in random numbers tables,

does not exist any more or less if a verifiable majority does one thing or says another, in a manner which can be clearly observed and reported upon by ten or a thousand researchers trained in exactly the same manner. I am far more interested in projecting possibilities than I am in paring and pinning them down.

Karl Mannheim (1936) sees allegiance to quantitative methodology as a product of culture, a phase in the growth of the discipline of sociology, in which sociologists demonstrate their longing for a verifiable reality they can count on, a means of reassuring themselves that one solid and discernable truth really exists. He writes:

It is possible, even probable, that sociology must pass through this stage in which its contents will undergo a mechanistic dehumanization and formalization. . . so that out of devotion to an ideal of narrow exactitude nothing will remain except statistical data, tests, surveys, etc., and in the end every significant formulation of a problem will be excluded. All that can be said here is that this reduction of everything to a measurable or inventory-like describability is significant as a serious attempt to determine what is unambiguously ascertainable and, further, to think through what becomes of our psychic and social world when it is restricted to purely externally measurable relationships. There can no longer be any doubt that no real penetration into social reality is possible through this approach. (pp. 43-44)

Our methods can never be separate from the situations we investigate; rather than seeking to apply an external code, we must ground our procedures in the activity in which we are involved. We must claim the definitions of the situations we explain as our own.

In introducing the anthology she edited with Merrill B. Hintikka,

Feminism and Methodology (1983), Sandra Harding explains that since existing "scientific" methodologies have traditionally been built upon men's experience -- and thus have excluded women's experience as a fit subject of inquiry -- they are ill-suited organizational strategies for work which does intend to study women's lives:

What counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience. Human experience differs according to the kinds of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women's experience systematically differs from the male experience upon which knowledge claims have been grounded. Thus the experience on which the prevailing claims to social and natural knowledge are founded is, first of all, only partial human experience only partially understood: namely, masculine experience as understood by men. However, when this experience is presumed to be gender-free -- when the male experience is taken as the human experience -- the resulting theories, concepts, methodologies, inquiry goals and knowledge-claims distort human social life and human thought. (p. x)

The authors whose essays are included in Harding and Hintikka's volume describe how they reformulated the methods they had been taught to fit in with both the specialized research they did, and with the feminist ideologies which guided their work. In a similar anthology, Doing Feminist Research (1981, edited by Helen Roberts), Ann Oakley enumerates the formally prescribed "textbook" conditions for interviewing which are taught to students of the social sciences (conditions which bear a striking resemblance to those my friend's friend strongly embraced): she writes that the interview is conceived of as a "mechanical instrument of data-collection"; that it is held to be effective only if the interviewer and interviewee confine their interaction to the asking of pre-scripted questions (by the interviewer)

and the answering of these questions (by the interviewee); and that the best, most reliable results are obtained when the interviewer maintains a detached, impersonal, professional stance, and when the interviewee responds as s/he is cued (pp. 36-37). Oakley believes that such methods can act to prohibit the goals of feminist research from being accomplished. She writes:

[T]he case I want to make is that when a feminist interviews women: (1) the use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible; (2) general and irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of the textbook paradigm are exposed; and (3) it becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 41)

The power of the researcher who carefully controls the direction of the interviews s/he conducts has been stressed by proponents of traditional research as the key in obtaining "objective" data; Oakley proposes such data may be collected at the expense of the interviewee, who is, thus, disempowered in the name of "science." Mishler (1986) concurs, stating that the imbalance of power and rigid format prescribed by traditional methodology serves to alienate participants and "to obscure relations between events and experiences and to disrupt individuals' attempts to make coherent sense of what is happening to them and around them" (120).

I tried, throughout my interviewing, to allow the participants to shape what transpired between us as much as possible. This meant that I tried to fit the questions I wanted to ask into the women's narratives, as they developed, rather than structuring the interviews

according to my "schedule." (As it happened, the questions I originally designed [see Appendix, pp. 290-91] were broad and open-ended enough so that most discussions ended up including most of them.)

Interviewees, of course, though rarely trained in social scientific methodology themselves, also share traditional ideas about what constitutes an interview (because they have usually experienced other interview situations -- primarily work-related). So often, participants and I would fall into a pattern of question-answer, question-answer, rather than the free-flowing conversation I envisioned as ideal. I struggled to turn these interviews into conversations, which itself is asserting a kind of power, but one that I feel does not lead to a unproductive experience for the participant. I was guided in my investigative behavior by the feminist theorists mentioned above, but I found Dorothy Smith's definition of feminist research especially inspirational:

Rather than taking up issues and problems as they have been defined and established in the discipline, the aim [of a sociology from the standpoint of women] is to explicate the actual social processes and practices organizing people's everyday experience from a standpoint in the everyday world. . . . [T]his means a sociology that does not transform people into objects, but preserves their presence as subjects. . . . It means finding a method that does not begin with the categories of the discourse, approaching the actualities of the social world with a view to discovering in it the lineaments of the theoretical object. Rather it proposes an inquiry intended to disclose how activities are organized and how they are articulated to the social relations of the larger social and economic process. (1987, pp. 151-2).

Over the course of conducting this project, I have striven to make

my methods cohere with -- rather than govern -- the work itself. Similarly, I have shaped my "readings" of the cultural phenomenon of literary advice-seeking by carefully considering the views of the people who engage in this activity, as they are the true "experts" in this situation. I have tried, above all, to preserve the integrity of my participants' narratives as I make use of their words.

chapter one

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: HOW AND WHY WOMEN READ SELF-HELP BOOKS

**"What is omnipresent is imperceptible. Nothing is more commonplace than the reading experience, and yet nothing is more unknown."
(Todorov 1980, p. 67)**

It is only through an examination of the act of reading itself, which begins with the vantage points of the readers themselves, that we can discover what makes women decide to read self-help books, and what, exactly, they get out of their reading. Participants' evaluations of their reading show how readers make use of self help books, as part of the work of making sense of their own lives.

I asked the thirty women whose reading behavior I am studying to tell me what they think their reading means, not only for themselves, but as part of a larger phenomenon of women reading self-help literature. I asked them what they thought women did in the past, without a wide selection of self-help books to utilize, had them compare written advice with other (past and presently available) options for receiving help, and compare the experience of reading self-help books with that of reading other types of literature. I asked them to describe why they thought women were finding self-help books especially appealing at this particular point in time.

I found that the women I interviewed read quite a variety of books for instructive purposes: including self-help books addressed to women that focus on self-image, self-esteem, assertiveness, and relationships with others (at work and at home), self-help books that

are not explicitly gender-specific, books dealing with health, New Age philosophy, traditionally religious books, and biographies. Some of the books in these categories are feminist in orientation, and others are not. (For a detailed breakdown of the types of self-help books read by each individual reader who participated in my study, see Tables 1 and 2, pp. 292-93.) The women who read New Age material tended to be younger (between 27 and 36 years old), but this was the only discernible difference in reading habits which was linked to age. All of the women who described their reading of self-help books as an activity in which they were often (as opposed to sometimes or rarely) engaged were white, except for one woman who described herself as half-white and half American Indian; so, within this group of readers, white women were heavier readers of self-help books than black or Latino women. None of the women I interviewed said that race or class status was a topic discussed in their self-help reading.

LEARNING TO READ

Early on in my interviewing, I was discussing a course I was teaching on "The Sociology of Women" with a friend who was familiar with my dissertation research. She interrupted my enthusiastic descriptions of the reading material for the course, saying, "You know, you really need to think about how you use books to shape your world view. They may not be self-help books, but you use them for the same reasons women who read self-help do." Working on this project has made me examine my own reading behavior, as well as reading behavior in general.

When I pick up a book, many things can happen. I can merge into

another world, the time and space in which my physical body exists seemingly suspended. I can look for answers to specific questions, and feel an excited satisfaction when I find them. I can become bored, agitated. My focus can blur. I can fall asleep. For a long time, I thought of the disparate possibilities for reading experiences as residing in the books themselves. (This one was great! That one was boring.) A book could envelop me, instruct me, bore me. But I always thought of the book as the actor, and of myself as the object upon which its action occurred.

Exposure to ideas about the meaning to be found in written material begins when we begin reading and expands as we are formally schooled in reading strategies. Part of becoming literate is learning to ask certain questions, to develop certain expectations of different reading experiences. Of course, in the process of internalizing reading strategies there are many demands we do not learn to make, many ways of reading we do not consider. And as we learn evaluative strategies to apply to fiction, we learn other -- often opposing -- methods for digesting non-fiction. Most of our critical techniques filter down to us from academic experts, who thus have significant control over aesthetic and symbolic interpretations, and how they are made. Since fiction, with its potential status as art, has been the primary mode of writing evaluated, most of the academic experts on whom we rely for critical strategies are English professors.

The theoretical implications of reading have only recently become a respectable topic of inquiry within the realm of literary theory (Tompkins 1980; Suleiman 1980; Graubard 1983). Before reader-response criticism, post-modern, feminist, and deconstructive

literary studies, critics attempted to extract universal or author-intended meanings from canonized texts. Readers were considered passive spectators to the literary process, lucky if they could skillfully pick apart the meat of the text and understand its symbolic implications and stylistic nuances as "New Critics" taught them to do. New Critics exhaustively pontificated on the intricacy, the correctness, the brilliance of motifs, images, words, assuming a priori that these motifs, images, words, were inherently laden with value, ensconced as they were in the solidity of the Canon of Great Western Books. According to Robert Crosman (1980), the movement of New Criticism within literary theory was a well-grounded product of Western cultures.

Because we have all been taught to believe in the [Western idea of] Imperial Truth, we have imagined the process of writing as antithetical to the process of reading: the writer, in contact with the wordless realm of Truth, somehow embodies his ineffable vision of reality in words and sends it to the reader, who (if all goes well) removes the "meaning" from its verbal envelope. (p.163)

Within the frameworks of these relatively new movements against New Criticism in literary studies, aesthetic value -- and consequently overall meaning -- can be evaluated differently. Feminist scholars, for example, have attributed importance to cultural works which have never been considered "art" by literary authorities because of the masculinist organization of the field of literary studies (See, for example: Baym 1978; Ferguson 1985; Miner 1984; Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Spacks 1972; and Tompkins 1985). Popularity among groups other than academics or literary critics has become a recognized

indication of significance. "The way in which a literary work, at the historical moment of its appearance, satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience obviously provides a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value" (Jauss 1982, p. 25).

STUDYING READING

A number of studies have been conducted to measure and compare readers' comprehension of fiction in order to chart various lines of literal understanding (e.g., Holland 1975), but not in order to discern literature's impact on -- or relationship to -- readers' life experiences. Over the past fifteen years, feminist scholars have been challenging the universality of the literary canons revered by traditional scholars and the role of the reader as a passive and absorbent sponge or toady to the values of "established" literary greatness (e.g. Fetterly 1978; Long 1986 and 1985; Radway 1984; Russ 1983; Tompkins 1985).

A movement parallel to that of New Criticism, which aimed to make the work of sociologists "scientific," has held sway since in the mid-twentieth century in America. Following in the footsteps of Durkheim, functionalists sought to make sociological methods verifiable and sociology respectable, using the model of the natural sciences, and borrowing the notion of the uninvolved, objective scientific observer as well. As in literature, questions of agency and empowerment were ignored by sociologists practicing a social construction of reality which aimed to strip away subjectivity entirely.

To date, sociological studies concerning reader behavior have been

primarily quantitative projects undertaken to determine who was reading, what they were reading, and where they got it (Berelson 1949; Yankelovich, et al., 1978), but not why they were reading or what they got out of it. In early cultural studies, sociologists attempted to trace the line -- then considered to be an arrow pointing in one direction only, like a hypodermic needle -- between cultural creators and culture recipients. Marxist and production-of-culture theorists offer a twist on the injection model, tying production and reception of cultural messages to the workings of hegemonic institutions (Becker 1982; Gitlin 1983; Griswold; 1986; Powell 1986; Williams 1958; and Wolff 1981), but the agency of the cultural consumers is subordinate to the authority and power of the cultural creators within these frameworks. Of late, feminist cultural scholars have begun to take into account the influence exerted -- in terms of both collusion and resistance -- by users of culture objects. The work of Janice Radway (with readers of romances) and Elizabeth Long (who is studying women's reading groups in Texas) are the only academic studies of how readers construct meaning as they read.

There have been a few quantitative studies of self-help reading conducted. In a random-sampled telephone survey of 1000 people in Portland, Oregon, Steven Starker (1989) found that women were more frequent readers of self-help books than men, and were more likely to say they found their reading helpful (152). Starker does not provide exact figures on this data, however. According to an 1988 Gallup telephone survey, women were more likely than men ever to have bought a self-help book; 36 percent of women said they had, as compared with 30 percent of men polled (Wood 1988, p.33). In the

Gallup poll, when self-help is broken down into topic areas, women are more likely to buy books dealing with "Love & Relationships": 11 percent as compared with 7 percent of the men questioned; "Stress & Anxiety": 19 percent as compared with 5 percent of the men questioned; and "Weight Loss": 10 percent, as compared with 2 percent of the men questioned. Men were more likely to buy self-help books dealing with "Self Improvement": 29 percent as compared with 20 percent of the women questioned; and with "Motivation": 18 percent as compared with 10 percent of the women questioned (Wood 1988, p. 33).

While this survey shows that women are, in general, more likely than men ever to have read a self-help book (36 percent as compared with 30 percent), this gap between men and women readers is not especially large. The survey answers, however, don't tell anything about the general or repeated use of self-help books by women and men. Also, the categories in which men outbought women were rather vaguely defined; reading a book about "Self Improvement" could mean reading a book about how to succeed in business or a book on assertiveness training. The sub-topic list from which respondents were asked to choose contained several nearly synonymous areas: "Love and relationships," "Intimacy and sex" and "Marriage and divorce." It seems likely that a respondent would choose the category "Marriage and divorce" only if s/he were reading a book on divorce, or "Intimacy and sex" if s/he were specically reading a book about sex; but very few self-help books which discuss divorce are primarily about divorce, and very few which discuss intimacy are primarily about sex. The topic areas used by the pollsters may well have confused respondents. Twelve percent of respondents said they read books about "other"

topics; this is the third largest category group of 22 categories, which indicates that the categories provided were inadequate. Also, the Gallup poll did not distinguish between heavy and occasional readers, nor did they ask respondents to comment on the quality of their reading.

Starker did ask his participants to discuss the quantity and quality of their reading:

The Portland sample reported reading an average of 2.82 self-help books per year. Asked if they had ever read a really helpful self-help work, 64.7 percent responded affirmatively. When asked for their overall evaluation of self-help books on a 5-point scale from "harmful" to "often helpful," not a single respondent considered them to be "harmful," only 2.2 percent judged them to be "unhelpful," and 14.4 percent found them "rarely helpful." The largest group of responses indicated self-help works to be "sometimes helpful" (50 percent), the remainder found them "often helpful" (33.3 percent), creating a pooled positive evaluation group of 83.3 percent. (p. 151)

As a clinical psychologist, Starker understandably focuses on issues concerning the clinical effectiveness of self-help books. He also polled "experts" -- psychologists, psychiatrists and interns in the Seattle area. Psychologists judged self-help books most favorably: 88.6 percent said they "personally prescribed self-help books to supplement their treatment," and 93.2 percent judged that they were either "sometimes helpful" or "often helpful" to clients who read them. Psychiatrists were less likely than psychologists to recommend self-help books -- though a majority did (58.8 percent) -- or to deem them helpful (70.9 percent) (pp. 153-55). Practitioners, especially psychiatrists, were quick to point out that reading could not substitute for therapy, and several felt (unlike psychologists) that reading

self-help was either useless or harmful (p. 155).

A New York Times article on July 6, 1989, reported that Forest Scogin, a psychologist, "has combined the results of more than 40 studies that compared using self-help books with actual psychotherapy. 'By and large, the books worked well,' he said. 'Psychotherapy had an advantage, but only a slight one'" (Goleman, p. B6). Starker's surveys, and those Scogin discusses, focus on perceived utility rather than specific usage, and since the researchers themselves are psychologists, concepts of effectiveness of treatment are taken for granted, or at least not explicitly examined.

Though vague in many ways, the Gallup survey does show some interesting differences in reading behavior depending on the five most reported sub-topic area within self-help (not counting "Other"). People between the ages of 18 and 34 were more likely to read books on relationships than those 35 and older (14 percent as compared with 6 percent); people with incomes under \$30,000 were more likely than those with higher incomes to read books on motivation (15 percent as compared with 11 percent); and people who had been to college were also more likely to read books on motivation (17 percent as compared with 9 percent of readers who had not attended college). Women who were working outside the home ("Employed") were more likely than those who were not ("Not Employed") to read books about "Self Improvement" (22 percent compared with 12 percent), "Motivation" (12 percent compared with 7 percent), and "Love & Relationships" (13 percent compared with 4 percent) -- whereas women who were not working outside the home were more likely to read books on "Weight Loss" (20 percent as compared with 7 percent of women working for

pay) (Wood, p. 33). None of these studies of self-help reading focuses on the act of reading itself and what the reader sees that act as accomplishing for herself, nor have researchers asked participants to talk about how their reading -- helpful or not -- fits into their lives.

In "Theory of the Text," Roland Barthes (1980) holds that reading experience is inextricably connected with social life and that it cuts deeply through our collective intellectual history:

The notion of the text is historically linked to a whole world of institutions: the law, the Church, literature, education. The text is a moral object. . . . It subjects us, and demands that we observe and respect it, but in return it marks language with an inestimable attribute which it does not possess in its essence: security. (p. 32)

I have gradually come to see that persuasive power resides in books, not because, as Barthes asserts, they "subject" or make demands on their readers, but because readers allow books persuasive power. Readers give authority to texts; yet this authority is always constructed and mediated by societal institutions and practices because the act of learning to read and all the reading that follows are "sociated acts" (Mannheim 1956, p. 65).

Perhaps it is because we rarely attempt to examine the act of reading -- or the social construction of that act -- that we rarely recognize it as an activity at all. Since we don't move, physically, while we are reading, and since reading is largely a solitary involvement, it doesn't seem to fit into the same category with other acts we commit. And since we have been schooled to think of books as authorities to which we submit our open minds, we often ignore our participation in the reading process. But, as Crosman writes, "Once we

decide that readers can make meaning, and ought to be doing so, we begin to see it happening all around us -- that is what reading is, after all" (1980, p.164).

TALKING ABOUT READING

Lauren, one of the women I interviewed, describes the power books have simply because they are books:

Books are amazing things. They're old things too. . . . At least in the history of Christianity . . . the book had this holy quality, because the things that were written down -- at least in elite culture -- were always the most important things. You wouldn't put things into writing that weren't sacred. . . . When the book first started, it must be something so moving that has happened, a revelation that has happened, that [the book] . . . holds it still, like a photograph. . . .

One has the feeling with a book that one is in the presence of something important. Not with all books, but with these kinds of books, there's the feeling that the books have a key. And I've felt some kind of mythic feeling, a lot of times, about . . . a book.

In speaking of the power of the written word to hold something "still, like a photograph," Lauren echoes Barthes's declaration that the text provides language with "security." The readers I interviewed were unanimous in their recognition that self-help books were repetitive, and thus, secure. Reading could be a ritual of self-reassurance where repetition was desired. Bonnie, who had been reading books to help her deal with grief after the recent death of her mother, told me that her father and brother had both read one "grief book" each, while she read several. Her primary interest was not each particular book, or the nuances of contrasting strategies for coping with grief, but rather, the relief the activity of reading these books offered her because they

enabled her to see what she was going through in print over and over again:

The grief books, interestingly enough, most of them say the same things, but I get a lot of comfort from seeing it in print. . . . It gives me a kind of comfort. . . . Like the grief books will tell you: "A lot of other people are going through this too. It's normal to feel anger." Now, somehow, seeing that in print is more comforting than having other people tell it to me verbally. It seems more real. Also, I can go back to it. . . . Whereas, it's harder to recall a person saying it, and getting the same kind of comfort.

Many other readers spoke about their respect for the printed word; during our conversation, Emily described the difference she sees between reading a book and talking to a friend when in search of a solution to a problem:

[Y]ou can get very wrong advice from a friend, wherein if it's a professional, you know, book that you're reading . . . you would tend to kind of agree with [what's written] because you figure that the person who wrote the book might be a professional, or know a little more than some of your friends do.

W.S.: A book is authoritative?

EMILY: I would say yes. . . . You know, there's no wrong information in it. . . .

W.S.: How do you know that?

EMILY: Well, it doesn't necessarily have to be wrong information, just something that you don't agree with.

Even when challenged, Emily refused to alter her description of books as loci of "right information." Most of the readers I interviewed tend to respect what comes to them in the form of a book, often seeing the book as having been written in direct response to its audience's needs. In Women's Ways of Knowing (1986), Belenky et al. describe women's

tendency to look to authorities, such as books, for "truth." They call such thinkers "received knowers." They cite one such received knower's explanation: "Things you look up in a book, you normally get the right answer" (p. 39), and assert that this woman, "[a]s typical of received knowers. . . did not realize that authorities have the capacity for constructing knowledge." Like this woman, several of the readers I interviewed discussed the information found in books as though it were disembodied, unconnected with any creator -- as, indeed, it appears to be when it arrives in book form.

Though respectful, most participants did not refrain wholly from criticism of books; they did not believe everything they read. However, not one of the women who offered negative caveats about self-help books told me women should abandon such reading, though many journalists investigating the genre have made such assertions.¹ Books were often viewed as suspect when they appeared sensationalistic to readers, when readers saw their publication as motivated by authors' desire to make a lot of money. Rena, for example, describes how she decides whether or not to place trust in an author:

Well, firstly, if the book is sensational I dismiss it. . . . You know, if it's obviously an appeal to you know, glamour, current thinking, trying to -- I can almost tell when a book is trying to make money, and that's the key thing. And when it's definitely just the expression of an ordinary person, I normally dismiss it, because I could write that book too. I'm looking for someone . . . who has some background, who knows something about what he's writing. . . . And also if they go overboard on a particular thing and don't seem to have any other respect for an alternate opinion, then I dismiss it too.

A self-help book strikes Rena as authoritative if its author

demonstrates credentialed expertise, not if "he" shows himself to be a person to whom she can relate on a personal level. She prefers authors who are moderate in their views, and will put down a book in which the author "goes overboard." She doesn't like glitzy media-propelled successes, and feels that she can sense whether a book offers substantive information or superficial chatter.

Readers' respect for a well-liked author can crumble. Evelyn told me about her immediate identification with Nancy Friday's My Mother/My Self, and how her opinion of Nancy Friday as respectable expert deteriorated when she read a subsequent book, Men in Love:

I don't remember [My Mother/My Self] clearly, but I remember -- because it was a long time ago -- that it was very intensely personal to me. I don't remember how, but I know I felt ... that it changed my life. It really made me feel differently. And then I read her other book ... Men in Love, and I almost threw up. I thought it was horrible. ... What happened was that a great deal of it was sexually -- and I'm very sexually liberal, and you know -- I thought it was horrible, horrible. ... Kinky stuff. ... It just nauseated me.

The readers I interviewed clearly distinguished between books they liked and the rest -- books which they either disliked or which had no impact on them at all. While several women remembered, like Evelyn, books which had angered or upset them in some way, the majority of the participants said that if they were reading a book they didn't like, they would simply stop reading it. Liz described reading a book called Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No, and getting angry because the book never fulfilled the cover promise: "I couldn't even get to their square one. ... It was like, 'Analyze: Why are you saying yes when you want to say no?' And I was like, 'That's why I'm reading this book!

If I knew that already, I wouldn't need this book!" Respondents all tended to voice dissatisfaction with books they perceived as facile (these evaluations varied considerably among the group). Participants were also on guard against books which they felt were intrusively instructive. For instance, Allison said that she didn't like books that "would tell a person to be manipulative." And though several women said they felt bad about it, all of the respondents said that when a book got repetitive, they would either begin skimming or stop reading altogether, unless they were experiencing the repetition as comforting, as Bonnie described earlier.

Many of the women I spoke with said that before our interviews, they worried that they would not be able to remember anything, or enough, about their reading. Many apologized when our conversations came to an end, saying they wished they had been able to remember more. A few told me they had looked through their books the night before, in preparation. One woman had stacks of books out on the table when I arrived. Their expectations regarding our interview made sense: someone calls you to ask if she can talk to you about your reading, and you apply your past experience in talking about reading. You want to do a good job for this academic stranger. You, no doubt, envision a string of oral book reports.

I did ask questions about specific books, so, in a sense, I did not disappoint these women's expectations. Readers showed satisfaction when they were able to describe the main ideas in books, and seemed annoyed with themselves when they could not.

Talking to readers made me reevaluate the underlying assumptions

of my questions: what do you remember about such-and-such a book, and how would you say it helped or influenced you? Originally, I felt that a text's "ability" to leave a lasting impression on a reader's mind must mean it did something for that person -- at least in comparison with books that were not remembered. I assumed that the amount remembered was an indication of a reader's effective usage of a book, and that I could measure, in some way, the causal relationships between readers, their books, and their actions. Women did tell me about acts which were inspired by reading, such as carrying on conversations differently with specific people, or trying to alter their thinking about a certain relationship or set of relations according to techniques they had read about. They gave me plenty of examples of "successful" utilizations of self-help books. For example, Janet explained how self-help books helped her to monitor and professionalize her behavior at work:

Well, I have learned one thing in particular, which is, I am somebody who has absolutely no patience, and when you're gonna be working with somebody [inexperienced], you have to realize that you have to have some sort of patience and time. . . . [Reading] has taught me to give people a fair chance. . . . And give them opportunities, listen to what people have to say, you know, and not taking sides in an office, which is very important.

But readers also insisted on a book's temporal, immediate importance. For instance, Pat said, "When I don't need it, why do I want to remember it? When I don't need it, I don't care. So I really use it when I need it. I don't know anything about them when I don't need them." Abby describes her "use" of Erich Fromm's The Art of Loving, and Lauren her involvement with the spiritual Course in Miracles similarly:

ABBY: I remember it affected me a lot at the time I read it. . . . It was helpful. . . . I remember talking about it, and talking about relationships with friends in college, so it probably changed my thinking in some ways. It's hard to say exactly how did it change my thinking.

LAUREN: I was just thinking the other day that it must not have done anything at all. It's funny, when you get out of working with a tool like that . . . it feels you maybe never even really did it. It's very hard to measure how things change, and to be perfectly honest, I really can't see clear evidence of it, since I'm not working with it consciously. But at the same time, I'm really sure that it did something.

Self-help books, unlike other types of books read by the women I interviewed, were often discussed as items to be used, as "tools" for accomplishing specific goals. In retrospect, many women find it difficult to articulate exactly how useful a certain book has been in resolving the situation for which it was originally enlisted. The question arises, do readers claim a significance for their reading because they don't want to look back and see their reading as a waste of time? I think not. Most of the women I interviewed spoke freely about books they considered a waste of time. But, as Lauren said, "it's very hard to measure how things change"; perhaps, indeed, it is impossible for a reader to put her finger on how, exactly, she has allowed a book to influence her, if she can see no strong indications of continued influence in the present.

One woman (Sandy) came to question the importance of her reading over the course of our interview:

Talking about this is really making me see why they never really -- you know, I don't remember them. Because I was wondering

why that was, and I was getting all nervous about this because I don't remember them, and there's a reason I don't remember them! . . . I haven't really learned anything. It's funny. I didn't realize that. I thought there'd been some great effect on my life. . . . [I remind her that, prior to this point in our conversation, she has said many good things about self-help books, and she says, frustratedly:] I think I do feel both ways about a lot of things.

I came to recognize that it was unrealistic to think I would be able to measure influence quantitatively, and I came to accept readers' ambiguous replies not as testimony against the notion of lasting effects, but as evidence of the complexity of their reading posts. Most of the women who described ambivalence about their self-help reading attributed this ambivalence to the fact that there were good books and bad ones; the good ones made them feel their reading was worthwhile, while the bad ones led them to see reading as a waste of time.

Reading self-help books can be a momentary means of alleviating the pressure of a certain problem and offering hope for a less stressful future, and may then be forgotten altogether -- as several readers said, used as a "quick fix." Bonnie's comments elucidate this most clearly:

I'm sure -- there's something, when I see the book, and I touch it, it excites me . . . because I'm sure, that within that book -- even though I've read five other books on the same subject -- it's gonna have the answer. . . . You see, the self-help books give me a sense of total possibility. I'll make the right choices, I'll find a man, I'll do everything.

Bonnie compared her self-help habit to drug use; she said she imagined that going from one book to another was like going from one high to another. Self-help reading, was, for her, a fleeting sensation which she looked forward to. She would save books up like treats. Reading

self-help books, then, can be a means of obtaining instant gratification, with no real concern for content. Cindy said that she found reading self-help (and she included biographies as some of her favorite self-help books) to be like a hearing a pep talk. She described reading as one of many creative outlets she would turn to which would help her to feel strong: "I use it almost I guess as a mirror . . . to look at myself and say, 'Don't give in.' You know, 'fight it. You can do it. . . . You will do it.'" Reading can also -- as I found with readers of religious books and feminist books -- be used as a way of continually bolstering a reader's desired conception of the world.

Recently, scholars have discussed the ways in which the perception of meaning is a gendered activity. One well-known example, Matina Horner's incomplete anecdote of successful men and women medical students, is often cited for its contribution to psychology because of the seeming oddity of women's responses. Students were asked to complete the sentence: "after first term finals, Anne [or John] finds herself [himself] at the top of her [his] medical school class," (Gilligan 1982, p.15). Women often assigned a tragic future to Anne, but not to John. This has been most commonly interpreted as an indication of women's "fear of success." Gilligan has since asserted that what women fear is a break in their web of relations with other people, and that traditionally masculine success for women does pose such a threat. Clearly, gender contributes to the interpretation of the story: women bring their direct and indirect experience of success and its ramifications to the task of enlarging the Anne/John anecdote.

In a similar experiment, Gilligan, borrowing a "dilemma" from Kohlberg's tests of moral development, asked eleven-year-old girls and

boys to project a moral ending to the story of a man whose wife's death could be prevented by his obtaining an expensive drug. The druggist will not lower the price of the drug, and the man cannot afford to buy it. Children are asked, "Should [the man] steal the drug" (Gilligan, p. 26). Again, it is not relevant whether the act, itself, of reading varies, nor are the answers given reliant on issues of basic comprehension. Gilligan argues that the situation is perceived differently by boys and girls because, generally speaking, boys and girls learn to make moral judgments using alternative (and often opposing) value structures. Boys are more likely to stick to the rules of a game, to pay attention to issues of legality, while girls are more likely to step outside the constraints of a problem to ensure that what they hold as moral imperatives (in this case, that life should not end because of a lack of money) are not compromised.

Certainly, if women and men gain access to and practice different strategies for structuring meaning, this will affect their lives as readers:

Combining the formulations of feminist psychoanalysis and literary theorists . . . we may deduce . . . that women and men, treated differently as girls and boys, quite probably will have recourse in later life to different treatment, different texts . . . and that even when reading the same text, women and men quite probably will respond to, cathect with, and derive psychic satisfaction from different aspects of the text. (Miner 1984, pp. 5-6)

This is not to deny the influence wielded by the "masculinist" reading strategies we all learn in school (as discussed earlier), but rather, to assert that differences in taste and reading experience may persist

despite formal education. From birth, women and men are bombarded with cultural messages about gender, with which they construct the hazy line between male and female realms of appropriate behavior. Gender becomes messy: women are often taught to aspire up to the male realm, and away from the least valued areas within the female realm, while also receiving the traditional line on what femininity should be. Reading is one of those experiences so deeply embedded in gender issues, and yet, so taken for granted in itself, that it is nearly impossible to point to clear-cut differences in reading behavior between men and women, outside of counting who buys what and who doesn't.

Self-help literature is a genre which participants recognize as existing specifically for women. This is true even for self-help books that are not overtly marketed toward a female audience (books which do not have the word "women" in their titles, and which do not have obviously "feminine" covers). Readers see women either as uniquely equipped with positive abilities which enable us to use this kind of book, or as uniquely disadvantaged or incompetent in a society which discriminates against women, and thus, induces us to turn to self-help books for guidance.

I asked the readers I interviewed to talk about both the reasons why they, themselves, were drawn to self-help books, and more generally about why they feel this genre is particularly appealing to women. In describing their personal use of self-help books, participants would describe certain concrete problems, or areas about which they sought information for particular individual reasons, whereas their general impressions about other readers were much more firmly linked to

social conditions.

Twelve women described their reading as primarily focused on themselves; they read to find information that would help them work on certain characteristics which they felt needed amending (such as becoming more assertive or more organized), or they read hoping to attain self-understanding, or simply to gain edifying information into psychological matters in general. Often this self-work was connected to problems with other people; assertiveness, for instance, is a way of resisting the manipulations of others. Shelley said that reading books on assertiveness training helped her to dissect the problem -- lack of assertiveness -- as it operated for her:

I think that reading those sorts of books helps you to, first of all, identify what the issues are: that the behavior has certain sources, and that there are reasons -- look at the underpinnings of the behavior. And once you begin to examine your own behavior, then through experience, and hopefully, positive reinforcement in those experiences, you're more willing to take those kinds of risks.

As a child, Shelley felt she was taught to be afraid to ask for what she wanted, and to feel like a victim. She first recognized a problem when she was placed in a supervisory position at work, and "wasn't able to handle it." Reading self-help books helped her to gain this insight, and to feel "much more assertive."

Liz read Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People (1936) to help her deal with a tense work situation, where she was having trouble with someone she supervised:

The woman who's the secretary for our office constantly ran away. You know, she would say ... "There's something to pick up

somewhere," and she'd disappear for an hour. . . . And I . . . would just say, "Donna, you can't do that!" And Donna would just go. . . . And my boss was getting upset at me for not keeping up with Donna, and so I said, "You know, this isn't working." My friend Bill had just read this book . . . and he said, "You know, maybe some of this would help out in your situation."

Reading the book did help, Liz said, because "it made me examine how I was going about trying to solve a problem. And what I was doing was trying to express myself without ever really listening to [Donna's] underlying message." Carnegie's analysis convinced Liz that Donna was bored in her job, and that she absented herself to demonstrate this -- perhaps unconsciously -- to the rest of the office staff. "And what I did was, instead of telling Donna what I wanted her to do . . . I listened to why she ran away . . . and why she didn't want to be in the office. And we reexamined the tasks to which she was assigned, so that she had more to do in the office, and she could feel useful there." In this instance, Liz was motivated by a relational problem, but she conceived of the situation as self-oriented; her own behavior, she felt, was crucial to a satisfactory resolution of the problem.

A majority (18) of the participants in my study read books relating to relationships with men because they were dissatisfied with the ones they had; because they wanted to understand something problematic in a specific relationship; or because a relationship had recently ended and they didn't understand why. Women in both categories (self-centered or other-directed readers) said that feelings of depression or dissatisfaction would often impel them to turn to self-help books. Women who read self-help because of their problems in relationships ranged from those who were very dissatisfied with

this aspect of their lives, to those who thought there was always room for improvement or introspective examination.

Evelyn, at one extreme, felt that her relationships with men were completely and inexplicably terrible, and through self-help reading, she sought reasons for why this was:

If I understand things, I feel a little bit better about them; I don't feel so overwhelmed and so helpless. Because I've been very, very hurt, and very confused and very despairing in my relationships with men. I've been hurt in my relationships with women, and with others -- meaning [my] children -- too, you know, but nothing like -- it's not the same. It's the depth, the intensity, the confusion, the craziness. I could always kind of figure out what's happening with myself and women friends, children -- but not with men. I've always felt very victimized ... and this has been helpful, so that maybe I could explain it to myself a little bit.

Ultimately, Evelyn said, reading was unsatisfactory, because it did not offer analyses which she felt were complex enough, and thus the proposed solutions were superficial. "At the end," she said, "they just tell you the same thing anyway: 'Don't do it! Stop!'" Evelyn continued to read self-help books despite her feelings that they were over-generalizing and simplistic because she found them soothing, because they made her feel less alone, and because she continued to hope that she would one day find a book which would offer a suitable answer.

Sarah said that, similarly, when she broke up with her boyfriend, she turned to self-help books -- checking about ten books out of the library at once -- because: "I felt totally unable to deal with it myself." Like Evelyn, Sarah said, "I was trying to put meaning to: why did Gary

and I break up? . . . 'cause, you figure if you see it in black and white, it's like, 'Oh, good, I feel better.'" And also like Evelyn, Sarah did not really expect the books to provide her with an answer, but rather, to make her feel less depressed while she was reading. "I think [they] try to sort of simplify things that are really, like, complex, and I don't end up getting too much help from them. But I do get certain ideas," she said. Sarah said she did use simplistic strategies offered by self-help authors from time to time, and that they had been effective. "Like in the How to Fall Out of Love with Someone, it had something like: If you can't get the person out of your mind . . . you can go to the extent of like, smelling rotten eggs when you think of the person."

Sandy said that reading self-help books helped her to become more tolerant of "differences" between her husband and herself, and that it encouraged her willingness to compromise with him. She said:

In my marriage, we come from two different ideologies, I think, and you have to find a middle ground. . . . He's very willing to . . . compromise, to see things other people see . . . He's come a long way . . . from doing all the bills, and doing everything for me, to being more of a partner. And I think that's learned behavior for a lot of men -- it was learned behavior for him. . . . I'm not sure what the direct effect would be, but reading someone who says -- like (Leo) Buscaglia says -- "You have to be very accepting of another person but not let that modify your behavior," I guess, [helped me] just be more accepting of the way [my husband] is. Because I was very judgmental about what he does. . . . [Reading has made me more] accepting that he has a choice to make. It's not my choice to make.

Through her reading, Sandy has come to conceive of her husband's and her own behavior as much more separate; she feels less of a need to try to influence him, as long as he remains willing to "compromise,"

and she feels stronger in her unwillingness to adapt to his expectations, if they are not in keeping with her (feminist) beliefs. Reading self-help books, then, can be seen as a means of not changing, a way to defend the integrity of one's views by aligning them with one's actions.

Nell described an instance of how a self-help book helped her to tackle a very concrete problem in her marriage. She said that she began reading Intimate Partners by Maggie Scarf because she was newly married and just generally interested in the topic of marriage. She found, as she read, that Scarf's analysis was applicable to the resentment she felt at her mother-in-law's constant attentions to her husband. She said, "It gave me, I think, a bit more insight into what was really going on there." She felt that reading Intimate Partners enabled her to understand her own anger at her mother-in-law's overbearing behavior (she felt invaded, and felt a judgment was being made against her as a wife) and helped her to understand the reasons behind her mother-in-law's behavior (her mother-in-law felt lonely, and was trying to keep herself necessary in her newly-married son's life). Nell said she also discussed her feelings about her new reading of the situation with her husband, and that together, they had discussed ways of resolving the problem. So for Nell, this particular self-help book enhanced communication in her marriage, which, she said, was "basically a very good marriage" in the first place.

Three of these (18) women whose reading centered on relationships said that they first sought out self-help advice after they were divorced, and a fourth said her divorce intensified her reading. Carol explained that after her divorce, "I had a lot of free time, and just

wanted to explore my feelings, and started reading them. And a lot of the ones [I read] at that particular point in time were dealing with . . . oh, self-confidence, self-image, and things of that nature, and positive attitude." So, for Carol, the break-up of her marriage led her to become more introspective.

Whether their reading was self- or other-oriented -- or both -- participants recognized that the "problems" they perceived which led them to self-help books were often issues with which women, in particular, were likely to be concerned. In their more general explanations for why the genre attracts women readers, participants differed in their valuation of self-help reading.

Val, Carol, and Lauren see women's use of self-help books as part of a skill women have in dealing with the emotional realm of life. Men, in contrast, are seen as inept, emotionally.

VAL: I think we're emotionally more secure than a man could even begin to want, need or desire. . . . Emotionally we're able to deal with every situation, whereas men have trouble just emotionally, with a lot of things that come across. That's what I think. And I don't think any self-help book is going to change that for a man. You know, they just don't have the same make-up women do. Emotionally, we're just totally opposite.

CAROL: I think women are more open to . . . be in touch with their feelings, and find things to make changes, where men avoid issues. And they don't, you know, they don't want to be confronted with a problem. They want to avoid it. And women will confront it. Women are the ones to take the initiative, and make the changes, and make all the effort and find out what can be done.

LAUREN: I think women tend to have more of an active world acting in and thinking about things, and reinterpreting things, and experiencing emotions, and experiencing maybe reactions to the

outer world. . . . I think there's really a live inner space, which I don't think is any less real than what the outer world is, and I don't share this kind of contempt for it that some feminists do [where] it's just like a mushy, emotional, ridiculous, housewife, unreal space that isn't valid. . . . I think there's more tendency for women to work with that space, and imagination, and changing attitudes . . . resolving inner conflict and the inner conflict of others, being mediators for people, being emotional centers for people.

Val, Carol, and Lauren described their own reading as providing a source of strength and growth. They tended to attribute this quality to the reading of women in general, as well, when I asked them to generalize. Belenky, et al., set up a continuum in Women's Ways Of Knowing, in which the thinking behaviors they value most highly are labeled "connected knowing." Connected knowers, they write,

want to embrace all the pieces of the self in some ultimate sense of the whole -- daughter, friend, mother, lover, nurturer, thinker, artist, advocate. They want to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men -- the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. In women, there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. And they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity. (p. 137)

Connected knowers at the top of the authors' continuum combine the best of what has stereotypically been defined as masculine rationality and female intuitive knowledge. They are holistic in their approaches to their lives and to the world around them.²

By describing their reading as an example of "emotional security," "confronting problems," and enhancing a "live inner space," Val, Carol, and Lauren attest to reading's integrative capacity. These women, like

the "connected knowers" discussed in Women's Ways of Knowing, describe their reading as part of an effort to unify their life, to confront even painful sides of their selves, in a way in which they feel men are incapable of doing. They also echo Gilligan's assertions that women are nurturers (for whatever reasons), and that this "ethic of care" (as Gilligan names it) motivates them to read books which can be applied to their relationships with others.

Other readers' responses to my question, "Why do you think women are so much more likely to read self-help books than men are?" highlighted the same themes over and over again: women are more emotional, and men find the emotional world alien. Women are more comfortable seeking help for problems they perceive in their lives, and are more willing to recognize that problems exist than men are. In Bonnie's words: "Men would rather go bowling, or go to a ballgame or drink three beers. A man could be in enormous pain, and someone would say, 'How are you?' 'Oh, fine' -- even to a friend." Since women are more inclined to express themselves verbally than men are, according to Bonnie, they are more apt to talk or read about their problems, since, "a book is almost like talking to someone, so it's kind of verbal." Bonnie saw her own reading experiences as interactive, "like a dialogue," and as a skill she had learned well as part of her socialization as a woman in this culture.

Occasionally, readers would see women's self-help reading as evidence of women's emotional deficiencies, as compared with men. Sarah, Nancy, and Mona described women's predilection to read self-help as a step taken out of weakness or unhappiness, and as part of women's general overindulgence in things emotional:

SARAH: [Reading self-help books is] a passive kind of thing; it's not an active kind of thing. You just kind of sit back and the book tells you what to do. . . . I think men would tend more to, like, go out and do something and not tend to just sit and be passive and have somebody feeding them stuff.

NANCY: They say it's a man's world out there, right? And women let themselves be manipulated all the time -- and I'm not saying all women, but a certain type -- I don't know. It just comes, I guess, from centuries, you know, where women always . . . were manipulated by them. And some men feel so superior. Women have a tendency to love too much, and they go by their emotions, and they let everything get carried away.

MONA: Some women feel they have more to deal with than men, more emotional problems to deal with than men, because what you would take seriously, most men might just, oh, they'll brush it off and say, "that's not important". . . . Like, some women feel they're stuck in a rut. They're not working. They're housewives. . . . They just do the same thing over and over and they get so tired of themselves. They're looking for an escape, something else to do. So they figure, "Where am I going from here? What can I do to heal myself?" In that way, they may just look for a self-help book or something like that.

Sarah, focusing on women's passivity, seemed rather contemptuous of her own reading. Sarah had a master's degree in social work, and viewed her reading of these popular-psychological books as both an extension of and a deviation from her professional interests. She knew that she turned to self-help books in times of bewilderment or trouble, and felt that they fell far short of prescribing solutions which she could implement. At times in our discussion, she sounded almost resentful of her use of self-help books. Both Nancy and Mona, however, were only occasional readers of self-help, and spoke as if they were distinguishing themselves from needier women users in their

descriptions and criticisms of women readers in general. Neither had found self-help reading to be an especially empowering experience.

Other readers attributed women's reading to more specific factors which currently isolate women, and create a need for comfort, of a sort. As Sandy, a 26 year-old self-defined feminist, said:

I think it's harder to be a woman. . . . I think that our roles right now are very complex. . . . It's kind of embarrassing almost, to talk about it. Especially, I have a hard time because all of the women I work with are much older than I am, and their experiences are different. I mean, they even had a harder time being women. And yet, they had an easier time, because the women that are older than 35, they came at the height of the women's movement, where it was good to be feminist, and we're kind of at the tail end . . . where it's, "what are you bellyaching about? Everything's wonderful now". . . . I just think that there's no place to go for advice. You certainly don't go to your clergy, Because they'll yell at you. . . . The impression I get is that there aren't as many women's groups as there used to be. . . . My impression of the 60s and early 70s is that it was much easier to network. And now, because we're supposed to be assimilated already, I think it's much harder.

Sandy sees self-help reading as filling in gaps -- or providing outlets for discouragement -- which were once satisfied by organized religion or feminist groups. Historically, American women have had more close-knit personal networks than American men, through which they offered each other support and aid in all realms of their lives (see, e.g: Cott 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1985). It is possible that the emphasis placed on friendship in women's lives has diminished as women have entered the paid labor market in greater and greater numbers, as the division of labor has become more specialized, and as families have become smaller and more isolated. All of these trends may have helped

to professionalize advice-giving and receiving. Conversely, the professionalization of advice-giving may have made obsolete certain therapeutic "tasks" formerly fulfilled by friendship, as a matter of course. Women's increasing reliance on distanced professionals (therapists as well as therapeutic authors) can be seen as another example of the increasing institutionalization and packaging of areas of women's experience -- once considered to be simply a part of everyday life -- into services which can be mass-produced for purchase.

Reading self-help books allows women to feel a part of an invisible, and thus, somewhat illusory, community of other women readers who share their concerns and problems. Most of the women I interviewed said that they talked to other people -- at least, occasionally -- about the books they read. Many said that they would recommend books they liked to their relatives or friends. So, books can enable women to make this illusive community real, to a certain extent. Sometimes readers find sharing self-help books with others beneficial, and sometimes not.

Several participants mentioned that they no longer recommend books because they have done so in the past, and their friends or relatives (most often, husbands) did not read the books. Carol and Vanessa both said that they talked about the self-help books they read only with each other. Carol said she would recommend a book to Vanessa if she "found that it 's been inspirational and helpful to me, and if I know that either she's either dealing with a similar situation, or the potential could arise." Carol and Vanessa read a lot of the same books, and feel that this type of reading separates them in a positive way from their friends who don't read self-help. Carol said about

Vanessa: "She's about the only person that is -- I'm not sure if this would be the appropriate word, but -- intense enough to either have a discussion of this nature with, or that would enjoy these type of books." Joan said that she often discussed self-help books with her friends, and that, in the past, she had done this in an organized setting: "Three of us had formed a little C-R group way back. . . . And we tend to, when we get together, always talk about what we've read, because I think we're still in that kind of trying to help each other kind of thing." Self-help, for Joan and her friends, became a group effort.

Most of the women I interviewed did not habitually discuss their self-help reading with others. Most women said that if it "came up" in conversation they would discuss their reading, or if they read a book which they thought was particularly applicable to a friend's life, they would recommend it. Liz said:

I do [recommend books], if [my friends] seem to be in this kind of state where they would be, you know, at all interested. . . . Sometimes I do it if they like, want to dump this huge load of things that are related, you know. Like I kept on hearing about this woman's arguments with her boyfriend. And I was like, you know, "you do the same thing all the time, so . . . why don't you read this, and see if you can get out of the rut of it?" But mostly, you know, unless I hear it twice, I don't recommend books, because I figure that they're fairly, you know, kind of personal, and . . . I guess I basically feel that a lot of people don't read them, and would be insulted if I suggested it.

Readers were well aware that many people view self-help books as trashy or wasteful reading. Bonnie told me that upon finding out that she read self-help books, a friend of hers said, "You're so intelligent; I can't believe you read that crap!" Knowledge of disapproval or

condescension impelled many of the women I interviewed to keep their reading to themselves.

Many readers said that they would not read certain self-help books in public, especially at work. Carrying a book like Smart Women Foolish Choices around, Bonnie said, is "really making a statement" that she would prefer not to make. She said -- and many other readers concurred -- that she would prefer to read self-help books "in the privacy of [her] own home." Just as these women read to feel less alien, they don't want other people deciding that they are maladjusted or stupid for reading these books.

Throughout my interviews, I asked women about the differences between reading self-help books and reading other kinds of books. Their interpretations of reading varied. Some women indicated that they distinguished self-help from fiction in terms of art: fiction, seen as art, could generate feelings for readers which non-fiction could not. Beauty was to be found there. Though identification with characters is also a part of reading fiction, novels were not read for didactic purposes; rather, this identification was valued as an end in itself. Fiction was seen as having a more profound effect than self-help books could by some readers; and thus it was considered to provide a reading experience that was ultimately more valuable (than that provided by self-help reading). But fiction was also described as a provider of "escapes" from everyday life, whereas self-help reading made real life all the more inescapable by highlighting its most painful aspects. Many readers voiced both views: that fiction was a more sophisticated type of reading than self-help reading, and that it was a more escapist (and, consequently, useless) way to spend time. Certain kinds of fiction

were seen as more admirable reading than others: Janet complained about women reading romances (which she said she had read avidly as a girl, herself):

I feel that all the women -- grown women -- who are ... involved in a career should try to keep away from reading too many of those Danielle Steele and Harlequin romances ... which I totally object to because I think it's very silly reading. Because it creates no knowledge for you. All it does is entertain you for a couple of hours. ...

Self-help reading, in contrast, was seen by readers like Janet as more practical and applicable -- definitely not entertaining. Other readers valued self-help more than other sorts of reading because it dealt with "reality" as opposed to the "make-believe" worlds offered by novelists.

Rena said:

When I go to the library I look at the non-fiction, I'm not very interested in fiction unless somebody has recommended something that they really have found good. ... I don't like love stories. I don't like mysteries. I did read them when I was a kid, but I sort of feel I know them already. I mean, there are just so many plots to novels, and there are just so many mysteries that there can be. ... But I think the other is really always fresh because ... you're reading about something that pertains to you and your life.

Self-help makes stronger demands on readers than fiction does, participants felt. Self-help becomes difficult when it forces a confrontation with painful problems. (It can do so only if the reader allows it this power, and readers all have veto power.) Though reading can be painful, it can also lead to a strengthened self-conception. Molly explained that, "those books helped me to identify the fact that I

was not a victim." She contradicted the popular notion I heard from many non-readers reacting to my dissertation topic: that self-help books encourage self-blame, and lead readers to shoulder responsibility for the consequences of deeply-entrenched societal institutions (such as patriarchy, which provides a plentiful supply of abusive men) over which they wield no real control.

When I asked another reader, Lucy, to explain what she felt she gained from her reading, she said, "I keep thinking that word, individuation; I think that's what I get. You know, trying to find out where my center is, being an individual, appreciating myself. You know, celebrating myself, 'cause I'm a unique person." Many readers discuss self-help reading as a way to gain control over certain aspects of their lives, a way to bolster up their self-confidence and to make them feel good about themselves, but they do not see these books as a force which will "change the world." Nor do readers expect self-help books to offer an all-encompassing plan to live by. (Readers of religious self-help books are an exception, and will be discussed in the next chapter.)

The women readers of romance fiction interviewed by Radway often described their reading as a fulfilling "escape" from everyday life:

[T]hese women believe romance reading enables them to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to indulge in fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles as wives and mothers. Romance fiction, as they experience it, is, therefore, compensatory literature. It supplies them with an important emotional release that is proscribed in daily life because the social role with which they identify themselves leaves little room for guiltless, self-interested pursuit of individual pleasure. (pp. 95-6)

Self-help readers are less likely (than the romance readers Radway interviewed) to describe their reading as pleasurable -- that is, as escape -- though it does provide them with good feelings and with a different sort of emotional release. Bonnie, for instance, described her excitement to see and hold new books, and her obsessiveness in simply shopping for them: "The shopping for the books is very ritualized. It's like an anorectic [anorexic] with food. I have to go to B. Dalton, I have to look at the whole rack, take them out, touch them." She laughed at her own behavior, but assured me that what she said was true.

Frequent readers would describe looking forward to new self-help books, even hoarding them. Several said they knew which one they would turn to the next time they felt a need. The reading itself, however comforting, was not seen as diverting, like reading fiction. As Bonnie explained,

[With] the novel, you can forget yourself a little bit, it's like watching a movie. Even though you see similarities, or things that touch you, it's different. It's outside of you. The self-help book is piercing right into you. . . . You're always -- you're reading the book -- but you're looking at the book separately and objectively, saying, "How does this impact on me?" The novel, you enter the world of the characters.

And Cindy, who said that she considered biographies to be self-help books because they enabled her to reflect on her own life and because they gave her ideas about her own artistic development, valued these books for their reality; she said: "I like biographies 'cause I can relate to the person, see their actual face in my mind. . . . But when you're reading fiction, you know it's a story. It could have very strong possible truisms in it, but it's still a story. And you can separate

yourself from it." Cindy saw biographies as true stories; and she felt the truth had the power to educate the reader in a way that fiction (untruth) cannot.

Readers see the activity of reading self-help books as a serious and self-reflective activity in which they seek a deep connection with the material they read. Despite the plenitude of case-study "characters" served up by self-help authors with whom readers can (and do) identify, this identification does not result in a detachment from reality the way it can in fiction. And though these women may find themselves at times in the characters of a work of fiction, this accomplishment is the whole point of their reading of self-help books.

When reading self-help, participants said they are more likely to subvert the physical authority of the text than they would in fiction: they skip around, read halfway through and abandon the book, read only the chapters they think will pertain to them or their particular situation, or even use a book by reading the back cover and quickly skimming through it in the bookstore. These methods do not mean that these women necessarily consider this a more casual or less demanding type of reading. At one point when she was reading self-help heavily, Carol kept a notebook which helped her to organize and encapsulize her reading:

[A] lot of times, during the particularly stressful period in my life, I even kept like a little journal of certain paragraphs or things that had specific impact on my life at the time, where I would just write them down and keep them handy so that I wouldn't have to go back and thumb through the whole book to locate that particular comment.

As the "connected thinkers" discussed by Belenky, et al., do,

self-help readers "establish a communion with what they are trying to understand. They use the language of intimacy to describe the relationship between the knower and the known" (p. 143). Self-help readers often spoke of their books as "friends," acknowledging that such a statement sounded "sappy" or "silly," but emphasizing how comforting an activity their reading could be. The women I interviewed described finding both nurturance and support through bad times by reading self-help books. Although this reading does not necessarily lead to any radical change in women's lives, it does provide its readers with, at the very least, a momentary respite, a chance to be self-reflective and evaluative. These are opportunities which women, who are often cast as providers of such nurturance and counsel for men and children, have difficulty finding and receiving from other people.

chapter two

SHRINKING GOD:
PSYCHO-RELIGIOUS SELF-HELP READING

Her little Bible was extremely precious now; Ellen had never gone to it with a deeper sense of need; and never did she find more comfort in being able to disburden her heart in prayer of its load of cares and wishes. Never more than now had she felt the preciousness of that Friend who draws closer to his children the closer they draw to him. . . . [I]t was a joy to think that He who hears prayer is equally present with all his people, and that though thousands of miles lies between the petitioner and the petitioned for, the breath of prayer may span the distance and pour blessings on the far-off head. (Warner 1892 (rpt. 1987), p. 540)

What was in [women's magazines] was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality. (Atwood, 1985, p. 201)

In The Wide Wide World, Susan Warner's bestselling novel of the late nineteenth century, the protagonist is orphaned and mistreated. She finds hope and reassurance through the active practice of Christianity. Daily Bible reading makes her miseries bearable; being a Christian provides a structure for her life. In Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, the title character finds a momentary respite from an overwhelmingly oppressive life in a future predicated on the current beliefs of the fundamentalist right. Religion, for the handmaid, structures her prison. Her clandestine perusal of a woman's magazine

of the 1970s in a society in which reading is forbidden for women allows her a reverie similar to the spiritual release described by Warner.

In my discussions with readers of self-help books, I repeatedly heard that reading was prompted by a "search for answers" to overarching questions, on the one hand, such as: "Why are we here?" or "What happens after death?" and less esoteric and more pragmatic questions on the other: "How can I get along with so-and-so at work?" or "How do you exist in a world where you have to be appealing to men, but you also want to do something for yourself?" Readers differed in their opinions about whether or not answers to the "biggies" could be found through reading, and about which types of self-help books (religious or psychological or New Age) could best facilitate such a search. What these readers shared, regardless of the magnitude of their questions, was a quest for order and for sense. And though many readers articulated their search in specific terms -- telling about reading to eradicate procrastination, or to deal with depression brought on by a severe case of asthma -- most also described their reading as part of a struggle to define themselves in terms of everything else, a struggle to gain a coherent world-view.

Recent self-help books are most often associated with the field of psychology, and may seem, on the surface, to comprise a secular genre. But many of the readers I interviewed spoke about their spiritual "growth" and religious convictions. Five women (of thirty) had read books that they described as religious self-help, and five others had read New Age books (including one reader of astrology). Odd though it may seem, a belief in supreme powers outside the self (which forms

the foundation of religious belief) has developed strong ties with a genre that offers guidance toward gaining supreme faith in the self, itself, predicated upon the principles of psychology-made-simple. I will explore the links between religious and secular quests, between mainstream self-improvement, traditionally religious works, and New Age readings.

Perhaps the only thing one can safely say about the spiritual state of American society today is that a smörgasbord of possibilities exists for those who are looking for a place to put their faith. In the eighties, we hear less about est and more about New Age religion, less about acupuncture and more about crystals with healing power. We are assaulted less often by proselytizing Hare Krishna in airports than we are by Jehovah's Witnesses appearing on our doorsteps on Saturday mornings. "Deprogramming" sounds like it might have more to do with evangelical cable shows going off the air than with parents retrieving their children from the Moonies. We are not worried, as we were in the 1970s, about strange cults snatching away our children, but more about hard-core traditional religious groups calling them "back."

We hear less now, too, of new kinds of therapies than we did in the seventies, when people were walking on coals and primally screaming. Encounter and consciousness-raising groups, if any, are seen as remnants of a more touchy-feely time. Instead of "getting in touch with their feelings," people try to figure out what their priorities are -- a pragmatic 1980s touch which contrasts with, even contradicts, the mushiness of the 1960s and '70s, pushing self-indulgence aside to let in efficiency. Yoga has yielded to Jane Fonda, who strips exercise of spirituality and drowns out the possibility of meditation with rock

music. But now, more than ever before, our language is saturated with the jargon first popularized by the human potential movement; we discuss "having our needs fulfilled," "working at our relationships," "growing emotionally" through various involvements.

Religion can offer a world-view through which believers may understand their lives in relation to eternity; religion can be a way of fixing one's gaze, and putting an end to disturbing questions. It can be a way of making sense out of non-sense, resigning oneself to the seemingly unalterable in life, or, as Marx described it, an "opium of the people" (1844 [rpt. 1963], p. 44).

Psychology can do all the same things: in all the ways religion can be seen as liberating or limiting and reactionary, so can psychology. Many recent self-help books are based upon an amalgam of both religious and psychological thinking. We have reached a point at which it is increasingly difficult to tell where one starts and the other begins.

Many scholars have attempted to define the current American spiritual and psychological climate, and to explain how it reached this point. Most see the American collective conscience as religiously fractured, fragmented and pluralistic, and overly dominated by a therapeutic, self-centered mentality (Rieff 1966; Bellah 1976; Bellah, et al. 1985; Conway and Siegelman 1978; Glock 1976; Robbins and Anthony 1981; Rieff 1966; Rosen 1975; Tipton 1982a and 1982b; and Yankelovich 1981). But among these writers, there is less agreement about the precise nature of the convergence between the religious and psychological roots of what is happening now, what the present state of affairs means in terms of today's social world, and where it will

lead us culturally. And none attempts to reveal how women's and men's experience of psycho-religion differs. I cannot offer a solution to these debates; but I believe highlighting them can help unravel -- or perhaps reknit would be a more appropriate word -- the fabric of psychological and spiritual practice in everyday life.

The predominant analysis of the psycho-religious scene in America today contends that our age is absorbed with a therapeutic approach to living, which, to some degree, has replaced religious institutions and seriously limited the social consciousness of its adherents by encouraging them to focus their energies inward (Bellah et al. 1985; Johnson 1981; Rieff 1966; Rosen 1975). The dominance of the therapeutic world-view is seen as the result of a combination of factors: a highly fragmented division of labor within a competitive profit-oriented system (alienated labor); the breakdown of trust in traditional authoritative institutions (namely, the family, government and the church), people's growing willingness to doubt the credibility of such institutions, and modern anti-authoritarian developments in psychology since Freud. Lack of direction, lack of commitment, and lack of community prevail, instigating introspection and self-involvement on a grand scale (Bellah, et al. 1985; Bellah 1976; Mannheim 1956; Glock 1976; Conway and Siegelman 1978; Tipton 1982b; and Yankelovich 1981). This interpretation, whether applied to Germans in the 1930s (Mannheim) or to the youth of San Francisco in the 1970s (Glock and Bellah), makes sense: social complexity leads to complications, contradictions, and conflict. The idea that modernization (industrialization, technological "advancement," urbanization) chips away at strong faith is certainly not new. In 1893, Durkheim described

the declining salience of religion that accompanies increasing division of labor:

[T]he more general the common conscience becomes, the greater the place it leaves to individual variations. When God is far from things and men, his action is no longer omni-present, nor ubiquitous. There is nothing fixed save abstract rules which can be freely applied in very different ways. Then they no longer have the same ascendancy or force of resistance. (p. 290).

However, the spiritual cohesiveness of our past to which many dismayed contemporary writers allude may be no more than idealistic yearning, for, according to Mary Douglas: "there is no good evidence that a high level of spirituality has generally been reached by the mass of mankind in past times, and none at all that their emotional and intellectual lives were necessarily well-integrated by religion" (1982, p. 29). She argues that secularization cannot be proven to be an effect of modernity.

In his essay, "Voluntary Establishment: Mainline Religion in Transition" (1982), Wade Clark Roof writes: "The era of countercultural protest and institutional alienation has passed, yet the themes of personal freedom and individual fulfillment are very much alive" (p. 142). Such values need not be taken as an indication that religious energy in America has been fading away, but simply that it has become more varied, and more self-oriented with recent modern developments. Roof argues that individualized religious beliefs are fostered through allegiance to "mystical" groups -- or New Age groups, now -- along with a regrowth in adherence to extremist factions of traditional religions, but that "mainline" (politically liberal, or middle-of-the-road) religious movements are suffering a loss of

membership. He writes: "Believing without belonging is an increasingly popular form of religious expression" (p.142).

Another argument central to scholarly evaluation of the modern self-absorbed religious spirit centers on whether or not a therapeutic approach means that people will become so self-consumed that they will not be able to interpret events in their lives using a sociological frame or a sense of social responsibility. Do psychologically-oriented books encourage a narrow view -- a laissez-faire conception of social interaction, of success (whether it be financial, romantic, or emotional)?

Richard Rosen, who derides the recent popular psychology phenomenon as "psychobabble," asserts that a single-minded focus on the individual results in an egocentric world-view, in which people are erroneously encouraged to feel that they control every aspect of their destinies:

One of psychobabble's problems is its insistence on interpreting the individual's history and history in general as the result of conscious choices; in this, psychobabble has fed both on the tendency toward shallow political analysis and sloganeering that was certainly one feature of the sixties counterculture as well as on the human potential movement with its emphasis on ego psychology at the expense of a deeper, psychodynamic critique. (1975, p. 6)

Rosen criticizes pop-psychology not for its ignorance of sociology, but for its glossing of pure clinical psychology, which he respects, but does not define clearly.

Bellah, like Rosen, traces the roots of overwhelming self-involvement to the sixties, which he describes as a time which

caused "the erosion of the legitimacy of the American way of life." Bellah attributes more critical capabilities to those involved in the destruction than Rosen does, but the results are no more attractive. "[O]ut of the shattered hopes of the sixties there has emerged a cynical privatism, a narrowing of sympathy and concern to the smallest possible circle, that is truly frightening" (1976, pp. 341-2). Though we may possess the faculties necessary to communicate, we are too apathetic to bother.

Yankelovich (1981), Conway and Siegelman (1978), and Tipton (1982a and 1982b) concur with Bellah's indictment of the past as a morass of events and trends that have boggled the collective mind of America. They add fuel to Rosen's depiction of the sixties' creation of a language so full of meaningless jargon that it can't be applied successfully toward genuine expression, and which limits its users' abilities to adequately take stock of the world around them.

Yankelovich describes a conversation with one of the people he interviewed:

An excessive use of "need" language, borrowed from self-psychology, makes it hard for her to think clearly. She can't arrive at lucid judgments about her life in these terms. She can't understand her true choices -- within the private world she has created for herself as well as within the larger world she shares with others. (1981, p. 54)

The therapeutic approach has filtered into the way we think, or describe our thoughts through language, and presumably into the way we behave, as notions about satisfaction, self-determination, and obligations have altered. New religious movements (such as New Age) are considered a product of a solipsistic popular psychology, and like

it, are labeled anti-social twists on the theme of frustrated lack of connections.

In a recent study conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White, a cross-section of 1500 Americans were asked to compare themselves with their perceptions of their parents in terms of happiness and autonomy. People were likely to see themselves as happier and more autonomous than their parents, regardless of race, economic status, political orientation, geographical location, or gender.¹

Yankelovich cites a Michigan study conducted in the 1950s and again in the 1970s, which shows that the more recently polled group worries more than the earlier group (1981, p.183). This study also reveals that "the number of Americans who believe their unhappiness and tension is their own fault diminished in the interval between the two studies -- from 13 percent in the earlier period to 8 percent in the late seventies" (p.184). Yankelovich considers this surprising information, in "an era dominated by self-assertive psychologies which tell people their destinies are in their own hands (p. 184). He also claims that Americans are turning the political malaise of the seventies inward, "so that pessimism about the nation's economic future now breeds pessimism about one's personal prospects as well" (p. 183).

Yankelovich resolves the contradictions between his depictions of Americans as generally happy (and happier than they think their parents were) yet, more likely to spend time worrying (though blaming themselves less for their problems than the previous generation did), and as increasingly depressive and introspective, by concluding that these conflicting states of mind result from a deep-seated knowledge

that the prosperity of the 1950s will never come again. Americans suffer from a sort of combination of the stages psychologists have assigned to the process of grief. Yankelovich implies that people deceive themselves about the control they have over their lives, and that, ironically, they seek control most when they feel they don't have any.

Women are uniquely situated amid the confusion produced by the sixties, in part, because research has so long neglected or trivialized our experience, but more importantly, because women's interactions with both psychological and religious institutions has always been unique. American women have long used religion as a means of reassurance that a better world existed, creating woman-centered, comforting and empowering religious communities (Cott 1977; Douglas 1977; Simonds and Rothman forthcoming; Tompkins 1985). What does religious reading do for women, then, and how do its effects compare with psychological self-help reading?

Many of the women I interviewed see their reading as a result of the increasingly weakening influence of institutional forces (most often mentioned were religion and family). These changes are viewed as having been sparked by the political activities of the 1960s. For women, the decade of the sixties ought not be held responsible for the political or social apathy of today, and ridiculed for its unfocused radicalism, but should be seen, rather, as an inspiration in reactionary times. The sixties mood, whatever it was exactly, was not the creator of the present mess, however it might be defined, but a potential revolutionary force which has been silenced.

Ehrenreich, Jacobs and Hess (1987) argue that for women, the

sixties was a time not only of awakening politically, but sexually as well. They chart this change through sex manuals which draw on popular-psychology. These books are even anti-religious in their adherence to self-centeredness and sensual fulfillment. Can adherence to psychological principles offer a valuation of the self that would not be possible within traditional Judeo-Christian pre- and proscriptions for what womanhood should mean? The answer is not so clear, according to Ehrenreich, et al. They demonstrate the complexity of advice offered to women by including a chapter about the influx of popular psychological notions about sexuality into Fundamentalist Christian prescriptive literature for women. However bizarre the result of this mix (and it is bizarre), the very existence of such a merger indicates that it may be impossible to try to separate the psychological from the religious components of belief. Indeed, the testimony of the religious readers I interviewed, none of whom are completely fundamentalist in their views, reveals the odd, yet entrenched, union of psychology and religion. There are, however, distinct differences between the two fields, which resist combination.

PSYCHOLOGICAL READING

Many psychologically-oriented self-help authors want to deemphasize women's connections with others. Even some self-defined feminist authors conclude that women's problems could be solved if we would only strive to be more like men: more aggressive, more detached, more rational. Beginning with Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963), women are told that our "overinvestment" in others (men and children) can become pathological:

we are told we are damaging them and ourselves. Friedan recommends that (middle class) women abdicate their control of the homefront (presumably by hiring poorer women to do the work) and pursue satisfaction by becoming educated enough to gain access to fulfilling work in the paid labor market. Ironically, at the same time, middle class men were bemoaning the alienation involved in conforming to company standards in the work world (Ehrenreich, 1983). Greer (1970), Friday (1977), Dowling (1981), and others, follow in Friedan's footsteps; all offer versions of this interpretation of women's dangerous socialization. Connections themselves come to be seen as dangerous when women, especially, forge them -- as even the bestselling Women Who Love Too Much by Robin Norwood (1986) indicates by its title. The culprit, according to these books, is not women's biologically-based masochism à la Freud, but a cultural disease passed down to us by our mothers, who were sometimes abetted by our fathers, which we have mistakenly clutched in desperation and unhappiness. Still, in all of these books, authors focus not on the context so much as the results of the problem (now, invariably, with a name), and women appear to be the cause.

In the process of overinvesting in the welfare of others, women are said to "lose" identity. For instance, Friedan writes: "It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is . . . a problem of identity -- a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique" (p. 77). For women traveling through a world landscaped by popular psychology, "identity" seems a very fragile, intangible construction, one which is very easily misplaced. Authors' focus on questions of identity exaggerates women's contributions to

their own obscurity: How do you know when you have it? How can you stop it from trickling away, or becoming eclipsed, or merely reflected, by the radiance of a man?²

In The Social Construction of Reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe therapy as a means of social control, in which "a body of knowledge that includes a theory of deviance, a diagnostic apparatus, and a conceptual system for the 'cure of souls'" is required (p. 104). The books do convey the message that women's actions are deviant; however, they are, at the same time, not deviant, because (the books explain) so many women are acting this way.

The meaning of therapy varies considerably among the group of women with whom I spoke. Several described entering therapy as a pragmatic line of action: one has a problem, one admits it, one pays someone to help with it, and ideally, through these actions, one eradicates the problem. More often, therapy was described as a lengthy process which could help one deal with a whole conglomeration of problems, often reaching back to childhood. Or, one might not even have any specific, namable problems: who wouldn't benefit from the opportunity to unload emotional baggage on a weekly basis?

Reading therapeutic self-help books was different, the women I interviewed agreed, from entering into therapy itself. The power dynamics were different, the cost was significantly different, the processes themselves (of reading and therapy) were different, and the outcomes would often -- but not always -- be different.

Therapy was often described as an unaffordable luxury, or if not a luxury, most women mentioned that therapy may be prohibitive in cost.

Thus, many readers described self-help books as the cheaper end of a therapeutic continuum, where therapy was seen as the most desirable, but least attainable end. As Val said: "I would love to be able to afford to go to a therapist, but unfortunately that's not in the budget, and I don't really have that many close friends that I could really say how I really felt about a situation. So it's sort of a process of elimination, really."

Though therapy can be socially stigmatized, it can also help to establish status, as Lauren described her first experience with a therapist in tenth grade: "all my friends were doing it, and it was a social thing. . . . It was something that we did . . . but I didn't think I really had a problem."

Most readers in my study recognized therapy as a legitimate endeavor, but part of what made them decide to read therapeutic literature rather than seek therapeutic intervention from another person was their distrust of professionals in this area. They were suspicious of therapists both because they were being paid to help as long as treatment continued (so why should they ever "cure" you?) and because professional training alone was not necessarily respected. Readers did not respect psychology the way they might chemistry; it was not seen as completely reliable and "scientific." Many readers suggested that therapists could have the same problems they did. (Don't you always read about how crazy psychologists are?) As Lucy said, in formal therapy, "you have the chance of running into a real asshole of a therapist."

Why, then, should a psychologically-trained author be treated as an authority? Doing analysis is not necessarily thought of as applying a

set of skills which take years to master, but rather, something which people can (and should) do themselves. One reader, Janet, who read mainly work-related self-help books -- voiced one of the same objections about psychological self-help books that other readers raised about therapy:

I hate to read something and I'm pinned down. I hate to read a book, and the book is telling me too much, "you must do this, and you must do that." I want the book to give me examples, take me into an experience . . . and I will feel a little bit more comfortable. Once I am reading a book, and this book is telling me "well, you should do this, and you should do that," I put it down right away because it's too demanding on me.

Janet said that she reads self-help articles in women's magazines, but would be unlikely to purchase and read an entire book, because of her belief that it would be overly-prescriptive (and repetitive). For most readers I interviewed, however, authority is less-questioned in book form than in person; it's almost as if the actual physical personhood of the author of the book melts away, and all that is left is the book itself, and the reader's self applying the therapy. Readers also respect what comes to them in the form of print, as I have discussed earlier. Several voiced the belief that if something were not well-researched, genuine, or expertly presented, it would not have been selected for publication.

Emily raises the issues which resonate throughout subjects' descriptions of the differences between solitary and one-on-one therapeutic action:

Well, reading . . . let's say, you're in a quiet room . . . and you can more or less weigh the situation for yourself, but with a

therapist, don't forget, that's time, money, and I would question sometimes. . . . Maybe this person has the same problems I do. Where does this person seek help from? Or who is this person being guided by? Or whatever. Maybe the books don't have all the answers, but it would give you . . . something to direct you on the right path. . . . With someone that you're going to see once a week, or twice a week, maybe you don't feel comfortable enough to open up to this person all your inner thoughts and your ideas. . . . [But] as you're reading, you can kind of be your own therapist, more or less . . . kind of get it together yourself.

Emily does short-term counseling in a health clinic where most of her clients are women. She holds therapy in less esteem than the other women in social-work professions who I interviewed, all of whom were involved in more extensive, long-term therapeutic practice. Reading, as Emily describes it, is an activity over which the reader has ultimate control: there is no one else shaping the situation, or intruding upon her privacy. It is almost as if the author does not exist.

Emily's discussion of the potential mistrust one would have to overcome to "open up" to a stranger, and thus make of a stranger an intimate, recurs in many of the women's explanations of how therapy differs from reading. Several women focus on the intrusiveness they see as inherent to a relationship with a psychological professional: "opening up" is not seen as a therapeutic accomplishment, but as a potential lapse in judgment or at least as an unreasonable expectation on the part of therapeutic workers. As Mona commented:

Okay, a therapist might say it's confidential, but . . . you're not going to open up 100 percent unless you're under drugs or you're hypnotized. Because I know I won't. . . . Because there's deep dark secrets that we keep that you wouldn't want anyone else to know. . . . When you go to someone, you're going to talk, but you're not going to tell them everything. When you read a book, certain

chapters, or certain things are going to . . . relate to your specific problem. You can relate to that, and maybe analyze yourself through what they're saying. Whereas, with a therapist, or whoever, they're going to do all the analyzing for you after they hear all your secrets -- if you tell them all of it, which I know you won't, because I can't see anyone revealing their inner soul to no one.

Most women were not as suspicious of therapy as Mona (who had never been in therapy). But most did touch on the possibility of getting bad or inappropriate therapy. Entering into therapy entails a risk, because there is no way of knowing in advance what you will get. With a self-help book, readers decide what to take.

Readers differed in their expectations about what a good therapist should do, but most agreed (therapists included) that s/he should not be too authoritative. They recognized that therapists walk a fine line between offering opinions and helping clients to uncover their own, between telling clients what to do and helping them to discover by themselves what their course of action should be. Though books were often perceived as more overtly directive, this did not necessarily mean they were better, but simply less subtle than a real, live therapist might be. As Lauren said:

Reading is like going to a lecture; you're kind of anonymous. You don't necessarily have to ask questions or really apply it to yourself or really think. You just kind of listen. And sometimes the writing is very strong, and will say, "this is you!" . . . But [authors] reach you in a different way from someone in therapy would, who . . . begins in a totally different direction of you starting with you. . . when you're reading a book there's a line, it's like a book is being written for a reason, it's to address like one issue, or something. Even the spiritual books, that are addressing the issue of the human condition -- it's one issue. . . . And you know it's them, and their shtick, and you kind of do it.

But in therapy it's not as clear that that person has a shtick. . . . I mean, obviously they have something they're trying to do, but they're not as open about it. . . . At least with the book, they can't manipulate you as directly.

There is some confusion in Lauren's description of the authority or point of view of the therapist versus that of an author of a self-help book. She describes face-to-face therapy as a situation in which interpretation of the expert can be more difficult than it would in reading: "it's not as clear that that person has a shtick." But she also asserts that in therapy, one has less power to resist the views offered by the expert than one does with a book (which you can reject without risking hurting anyone's feelings or confronting any power issues). So Lauren portrays therapy as requiring more interpretive power, and possibly more resistance: "At least with the book they can't manipulate you as directly."

Participants, especially those who had experiences with therapy, viewed therapy as much more diffuse than reading, an experience which was valued for the process itself. Sarah explained that, "at this point, the therapist I have right now wouldn't [recommend or discuss self-help books] at all. She's more like analytic, and into dreams and that kind of stuff." Therapy is, thus, much less practical or pragmatic than the self-help books which derive from its tenets, and some readers (therapists, especially) valued it more for its abstractions. One of the social workers I interviewed said that she would recommend self-help books to her clients because she thought they were an effective, albeit overly-simplistic, adjunct to live therapy.

A recent article in The New York Times reports that many psychologists do recommend self-help books to their clients, while

others study the difference that results from reading. Self-help books can be effective, researchers report; Forest Scogin, a psychologist at the University of Alabama has compiled the results of over forty studies which compare reading self-help books with entering therapy, and concludes that "Psychotherapy had an advantage, but only a slight one" (Goleman 1989).³ Of course, Scogin's -- and other trained therapists' -- views of what makes different activities therapeutically effective may differ from the evaluations of the users of these methods.

Comments made by Lucy and Bonnie illuminate the differences many of the women I interviewed raised in comparing therapy with reading self-help books:

LUCY: Well, I figure a therapist is there, you have one hour, you know. And a lot of those hours -- I wouldn't say wasted, but -- they are like a lead-up point to maybe a lightbulb or a revelation. Where a book sometimes you can get that a lot quicker.

BONNIE: I know how it's different. An official therapist does not say, "now here are three things you're gonna do to meet a man." Now the self-help book will promise me that if I do five things -- the promise is either stated or implied. . . . Therapy is more like real life. The self-help book is this artificial world, fantasyland.

While therapy may be more effective in the long run, self-help books may help to accomplish goals faster, or at least, as Bonnie implies when she calls a self-help book an "artificial world, fantasyland," may provide the illusion of a solution faster. Some readers, like Bonnie, were explicit in their assertions that this "illusion" was what they sought, what they found comforting in times

of stress or pain.

Several of the women I interviewed stated that reading was easier in that it meant they did not have to go to the trouble of negotiating a relationship with a professional therapist. The "clinical situation" as Carol calls it, can be intimidating, and can work against gaining "information."

I think the books actually have been as much of a benefit as the therapist. I think they've -- in a lot of cases -- given me a lot more information because when you're in a clinical situation, a lot of times, you're nervous and everything is happening so fast, and you know you're restricted because you only have an hour or something like that, where things, you know, escape you. And you don't remember what actually was said or what you were actually told to do, where with the book, you have an instant recall. You can always go back and reread the chapter, or you know, take your time reading it, highlighting specific information. And I've found that the books are very, very helpful.

Carol framed both therapy and therapeutic reading as a quest for information, a practical and scientific exercise, a means of revealing emotions via the intervention of a therapeutic instrument, and thus overcoming the problems they cause.

However much the reading process may be controlled by the reader, therapy in book form is seen by most participants as much less specifically geared to her needs, because these books are written with the explicit goal of appealing to a mass market. An author of a book can offer insights, but not specific insights in the same way a therapist might. People with whom you have an on-going interaction have the ability to show you parts of yourself you might not be able to see, and might not be able to tap into while reading. Sarah (who said

earlier that her therapist would not recommend or discuss self-help books because they were facile compared to her (the therapist's) psychoanalytic methods) also stressed her personal connection with her therapist as a factor which made therapy more effective than self-help reading:

I think therapy really gets into things, really gets into issues, and really helps me change. Because I think the whole root of it is really changing certain behaviors or thoughts, or whatever. And also that [therapy] helps me really see myself more clearly, and a book normally, a book doesn't do that for me, because a lot of times, it's hard to see yourself. So it's nice to have a person sort of telling you what they see, or telling you what they hear you saying kind of thing. That just can't happen in a book.

Good therapy, according to Sarah, works like a mirror held by someone else, because "a lot of times, it's hard to see yourself." Therapy can help solidify a sense of ever-elusive identity.

But, Sarah goes on to explain, live therapy is not always available, nor are friends. Books can be used to fill a gap created by propriety. There is a point when you feel you are imposing on friendships; books, in other words, can be your friends, can be your therapists, in time of need:

When I'm feeling very needy, I think just for me, it's hard to like keep calling friends, or you know, you can't keep going for therapy, and so there's the book, it's right there, so you could just open it up . . . so it's like reassurance to just open a book and read a line . . . and feel like maybe that's something a friend would have said, actually. . . . It might not really help, but it is like a reassurance.

Hiring a therapist or buying a self-help book is like buying a friend.

In a time when most women are working full-time outside the home, and in a place where it becomes increasingly difficult for friendships to remain central to women's lives (all of the women I interviewed lived or worked in large metropolitan areas), friends become providers of leisure-time diversion rather than of an intimate, everyday connection. And since services like therapy can be purchased, providing therapy in friendship may seem less appropriate or necessary than it once did. In talking about the conditions that have led to the current success of the self-help genre, Lucy said:

Women were home thirty years ago. Women talked on the phone. Women talked, you know, in their daily life. We don't have time now. We're so busy. We're so pressured. I don't always have time to talk to a friend. I'm not going to call a friend at 11:30. But I'm gonna read a self-help book.

Purchasing self-help books to fill in the gaps that come from becoming work-oriented is easier, and often more practical, than buying a professional's time.

Lauren discussed the construction of therapy, in terms of what it means when it functions within a capitalist market system. She describes her attraction to the field of therapy, as well, and her ultimate decision against such a career because of her view that charging money for counseling is ethically problematic:

I always wanted to be a therapist, because I always thought I was really good at talking to people. . . . And I like helping people, and it seems like a really great way to make money. But at the same time, I had so much resentment against the idea of someone getting paid to do that. I really think that it should be offered by the world. And not just friends, but I think a kind of formal ability that people should have to be there for other people. . . . I

think it should be automatic.

Ironically, privacy and independence are much more highly valued in a therapeutic culture than communalism and interreliance, and the encouragement of these very characteristics may lead to the anomic conditions that create a "need" for professional therapy -- in live or book form. Though other participants implicitly stated they felt the need for therapeutic connections with others, only Lauren expressed her desire explicitly, and objected to the idea of paying for a service that should be considered part of human interaction, something "offered to the world."

Participants who did therapy for a living were much more likely than non-therapists, unsurprisingly, to talk about self-help books as possibly the first step in a therapeutic process, in which therapy itself was seen as the ultimate, crucial, and most promising step toward change. They saw reading as a much simpler step to take, not only because it didn't involve the same social stigma as therapy might, but because it didn't require the sense of commitment which they viewed as necessary to on-going therapy. Anna said: "I think for some people . . . if therapy or counseling or whatever is too threatening, or even, like, even self-help groups like AA, which isn't really run by a professional. . . . if that's too threatening, I think people are more prone to pick up a book." She went on to say that reading, though "one step removed" from actual therapy, could allow its participants to opt out of actively working to solve their problems: "If you're in a situation that's painful or . . . that's something that you want to change, you don't have to confront it directly by talking about yourself." She felt that a good therapist would be more effective at

treating deeply-rooted problems, and criticized the books for providing what she saw as only a surface level of treatment.

Two therapists (Anna and Hillary) discussed the possible danger in reading self-help books, if readers were to treat them as a cure-all, or as a substitute for therapy in the face of complex problems. This, they felt, would be misleading. Berger and Luckmann also subscribe to the notion that the "face-to-face conversations" upon which therapy is based are irreplaceable.

[T]he individual may resort to various techniques of reality maintenance even in the absence of actual conversation, but the reality-generating potency of these techniques is greatly inferior to the face-to-face conversations they are designed to replicate. The longer these techniques are isolated from face-to-face confirmations, the less likely they will be to retain the accent of reality. (1966, p.142)

Such ideas, when applied to reading, echo Bonnie's comment that self-help books could help her to create a "fantasyland" for herself, while she read.

RELIGIOUS READING

A traditional religious interpretation of the "feminine mystique" opposes the psychologically-based, identity-focused thinking: women have become selfish -- or, if not selfish, misdirected -- in their energies. Ideally, women should be home, ministering to their husbands, children and home. Traditional religious women who participated in my study sometimes had trouble reconciling their conservative, religious-based views with economic reality and with the egalitarian rhetoric which has become taken for granted by many

people in the 1980s. I asked Marianne, a self-defined Christian who thinks the Bible is the best, most complete self-help book available, to discuss her beliefs about the differences between men and women, as they have been influenced by her religious reading. She explained that though men and women are equal, a certain party is more equal than the other:

I believe that men and women are equal. I think inside we're equal; we just have different bodies. . . . But in a marriage relationship, to me, the husband is the head . . . of the wife and the head of the home, but it doesn't mean they're not equal, it's just, somebody has to be in charge. I think as far as decision-making, it's equal, but if there's a disagreement, I think the husband has, like, the final say. . . . And I, personally, think that mothers should be home with their kids. And I don't have any qualms about -- like, my sister works, you know, and I know a lot of people -- a lot of women -- do, and I have no problem with that. But if it was me, I would -- if I had children -- I would try and stay home, because I think a mother should be with 'em, you know, 'til they get in school, at least.

The tension between patriarchally-based religious prescriptions and proscriptions regarding women and a popular psychological framework -- shaped, in part, by the women's movement -- results in similar, but more self-conscious, equivocations on the part of the other religious readers I interviewed. Shelley, who considers herself a feminist and an Orthodox Jew, said, "I won't tell you that there's not a lot of sexism in [Judaism], but that's the trade-off that I've made." Achieving the sense of community and wholeness of life she desired led Shelley to strike a bargain of sorts, in which she would de-emphasize some of her feminist beliefs.

Involvement in traditional worship tends to include membership in

a religious community, whereas therapy is commonly thought of as a singular pursuit. I interviewed two women who had become practicing Orthodox Jews during their adulthood (of whom Shelley was one); both explained that the community -- or the sense of belonging -- they hoped to gain was a motivating factor in their embracing of religion:

DIANE: I think this was appealing to me because this is who I am. These are my roots. I am a Jew, and I think on a spiritual level or a soul level or a very internal level, I am connected to Torah because I am a Jew. It's just a matter of sticking in the plug, you know, to get plugged into the source where you come from.

SHELLEY: I decided that there had to be a better way of life. . . . When I was . . . 26, I was living on the East Side, and I was teaching at a small girls' college . . . spent the summer in a house full of singles. . . . And I was living in the middle of this, you know, enormously anomic situation. . . . People weren't connected to each other. And I met somebody . . . I really had the sense that he was part of a community. . . . There was something very appealing to me about this sense of community that I saw this fellow talking about.

Both Diane and Shelley described their adult involvement with Judaism as a return. Reading helped both to reinforce and to expand their new-found sense of community and religiousness. Diane said she had been led away -- and astray -- from the values of Judaism by a decadent suburban lifestyle which led to a divorce, which led to an even more decadent urban lifestyle. Shelley said she had had a Jewish upbringing, and that "my parents had always told me that if I married a non-Jew, they would sit shivah for me," so a rebirth of Judaism in her life eliminated potential family problems.

Amelia, a devout Christian, described a similar return to the religious structure of her youth:

We were really brought up in a Christian home. We would pray every morning together. You know, my mother would make sure we prayed in the morning and prayed at night. You know, when you become a teen, you start partying . . . these things are not important anymore. And as you get older, you realize that it is important. It's helped you through your life. . . . And then you go back.

Each of these three women describe their religious revivals as natural developments. This belief that her belief itself is fated adds to her sense of security, and her sense of rightness (which each of these women described feeling).

Amelia read both psychologically-oriented and religious self-help books, but had difficulty finding words to describe the differences between these two types:

A religious self-help book gives me what I need in -- spiritually. Sometimes you can put both together, and come out with the results that you want, but I prefer to read spiritual self-help books, because I feel that, like, professional self-help books, I know where I'm heading, but I'm also trying to get there. . . . I want to be a good Christian. . . . I want to be a good person, that I am able to really help someone . . . and be unselfish. This is the big word, being unselfish.

Religious reading, for Amelia, offers necessary affirmation of the sort of person she has chosen to be, like positive reinforcement. She believes that religious self-help reading is more important than "professional" self-help because it helps to maintain qualities she sees as residing on a deeper, or "spiritual" level.

PSYCHO-RELIGIOUS READING

One might expect that women who lead lives structured by Orthodox religious dogma -- Jewish or Christian -- extol the values of self-sacrifice, of giving, perhaps even of self-abnegation for the sake of their families. As Marianne's exhortations about staying home with her children and Amelia's descriptions of "a good Christian" indicate, they do cling to these conservative values. But they also don't. Traditional "feminine" qualities were not the central components of the belief systems of any of the four religious women I interviewed. Though a belief in the importance of serving others for the sake of a better world was certainly a result of becoming religious, each explained what religion did for her, and how it had attracted her to it with its promises of a better life.

Diane, for instance, insists that the basis of Judaism is that "God made this planet and made us . . . to enjoy the planet. . . . We're here to be happy." The human part of the bargain involves following "simple rules for living." Amelia said, "If I come in [to work] and I feel very heavy, I have a problem, and I sit and I read the Bible . . . I feel better. . . . Since I started reading my Bible and reading books like that, I have felt much better as a person."

The main difference between religious and psychological orientations is that the searching is far more likely to come to an end which satisfies the searcher in a religious quest. In a sense, once the commitment to believe has been made, the hardest work has been done, and major doubts are overcome. You have your answers ("blueprint," as Diane calls it) and all that's needed is daily maintenance, like watering a green and leafy plant. You don't have the anxiety of not

knowing -- or not knowing the most important material -- or wondering if your belief will change (or the plant will die). With belief comes a reason to live, and only believers (believers believe) are provided with an uncomplicated program to carry out (plenty of water and lots of light). As Weber wrote: "Religion claims to offer an ultimate stand toward the world by virtue of a direct grasp of the world's meaning" (1915 p. 352).

Therapy, on the other hand, can go on endlessly; the search for the elusive self you want to know intimately may never end. The psychological search is built upon repeated reexamination of one's particular past, but the religious quest need not concern itself with this at all. Perhaps this is why there has been a recent surge of interest in Orthodox religious movements (Roof 1982). Thus, religious searching may be seen as a rejection of therapeutic self-centered values.

Though predicated upon different values, religious and psychological searches may yield the same general ends. The narratives of Diane and Molly, show how two self-proclaimed searchers achieved a contented tolerance for aspects of their lives about which they had once been unhappy. Diane explains that within an Orthodox Jewish framework, she has learned to accept what happens to her as "God's will":

Everything God does to us is for the good, even though we might not perceive it as good. . . . I've looked back over my life, at things that I was angry about and couldn't handle, and [things] I was heartbroken [about]. . . . I realize that everything that was denied me, in this life, here -- thank God it was denied me. I mean, I would have been miserable in each situation had it gone the way I thought it should go at that point. . . . So anything that

happens to me, whether I like it or not, at this point, somewhere down the road, I'll be able to look back and say, "I understand". . . . I can deal with anything that happens to me now.

Diane tells about being jilted by the man who originally "brought her back to Judaism." Heartache was still heartache, but it was heartache that made sense to her, because it was part of God's plan. Diane sees mainstream self-help books about relationships as overly-analytical: "If you run across a 'man who can't love,' you go on to another man. You don't bother analyzing: 'What if I do this? What if I do this?' It gets me crazy." Women don't need self-help books to understand their relationships with men, because, according to Diane, "Now, when you date a guy, you really know deep down in your gut what the story is. You don't want to believe it, perhaps, or . . . want to say, 'no, I can change it.'" Diane feels that women suffer in their relationships precisely because they are attempting to dissect them psychologically: "I think that we've gotten so wrapped up in over-analyzing everything that we've forgotten to trust our instincts." For Diane, Judaism incorporates definitions of women and men as instinctual beings designed to love one another in a specific, prescribed manner, and meddling with this can lead only to problems.

Though this might sound like a sort of blind faith that might be experienced only by the deeply religious, I would argue that it is not completely blind, nor is it simply religious. Diane has clearly chosen this route. Though it may result in a decided lack of critical analysis, she has decided that such critical analysis never accomplished anything for her. Prior to becoming religious, Diane said she had "investigated" Hindusim, Buddhism, and Christianity. "I was always

searching, searching to make all the pieces of the puzzles fit -- in my life, and in society. . . . I was spiritually searching because I felt I needed something to tie my life together." And Judaism clearly satisfies Diane's desire for order and structure. When something about the system she has chosen doesn't make sense to her, she waits. "In Judaism, if you believe, you take a lot of things on faith, without understanding. Then, eventually, the understanding comes to you, and invariably, it makes sense."

Like Diane, Molly talks about changing her expectations about her life -- especially about her involvements with men -- but as a result of psychological reading: a self-imposed behavior modification exercise that helps her to expect less in the long run: "I've made like a deliberate attempt to be less demanding and less intense, and I've tried to think more, well . . . 'what are their feelings?' instead of just always being oriented towards what I was feeling. Try to feel them out and be more tolerant."

The question arises: can't both the religious and therapeutic routes to the same end be seen as methods of adapting to the inadequacies of heterosexual relationships? Both Molly and Diane have accepted the notion that involvements founded upon socially-enforced divergent gender behaviors for men and women -- where men's behavior stays the way it is, and women's adapts -- is appropriate. They have both found ways of accepting that the love they want, need, even crave (Molly described being "almost frantic" without a romantic prospect in her life) isn't going to come. Diane would object to this analysis, saying that she didn't become an Orthodox Jew because she was having trouble in her relationships with men. Judaism, for her, now, is an all

encompassing solution to the problems of life in general (not just romantic ones). She did not come to Judaism "in pain" she said, but rather, because she was looking for a better way to live. And Molly might object as well, saying that her pre-self-help book behavior was truly detrimental to her own well-being, that now -- as less demanding, less concerned, more "manlike" -- she is better off. Ehrenreich, et al., discuss women's appropriation of masculine behavior, and the greater freedom that comes with it (1987). I asked Molly whether she thought that self-help books encouraged self-blame and obscured a recognition of larger, even uncontrollable social factors, and she replied:

I just think that anything that's gonna help you as an individual realize, like, why you're acting the way you do, like, even though . . . there may be broader things that are gonna prevent you from changing it, it's got to help you in some way, just to even be able to recognize it in the first place.

Psychologically-oriented self-help books promote an image of the individual as the unit of society, so even when a problem is societal, the unit of change can only be the individual.⁴

Molly continues her explanation of how books don't blame readers by saying, "If you can't recognize it [whatever the problem is], then you certainly can't . . . make a change." When I put similar questions of blame to other therapeutic readers, they responded similarly: Maybe the books encourage readers to focus on their own behavior as the problem, but you can't change anybody else, anyway, can you? The unit for analysis, before reading even began, was always considered to be the self.

Religious reading done by orthodox believers, on the other hand, is part and parcel of their group experience -- they do not read together as a group, but their reading is a result of membership in the group, as well as a method of strengthening their allegiance to the group: learning how to be a good member. There are psychological groups that have arisen also, such as groups based on Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much (1985), that confirm a looser sort of membership, but also draw on religious tactics for binding members together. These groups are neither purely religious nor purely psychological, but grow out of the marriage of the two.

WHERE THE TWAIN DO MEET: NEW AGE READING

Traditional religious advice is, for most self-help readers, not a valid possibility for answers to questions of the 1980s. Mainstream religion, which most people had some sort of brush with as children, seems out of date, out of sync with their current moral views, especially regarding sexuality. Celia describes how New Age books appealed to her, as compared with the formal religious prescriptions she had been taught growing up, and which she had come to resent as an adult:

When I was younger, I was a devout Catholic. And I've had to, unfortunately, through education, and just different experiences, I'm not as devout as I once was. And I used to get a great high just out of going to church, and what I believed in. And I still get it, but for different reasons. I don't readily accept the standing of the Church's teachings at the present moment, and I cannot pretend I do, and go along with it. . . . So that's why I read. . . .

Catholicism: you can only do it if you follow their doctrine. This [New Age philosophy] is not so rigid. It's not like you have to not eat meat on Friday. And I can be married twenty times,

and it's not to say I'm a bad person. . . . I'm looking for something more than [the Church]. I'm looking for something that's not based on money. . . . I'm looking for something that's going to accept me and all my flaws. . . . I'm looking for a way to find peace with myself and nature in general.

So, for some self-help readers, psychological religion -- New Age, astrology -- steps in to fulfill the same functions that religion does, or that psychology does.

The New Age movement is one strong manifestation of the psychologification of religion, offering an odd mix of commercialism and spirituality. The New Age movement's most visible congregation points are its bookstores, where buyers browse in solitude to monotonous, soothing music. There are little shrines in which one can meditate (sans shoes) in some bookstores. The shops are often staffed by people in the know -- somewhere between Waldenbooks clerks and clergy-- people who can recommend holistic healers or hook readers up with New Age organizations.

Drawing on data collected by the General Social Surveys of the National Opinion Research Center from 1972 to 1976, which provides "information . . . [about] approximately 7,500 representative Americans" according to Roof (1981):

[T]here have been marked cultural shifts among youth in recent years, especially with regard to the meaning systems used for interpreting their lives. Traditional theistic beliefs and values have lost much of their plausibility and are being partly replaced by more mystical, personally oriented approaches to life. Religion for youth is very much a privatized matter today, with the result that many have turned away from visible group loyalties as a basis for self-identification. Consequently, many youths in the seventies have been weaned away from the established faiths and now seek their identity in either secular

or countercultural settings. (p. 90)

The New Age movement attracts young people today in the same way that eastern religious movements began attracting young people in the sixties. "New Age philosophy is becoming the religion, or at least the ethos, of a growing proportion of the young professional middle class that is now beginning to move into positions of responsibility and authority" (Bordewich 1988, pp. 37-8). Certain aspects of 1960s-era experimentalism -- such as self-actualization theory -- remain, but the movement fueling the dissemination of radical values has all but disappeared, making New Age religion a sort of yuppification of hippie spirituality.

Many of the women I interviewed who said they did not read any New Age or religious self-help books looked at these books with suspicion. A few readers dabbled in books that combined spirituality with self-help, reading, most notable, the bestselling and very visible Dianetics. Gloria, one of these "mainstream" self-help readers, talked about her inability to gain anything from her reading of Dianetics:

My son brought the book into the house, and he was reading it, you know. . . . And so I took it. I took it for about a month. I started reading it And I kept on reading it, and reading it, and reading it. And I was like, "Wait a minute. Am I getting anything out of this book?" I didn't like it. Now, I didn't finish it; I must have read like half of the book. . . . I didn't get it. I kept on reading it to see if I could get it.

Emily also was disappointed with Dianetics. She said, "Usually when I finish reading a book, I display them nicely. . . . This particular book is just thrown down . . . like it's going to be discarded." Unfulfilling reading experiences such as Gloria's and Emily's could lead to a

rejection of all books which readers group together with the ones that disappointed them.

I asked the women who said they read New Age books with some regularity to define New Age and to tell me how this type of reading compared with "mainstream" self-help and with "straight" religious self-help. Sarah describes New Age as having "a spiritual kind of thing to it -- not any religion in particular, but a spiritual, meditative kind of thing to it." She went on to say that New Age books "tell you how to be," explaining that, "they'll talk about just being mindful and you know, awareness. . . so walking around being more quote unquote conscious." Abby said: "The backbone of [New Age] is sort of accepting reincarnation." When I asked her how New Age religion was different from mainstream religion, she said:

It's not all that different. It's just, I sort of don't identify with any of the religions, so I guess it's working on my spirituality, not really religion. But there's a lot of similarity. That's one of the things that I got from it. Because I was kind of not sure -- you know, I was brought up Jewish . . . but not very Jewish, and not really following stuff. My boyfriend's Catholic, and you know, it just, it hasn't been something that I identified with. So I kind of fell into hearing about New Age stuff. . . . Just the basic idea of . . . trying to make gains in this life . . . sometimes to make up for . . . things that might not have gone so well before. . . . sometimes when hardships happen, I think a lot of that might have to do with things that happened in other lives. I mean, it's not a punishment, but . . . it's a chance to try to . . . make it come out a little bit better.

Perhaps the only thing that readers agreed upon was that New Age philosophy was different from, even antithetical to, mainstream religion, and that it offered experiences on another (somehow

supernatural) plane. Mystical experiences of salvation or transcendence, of course, have long been part and parcel of major world religions (Weber 1922), though not included in these women's experiences of what Roof terms "mainline religion," by which he means long established varieties of Judaism and Christianity.

Bordewich's was quite disturbed by the New Age cults he investigated in New Mexico; he sardonically describes the search for spiritual enlightenment which is the core of New Age philosophy:

What virtually all participants in New Age movements have in common is the belief in a cosmic destiny for mankind, which individuals pursue mainly through mystical examination of the self; and in a "new age" of existence that will be peopled by superior beings who have undergone a process of inner "transformation." (p. 38)

Of course, how odd to look for a "cosmic destiny for mankind" via "mystical examination of the self." This is the point at which popular psychology blends into religious practice. It doesn't make sense, Bordewich would have us think. And yet, it makes perfect sense in a world called "post-modern," where religion collides with science in the guise of popular psychology, where the "self, improved, is the ultimate concern of [our] culture" (Rieff, p. 62).

The effects of such a merger are contested. Does New Age combine the worst of the psychological and the religious, producing fanatical and self-centered believers? Bordewich would say so:

By validating mystical and magical experience, [New Age thinking] sows corresponding doubt about the trustworthiness of rational thought. By denying the importance of the past as a basis for action, it has the capacity to separate the individual from both his own and society's history. New Age thinking

encourages the belief that what "feels right" is the best -- perhaps the only -- measure of human behavior. . . . New Age philosophy mimics liberalism with its idiom of globalism, cooperation, tolerance and truth through self-understanding; it rejects as mere "reformism," however, liberalism's traditional concern with social issues like racial justice and equal opportunity. Indeed, New Age thinking generally regards such problems as mere states of mind. (p. 44)

Marx wrote that "religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself" (1844, p. 44). Now, by utilizing New Age philosophy, man -- or woman -- can do both. Bordewich draws upon the same argument that has been leveled against psychology: introversion is unhealthy.

Unlike their soul-searching predecessors of the 1960s, New Age adherents do not have to examine society to "find themselves." New Age, like self-centered psychology, holds that reality comes from within, or as one of the New Aged women Bordewich spoke to said: "You work on yourself because there is nothing else. . . . Everything outside is corrupted" (p. 44). Bordewich takes the reification of apathy in which New Agers engage as an absence of critical thinking, a complacent dismissal of real world events in whose place are substituted platitudes about universal oneness.

Robert Wuthnow (1981) and Donald Stone (1981) were both involved in a San Francisco Bay area study conducted by the Survey Research Center at Berkeley, in which 1000 randomly selected people were polled about their religious involvement. Stone writes that of those questioned, 17.3 percent said they "had taken part in an encounter group, similar kind of training such as sensory awareness, sensitivity training, a T' group or growth group" (p. 217). It seems that

researchers expected to find that membership in pre-New Age spiritual groups would rely on self-involvement. Wuthnow writes: "It was not anticipated in our research design that there would be a positive relation between mysticism and political action. Accordingly, no attempt was made to build into the design a means for exploring this relation" (p. 235). What the research did reveal was that people involved in "mystical" spiritual movements were not more politically apathetic than those not involved.

Though these groups may encourage self-involvement, it is not a self-involvement that necessarily encourages disinterest in everyone else. Stone writes: "In all, the survey and interview evidence does not indicate that awareness group participants are any less sensitive to social forces, less interested in improving the lot of disadvantaged people, or less individualistic than other people from similar backgrounds" (pp. 224-5).

Wuthnow asserts that people involved in groups such as Zen, Hare Krishna, Scientology, and Synanon -- but not in Neo-Christian groups -- "tend to be more committed," more socially conscious, than those who are not (p. 233). But mystical movements do not seem to provoke a radical social conscience. Wuthnow posits that the success of such movements in the 1970s may be attributed, in part, to their adaptability to capitalist ideology:

For young people who have found themselves suddenly incorporated into the mainstream of modern American culture, mysticism may have become a quick and relatively painless means of developing a new identity at the personal level that squares with the larger values to which they are exposed through education and the marketplace. (p. 240)

New Age philosophy does not challenge the ideology of capitalism. It does not require a world-view that is contradictory to the world of work where believers earn their money. Like a mild dosage of valium, New Age allows people to get on with their lives, free -- if only temporarily -- of anxiety.

The women I interviewed were not deeply involved in the New Age movement, as were the people Bordewich reported on. Participants who read New Age literature were merely looking around, browsing for a spiritual fit. Psychological reading led, for some readers, straight into New Age. None of the participants who read New Age literature seemed to view New Age thinking as the first step into a quicksand of dangerous reality-avoidance as Bordewich believes it to be; rather, they saw it as a tool toward greater -- though mystical -- interpretive power.

Blueprint. Comfort. Reassurance. These are words that women themselves have applied to the religious, psychological, and psycho-religious self-help they read. The similarity of participants' descriptions of the books, regardless of classification, is striking.

MARIANNE (about Christian self-help books): Well, most of 'em, I would say the majority of 'em, will lift your spirits. To me, they'll make you feel better about yourself.

ANNA (about astrology): I guess [the point of reading about astrology] is to get more understanding of yourself, and probably ultimately to change yourself. To point out, you know, what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are.

VAL (about psychological self-help books): Even though they're generalized. . . there's always something in there that seems to

hit home, which is nice.

Self-help books, wherever they fall on the spectrum that runs from secular to religious, are like a camera, pointed by the reader at herself. She may wish to discover what's there, focus on it, freeze frame, and keep that single photograph as her evidence, her faith. Or she may wish to shoot from many difficult angles, varying the shutter speed, hoping to arrive at some genuinely representative composite. Perhaps a bit of both. She may wish to use these prints to make alterations, but, more often, her primary focus is on "understanding" herself: her motivations, her actions, her childhood, how she fits in. Accepting the self-help authors' views may mean altering herself to fit into existing, unchangeable, conditions. So, in a sense, self-help reading can serve to buttress the status quo; it can -- and often does -- reinforce patriarchally-created forms of interaction. But, however misguided or insular her attempts to know herself may seem, her search is about hope for immortality, about change, about redirection.

chapter three

READERS WRITE IN:
LETTERS TO BETTY FRIEDAN AND ROBIN NORWOOD

The women I have interviewed about self-help reading have described reading as an interaction of sorts, in which they gain insight into another person's -- often someone they view as an expert's -- ideas about their lives and their problems, even though they know authors don't know anything about them in particular. What happens when readers attempt to realize the connections they feel for writers? Letters to Betty Friedan and Robin Norwood, in which readers have written about their specific reactions to The Feminine Mystique (1963) and Women Who Love Too Much (1985) confirm participants' observations about the nature of the reading experience, and expand upon their valuations of the effectiveness of reading to gain introspective knowledge, insight, and advice.

In the preface to The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan wrote that her inspiration to write the book to follow came out of her own life, which led her to see that "something is very wrong with the way American women are trying to lead their lives today" (p. 9). Friedan sought the answer to what she calls, "a personal question mark"; she "wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split" she had begun to notice dominating her own life (p. 9). The whole point of The Feminine Mystique, Friedan felt, was to forge a connection, to enable other women to experience awakenings similar to hers in their own lives, women who suffered as she had suffered. She writes: "[T]here

would be no sense in my writing this book at all if I did not believe that women can affect society . . . that, in the end, a woman . . . has the power to choose, and to make her own heaven or hell" (p. 12).

A quarter century later, Robin Norwood begins Letters From Women Who Love Too Much (1988) by explaining how her connection with -- and concern for -- other women had led her to publish this book, a sequel to her first best-selling book, Women Who Love Too Much (1985). She wrote that "the seeds from which this book [Letters] would grow were sown with the first letter I received in response to WWL2M [her abbreviation for Women Who Love Too Much]" (p. xi). This letter was from a woman whom Norwood calls Beth B. (Norwood gave all of the letter-writers in this book a first name and last initial -- reminiscent of grade school, or perhaps confession magazines. She also printed all the letters in italics, to contrast with the portions of the book which she wrote herself. I have dropped the italics throughout.) Beth B. wrote:

Never in my life have I been so moved by a book to put pen to paper to write the author. . . . I must say your work affected me so profoundly that I am certain it was the key in fostering an entire positive direction out of so many years of ceaseless pain and confusion. There were times when I felt this book was written just for me alone. . . . I remember one night sitting on my kitchen floor poring over each page; at times I had to close it and put it by my side until my weeping lessened. (pp.xi-xii)

Beth B.'s letter provided Norwood with a sense of *déjà vu*, a memory of "that experience of sitting on the floor sobbing with pain and relief and gratitude because another women had honestly described her struggle -- a struggle so like my own" (p. xiii). Norwood never tells what it was

that she read which had her sobbing on the floor herself "with pain and relief," only that "that experience had come after reading a magazine article in the early 1970s in which the author described how it felt to be a woman in this culture." Like her own readers, Norwood wrote that her experience of reading made her feel less lonely: "When I read that author's words, I knew, with almost a shock, that I wasn't alone anymore" (p.xiii).

Presumably, then, Beth B.'s missive sparked a new idea for a helping tool for women. After receiving "what seemed like an avalanche of responses" to Women Who Love Too Much which "spread beyond her desk to nearly every flat surface in the house" (p. xiv), Norwood decided that she would publish her readers' letters to her, allowing readers, in a sense, to communicate with each other: "Now, hopefully through the vehicle of this book, you will be sharing with each other" (p. xvi).

Both Norwood and Friedan received a slew of mail in which readers thanked them, above all, for doing away with their (readers') sense of loneliness. These readers' letters attest to the power of reading in women's lives. Both The Feminine Mystique and Women Who Love Too Much were immediate bestsellers -- thus, in both cases, the authors' definition of the situation was perceived by their audiences as compelling.¹ The quantity and enthusiasm of the letters indicate that the authors' arguments were perceived as deeply meaningful. In their letters, readers tell of the various ways in which they construct meaning out of these books. Considered as a group, however, the letters give hints about how individuals enact (or attempt to enact, or, at the very least -- think about) social change in their own lives. One

might expect that books written twenty-five years apart would elicit very different responses, but the groups of letters received by Friedan and Norwood are remarkably alike.

These sets of letters -- the ones Friedan received during the 1960s and '70s and selected to be maintained as part of the Betty Friedan collection,² and those Robin Norwood chose for publication, which she received between 1985 and 1987 -- may or may not be representative of the "average" tenor of letters received by these authors, or by other self-help writers. Obviously, people do not write neutral letters to authors; they write when they have been particularly affected by what they have read. Many write because they feel alone; what they have read makes them feel a sense of connection with other women, but especially with the writer, and they want to maintain this sense of connection. Many write to complain. It could be argued that if Friedan and Norwood were selecting which letters would be preserved or printed, they would be most apt to dispose of letters which were either negative or inarticulate, and they may have done so. But in both cases, critical letters were included as a part of the final collection. (Also in both sets of letters, complaints are far outnumbered by letters of praise.) What is most pertinent to my study is that the letters provide the opportunity to compare the forms of expression that two different groups of readers -- divided by many variables, most notably by time -- share in describing their responses to two self-help books.

Of course, part of the similarity over time may be explained by the form which a fan (or a hate letter) to an author takes; there is not a lot of variation within this structure. But it is not only formal qualities

that the letter sets share; the nature of the effects of reading described was strikingly similar in both cases. What an examination of these letters offers that my discussion of interviews with readers does not is a sense of the immediacy of readers' reactions to books. Also, readers writing to authors are fundamentally different from my participants in that they did not express themselves knowing what they wrote would become the object of sociological inquiry.

My reading of these letter sets has strengthened my belief that the content of an inspiring book is less important than its author's style and what I call the "service" she offers the reader: the sense that the reader has a guide, or even a friend in the author, who, though she is not with the reader physically, knows what her life is like and would like to help improve it through her writing.

When Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique, it was unique. There were not slews of books which claimed to define and address women's problems as there are now; there were no bestselling feminist works at all. By the time of Norwood's writing, The Feminine Mystique had paved the way for the burgeoning genre of self-help geared for women. At first glance, the books seem very different: Friedan's is far more politically and socially grounded than Norwood's. She wrote sarcastically, vehemently, forcefully, because she wanted to incite her audience to action: they had sat idle for far too long, she thought. Norwood's tone, on the other hand, was calmer; she soothed her readers, encouraged them to take their time, move slowly, and urged them not bite off more than they could chew. Nonetheless, The Feminine Mystique and Women Who Love Too Much are thematically similar.

Both Friedan and Norwood attacked a problem that they felt was paramount in women's lives during their particular "today." Their respective definitions and evaluations of the problem were different, but the way each author saw the problem acting on women's lives was quite similar. Upon close examination, Friedan's "problem that has no name" bears a strong resemblance to Norwood's "man-addiction." The women Norwood addressed may well have followed the advice given by Friedan; they may be daughters of the middle-class women who read and reacted to The Feminine Mystique. They may have received a top-notch education as Friedan suggested they should do. And they may have escaped the life of drudgery and overinvolvement with their children which Friedan rails against. Norwood's readers presumably are not mostly housewives, and yet they are still suffering because their reliance on men has remained central to their lives. They are still emotionally unhealthy, according to Norwood, because their focus on heterosexual involvements has not weakened as they have gained independence in the forms suggested by Friedan. Thus, in Women Who Love Too Much, the feminine mystique is alive and well, and causing all sorts of physical and emotional trauma.

Though Friedan and Norwood advocate seemingly different solutions, they both seek to remedy this generalized dissatisfaction of women they perceive. Friedan tells her readers to get educations, to seek rewarding and remunerative careers, to spend less time at home and with their children: to emulate upwardly-mobile men. Norwood encourages her readers to treat their problems as they would a disease: to seek out therapy, especially in groups with other similarly afflicted

women, to place faith in a higher power, to reevaluate and perhaps end their relationships with the men with whom they are involved. She suggests that women readers should apply disinterested and pragmatic strategies at home, as they would at work.

One of the prime differences in Friedan's and Norwood's evaluations is that men fare much better with Friedan. True, she sees them as part of an omnipresent and overarching system which has worked to keep women down, but, she assures her readers, men would really prefer it if women would better themselves, would become more like men. Women would become more intellectually stimulating companions, rather than drab housewives all-consumed with the drudgery of housework and child care, according to Friedan.

Many of the men Norwood describes, however, are brutes. They range from insensitive to violently abusive; they are sexually aggressive and emotionally repressed. They are schizophrenic in their attempts to cement and sabotage the relationships in which they are involved. Norwood's women, like Friedan's, are implicated in maintaining men's psychological failings as well as in maintaining their own. Readers, in both cases, have accepted these readings of the inherent problematic nature of heterosexual relationships; in fact write that they have found them immensely appealing. Friedan received letters from women who told how glad they were that they could improve themselves for their husbands' benefit, and Norwood's readers sent in tales of men's horrendous, reprehensible behavior toward them.

Women who wrote to thank both Friedan and Norwood word their descriptions of their reading experiences in strikingly similar ways.

For instance, a woman writes of reading The Feminine Mystique: "It's like a bombshell has exploded inside me, shattering old images of a women [sic] and throwing light on the woman of today. . . . Now it is a comfort to realize that I'm a normal women [sic] entangled in the world of today." More than twenty years after Friedan received this letter, a woman Norwood calls Moira D. writes: "The thoughts that I write to you are thoughts that have rattled around inside of me for so many years that I've thought that I would explode. I've always felt that no one else would really understand what I was feeling until I read WWL2M" (1988, p. 27). Both these readers describe the effects of their reading as earth-shattering. Their reading has helped them to understand that the alienation they had felt was not unique; it is almost as if reading the books make a community of other similarly miserable and alienated women a reality. As participants in my study agreed, the act of finding oneself in one's reading can dissipate loneliness. Knowing others are suffering in identical ways can help, even if one does not know these others personally.

A reassured reader writes to tell Friedan: "I rushed upon [your book] like a drowning person, because, at length, I had found the problems spoken about, explained and solved, problems of which I had always believed only myself on earth to think in the same way." Reading can provide answers to long-felt problems; these answers are perceived as monumental by letter-writing readers. A Friedan reader writes that The Feminine Mystique "is the answer to my inner struggle," and, likewise, Moira D. informs Norwood that "[r]eading WWL2M gave [her] the strength to end the [destructive] relationship" she had been having

for a year with a married man (p. 19).

Women writing to both Friedan and Norwood are vehement about the degree to which they identified with what these authors had to say. One woman writes to Friedan, "I'm the gal in your first chapter! Remember me?" Another writes, "I felt as if you had sat in my house and in my neighborhood and in my bridge club and spied on me and my friends." A woman who Norwood calls Gina R. writes to tell her, "I fit the prototype in your book quite exactly, and if I had known about you, I would have been quite upset that you wrote about me and spread my intimate thoughts and feelings on the pages of your book for the world to see" (p. 328). Readers who "find themselves" within the pages of a book are really quite delighted and surprised. (Gina R. goes on to tell Norwood: "The knowledge I've gained . . . has enabled me to have strength in this ongoing struggle" (p. 330). As the women I interviewed explained, and letter writers confirm, the possibility of self-discovery leads them to self-help books; fiction is held to be less capable of sparking this type of awareness.

Readers' letters attest to women's feelings of reassurance gained through reading. Where before they had felt self-doubt, after reading they often feel exalted. Reading about feelings or experiences they had suffered through made women realize that they were not abnormal and not alone. One woman writes to Friedan: "For the first time in my life -- I have the feeling that I'm not an "odd-ball" -- and that the guilty feelings I have had for the past ten years are not warranted. I cannot express in words what your book as [sic] meant to me." And Catherine N. writes that Norwood's book has helped her to stop doubting her

sanity: "Before I read your book I thought I was going crazy" (p. 118). Readers are heady with the relief they feel the reading experience has given them. Another letter to Friedan reads: "It is hard for me to convey exactly how released and at peace I feel now." And in a letter from Willow D. to Norwood, one finds a nearly identical expression of relief: "I don't know what will happen in the future for me, but for now, I am more at peace with myself than I have ever been before. I like myself. I'm okay" (p. 40). Identification with self-help reading, as participants in my study have stressed, can be experienced as an enormous relief. Just having her own dilemma there in print, simply having a label to fit on the problems she was experiencing, felt empowering, could make formerly insurmountable problems seem less formidable to a reader.

Readers writing to both Friedan and Norwood indicate that prior to their reading, they had been looking, unfruitfully -- and perhaps desperately -- for meaningful help, for "answers." As several of the readers I interviewed said, self-help books could provide revelations where other methods of searching failed. One woman writes to Friedan, "There were times when I wondered whether I needed a minister, a doctor, a marriage counselor, or a psychologist. I find I needed your moral support for my convictions." Several others write to tell Friedan that upon their illuminating reading of The Feminine Mystique, they realized that the long hours they had spent in therapy were wasted. Norwood's readers were more likely to place value in therapy, especially group therapy, as she did (and as she wrote about extensively in Women Who Love Too Much); but they write also of

finding revelatory answers only in her book. For example, Leslie S. elaborates:

I have spent the better part of thirty years actively trying to find out what this life of mine was all about and why it was always such a mess. My library consists mainly of self-help books. My courses in college were almost all in sociology or psychology. I have been involved with various kinds of groups and have had a lot of individual therapy, but nothing has ever really hit the nail on the head or explained me to myself (until WWL2M). (p. 51)

Many women write to Friedan and Norwood simply to thank them for "hitting the nail on the head," for describing situations in which they had been involved -- but the dynamics of which had gone unexamined -- until their reading. Reading is thus experienced as eye-opening and liberatory. One woman writes to Friedan:

I have always felt that I had the potential to do something significant with my life but when I got married last June I began to fall victim to the mystique you so adequately describe and analyze. . . . I was beginning to feel more and more that I would end up living more and more through my husband. . . . I am extremely grateful to you personally and to your book for having helped me to reject the above plans. . . . It's much easier to reject the right to choose than it is to choose; but it is more satisfying to choose.

After reading The Feminine Mystique, this woman writes to say that she has accepted Friedan's line on the then-current "Woman Question." She came to believe that women were responsible for the "mystique" that made them live "through" their husbands, and that, thus, only women could take action toward achieving change. Readers are elated

to see what they feel is the "truth," even if it does not reflect well upon them or validate the way they have been living their lives. One woman writes joyously to Friedan, "We are all sick, and most of us don't know it. And even if we know it, we can't quite figure out why. Your extraordinary book gets straight to the heart of the matter."

The accusing finger Friedan pointed at housewives across the country had an exhilarating effect on many other readers. For instance, one woman writes to Friedan describing how the newly-recognized self-inflicted nature of her problems is freeing:

I have gone through many periods of depression, not knowing why . . . and blaming my husband. . . . I was mad at the world. . . . Now I know I had no one to blame but myself. . . . It has taken me five years of marriage and being trapped, and your book to make me realize that the one at fault is me.

Thank you again for giving me a start in the right direction.

Readers' responses to The Feminine Mystique are rife with expressions of self-deprecation: "At last I have something worthwhile to say [to my husband]"; of suddenly recognized, though long-harbored, feelings of inertia and worthlessness: "Thank God, I now have the courage and determination to start living again." The legitimacy of such feelings was reinforced by Friedan's analysis of the problem, and her recommendations for resolving women's dilemma challenged these particular readers to attempt a new start.

Finding one's life on paper can also be a painful experience, as participants in my study have also indicated. Fans writing to both Norwood and Friedan discuss the pain they felt while reading, as well as various procrastinating strategies they used to avoid it -- such as

reading only a few pages each day or putting the book in another room, so as not to have to look at it and be reminded of the "truth" it held waiting for them.

Readers who feel the books they read describe situations that resonate with their own experiences do not see internalizing the problem and single-handedly fighting to solve it as unreasonable tasks. Rather, once they have seen the light, self-amendment becomes their goal. As the readers I interviewed proclaimed, you can't change anyone else, but you can change yourself. The tendency to see problems as internally located (and thus solvable by focusing on the self) runs rampant in the genre of self-help, and these two books are no exception. Even though Friedan and Norwood deliver social criticism in their works, the unit they recommended altering for social change is each individual woman's psyche. And, in both analyses, a woman's psyche begins its oft-warped journey when she is born. Friedan and Norwood both describe how social forces conspire to maintain the unfortunate status quo; but both emphatically declare that women can cure themselves -- and in so doing, cure others as well. In a letter to Norwood, Terri D. writes about how she has continued an addictive legacy handed down to her by her mother, which fits perfectly into Norwood's description of how women's problems can be the results of maternal malpractice.³

My mother is a woman who loves too much. She really doesn't see her children as they are. She's too entangled in her stormy relationship with my father. . . . I was determined not to trap myself the way she had trapped herself. Nevertheless, she taught me to be a woman who loves too much and to use alcohol as a coping mechanisms. I developed a different life-style from hers

but we still ended up with the same addictions. (pp. 135-36)

Writing readers like this woman have striven to break familial chains, encouraged by Norwood's tales of the success of her clients. Readers thus share Norwood's conclusion that addictive behaviors are personal problems first, though they may translate into social ills as well, if enough women suffer in the same manner.

Many of the letters Friedan received were from women whose reading of her work had somehow spurred a sense of initiative; several women write specifically of the actions their reading of The Feminine Mystique has led them to take. Some are not explicit about what they would do, but assert that they would, indeed, do something:

After having lived with your book for a week now I must admit to an inner state of controlled chaos. . . . [The Feminine Mystique] will serve to move me to do that "thing" which has been nagging at me for a long long time. . . . to pull together these talents + abilities of mine into some definite pursuit.

The most common step writing readers said they would take was to return to the classroom (usually college); Friedan emphatically recommended this throughout her book. Young women write that they are not going to allow themselves to fall into the traps that had ensnared their mothers. A woman who enclosed a poem she had written informs Friedan, "For the first time in two years I am writing seriously, goaded by your beautifully written book." Another woman exclaimed dramatically, "Thank God, I now have the courage and determination to start living again." And another describes in detail how Friedan's influence drove her into a frenzy of activity:

Half an hour ago I finished reading The Feminine Mystique. Since then I have been added to the list of substitute teachers in my community, obtained an on-call babysitter for my two year old son, made an appointment at a nearby college to take brush up courses & am truly looking forward to my husband's return from work.

It is possible that the excitement and ambition expressed in letters such as these dissipated after the intensity of the reading experience faded. As one participant in my study, Bonnie, explained, when she was actually reading, she would feel that anything was possible. Eventually, however, she would be forced to confront the "real world," where problems appeared far more difficult to tackle. But to Bonnie, and to these enthusiastic respondents of Friedan's, these purposeful feelings and the elating sense of identification which reading provides are valuable in themselves. As one Friedan fan writes, "I can't say my struggle has ended, but. . . at least I know now what it is I'm struggling against" (emphasis in original).

Norwood's writing readers had much more specific step-by-step advice to follow than Friedan's did, and many of her readers undertook her recommendations with the same avidity Friedan's readers describe. One such reader details her course of action by including a litany of the "new" answers to the problems of women: Wendy D. writes a letter which is strongly evocative of the list of reading-propelled activities provided by the woman writing to Friedan (cited earlier):

I hated Women Who Love Too Much.
 I hated it so much that it took me months to read it. . . .
 I hated the women you wrote about. I hated the stories. . . .
 And then I finished the book.
 And then:

- I went to my first Overeaters Anonymous meeting.
 - I found Al-Anon.
 - I joined ACOA. . . .
 - I got into group therapy
 - I found VOICES and for the first time in my life talked about having been sexually abused.
 - I stopped binge-eating.
 - I got a new job.
 - I made a budget for the first time (I'm thirty three).
 - I have begun a new life. . . .
- I thank you. (pp. 3-4)

The responses to reading described by Friedan fans seem less self-oriented than those Norwood fans describe, but this may be because Norwood's recommendations are far more therapeutically-oriented than Friedan's. One of the primary differences between Norwood's and Friedan's approach to women's problematic lives is that Norwood borrows the therapeutic and spiritual program utilized in Alcoholics Anonymous and other "Twelve Steps" programs, and applies it to curing "man-addictions." While traditional Christians object to Friedan's rejection of conservative values, such women need not be put off by Norwood's underlying liberal feminism, because it is subtly interwoven with traditional religious prescriptions, New Age spiritual practices (like chanting affirmations), and various psychological exercises (like role-playing). Foy K. writes to Norwood to thank her for the book's religious agenda:

One of the things that meant the most to me in your book was that you specifically addressed spirituality. As a Christian woman I have been having the hardest time finding some kind of middle ground or compromise between what I felt were two extremes. I have been attending an excellent program for battered women. . . and yet I hear so much "Leave the bastard,"

"Screw him" . . . "File for divorce," etc. that it seemed to be the only line of thought, and quite frankly disturbed me. The other extreme, which I am exposed to through church, a women's Bible study and most Christian friends is that you stay in the marriage NO MATTER WHAT. . . . So many people seem to be running from God these days that I was almost shocked to find Him even mentioned in a book that I did not buy in a religious bookstore. (pp. 93-94)

It is unclear from Fay K.'s letter whether she has found a way to integrate the two conflicting approaches to the problems she has encountered in her involvement in the battered women's group and in religious activities, but her reading of Women Who Love Too Much has clearly led Fay K. to feel there a middle ground exists between feminist activism and reactionary religious doctrine, which she can appropriate in the name of self-examination. A focus on the self can draw on bits and pieces of various disciplines; in creating a fitting merger for themselves, readers can deemphasize whatever seems strident, distasteful, or inappropriately political to them. Norwood's approach encourages readers to make their own combination grab-bag of strategies and theories. And while it may leave them without a grounded or clearly articulated world-view, readers did not write of feeling uncomfortable or confused in their applications of Norwood's combination-dinner approach to problem-solving. (As one of my participants responded when I asked her to talk about which kinds of self-help books she thought were most effective in addressing women's problems today: "Whatever floats your boat.")

Many readers' letters provide examples of how women's excitement over these authors' books made them want to spread the word. In a

letter to Robin Norwood, in which Rhonda D. says that she had been involved in a destructive relationship since June, she explains that she came to read Women Who Love Too Much after several friends recommended it to her: "By August, I was once more almost incapacitated by stress. Within four days, three people in three different locations told me to read your book. . . . I figured (Alcoholics Anonymous person that I am) that God must be trying to tell me something so I bought your book and read it" (pp. 177-78).

Many readers write to complain about the price of Friedan's book, because it made their task of spreading the word more difficult. (Hardcover prices today make these objections seem laughable.) One woman describes her proselytizing activities among family members: "My only complaint is that \$5.95 is too much for a book which should be required reading for just about everyone! When will it be in paper-back? I have given copies to my daughters-in-law, sister -- and have kept my own marked copy and have another which I lend."

Readers write of group discussions with other women readers that have been spurred by their enthusiasm over The Feminine Mystique. Norwood concludes her first book by offering suggestions on how to form a "Women Who Love Too Much" group which is clearly a descendant of the CR group of the seventies spurred by The Feminine Mystique. Ramona A. writes to tell Norwood how founding such a group has helped her to improve her life in many ways:

I felt my only hope of recovering was to start my own group for women like myself: addicted to men. I was already in therapy but I felt I needed more. . . . I can't begin to tell you how my life has changed since then, how the doors have opened for me, how my

self-esteem has grown, how my faith has grown, or how I have grown. . . . Since I formed the women's group, besides working at my regular job, I've started working part-time at a halfway house for recovering addicts and alcoholics. . . . I no longer sit and cry, or isolate myself, or pray to die. Nor am I constantly depressed. Nor do I feel I need a man in my life to be happy or to take care of me. (pp. 286-87)

Women write to Friedan also about trying unsuccessfully to get their husbands to read The Feminine Mystique, or of husbands who read and discredited the appeal of Friedan's argument. One woman writes, "I only hope enough husbands will take the time to read your articles. . . . Mine wouldn't. He doesn't believe in trying to live by books." Another Friedan fan, who feels the book "is almost like reading my own diary in places," writes that she gave it to her husband to read, and that, "[h]e says he 'can't get any sense out of it.'" Though reading may result in a desire to share the excitement and intensity of the reading material with others, this desire may be thwarted. Sharing Friedan's book with their husbands may have led some readers to feel the effects of "the feminine mystique" even more strongly than before. Writing readers, like the readers I interviewed, feel that men are unlikely readers of self-help books because of their cultural conditioning, which allows them to evade the examination of problems which affect their lives, or to feel that women are the ones who should carry out analytical and introspective tasks.

Not all letters were full of praise for Friedan's or Norwood's definition of the situation or the remedies they offered. Both Friedan and Norwood received letters which criticized their books for the narrowness of their arguments in terms of race, class and sexual

preference. The letter below points out the classist assumptions embodied in Friedan's suggestions that the tedium of housework and child-rearing could be relieved by hiring others to do it:

The book seems only to apply to fairly well-off women. At the beginning you stated that women suffering great poverty did not have the boredom problem Perhaps your aim in writing was to liberate the more well-off women, and not these. You say one should get an outside job, and in some cases have hired help to do the housework. Yet somebody still has to do this work, and it's still a woman, so these women are still in bondage. I should like your opinion in this.

Whether or not Friedan ever sent her opinion was unclear from the files kept. Occasional responses from Friedan dotted the files of letters I studied; these were form letters which thanked recipients for their letters, and closed with the inspirational line, "Good luck to you on your road." There was no indication from the files as to who among her fans and critics received responses.

Norwood, on the other hand, provides detailed, very personalized, and sometimes very long answers to her mail in Letters From Women Who Love Too Much. It may be that Norwood had more time on her hands, that she is a more concerned person, that she hired a secretary, or that she anticipated a second money-making book which would be comprised of the letters she had received coupled with her own conscientious responses. It is also possible that Friedan also wrote detailed responses and did not store them with the letters to which they corresponded, or simply didn't save her responses. In any case, Norwood has responded to the criticism offered by writing readers, while Friedan apparently has not.

Norwood includes fewer letters which criticize her analysis in Letters than Friedan maintains in her files at the Schlesinger Library. One of the handful of critical letters about Women Who Love Too Much is from a woman who states that Norwood had the problem backwards. Marcie K. writes: "[W]hen will you . . . write a book on the subject of 'men who love too little'? After reading these women's recollections of their fathers and ex-lovers, I wondered to myself, 'Where in the hell did these men learn to be such rotten fathers, lovers and husbands?'" (p. 314). Marcie K. urges Norwood to reformulate the dysfunctional behavior in heterosexual relationships as originating from men's lack of concern, rather than from women's overinvestment. She also asks, "do you work only with white women? I seem to be reading only about them" (314). Here Norwood snips in her reply, "I no longer 'work with' anybody, white or otherwise. It has become very important to me at this point in my life simply to continue to pursue my own recovery in a support group of peers. I do not have a private practice any longer." She then goes on to explain that, when she was writing Women Who Love Too Much, she saw primarily white women clients, the implication being that she could thus write only about them (p. 315).

Phyllis R. writes to tell Norwood that she feels excluded from her (Norwood's) discussion of her clients -- though she believes Norwood's analysis certainly applies to her habits in relationships -- because she is a lesbian:

If the book is reprinted, which I'm sure it will be, I was wondering if you could add a clause to your introduction to include me and others like me. I am a lesbian and had a hard time with the constant implication that my obsession is with men. . .

[T]he feeling I had of being invisible to you was difficult to get past. Your book is very helpful and I ask that somewhere in it you acknowledge my existence. (p. 335)

In a similar vein, Friedan is criticized for mishandling homosexuality. She received several letters from readers who are outraged at her implications that homosexuality is an aberration created by smothering mothers.

In more general reactions to The Feminine Mystique, readers write that Friedan overstates her case. Readers direct their attacks against Friedan personally, calling her a man-hater, and including various other insults along this line. For example, one letter reads (in its entirety): "I can't tell you how nuts you are -- I bet -- you're not happy at home and I'll bet your children suffer because you don't know the joys of being a real woman." Critics range in tone from bitter and attacking (as in the letter above) to polite yet provocative.³ Many men write to tell Friedan that she clearly does not understand what women want. Many women indicate that they see The Feminine Mystique as an unjust attack upon housewives like themselves, who, they assert, are happy doing what they are doing; are fulfilling God's will or Nature's plan; and are lucky to be doing it. Readers perceive many of the points which make up Friedan's overall call for doing away with housewifery as personally insulting and enraging.

One woman writes: "I'm mad, I'm sick, I'm tired of being told by every article in every magazine that because I'm 'just a housewife' my husband finds me a dull companion, my children are not self-reliant, and my time and talents are being wasted on 'trivial unimportant matters.'" Another reader writes that she agrees "most emphatically"

with Friedan, but feels that Friedan has "pass[ed] too lightly over the rewards of motherhood." She reminds Friedan that there are realistic barriers preventing women from finding "satisfying job[s]," and making housewifery "the one area remaining to women where there is any satisfaction of achievement." A (possibly man) reader writes more angrily: "A harried mother preoccupied with a career or extra curricular activities is neglecting her duties as much as if she spent the day in a saloon."

So, while there were, indeed, many readers who accepted Friedan's assertion that women were leading meaningless lives as housewives and mothers, there were also readers who vehemently rejected this assertion or who rejected Friedan's implication that women should shoulder the blame for a situation which was, in many ways, so deeply institutionalized that it was beyond women's control.

Letters from angry, even hostile readers do not indicate that Friedan's or Norwood's arguments were wasted on such readers; these readers, too, were deeply affected by her book, in that it made them think about their own lives, offended their sensibilities, and conflicted with their traditional -- or more progressive -- views. These angry letters to Friedan show what readers may do when they find what they read objectionable, and when it hits close to home.

The women I interviewed said that if they disagreed with a book, or it made them angry, they would be unlikely to finish it. They might throw it away: this would be the ultimate rejection. But participants said they were most likely to get angry at books in which authors provide facile theories or recommendations; that they would not be

likely to read a book in the first place that they thought might be ideologically offensive to them. Most were rather unperturbed by substantive differences between their own beliefs and those presented by the author -- as long as they felt there was something of substance there to read. Also, participants in my study were reading books that might have feminist content at a time when such ideas were not new or unusual to them. (Many participants said they would define themselves as feminists. Those who would not said they believed in "equality" between men and women in the workplace.) "Hate mail" and readers' critical responses show that challenging or deeply disturbing reading experiences may also result in attempts to make these reactions known to the author.

Readers' letters, like conversations with readers, testify to the importance of the reading experience. Since they are more immediate evidence of the effects of reading, letters show an intensity of reaction that readers, in the interviews I conducted, rarely expressed. (They might tell me about books they loved, but they often had difficulty detailing exactly what made those books so exemplary, in retrospect.) Letters offer an intriguing entree into readers' thoughts, when seen as attempts to forge a relationship with a distant "authority," a woman who has, in many cases, helped to effect changes in unhappy lives, and, in many cases, somehow upset the balance of such lives. Many writing readers held out the offer of friendship to these authors (especially Friedan). So, while several of the readers I interviewed spoke about feeling a connection with the authors whose

work they found influential on their thinking, the letter writers went one step further by attempting to make this figurative link real.

These letters may have served as a part of the self-help process for the readers who wrote them: writing itself can be therapeutic. Writing about what they read allowed readers to act creatively, to put their situations down in words on paper, in an emulative gesture of self-affirmation. If reading is experienced as an act of unburdening, writing confirms and reifies the intensity of this experience.

In their letters to Friedan and Norwood, readers confirm many of the thoughts about the self-help genre that participants aired in the interviews, but, most importantly, they confirm that the activity of reading self-help books is a constructive one, in the eyes of those who engage in it. Whether or not readers then act upon what they have read -- and whether or not the sense of control authors encourage them to build is a realistic response to their problems, they have felt, however briefly, that their lives can be different.

chapter four

MAKING IT READABLE:
EDITORS AND AUTHORS OF SELF-HELP BOOKS

Sociologists have long sought a heuristic strategy which would enable them to understand the creation of culture, to describe the acts and contributions of producers, users, and the social world of cultural commerce. I have focused on the activities undertaken by readers in absorbing, reaffirming and rejecting the cultural messages found in self-help books (in Chapters One, Two and Three). Here, I will shift my examination to the creators of self-help books -- namely editors and authors, and the publishing industry in which their activities take place -- in order to achieve a multi-faceted evaluation of self-help reading.

Wendy Griswold (1986) defines a "cultural object" as the ever-varying product of social activity:

A cultural object is an artifact constructed from previously used cultural elements, current conventions, contemporary aesthetic and social interests, the individual vision and expertise of the artist, the demands of the audience mediated through an existing institutional structure, and sometimes a dollop of unpredictability which heirs to Romanticism labeled genius. (p. 187)

Griswold explains the creation and longevity of cultural objects by translating the complexity of the contributing factors she discusses above into a diagram, "the cultural diamond," the four corners of which are the "creator," the "audience," the "social world" and the "cultural object." According to Griswold, no account of a cultural phenomenon is complete without a consideration of all four corners of the diamond and

of the connections between them.

Authors are usually seen as sole creators of their works, but the production of all cultural commodities is structured by institutional requirements and practices and, thus, should be seen as a creation of a community of workers (Becker 1982). Editors occupy a unique position in the process of generating self-help books because they negotiate both with authors and with higher-ups in the bureaucracies that structure their work. They are the first judges of authors' proposals; thus, their activities are most crucial in determining what will and won't be published. I have conducted interviews with editors working at five different publishing houses in New York City, all of whom have been, or were at the time of the interviews, involved in the production of self-help books. I will first discuss the participating editors' perceptions of their work, their descriptions of the institutional requirements and constraints upon the production of self-help literature, and their views about the genre itself. Next, I will examine authors' statements about their motivations and goals in writing self-help books.

PROFIT OR PERISH

The history and usage of self-help literature for women is tied to the history of book publishing and distribution, as well as to the social, political, and economic changes that affect women's lives. A brief discussion of the development of the publishing industry serves as a necessary backdrop to editors' and authors' views of the genre and their positions as cultural gate-keepers and producers of self-help books.

In June, 1939, Robert de Graff founded Pocket Books, and began an

experimental plan to market a list of ten books -- ten thousand copies of each, at 25 cents a book -- in New York City (Davis, 1984, pp. 12-13). Before Pocket Books appeared on the scene, hardcover books were quite difficult to find and expensive to own, and earlier schemes to market paperbacks had never been successful on a large scale (Davis, pp. 16-19). Bookbuyers had limited access to books, as there were only about 4,000 businesses which sold books, and among these, approximately 500 "legitimate" bookstores. "In two-thirds of America's counties, there were no bookstores at all. Thus only half of the books produced by American book publishers sold more than twenty-five hundred copies" (Davis, p.16). Successful paperbacking, begun by Pocket Books, transformed the distribution system publishers utilized and "democratized reading in America" (Davis, xii).

Technological innovations in publishing, changing conceptions about authors and audiences, and the past success of magazine and newspaper subscription novels -- all predating de Graff's debut of paperbacks by up to one hundred years -- enabled the large-scale manufacture, sale, and success of his company's books (Radway 1984, pp. 19-29). Radway describes how the traditional view of the book "as a unique configuration of ideas conceived with a unique hypothetical audience in mind" was challenged in the early 1800s by "an alternative view which held that certain series of books could be sold successfully and continuously to a huge, heterogeneous, preconstituted public"(p. 21). The editors I spoke with in 1988 demonstrated that they rely on both the traditional and objectified conceptions of reading material, often differentiating between books which they believe fall into the first category (those with inherent literary merit) and books which fall into

the second (appealing -- though not necessarily artistically remarkable -- commodities).

Usually, a book is published in hardcover first, and if it sells, or sells reasonably well, paperback editions will follow. On occasion, when publishers and editors believe a market can be created in for both types, books are published simultaneously in hard and softcover editions. The hardcover publisher usually owns the paperback rights, but this is not always the case. Authors may negotiate hardcover and paperback sales separately, or increasingly, since many publishing companies produce both types of books, make a joint hardcover and paperback deal with the same conglomerate. The difference between trade and mass market paperbacks is often fuzzy, but basically, mass market books are printed in larger quantities, are smaller in size, generally cost less, and are more widely-distributed than trade books, owing largely to their sale outside of bookstores (e.g., drugstores, newsstands, and supermarkets). Self-help books are published most often in mass market rather than in trade form.

The majority of books lead very short lives. "The average books is dead in days or weeks; 90 percent are dead, in their original editions, within a year" (Shatzkin 1982, p. 3). Mass market books are destroyed when returned by retailers, whereas hardcover and trade paperback books are warehoused, remaindered and/or backlisted. Part of the reason for the early demise of so many titles can be attributed to the distribution system. Sales representatives from publishing companies negotiate deals directly with bookstores -- or chain offices -- twice yearly. This process is time consuming, and is often not completed before books go to press, so the supply of books printed (press run)

does not necessarily correspond with the demand from booksellers. Roughly one-fourth of new books are never sold on the retail market (Shatzkin, pp. 12-13).

One editor of trade books, who had worked in the past editing mass market books, explained why mass market paperbacks were less likely to "live" as long as trade books in bookstores:

A mass market book is a disposable commodity. When a mass market book doesn't sell, they cut off the cover, they destroy the book, and the cover comes back to the publisher for credit. . . . [In trade books] in order to get credit, you have to return the book, so . . . the retailer tends to keep the book around a lot longer, and these books have a longer life, and do backlist [sell well after their initial printing].

Editors describe the publishing business as a series of steps where selling books successfully marks the end of the process. There are obstacles to be tackled at each successive level, and various "gate-keepers" monitoring progress along the way. First there are the agents, who winnow down the plethora of written material that will be submitted to editors. Each editor I spoke with said that it was entirely possible for a work to be bought without an agent's representation, but they agreed that projects bought in this manner ("over the transom") were rarities. Editors said that a very low percentage of the total projects they saw (with and without agents' representation) would become books; one estimated that "we usually see somewhere between 20 and 50 books before we buy one of them. We spend a lot of time turning stuff down, because you don't see how to market it effectively, or you simply don't like it." Projects may visit many publishing houses, of course, before finding a home or being

discarded altogether.

Next, editors determine whether the projects given to them by agents are worth pursuing. When a project is highly desired -- usually when an author is well-known -- publishing houses take part in an "auction" where they call their bids in over the phone to the author's agent. In order to deal with the quantities of manuscripts that pass through their offices, editors will often "farm out" reading to their assistant, who make up another step in process of weeding out the "good" from the "bad." Editorial assistants are almost always the readers of agentless manuscripts, or "slush." The editors I interviewed said that they would always read a project themselves before going forward with it, and saw assistants as time-savers, whose labor they were grateful for.

Once an editor has decided she would like to buy a project, she must present it at a larger meeting whose participants and format vary from house to house. Here, she attempts to sell the project to the editorial board, which often has veto power. Sometimes the board does not have explicit veto power, but its support is always seen as desirable. In such cases, an executive editor or publisher will have ultimate discretion over the final approval of projects.

PICKING AND CHOOSING

I was particularly interested in uncovering the strategies editors use to determine that a book is worth buying, and that it is, thus, potentially salesworthy. Editors' views of self-help books often echoed those of the readers I interviewed. Each of the editors I spoke to stressed the many unknown factors which affect book publishing.

First and foremost was the fact that books which don't sell can be returned (and, as discussed above, often literally destroyed).

Awareness of the transient nature of their product makes editors' decisions to buy and produce books weightier than such decisions in other businesses, they feel. (Indeed, the option to return was developed beginning in the 1930s and 1940s to induce retailers to buy books under conditions in which the risk of incurring great financial loss was eliminated for them [Shatzkin, p. 97].)

The editors I interviewed took pleasure in describing the unpredictable nature of their work, and the "educated guesswork," "hunches," and "instinct" upon which they relied in their attempts to make profitable decisions. Editors were reluctant to quantify their success rates in prediction-making; they saw profitable choices as arising from a delicate balance between certain abilities they possessed as astute cultural observers and sheer luck. One editor describes the nuances of her own decision-making process:

You think. You work a lot on gut. . . . An old boss of mine used to say that . . . if an editor buys ten books, seven of them are going to fail, two of them are going to succeed, and one of them is going to be a blockbuster, and you're not going to know the reason why for any of it. And you give it your best shot, but a lot of the times you just have no idea. You know, you do a lot of educated guesswork . . . based on your experience, and very often the track record of the particular subject or genre, and the track record of the particular author. Or you just see a need. . . . This is an extraordinarily subjective business. Every editor has stories about the book they turned down that went on to sell two million copies. But every editor has a set of criteria that a book must meet if it is something that they want to take on and champion and sponsor.

Editors, like readers, had difficulty articulating what this set of criteria is -- what, exactly, makes a book appeal (or not appeal) to them. All five editors did acknowledge several loosely-defined qualities they seek in determining whether or not a project is worth the investment of time and money. Self-help books must be "well-written" by authors who are appropriately authoritative. Self-help books must offer something "new" or "different." They must be timely.

One editor said that self-help books "written with a particular passion" or "a sincere impulse" will do better than ones written cynically, glibly, or condescendingly. When I asked how she tells if a book is well-written, she said, at first, "the same way you do." Then, when pressed to elaborate, she said, "it's subjective." The editors I interviewed wavered between the belief that "goodness" was measurable and clearly discernible to a well-trained reader, and the feeling that quality, itself, was elusive and could be determined only by each individual reader. Thus, editors expressed beliefs in both the universality of appeal (of particular books) and the individuality of the reading experience.

When I expressed amazement at the fact that the publishing industry relied on a small circle of editors in New York predicting the tastes of people all over the country -- and that this process worked -- one editor reminded me that "we're all members of the same culture." Things may happen faster or slower in certain places, she said, but eventually the same things transpire all over the country. In order to be a good editor, all five agreed, one must know what's going on. Editors said they try to stay attuned to the pulse of the nation by

reading a lot -- newspapers and magazines, especially -- by talking to friends and relatives, and by watching television. But, ultimately, their decision-making would always bring them back to their own personal experiences and impressions. One editor described the social construction of "instinct" which she felt guided her decisions:

[I]f you can't trust your own instincts, then you can't be in publishing. Obviously [instinct is] a product of experience. You get better as time passes. I can sort of track my books through my own life experience, and it really reflects where you are at a given time. And I don't think that's bad. I always look for that . . . connection with my own experience because that's what gives you that real kind of extra energy for something. You have certain professional instincts, but if you don't go beyond the professional instincts, you're not gonna make it, you know. You've got to connect with it in a very personal way. I think you'll find any editor who does these books successfully really, kind of, is in there. . . . For instance, [with one particular book], I had had a love affair years ago with a guy like that, and I read it and I said, "Oh, now I understand what was going on!"

Each editor said that she would have to believe in a project to sell it, or at the very least, to believe it held broad appeal for others (as in the cases of editors who said they would not do this kind of reading outside of work). Editors said they looked for written material that demonstrated "a sense of mission," that addressed what they considered to be "real problems or needs," material they felt could "touch a nerve." One editor explained that an author's method was as important a consideration as content:

How a book is done is as important as what the book is about, and you can have a lot of books about the problems women have getting men to commit. . . but only a handful -- less than a handful -- of those actually hit. . . . We like to feel that our books

are solid, that they are not just going to be here for six months, that they are going to what we call backlist, which means that after their initial sale, they will continue to sell for three, four, five or more years.

The composition of lists (all the books a house is publishing), which are compiled twice annually, have an effect upon the projects that are bought because publishers want their lists to show diversity, even within topic areas. One editor described how she tries to compile a varied group of projects, but that more importantly, she looks for books that affect her personally: "I might know about a trend, and say, 'Oh, we need something to fill that slot,' but many of these books start with just, you read something, and you say, 'my god, you know, that's right!' You have to feel a commitment for a book or it's not -- you can't muster up the energy."

While editors attempt to create balanced lists and to fulfill their own personal requirements in selecting projects, they also try to publish books which will hit bookstore racks at the right time. One editor lucidly described the importance of timing in selecting book projects. She said:

You're just constantly reading and looking and trying to keep yourself at least five steps ahead of what's actually taking place in the consumer end of things. You want to be ahead of the consumer. You want to catch a trend before it actually happens. It can also work against you if you get onto a trend too early; you can publish before it's time.

Editors emphasized that the amount paid for a project and the number of books in a print run were figures that could not be easily or exactly quantified. Five thousand copies was the lowest figure editors

cited, and one million was the highest. Payment to authors could range as widely, they said. One editor warned me that I was trying to get her to quantify something that was impossible to quantify. Publishing was "not a science," she said, and there were no formulas used to determine what would be paid or how many books would be published, though these two figures were certainly related. Decisions about advance payment to authors were strongly tied to editors' estimates of potential revenue. Such decisions were further complicated by competition among publishing houses for a single product, and by publishers' desires to enhance their reputations to attract future sales. One editor explained:

You know, you don't necessarily always buy a book simply to sell lots of copies. Sometimes it indicates a new direction in your program. You know, you may spend more than you think a particular book is actually worth in terms of its net sales to your company, but it's a statement acquisition -- it says something about where you want to go and it can help attract new properties to you.

Editors see books as commodities in that they are meant to be sold, but in many ways, they see books as distinct from other products for sale. In other words, selling books is the point of publishing, but it is not the whole point. At none of the publishing companies was market research of any kind undertaken to determine the characteristics of self-help audiences. Two editors, cited below, sum up the reasons they believe market research would be impractical:

If we were doing a product line [then we might do market research]. For example, some of the romance lines . . . used to do market research because they were selling a product. Those lines are sold like soap. They're very consistent. And they were able to

determine who the reader is. But by the time you get through market research, your book is dead, and who knows what the next book is going to be? Because that market is constantly shifting and constantly changing.

It's not an industry which has ever systematically attempted to quantify or research or study what the American consumer really wants and buys. . . . There's a fundamental problem which is that -- one that Proctor and Gamble doesn't confront -- there are 40,000 new books, including revisions and up-dates, published every year! So you're not talking about something that's easy to catalog. We're not talking about ten brands of toothpaste. We're not talking about 25 brands of cereal. We're not talking about things that will come and stay forever.

Time does not permit testing; both the time frame involved in in-house production and the life-span of a book once it gets to stores mitigate against experimentation. The first editor cited above emphasized the guesswork necessary in making decisions about projects which could take two years to be published. Though self-help books are products which publishing houses make money from marketing, their producers do not see them as interchangeable. Editors do not see self-help books as formulaic creations which can be tested and marketed in the same way that toothpaste can. They believe books adapt to changing tastes and desires of the reading audience. It is important to bear in mind that there are books which these editors do see as formulaic and static -- and, thus, researchable -- namely, romances.

Most important, and evident from each editor's comments, was the belief that unpredictability enhanced the work involved in editorial decision-making. Guesswork, gutwork, and serendipity were all seen by the editors I interviewed as motivating and exciting parts of their jobs. Uncertainty is a dominant backdrop to all aspects of editors' work. One

editor said:

[T]here's a lot of psychology involved because . . . you're taking this pile of papers, and you're asking someone to pay you for it. And there are so many steps in between. I've got to sell it here. My people have to sell it to the sales force. The sales force has to sell it to the bookstore, and the bookstore has to believe, and have an expectation -- based on all the support we say we're going to give it -- to sell that book to someone else. And how fraught with danger it is. Especially if you're saying, "I've got to get her on 'Donahue,'" or, "I've got to get Michiko Kakutani at the [New York] Times to review it."

Editors explained that the process involved in signing a contract on a project and transforming it into a book involves assistance from the publicity department of the publishing house. The editors I spoke with gave varied accounts of exactly where and how publicity people participated in the process, but all five were emphatic about the importance of the publicity department's role in selling self-help books. Publicity people were responsible for arranging advertising, bookstore displays, live appearances like book signings, and radio and television engagements for authors.

Editors saw television as an influential force in the selling of books, though not as influential as many critics of recent trends in publishing believe it to be. Thomas Whiteside, for example, argues that changes in the structure of publishing, book marketing and retailing have made publishing houses concentrate on producing blockbusters (1980). As trade and mass market publishing companies become corporate conglomerates, as chain bookstores reach their computerized tentacles into malls across the nation, competition among bookmakers results in a trash-infested industry, catering to the

lowest common denominator of reading tastes, he argues. Television, which Whiteside sees as a wasteland of inanity, has had a large part to play in keeping what trash afloat. Whiteside writes:

As commercial television has inculcated in mass audiences the concept of the personality-author, it has at the same time helped to provide publishers with tempting visions of a new scale on which books of a certain kind, at least might be promoted and sold, through the use of multimedia techniques and the blockbuster approach. (p. 38)

Self-help books most definitely fit into the "books of a certain kind" Whiteside mentions above: they lend themselves quite well to television presentation, providing both "issues" and "experts" to which audiences respond (as a glance at the contents of recent Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue shows would bear out).

Whiteside contends that the beauty of books is being co-opted by the recent relentless capitalistic tenor that he believes has infused the publishing industry. Books, regardless of quality, "are all made to seem strangely alike. . . . all treated as 'product'" (p. 193). Literary merit has fallen by the wayside; Whiteside implies that a golden age when publishing was committed to discriminating good taste and intellectually-inspired love of books has been replaced by profit-seeking bureaucracies. "[T]he mass merchandising, the hype, the frenzied pursuit of Number One which the publishing industry has turned to as a central and universal tool is in its very essence anti-art, and even anti-thought" he concludes (p. 193).

Whiteside is not alone in his view of the corruption of the book-making industry by the combined forces of television, corporate capitalism, and presumably easily-led consumers. Walter Powell also

sees the profit-seeking conglomerates as the villains, arguing that chains are changing cultural reading opportunities in America for the worse, and that "if present trends continue," there is no question that "irreparable harm will be done to our public culture" (1983, p. 62).

This analysis is similar to that made by Todd Gitlin in his dissection of the institutional forces behind prime-time television (1983). Producers, writers, and audience are seemingly powerless against the forces of what Gitlin sees as the obscene mindlessness they have created. Network executives, according to Gitlin, perceive their audience as "uneducated, distracted, and easily bewildered" (p. 87) and out of fear of losing it, continue to benevolently shovel garbage its way. "We swim in [television's] world even if we don't believe in it" Gitlin announces bleakly (p. 333).

In such descriptions of cultural commodity production, producers are seen as carrying out their duties in an institutional setting which absolutely prohibits the challenging of the socio-political status quo. The results -- the cultural objects created by their endeavors -- are seen as overwhelmingly poor examples of creativity, material which will appeal to the lowest tastes of the misguided masses. The editors I spoke with, however, do not see themselves as powerless trash collectors, nor as participants in a conspiratorial megapolopoly whose goal is to reify the political status quo.

Other cultural analysts, too, see the "massification" explanation of production and consumption as simplistic (Lacy 1983; Long 1985; Vaughan 1983). Though mergers have produced mega-corporations, the number of small publishers has, at the same time, increased (Vaughan, 1983). Lacy contests the view of television as a hypnotic force

captivating potential consumers; he writes that "[t]he total number of books published has approximately quadrupled since television became generally available," and that measurements of book sales (by number of copies) do not show a clear and sustained link between viewing and buying (p. 121).

Editors varied in their assessments of the efforts of the marketing and publicity departments of their companies, but most agreed that it was simply practical to recognize that sales could depend on authors who were also competent spokespeople for their work. Editors said that the marketability of an author could affect the amount s/he would be paid for a project, or the treatment the book would receive from the publicity department, but insisted that it was unlikely that an inarticulate or somehow unpresentable author could cause a worthwhile project to be dropped. Only one editor disagreed, arguing that since self-help books tend to come in waves, and since "often they [authors] don't write their own books anyway," it may be possible to choose between a number of authors writing on the same subject. In this case, it would make sense to choose an author who could perform well on television.

Editors agreed that the publicity department's efforts could encourage the success of a book -- could even push a book into the bestseller category -- but warned that publicity alone could not make a book successful. "You cannot sell a book people don't want," one editor said. Editors firmly believed that a book does well because people want to read it, and consequently, they do not support any theories of cultural consumption in which coercion on the part of producers or marketers is central (such as those put forth by

Whiteside, Powell, and Gitlin above). Editors see themselves as providing a service by which they hope to fulfill book buyers' expectations and satisfy their tastes.

The role that publicity and marketing departments of publishing houses played in decision-making about the purchase of projects varied from house to house. Publicity people's input ranged from clearly-delineated participation in editorial board meetings to making more casual recommendations; only one editor said that the publicity department had no formal or informal power in decision-making about purchases. Editors felt the input they received from publicity people was often indispensable, and they would seek such advice themselves. One editor described how she would arrange for the publicity department to get involved when she had determined that a project warranted their participation:

For anything that I think will be, you know, a publicity-driven subject -- and most self-help subjects are -- I will often have a -- what we call a -- dog and pony show, and I'll get in, you know, people from marketing, people from publicity and a couple of other editors, and we'll just see how articulate the author is. . . . You want to see whether they can answer questions concisely, and whether they're kind of basically attractive personalities. They don't have to be glitzy or glamorous or cute or anything of that kind, just coherent.

Editors said that it was becoming more common for authors to focus on self-presentation, and to include video tapes of themselves as part of the original package under consideration. One of the editors I spoke with acknowledged that there had been "a lot of objection and commentary about video submission," but said that she felt that this development was a reasonable and professionally prudent response on

the part of authors and agents to "a very crowded marketplace" where sales could be affected by television appearances. She said that authors were now taking the initiative to market themselves along with -- or even before -- their submissions were made:

Some people go out and produce a video before they make the submission. We don't ask them to do that. They're savvy. They know it's a selling tool. And then we can say to our sales force. . . . "We've seen the author. The author's phenomenal!" And if you're right, they're dazzled. And if you're not, you're in trouble.

Editors were quick to mention that blockbusters enabled them to also publish books which they felt had merit, but for which they did not have high financial expectations. Editors believed that -- in contrast to the scholars cited above who believe the publishing industry doesn't care about quality -- recent developments in the book-making and selling industries (increased commercialization, a more explicit focus on books as commodities, larger publishing corporations, the proliferation of chain bookstores, and a reliance for publicity on television shows) did not mean that book-loving was being replaced by money-grubbing. Rather, they felt that these factors made their work easier in some ways. One editor, who had worked previously as a journalist writing about the publishing industry, discussed resentment on the part of small owner-run bookstores about large chains, which could afford to discount books more easily. She said the issue was complex, and ought not be oversimplified into a case of corporate victimization of struggling entrepreneurs.

Small bookstores are upset by discounting and by what they call the bestseller syndrome. On the other hand, they benefit from

the amount of advertising that the bookstore chains do. . . . I've talked too many sides of the issue to really think that it's very black and white. And it's also, you know, the chains are a response and a creation of the way publishers have treated and built them. But I think . . . it may be correct to say that the chains -- because they are computerized and much more systematic -- they can tell you what is selling, and they've become an important statistical source for publishers because they brought bookstores to where they never were before. . . . They can, in any given week, tell you what's selling everywhere. . . . There's no small bookstore who can do that for you. . . . In that data you capture a lot about where the market is and what the market wants.

Access to statistical data collected by large bookstore chains enables editors to manage the guesswork they will do in the future, and allows them to see concrete results of the decision-making they have already completed.

I asked editors -- as I had asked readers -- to tell me how they defined the genre of self-help, and to talk about how they perceived it to be relevant (or not) to women's lives. Editors' definitions and evaluations of the usefulness of self-help books were similar to those of readers, but reflected their particular professional interaction with these books. One editor defined self-help by focusing on the books' potential ability to save users time and money.

Self-help is a category with many facets that attempts to allow a person to either seek information to help them without the assistance of a professional, or to use the information in conjunction with or to help them reflect on the advice that they may get from a professional. But self-help is really a very broad ranging category. It's everything from how to fix your car, as opposed to taking it to a mechanic, how to fix your life, how to improve your relationships, how to make changes in yourself. So you know, so it's an umbrella term that's used to describe a

whole wealth of subject areas but with the essential message being on the, you know, can-do aspect of a person. You can do it yourself more cheaply than if you went out and had other people do it for you.

Editors also voiced the same concerns that readers did about the quality of self-help material, often reeling off titles they felt were "good" and titles (nearly always published by other houses) they felt were "bad." One editor faulted psychological self-help book authors for their tendency to oversimplify, and thus, to promise to offer answers to problems that required more than a book could possibly give:

I think a lot of them are quick fixes and easy answers that don't deal with the... causes sufficiently for someone to change their patterns. And I think that anyone who is looking for psychological help is trying to change a pattern, and that's not done by reading a book unless you have extraordinary gifts of insight and motivation. It usually takes some type of one-on-one, or therapy.

As professional readers, editors hope the books they create will last on the shelves, and are especially concerned with the time frame during which self-help books will be found usable. One editor defined self-help in terms of their longevity:

I think self-help books fall into two categories, the ones that just go on forever, M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled [for example]... and books that are much more topical and focused. For example, in twenty years I don't know that anyone is going to read Smart Women Foolish Choices, not necessarily because the issue is any less pressing, but because we'll be approaching it differently, the whole demographic men-versus-women, and also in terms of age and emotional development, will be entirely different in twenty... years. A book like Sex and the Single

Girl, the ultimate self-help book of what, the '60s? I mean, is just laughable in a lot of ways today. So self-help books go through fashions the way other books do also.

All five editors agreed that self-help books must be practically didactic -- that they should offer readers a comprehensible program to follow toward achieving desired results, and that this program should address current needs.

Like the readers I interviewed, editors felt that recent social and political changes had created an environment in which women were more likely than in the past to turn to reading for guidance or for a sense of community. One editor enumerated the factors she felt contributed to the current success of the self-help genre:

Well, I think that you're talking about . . . really a tremendous upheaval in terms of women's and men's roles and how women and men dealt with their sexuality. It became acceptable to live out of wedlock. . . . As the population shifted, and there were more women for fewer men of marriageable age, you saw . . . women . . . pursuing careers as an acceptable alternative to . . . getting married. Well, what was there in terms of role models for these women? Almost nothing. So where did they turn? To each other, and for advice, to the self-help books because their mothers and grandmothers had very little to offer them. You also saw, you know, a serious fragmenting of family life in a way that really had not been seen before. It's not that there had never been divorce. It's not that there had never been single mothers. But when you take a look at statistics and the percentage of the population . . . the fact that the population is so much more mobile, that families and friendships tend to be far more tenuous now than they were twenty-five years ago -- and who knows what they'll be twenty years down the road? People have to turn somewhere. And I think they're turning to these . . . authority figures, the way that. . . maybe you used to talk to your mother, or you used to talk to an older sister, or you used to talk to whoever.

This editor felt that marriage -- once an immutable fact for most women -- had become an option, and at the same time, norms governing heterosexual interactions had been called into question. Without widely-accepted guidelines for behavior, women, especially, were at sea. She said, "I think what a lot of the self-help books are doing are responding to a need for advice, a stability." This editor saw women's use of self-help books as a means of allaying their confusion, and as outlines for conducting relationships.

Several editors said that part of the reason they thought women were reading self-help books much more than men were had nothing to do with the genre, per se, but was due to the fact that women read and buy more books on the whole. Editors, like readers participating in this study, also said that they felt psychological self-help was especially appealing to women because women are more likely to examine and attempt to ameliorate problems in their lives than men are. In the words of one editor:

I don't know whether this is a cultural or a genetic thing, but I think, as a rule, women are more introspective than men. We have certainly been trained -- if there is some kind of inherent predisposition among women to be more sensitive, more nurturing, more aware of others' feelings . . . that has certainly been nurtured in us by the culture. . . . I think women have a real hard time in a lot of ways -- not to say that men don't -- but the women I know seem to be actually looking for answers, and the men seem to feel like why should they bother?

Editors also mentioned that women readers find self-help books appealing because our culture encourages people -- especially women -- to seek out the advice of "experts," and reading is, as one editor

said, "one way to gain access to an expert." Capitalist consumer culture also promotes a focus on the self as a product to be improved with the aid of purchases (like books). Ego-centered behavior, which editors see self-help books as advocating -- has become a viable subject area in women's reading. And even though many of the currently popular self-help books are about forming or conducting fruitful relationships with others, editors felt the commercial success of these books reflected the growing self-centeredness of women. They saw this as a potentially positive or liberatory development.

Several editors complained about books which they saw as pitting men and women against each other. One editor said that recently there has been a "whole spate of man-bashing books," and while the messages promoted in such books may be, in part, realistic, she felt they were not representative of the whole picture of heterosexual relations. She told me about a book she had signed recently which offered a "more refreshing message." The premise of this book was that there were good men out there, and that women were, in part, responsible for the ways in which men treated them.

Another editor said that she felt certain questions were unanswerable in a general sense, and so she felt self-help books were often deceptive in their claims or promises:

I don't think there is a book that can tell you how to make a relationship work. . . . Problems people have with relationships tend to be easier to generalize than what makes a happy relationship a happy relationship. . . . I've seen a lot of proposals from people that we've all turned down about what makes their marriage work. It's not what's going to make your marriage work, or my marriage work, or your mother's marriage work, or your sister's marriage work. That's something that's got to be

worked out a very individual basis. . . . You can give people [only] guidelines about solving their problems.

Editors cautioned against the danger (also mentioned by readers themselves) that reading books was all too often a doomed quest for a "quick fix" or a substitute for a real, live therapist. Profound problems, they felt, would not be eliminated by reading alone. One editor said that self-help books exemplified people's desire to find easy answers to complicated problems. Another said that she thought reading was often a step in the right direction, even if it were not a cure-all. "It's easier than going into years of analysis, or years of therapy. . . . I suppose it's a good thing to have people become aware at any level," she said. It is not surprising that editors of self-help books are quite supportive of therapeutic conceptions of health and well-being, and support psychologically-based methods of decision-making, problem-solving, and behavior modification.

Editors, like readers, said that reading self-help books offered women the opportunity to confront problems without going public, which consulting a specialist would involve. "I have one book at home that has underlinings, marginal annotations that I wrote when I was really working on a problem," one editor said. This editor also said that she felt that self-help books were helpful even if devoid of sophisticated theoretical underpinnings, if they could assist people in defining what their problems were. She said that she would often tell authors: "Even identifying what is going on in this person's life, even putting a name and a boundary around the pain or the difficulty that they're in, is such a gift, that even if you don't have the ultimate solution, it doesn't matter."

Three of the editors I spoke with said that they would read the types of self-help books they edit as part of their own personal (not work-related) reading. One editor said, "I get exposed to, of course, enormous numbers of books in the course of doing business, and there are definitely books I have taken home because I needed what was in them; there was no professional reason for me to be reading them." Another described how her personal reading could also help her professionally, to bridge the gap between the business world and the realm of the lay-reading public.

One of the editors who said that she, personally, would not read self-help books, explained that although she "probably shouldn't say so," she thought a person would have to be "sort of insecure" for self-help to appeal to her. She said that she thought people read books in the genre constantly, and could become "sort of addicted to it." She did not think this meant that self-help books could not be helpful, and told me that when her mother was widowed, she gave her a self-book on the topic, which, she said her mother found "enormously comforting." She said that it helped her mother to feel that what she was going through was normal, and that it let her "see she was not alone." The other non-reader said that she "never responded to the more popular kind of advice books," and that if she were to consult a book for assistance, it would probably be of a more practical, rather than psychological, nature.

Four of the five editors I interviewed spoke about connections between self-help books for women and the feminist movement. (The fifth saw no connection between feminist concerns and her work.) One editor said, "you won't find any anti-feminist books on my list," but

others said that since they hoped to find broad audiences for the books they published, it would be impractical to judge books based solely upon their own personal political agendas. One said that sometimes, "you find yourself having to suspend your belief system in order to make an objective and informed decision Really, your job as an editor . . . is to provide various segments of the marketplace with what they want or feel they need."

PREDICTING THE FUTURE

I asked the editors I interviewed to speculate about where they thought the genre of self-help was headed now, both because I was curious about what they would think as experts in the field, and because I wanted to hear what their actual guesswork would sound like, after hearing them describe the process in detail. Editors agreed that the two hottest current topics in self-help books were addiction and new age philosophy. Several had begun working in one or both of these areas.

Editors described ways in which addiction theories and therapies were being applied to interpersonal or interfamilial relations. Only one editor with whom I spoke thought this area of self-help was already "glutted"; the others felt it was still burgeoning. They agreed that books focusing on women's relationships with men had become overly narrow since the outbreak of prescriptive literature launched in 1985 by Smart Women Foolish Choices and Women Who Love Too Much. They expected a trend toward books written more generally about (heterosexually-oriented) family life. Books growing out of the AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics)

programs were mentioned by all five of the editors I interviewed as examples of a growing topic area within self-help. "Recovery" strategies utilized by alcoholics and their families in these groups are being applied to emotional problems which may be unrelated to substance abuse. Each editor talked about recent influxes of book projects centering on the premise that dysfunctional behavioral patterns are, at root, addictive, and should be dealt with in ways that have been effective in treating alcoholism and other physical addictions.

When I asked one editor why she thought conceptions of problems as addictions were currently in vogue, she said:

I think that in terms of the chemical addictions . . . the disease theory of alcoholism has had a fantastic role to play in enabling people to deal with addictions as a practical problem, rather than as a moral failure, so that whereas years ago, you know, the shame involved in admitting any of that was so overwhelming that people never went for help. Now you can just say -- and remove the stigma, the incredible stigma from the condition. And I think it's just been a major breakthrough. I think that the ramifications are way beyond alcoholism. I think we're now a society that're really looking at compulsive behavior on every level.

Editors said they thought women and men find New Age approaches attractive because they combine many traditional elements -- philosophy, psychology, and history -- with an intriguing and exotic flair -- occult, Eastern religion, holistic medicine.

Since my meetings with these editors, I have been watching the bestseller lists, and so far, their predictions have been accurate. And whatever happens next in the self-help genre will be shaped by them

(and by others like them). Yet, ironically, if these editors were familiar with Wendy Griswold's cultural diamond, they would see themselves as rather unobtrusive participants in the creative end of making culture. Their vision of their role in making books revolves around the idea that they merely push projects forward, while shaping them to fit the waiting public's needs. The many tasks that build upon each other as a written project grows into a completed work are parts of a profession they see as helping those it serves.

Over the course of their careers (one of the editors I interviewed had worked in publishing for twenty years), the themes their authors have written about have changed -- and will continue to change -- but editors do not see their work as contributing to this change. Rather, they see themselves as guides, consultants, hopeful fortune tellers predicting future reading tastes, who remain quietly in the background.

Editors of self-help books obviously have a vested interest in the reputations of their books; I expected that they would see their projects as addressing legitimate concerns, and offering something beneficial and unique to readers. Editors expressed a certain degree of cynicism about the genre of self-help, but their criticisms were most often about other books -- books with which they had little or no professional connection. They spoke willingly of the shortcomings of reading as a method of problem-solving, but their comments did not negate the validity they perceived in the works they brought to press.

WRITTEN DEFENSES

Authors, on the other hand, must be expected to defend the integrity

of their creations, even more enthusiastically than editors (or else acknowledge themselves as frauds or money-hungry sensationalists). When they are interviewed in the media, self-help authors recapitulate the arguments already put forth in their work; this is, after all, what any good self-promoter would do, and what publicity departments advise. An examination of writers' introductory comments illuminates the ways in which authors frame their arguments, the ways in which they attempt to keep readers interested. It makes sense for authors to present their most eloquent and attention-grabbing material first, if they hope to keep readers reading.

COVERS: PROMISES MADE

Of course, before they ever become readers, potential buyers must first be sold by the covers of the book for sale. Self-help marketers are well aware that people do judge books by their covers. Perhaps more than any other literary genre, self-help books feature covers which are meant to attract, meant to sell. Titles are large and bold. Covers generally include extensive advertisements for the contents, which promise the potential reader various life improvements. If the authors are well known, their names will be featured prominently, and in all cases, if the author has any advanced degree, it will be included.

A detailed examination of one such cover shows the various tactics promoters use to hook readers. A red and purple heart, made of two question marks facing each other appears on the cover of Smart Women Foolish Choices. An arrow through the heart underscores the words "FINDING THE RIGHT MEN." Underneath this caption are the words,

"AVOIDING THE WRONG ONES." This simple graphic design of a heart which doesn't know why it has been broken suggests that the answers may be found inside. Across the top of my copy of the book, outlined in blue, are the words, "ONE MILLION IN PRINT," which assure potential buyers that they will be among a horde of other smart women if they decide to purchase the book. In bold purple, the blurb on the back cover announces, "THERE ARE GOOD MEN OUT THERE -- AND HERE'S HOW TO FIND THEM." The reader is told, in individually bulleted claims, that she can: "●Broaden, not lower, [her] expectations," "●Avoid all-too-common types like the Married Rat, the Pseudo-Liberated Male, and the Perpetual Adolescent," "●Recognize 'Diamonds in the Rough,'" "●Free [her]self from 'love addiction,'" "●And understand what really makes men fall in love -- and stay that way." Underneath these promises-to-be-fulfilled by reading are excerpted quotations from reviews from The Los Angeles Times and The Charlotte Observer, lauding: "A FASCINATING, HELPFUL BOOK," and "VALID ADVICE. . . You may go from romance junkie to free woman in one easy, insightful reading."

The readers I have interviewed are, somewhat suspect of cover promises, but wishfully attracted by them nonetheless. They recognize that covers are advertisements, and that ads tend to exaggerate and even mislead; but they are attracted by them as a sports spectator might be to a pep-rally before a big game. One woman told me about reading several self-help books during trips to bookstores, by looking past the deceptive covers and glancing through the books, so that she could weed out those which were not worth purchasing. Titles can allure as well as repel; many women reported being embarrassed about buying such titles as How To Marry the Man of Your Choice, and several

asserted they would not even consider "silly" titles, such as Men Who Hate Women And The Women Who Love Them.

KEEPING READERS READING

Self-help authors usually begin by presenting what a few of my readers referred to as their "promise" (which is often -- but not always -- a toned down restatement of the aggressive promise made on the cover). In their introductions, authors devote their energy to showing that the topics they will discuss and the analyses they will offer will help readers make changes that are of paramount importance. In some introductions, authors' statements are so ambitious they sound as if foolproof plans for achieving a state of perfection and bliss will be revealed.

In The Power of Positive Thinking (1952), now considered a classic of the genre of self-help, Norman Vincent Peale writes: "THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN to suggest techniques . . . which demonstrate that you do not need to be defeated by anything, that you can have peace of mind, improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy. In short, that your life can be full of joy and satisfaction" (p. ix). More recently, but no less ambitiously, Irene Kassorla promises readers of Go For It (1984) that with her help, they will be able to realize any goal or dream. She provides a list of accomplishments that following her program will enable readers to achieve:

- become the person you could greatly admire.
- make a difference in your world.
- be increasingly creative and innovative.
- balance a healthy combination of warmth and assertiveness.
- infuse a sense of joy into your daily activities.

- get the appreciation and approval of those you value.
 - develop more endurance and energy.
 - explore the full extent of your personal magnitude and power.
- (p. xiv)

Authors want not only to show the benefits that readers will reap from continued reading, but also to impress upon them the urgency of the issues to be discussed. Authors want readers to feel they ought not put the book down. Reminders of the momentous nature of the arguments being presented recur throughout self-help books. Steven Carter and Julia Sokol, authors of Men Who Can't Love (1987) proclaim, for example, "Today, unlike any other period in our history, the fear of commitment is destroying the fabric of our society (p. 68).

Self-help authors demonstrate their reliability or expertise in two ways -- and commonly through a combination of both: they present themselves as well-educated, practiced, and even scientifically sound professionals and/or as authorities who are enriched by life-changing personal experiences. Many begin their books by telling about the personal and/or professional circumstances which led them to begin writing. These introductory self-revelations are meant to draw readers into a relationship of sorts with the author. They are meant to elicit trust as well as an interest in both the topic and its discussant. It is as if the author were letting the readers in on his or her secrets.

Some professional authors reveal that they were led to pursue careers in psychiatry, psychology, or counseling as a result of having "been there," while others claim to have gained their insights through their practices alone.¹ Some professionals approached the task of writing by maintaining the personae of disinterested experts. They do not expose their own lives in any way, do not use colloquial language,

nor address readers directly. For instance, Harold H. Bloomfield, M.D., et al. (1975), begins TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress by writing:

In our discussion of expanding human capacity through psychophysiological intergration we will use the concept of creative intelligence to describe the principle of integrated, or holistic, growth which TM catalyzes. . . . The purpose of this book is to present the significance of TM within a coherent scientific framework. (p. 8)

Authors who maintain a distanced, almost textbook-like tone hope to present their arguments in a manner that will be respected; they are intent on making their work sound genuinely authoritative. Some authors believe that if they adopt a style associated with scholarly writing or clinical reports, their arguments stand a better chance of being credited. Authors also hope they will not lose the respect of their colleagues by writing books for laypeople; using professional language may help to maintain status.

Some authors appear confused in their struggle to settle upon a narrative style; they erratically combine a dry, professional tone with a more informal, personalized language. One such example is Thomas A. Harris, M.D., who explains his purpose in I'm OK -- You're OK (1967) by writing: "This book is the product of a search to find answers for people who are looking for hard facts in answer to their questions about how the mind operates, why we do what we do, and how we can stop doing what we do if we wish" (p. 13). Harris begins matter-of-factly; he does not attempt to make personal contact with readers: he will help "people" understand how "the mind" works. But then he shifts in the middle of his statement, and includes himself in

this category, saying he will examine "why we do what we do." Harris wants to sound like a scientist, but he also wants to entice the reader by addressing him or her in a more personable way.

Over time, the purely professional and rather cold narrative style has nearly disappeared from the self-help genre. Most authors have adopted writing styles which enable them to address readers familiarly. An informal authorial voice lends itself to a confession-style introduction. When authors disclose information about their personal lives, they want to show how their wonder and excitement over their own improvement has impelled them to help others going through the same problems. "Confessional" authors reiterate the same basic process: First, they realize they have a problem. Rather miraculously, but through their own hard work, they overcome it. They become advocates for others with the same problem, who are less able to fight their problems alone, as authors have. Finally, they become prophets, and set out to explain -- on paper -- the unique process which has saved them from a lifetime of misery or loneliness.

Authors' revelations make reading seem almost like an exchange, the reverse of the way live one-on-one therapy usually works; here, instead of clients revealing themselves while therapists are disinterested listeners, the therapist speaks to a client who does not respond (directly). Many therapist-writers try to show that they are just like regular people, and that they trust readers with the (sometimes sordid) details of their personal lives.

On the very first page of Codependent No More (1987), Melody Beattie tells readers that she used to be an addict and alcoholic. She

goes on to explain that after recovering, she became a "codependent" -- someone who is closely involved with another person's addictive behavior. Her experiences as an addict, a codependent, and finally, as a counselor of both addicts and codependents, led her to write the book. She wants readers to know from the outset that she is not an authority claiming to have the answers to all of their problems. She simply has an understanding to pass on: "I'm not an expert, and this isn't a technical book for experts," she writes.

Professional authors sometimes reveal their lack of expertise when it comes to their own lives, in an attempt to gain readers' empathy. In the section of Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them (1986) entitled "A Personal Introduction," Susan Forward confides:

On the outside, I appeared confident, fulfilled -- a woman who truly had it all. . . . But at home, it was another story. . . . I soon discovered that [my husband] had a great deal of anger inside him and that he had the power to make me feel small, inadequate and off-balance. He insisted on being in control of everything I did, believed, and felt. (p.4)

Forward writes that she came to realize that she and her husband should be in therapy, that their marriage was suffering from the same problems the women she counseled were describing in their own troubled relationships. Her husband was unwilling to go for professional help, however. So, she writes, "Finally, painfully, I came to the conclusion that I could no longer stay in our marriage without giving myself up" (p. 9).

Divorcing her husband changed her life. With a heightened awareness of -- and interest in -- misogynist relationships, Forward

began to see patterns in her clients' descriptions of their lives. "Convinced that I had discovered a major psychological disorder, I decided to test the waters further by discussing the topic on A.M. Los Angeles, a TV talk show." The show was bombarded with phone calls; Forward was swamped with letters. "I knew I'd hit a nerve," she writes, "The sense of urgency in the letters was tremendous. Women wanted to know where they could find a book on the subject of misogyny." The rest, of course, is history. Forward became a woman with a mission: "I knew then that I had to write this book -- not only to help women understand what was happening to them, but also what they could do about it" (p. 11).

The particular experiences of each author define the contours of the problems and proffered solutions. Like Forward, Dowling felt an urgent need to write, to make a connection with other women suffering as she had suffered. But Dowling saw her situation (and thus, women's situation in general) as developing out of her own inadequacies (and thus women's inadequacies), not the inadequacies of her husband (and thus, of men in general). Dowling felt "trapped" within her marriage, her housewifery, but came to feel that this was a trap she set for herself. Her view of her own problem as self-initiated encourages readers who identify with her descriptions to see their problems in the same way. Dowling writes of her own resistance to the idea that she had been responsible for her own unhappiness and lack of autonomy, thus encouraging readers to recognize -- and to overcome -- the same denial in their own lives:

Financially [my husband] was providing everything. . . . It hurt him, he said, that I seemed content to sit back and take

advantage of his willingness to help out.

The suggestion that I was not living up to my end of the bargain was utterly enraging. . . . Didn't he appreciate all that I was doing for him, the lovely home that I was making, the wonderful cakes and pies? . . . It was true that in our domestic arrangement I was the one who was doing most of the "shit work." It was also true that I had arrogated that role to myself. . . . Inwardly, I wanted to be doing the shit work. (pp. 8-9)

Dowling goes on to explain that her unhappiness led her to begin writing, and thus, her writing helped her to see her own predicament clearly, and to face the fact that she had brought her problems on herself. She sees writing as a potential way of overcoming her loneliness: "Maybe if I described the experience I would find that there were others out there like me. The idea that I might be an anomaly, some kind of helpless, dependent misfit, alone in the world, was horrifying," she writes (p.13). And, of course, the success of the book indicates that Dowling was correct in her assessment that others like her existed. Authors describe the positive outpouring of identification with which they are met when they begin to discuss their ideas publically; and in telling, they invite the reader to join the group of vehement supporters even before she has read the ideas in question.

Harold Kushner describes how loss, rather than a crisis in identity, spurred his writing of Why Bad Things Happen To Good People (1981). The death of his son made Kushner, a rabbi, question not only religious teachings, but the meaning of life itself. In his introduction, entitled, "Why I Wrote This Book," Kushner writes vividly of his son's life and death, of his own despair, and of his inability to find enough consolation from friends or in religious books. The books he read "had

answers to all of their own questions, but no answer for mine." He decided to create what he did not find for others:

I am a fundamentally religious man who has been hurt by life, and I wanted to write a book that could be given to the person who has been hurt by life -- by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment -- and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better. . . . If you are such a person, if you want to believe in God's goodness and fairness but find it hard to because of the things that have happened to you and to people you care about, and if this book helps you do that, then I will have succeeded in distilling some blessing out of Aaron's pain and tears. (pp. 4-5)

Men authors of self-help books are less likely to reveal their own stories as Kushner did. Another exception, and one of the first men writers of self-help to bare all is Mel Krantzler, who begins Creative Divorce (1973) by telling the story of his. He was devastated. "I felt like the loneliest man in the world. My internal inventory was zero. Looking back, I could see only failure and guilt -- and ahead, a vortex of emptiness, fear and uncertainty. After twenty-four years of marriage, the prospect of living alone seemed intolerable" (p. 10).

This was the old Mel Krantzler, as yet untransformed by the miracles of self-exploration offered by single life. Divorce, rather than acting as the negative force he first perceived it to be, transformed him: "By getting me out of the ruts of my earlier existence," he writes, "the divorce forced me to take a good look at myself, analyze where I was and how I had gotten there, and set the stage for what has been the most exciting and rewarding period of my life so far" (p. 10). Krantzler eventually became an advocate for divorced people, beginning "a new career as a full-time counselor in

divorce adjustment problems." His book grew out of his own personal/professional experience, out of his conviction that divorced people could use help finding the yellow brick road that Krantzler stumbled upon himself: "I saw the need to share this knowledge with other divorced or separated persons who felt trapped and hopeless," he writes (p. 31).

In Men Who Can't Love, Steven Carters described how his research for the book initiated self-reflection. In his interviews with single women, Carter heard complaints about men that forced him to confront his own past relationships, and his own inability to make commitments:

I liked talking to these women. It was terrific being viewed as Mr. Sensitive, Mr. Understanding, Mr. Nice Guy, but it was a hoax. When I stopped to think about my own relationships, I couldn't help but acknowledge that there had been times when I was no different from most of the "creeps" they complained about. (p. 17)

Carter's self-revelations are different from most in that they are about the process of writing, not about the process which led to writing. Carter wants to show readers how he, too, learned about himself while gathering the material he will present.

Like Forward, Krantzler, and Carter, many self-help authors see themselves as crusaders of sorts. They feel that they are the first to offer a satisfactory definition of a problem, and/or the first to design a successful way out. Dowling writes: "The question was, why was no one talking about this? How many women might be suffering in silent confusion? Is an inner fear of independence epidemic among women?"

(p.19, emphasis in original). Dowling names the problem "the Cinderella Complex." In Women Who Love Too Much (1985), Robin Norwood writes of her "discoveries" that obsessive love was really based on fear, that women learned to "love too much" in their childhoods, that love could function just like other addictions (pp. xiv-xv). With her new way of understanding relationships, Norwood felt that only a new treatment would be successful; she recommends "Women Who Love Too Much" groups, founded on the same principles as Twelve Steps Programs developed by A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) and its spin-offs.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR READING

Whether or not authors includes "conversion" narratives as parts of their explanations of their crusades, they invite readers to listen; they pepper their writing with questions, admonitions, assignments, and advice for all the "yous" out there reading. They urge readers to imagine themselves a part of the telling, to get involved in the substance of the book. Some authors write that they will provide easy answers, while others caution that reading their works may be difficult, may be painful, may entail hard work, but promise that it will be worth it. Authors' assurances of both difficulty and ease are used to entice readers. Kassorla, for instance, tries to appeal to readers in a hurry, writing: "EVERYONE READING THIS BOOK HAS THE POWER TO CHANGE. EVERYONE . . . AND ESPECIALLY YOU CAN DEVELOP WINNING BEHAVIORS. YOU CAN START RIGHT NOW!" (p. xii, elipses in text). She makes the job ahead sound easy and exciting. Forward, on the other hand, attempts to attract readers with her promise of a

challenge:

This journey of exploration and change requires you to participate in many of the exercises and assignments that I take my clients through. . . . However, just as reading a diet book without going on the diet will not make you any thinner, reading the exercises without doing the assignments won't provide you with the tools that will enable you to change your unhappy relationship -- or, when necessary, to end it. (p.160)

Solving one's problems -- an act self-help writers increasingly have referred to as "recovery" -- will take time, energy, and devotion: Norwood warns her readers early on: "Should you decide that you really to want to follow these steps, it will require. . . years of work and nothing short of your total commitment" (p. xvii).

Self-help authors, whether casual or formal in their style, have commonly claimed scientific backing for the material they present. Authors have relied on popular perceptions of the realm of the scientific as factual and undoubtable. In Psycho-Cybernetics (1960), Maxwell Maltz proclaims: "Science has now confirmed what philosophers, mystics, and other intuitive people have long declared: every human being has been literally 'engineered for success by his Creator'" (p. 25). In Body Language (1977), Howard Fast draws on the works of many experts (including Goffman, Birdwhistell, Wachtel, Hall, and others) to substantiate the "scientific" nature of what he presents. David Burns introduced Feeling Good (1980) by writing: "In this book I will share with you some of the latest scientifically tested methods for overcoming blue moods and for feeling good about your life" (p. 1).

Authors' defenses of their work as science are applied to all

varieties of self-help advice, from therapeutic techniques, such as those cited above, to religious cult philosophy. L. Ron Hubbard calls Dianetics (1985) "the Modern Science of Mental Health," and assures readers, "All our facts are functional and these facts are scientific facts, supported wholly and completely by laboratory evidence" (p. 96). (Hubbard does not include any clear descriptions of the research he claims has been done.) Writing from a more traditional religious framework, Peale (1952) claims that even the Bible was a work of science: "These principles [of faith] are scientific and sound and can heal any personality of the pain of inferiority feelings" (p. 16).

Authors also attempt to show that what they have to say will be broadly appealing by assuring readers that they don't have to identify with every case study to gain positive results from their reading. Authors stress that their messages may apply to less extreme cases as well, telling readers that even if their lives are not falling apart they can probably learn from reading and "participating" in the suggested exercises. Norwood, for example, implies that most -- if not all -- women should be able to relate to her book, and that if they can't, they're deceiving themselves:

[I]f you are a woman who loves too much, I feel it only fair to caution you that this is not going to be an easy book to read. Indeed, if the definition fits and you nevertheless breeze through this book unstirred and unaffected, or you find yourself bored or angry, or unable to concentrate on the material presented here, or only able to think about how much it would help someone else, I suggest that you try reading the book again at a later time. We all need to deny what is too painful or too threatening for us to accept. . . . Perhaps at a later reading you will be able to face your own experiences and deeper feelings. (p. xvi)

Norwood tells readers that, essentially, there is really no way not to relate to what she has to say; by not identifying or disagreeing with her -- even by finding the reading boring -- readers demonstrate the psychological reaction of denial. Most self-help writers are less dramatic in their exhortations to readers.

Sonya Friedman (1985) delivers a more inspiring pep-talk designed to keep readers reading; she writes: "Be a smart cookie. Do not go back; do not even stay as you are! Go forward with energy. Go forward knowing that you can reconstruct your life. . . . You have a right and a responsibility to enjoy life, to be excited by it" (pp. 17-18). And in her pursuit of identifying readers, Helen Gurley Brown offers the most gung-ho, all-inclusive, and most drawn-out come-on of all. She describes the readers she hopes to attract -- "mouseburgers" -- as "people who are not prepossessing, not pretty, don't have a particularly high I.Q., a decent education, a good family background or other noticeable assets" (p. 2). Brown encourages women to find out if they are mouseburgers by considering a number of questions:

Of course, we have to determine if you want the same things I have wanted for my book, my craft, to be useful to you. Do you, by any chance, also want:

To love and be loved by a desirable man or men?

To enjoy sex?

To be happy in your work -- and maybe even famous?

To make money -- possible a lot?

To look great?

To have wonderful, loyal friends?

To help your family?

To be free from most anxiety?

Never to be bored and maybe leave the world a better place?

(p. 3)

What ambitious heterosexual woman could fail this mouseburger test? It doesn't matter, of course, because Brown aims to reassure readers that they should be readers -- that they are mouseburgers. As if one questionnaire were not enough, Brown adds a further, more extensive test of mouseburgerhood:

Since I can only help mouseburgers, we need to find out if you are one. Please answer True or False to these statements: You're smart. . . . You are sensitive. . . . You're modest. . . . Envy is not unknown to you. . . . You're more selfish than altruistic. . . . You have a sweet natural sex drive that brings you enormous pleasure. . . . You have drive. . . . You sometimes hurt. . . . It's hard for you to be casual about anything. . . . You want it all, and are "willing to pay the price". . . . If you answered "True" to at least ten . . . I think you and I are alike. If you answered "True" to even five, I may be able to help you. (pp. 3-6)

Brown differs from many self-help writers in that the conglomerate of qualities she details under the umbrella label she applies are largely positive ones which don't need changing, just development. The reason mouseburgers do not always blossom unassisted is that they are impeded by a lack of confidence or, at worst, they are just a little lazy. Mediocrity could be finely tuned and polished into superiority, Brown promises, enlivening her narrative with personal anecdotes that assure readers they, too, can become successful, happy, and loved if they take her example to heart.

Self-help writers often describe their works as therapeutic texts, which, if readers are diligent, can yield the same results as live therapy. Louise Hay (1984) gives careful instructions to readers on how to follow her program:

I have set up this book to take you through a session, just as I

would if you came to me as a private client or attended one of my workshops.

If you will do the exercises progressively as they appear . . . by the time you have finished, you will have begun to change your life.

I suggest you read through the book once. Then slowly read it again, only this time do each exercise in depth. . . . Take two or three days to study and work with each chapter. Keep saying and writing the affirmation that opens the chapter.

The chapters close with a treatment. This is a flow of positive ideas designed to change consciousness. Read over this treatment several times a day . . . (p. 3)

Readers are often subtly informed, as Hay's instructions indicate, that if they don't do the work, they won't see improvements. The work (as Hay's instructions also show) can be quite demanding.

Marabel Morgan (1975) writes of her experiences in reviving her slumping marriage, of her "pursuit of knowledge" which led her to see "certain principles" recur, which she then applied "with stunning results." The ultimate altruist, Morgan gushes: "If, through reading and applying these principles, you become a Total Woman, with your husband more in love with you than ever before, my efforts in writing this book will have been rewarded" (p. 21). Louise Hay tells her readers: "Know that when you work with these ideas my loving support is with you" (pp. 3-4). A bit more humbly, Norwood states in Letters From Women Who Love Too Much (1988) that "[s]imply reading a book, no matter how deeply it affects us, is never enough in itself to bring about the changes we desire in our lives. At best a book can be a signpost, an arrow pointing out the direction in which we need to travel" (Norwood 1988, p.4). But Norwood then directs readers back to the first "signpost" she authored, without which her second will not be

as useful. She plugs Women Who Love Too Much in the preface to its sequel, explaining: "Obviously, in order to gain the most from this book a reader should have already read WWL2M slowly, carefully, and hopefully [sic] more than once" (p. xv). Self-help authors almost never speak of their books as purchaseable commodities, because this would call their altruism into question.²

NOBODY DOES IT BETTER

There is a defensive quality to self-help authors' attempts to show the uniqueness of their arguments. Many authors are critical of competing or preceding self-help books on the same subjects; they want to show that the existing sources are inadequate, and that their work will fill a void. Self-help writers, however, seem to have a short memory and a narrow field of vision; authors discuss other works not to show how theirs fits in or conflicts with what is available within the genre (or outside it, in sociological or more academic psychological work) but to justify their writing at a particular time when there are likely to be several (or several dozen) other books on the seemingly exact same topic. Authors defend the definition of the situation they present as the only accurate one. Unlike the writers at the academic end of the discipline from which self-help books have trickled down, self-help authors often demonstrate a contempt for their colleagues; like readers, they suspect opportunism as a motivating force for a great deal of self-help writing, and want to show that they are not part of this trend.

Even straight-shooting Robert Ringer feels inclined to separate himself from the other quacks out there proselytizing their own miracle cures. In Looking Out For # 1 (1977), he writes:

There are no ulterior motives involved. I'm not out to convert you to a cause, to enlist your aid in destroying an "evil," or to gain your support for or against anything. If you understand that the means to my end is to provide you with a valuable product, then you're already in the proper frame of mind for the realities which lie ahead. (p. 7).

Like Ringer, but usually in a less brash manner, self-help authors emphasize their honesty, commitment, and sense of vision amid a sea of misguided theorists or even tricksters. Ironically, in his self-defense, Kushner confronts the views that Ringer espouses, which, by the time of his (Kushner's) writing, have gained a good deal of popularity:

My objection to the "looking out for number one" philosophy is that it does not work. Take advantage of other people, use people, be suspicious of everyone, and you are liable to be so successful that you will end up far ahead of everyone else, looking down on them with scorn. And then where will you be? You will be all alone. (1986, p. 59)

More recently, Carter and Sokol write that "current popular non-fiction" addressed to women inadequately analyzes the problems in heterosexual relationships because it examines them from women's point of view, and "[a]t the very best, this is exposing only half of the problem" (p. 49). They assure readers that their book will be different because Carter has talked to men, and because he, as a man, could supposedly better understand men's motivations. Carter and Sokol do

not comment on several similar self-help books which pre-date theirs, in which authors also claim to reveal men's secret motivations (such as Kiley's The Peter Pan Syndrome [1983] and Cowan and Kinder's Smart Women Foolish Choices [1985]).

Usually, self-help authors direct their objections at specific popular works which precede their own. Occasionally, though, authors offer wider generic critiques. Wayne Dyer, for example, faults psychology for its adherence to the medical model's methodology of viewing people in terms of pathology -- or at best, a lack thereof. He writes:

[Psychologists] have written extensively about mental ill-health, but very little about attaining mental health. They have written a lot about striving, but almost nothing about ever arriving anywhere. They see people as always having to improve rather than accepting them as healthy the way they are. (1980, p. 5)

Unsurprisingly, Dyer does not go on to develop his argument into a treatise on how readers could or should remain the same (he would not be writing self help if he did!). His tautological message is that self-acceptance will enable one to make changes, to fulfill one's potential: in other words, if one thinks of oneself as healthy, one will only get healthier.

Kushner sees the therapeutic framework (upon which most self-help books were based) as an evaluatory and adaptive tool, but not one that offers meaningful insight for spiritual or humanistic development. Psychology couldn't go beyond helping people to adapt to social norms. He writes: "the values of the therapeutic approach tend to be values of adjustment to what is, rather than visions of a world

that does not exist. . . . [A skilled therapist] can unblock our ability to live meaningfully, but that is as far as he can take us" (1986, p. 21).

In the world of the self-help preface, authors celebrate their own expertise, altruism, and fervor for what readers are about to receive. In effect, the message each author hopes to convey can be generalized: I, an ordinary person, found out the hard way, and so I wanted to make it easier for you; and/or, through my (helpful) job as a doctor/psychologist/ therapist, I have come in contact with many who suffer from the same problem, and this book, I hope, will enable me to aide zillions more than I could if I divulged my helpful messages only to those who paid to get inside my office.

Both authors and editors see themselves as modern-day prophets, hard at work in the distribution of (human rather than divine) expertise about how to live more fruitfully, more orgasmically, more successfully, more happily. Editors' modest self-evaluations show that they see themselves as silent partners to authors in the creation of books, but descriptions of the intricacies of their work indicate that their judgment and activities govern this process. Authors' self-evaluations are far less modest: in their attempts to entice readers to continue participating, they boldly laud their own work, claim grand applications for it, and defend its validity against a backdrop of competing popular self-help books.

chapter five

**SHELF LIFE, PART ONE: PAYING THE WAY
AN EXAMINATION OF BESTSELLING SELF-HELP BOOKS, 1963-88**

Participants in my study have easily described how self-help books have (or have not) affected them personally, but have seemed puzzled when I voiced my own sociological concerns. When I asked questions about how self-help authors handled issues of blame and anger; about whether self-help advice was feminist or anti-feminist; and about how authors presented social as opposed to individual problems, they responded with puzzled looks. They asserted that, in reading these books, they sought advice and information about changing themselves, not about changing others or changing society.

But as a scholar engaged in sociological and feminist evaluation, the social ramifications of self-help authors conceptualizations of blame, anger, feminism, and individualism were key issues for me in understanding the coherence of the genre of self-help and its impact on women readers. Self-help books are not the only game in town proffering advice to women about how they should live their lives. They are part of an extensive web of psycho-media, which includes women's magazines; women's fiction (or fiction directed at women, like romances; videos and tapes which offer advice; and "women's television," soap operas and daytime talk shows and a specially-targeted smorgasbord of cable offerings. Self-help books are simply the most forthrightly instructive of these cultural objects marketed toward a female audience, and can thus illuminate the prevalent images of women created for women (often by women) which

are currently bought and sold in America.

Self-help books -- especially those addressed specifically to women -- have come under attack by critics in recent years. (These criticisms are discussed in detail in chapter six.) I do not intend to go to battle with the critics who have cast their aspersions on self-help books, in part, because I -- and the readers I interviewed -- often agree with the stylistic and/or substantive appraisals critics offered. But more importantly, no amount of contesting the applicability of these books to people's lives will render them impotent. The fact remains that these books do appeal, do sell, and do tell a fascinating story about womanhood and manhood today. Critics' negative assessments point to the most glaring problems which afflict the self-help genre -- oversimplicity, redundancy, encouragement of self-blame. Yet, ironically, these are the traits that have always been characteristic of self-help manuals -- since Americans began writing them -- and these are traits without which the genre might not exist.

Regardless of whether or not self-help books provide the assistance they promise, regardless of whether or not self-help readers read each and every word and attempt to put authors' plans in motion, and regardless of how long bestsellers remain bestsellers, the very existence and success of the genre of self-help since its inception says something about the American social psyche. The accuracy of the portraits of women and men offered by the books is, of course, important in terms of readers' usage of self-help books, and has been considered in other chapters. Here, however, I want to flesh out these portraits, and see where they have come from and how they've been shaped over the past quarter-century years. I will review the genesis

and "development" of the troubled woman and the troubling man (or sometimes vice versa) as they have been described and detailed since the 1960s, and focus on themes which are necessary to their maintenance in self-help literature.

THE OBJECTS OF STUDY

I have examined self-help books which appeared on the New York Times Book Review hardcover non-fiction, hardcover advice, paperback advice, trade, and mass market bestseller lists between 1963 and 1988.¹ Lists appearing during the first week of each month were consulted; all self-help books which fall into the categories of psychological self-improvement (at times linked with physical well-being), spiritual development, sexuality, or relationship enhancement were included. (See Tables 3 and 4, pp. 294-301, for chronological and topic area listings of the bestsellers.) Self-help books dealing strictly with financial matters, diet, exercise, health or child care are not included.² I have included bestsellers with a central focus on success in business or health only when authors claim their programs will involve introspection or psychological "growth" (beyond simply the manipulation of the physical self in order to feel better mentally or to succeed at work).

In making judgments about what self-help is (and isn't), I have included books which present the claim -- inside or on their covers -- that they can offer instruction or assist readers in remedying personal problems. Steven Starker, author of Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books (1989), believes that "intended audience" and "presumed utility" are crucial variables to

consider in determining whether a book should be defined as self-help or not. By "intended audience," Starker means a book should be "clearly addressed to the lay reader," and by "presumed utility," he means a book should "[purport] to be of immediate and practical use to the reader, offering instruction in some aspect of living" (pp. 8-9).

Establishing that books are intended as self-help, of course, involves making judgment calls, no matter how clearly one defines one's standards. Starker writes that self-help books should be "lively, interesting, readable and simplified" for a lay audience; but whether or not a book fits this description depends more on the readers than on the book, in my estimation. I have paid less attention to style than Starker does, and relied on more obviously observable phenomena, such as titles -- which, more often than not, are dead giveaways that a book is meant (or not meant) to be a self-help book; statements printed on the covers or made by authors in their introductions; and the form of exposition utilized by the author to present recommendations for change.

The general object and formal characteristics of self-help books have not altered over time, but their directions and theoretical underpinnings have varied considerably. Self-help authors allege that their aim is to assist with problems usually described as widely-encompassing -- if not all-encompassing -- flawed patterns in individuals' thoughts or behavior. Authors often begin by defining a set of problematic behaviors, and labeling them and those who practice them. This is usually done in the opening pages of the book; afterwards, the problem is dissected, accounted for, and finally, remedies are prescribed.

Norman Vincent Peale, for example, was quite enamored of the

break-down technique for self-improvement. In The Power of Positive Thinking (1952), he presents "ten, simple, workable rules for overcoming inadequacy attitudes and learning to practice faith" (pp. 24-5); "ten rules for getting effective results from prayer" (p. 65); "six points [toward] . . . reducing the tendency to fume and fret" (p. 92); "a ten-point worry-breaking formula" (pp. 131-2); "ten simple suggestions . . . to use generally in solving your problems" (p. 143); "eight practical suggestions" to use "when a loved one or you are ill" (pp. 155-6); "some [twelve, to be exact] practical suggestions" to use "to fill the mind with attitudes of good will, forgiveness, faith, love, and the spirit of imperturbability" (pp. 164-6); "seven practical steps for changing your mental attitudes from negative to positive" (pp. 178-9); "ten rules [to] . . . help you to relax and have easy power" (p. 189); and finally, "ten practical rules for getting the esteem of others" (p. 100). Many self-help authors have since drawn on Peale's methodology, and divvied the bits and pieces of the processes they recommend into carefully numbered steps to make them look easy to accomplish -- or, at the very least, manageable.

Part of the self-help book's "promise" is that if readers can understand and accept the author's view of the problem -- her or his jargon, subdivisions, typifications, and classifications -- then they will be able to gain control over the problem as it manifests itself in their lives. Self-help authors promise readers they can attain all varieties of happiness; assure them they can create order in their lives; invite them to seek a genuine sense of identity; and offer spiritual bliss through (correctly applied) devoted self-attention. This is basic to all self-help books -- they rely on the premise that control over all

aspects of life can be gained with the proper determination and method. Once readers learn these techniques, authors imply, everything else will fall into place. This offer of a method to gain control varies in form, ranging from explicit guarantees to much more muted implications.

Authors who do not systematically or explicitly guide readers in any way may still have their works marketed as self-help books. The Feminine Mystique, the earliest example in the wave of bestselling self-help books I have studied, is more of a political treatise than a program for reform: Friedan set out to "hunt down the origins of" and to analyze the problem she names "the feminine mystique." She did not promise to solve readers' problems, but clearly she hoped to rouse their resistance, especially with her concluding chapter, "A New Life Plan for Women." The book, however, was marketed as self-help: the first edition cites Pearl Buck and Virgilia Peterson on front and back of the dust jacket, exclaiming (respectively):

Betty Friedan has, in my opinion, gone straight to the heart of the problem of the American woman, the problem she is to herself and the problem she creates thereby for the American man. This is a sensible, sound book, and now that the absurd feminine mystique is set forth so clearly, we can discard it and let a woman be a woman.

I found The Feminine Mystique absorbingly interesting, pertinent, relevant to my own problems and those of every woman I know. . . . What Mrs. Friedan has done is to show both cause and cure. The book should be read by every anxious woman in the country.

Comments like these make The Feminine Mystique sound as if it can be

applied to the life-experiences of any "anxious" woman, and encourage potential readers to categorize it as a self-help book.

Similarly, the books of Masters and Johnson, which are organized around laboratory studies of sexual behavior, come dressed as self help. On the back of Human Sexual Inadequacy, for example, is printed: "WHEN SEX IS A PROBLEM -- MASTERS' AND JOHNSON'S BREAKTHROUGH BESTSELLER." But inside, the style the authors choose is quite clinical, and probably not originally designed to appeal to a mass audience. I have included books such as these because their covers imply that they ought to be used as advice, and because I believe, that as a result of cover promises, they were probably bought and used as self-help. Often, as with the works of Friedan and Masters and Johnson, books gain a reputation as self-help even if they do not appear to have been written for a lay audience or to have lent themselves to easy-to-follow step-by-step application to readers' problems (as Starker believes self-help books should).

I begin by discussing self-help books whose titles do not imply that they are geared specifically to women, books I call "unisex" self-help, a category which clearly enabled women's self-help. Religious or spiritually-oriented self-help books are included within the unisex category. Books dealing with sexuality are a fitting point of transition into women's self-help books, as they often are specifically directed at an audience of women. Finally, in the second part of this section (chapter six) I will discuss self-help books which are clearly addressed to women or which deal with amending relationships holistically

(rather than from a sexual angle). I have included relationship-oriented self-help books within the "women's" category because I believe they are -- much more often than not -- directed toward, bought, and read by an audience of women. Women, as participants in my study have testified, are held culturally responsible for doing the bulk of the work involved in maintaining heterosexual relationships, so presumably these books are written to appeal to us.

In my own reading of self-help books, I have not approached them as my participants have -- out of need, desperation, or as part of a personal quest for specific or far-reaching answers. I sought out ideological patterns and looked for differences. I selected passages to discuss which I felt were crucial to authors' arguments, as well as passages that I felt would help illustrate the images of American women and men which are sold in self-help books. And since the demands I have made as I've read are different from those of the women I interviewed, our interpretations are not necessarily the same, just as my interpretations of their reading are separate from my interpretations of my own reading.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SELF-HELP GENRE

The first American self-help books centered on Puritan desires to achieve Christian goodness and its other-worldly rewards (Starker 1989, pp. 13-15). Gradually, the books turned secular, but retained their focus on moral behavior's relationship to material success. Benjamin Franklin's writings of the mid-eighteenth century, of course, serve as Weber's prime example of the transformation of the Protestant ethic into capitalist dogma. Achieving financial success

became a calling; "Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life" (Weber 1904-5, p. 53). Guides to easy money-making proliferated.

Starker writes that the highly visible opulence and greed which was characteristic of the Jacksonian period, beginning in the 1820s, spurred a reactive resurgence of self-help books which focused, like Franklin's, more on hard, honest work, and less on the pleasures of wealth. There were many books of this type addressed to children (pp. 16-18). The publication of self-help books which promised that the work ethic would result in financial success continued until it was supplanted by the writings of "New Thought" proponents in the late nineteenth century. In these, the individual psyche took center stage; all action was conceived as radiating from the mind itself. The goal, then, of New Thought philosophers, was to achieve a healthy mind. Starker writes:

It was clear by the latter part of the nineteenth century that the classic self-help tradition, with its foundation in Puritan values and virtues, was no longer relevant to the new American culture and problems. An urban, industrial, and increasingly scientific American desperately needed a new philosophy to provide hope and guidance to those confused and demoralized by rapid societal changes. . . . Rather than powerless pawns of industry, politics, and urbanism, people were properly to be viewed as important, unique, and full of potential, as local manifestations of Divinity. (pp. 20-21)

Offshoots of New Thought, theories of "Mind Cure," were popularized, primarily through the efforts of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. Challenging the Puritan conception of a vengeful, omnipotent God, Eddy and her followers saw human efforts as paramount. Physical

ills were held to be manifestations of the mind, and, with the proper religious redirection and concentration, it was believed that disease -- and all sorts of stresses caused by industrialization and urbanization -- could be overcome.

The subconscious was conceived to be an invisible source of power and creativity, present in everyone, which could be harnessed by the true believer using meditative/relaxation/suggestive exercises. . . . Mental suggestions needed only to permeate the individual human mind in order to reach the subconscious and there resonate with Divine Mind. (Starker, p. 34)

At the same time as self-help books generating from New Thought philosophies were gaining popularity, self-help books for women written by doctors proliferated. These books espoused a rather different ideological orientation; they saw female virtue as residing in frailty, even invalidism. Ehrenreich and English (1978) chart doctors' authority on womanhood in For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women. They write: "[T]he theories which guided the doctor's practice from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century held that woman's normal state was to be sick. This was not advanced as an empirical observation, but as physiological fact" (p. 110). Passivity was prescribed for women as womanliness -- the "rest cure," a popular treatment for upper-middle-class women plagued by nerves stretched this to the limit, advocating complete inertia for weeks at a time (pp. 131-33). Though passivity may seem a polar opposite to New Thought's focus on the self, it, too, relied on meditation, relaxation, and saw stress as individually-induced, and thus, controllable, rather than resulting from social forces.

The self-help books of the past quarter-century revitalize the themes of the Puritan period, along with the New Thought and mind cure conceptions of individual agency. Both approaches have been modified by the popularization of psychology, which Starker charts as beginning between the World Wars, when psychoanalysis and behaviorism both gained notoriety (pp. 42-43). More recently, self-help books have been deeply affected by the mainstreaming of the (liberal) feminist movement, and by the rise to popularity of conservative politics (Reaganism and the New Right).

UNISEX SELF-HELP BOOKS

The earliest unisex bestselling self-help books of the past 25 years are about gaining control over one's circumstances through a "scientific" understanding of others' behavior. Relying on transactional analysis, self-actualization therapy, and/or gestalt therapy, these books assert that awareness will help readers gear their own behavior toward achieving desired ends. The unisex books fall into two basic categories (which do, at times, blend together in a rather confusing fashion). The first group's authors see "rational" thought as the key to attaining success, happiness, satisfaction. Their discussions make identity a machine-like quality; they believe it can be methodically built or rebuilt with the proper instruction and tools. Identity-as-machine books were primarily written by enthusiasts of transactional analysis, which was first articulated by Eric Berne in Games People Play (1964), and reiterated even more successfully a few years later by Thomas A. Harris in I'm Okay -- You're Okay (1967).

The second group of unisex self-help books was much more earthy

and emotionally-oriented; its authors encourage readers to undertake the careful examination of their feelings, thoughts, and past experiences -- especially childhood -- in the pursuit of "personal growth." Here, identity is conceived as a rather messy accumulation of emotions and encounters with other people which can be altered through methodical introspection which, when undertaken properly, will yield enhancing developments. Early books of this type rely upon language popularized by the hippie counter-culture, which has gradually been modified into the yuppie language of New Age philosophy. Titles allude to self-enhancing expansion: How to Be Your Own Best Friend (Newman and Berkowitz 1971); The Road Less Traveled (Peck 1978); The Sky's the Limit (Dyer 1980); How to Heal Your Life (Hoy 1984), and so forth.

Identity-as-growth books were presented as vehicles through which readers could achieve self-knowledge and self-love, qualities that were held to be prerequisites for relationships with others. In one of the most well-known of these, How To Be Your Own Best Friend (1971), the authors explain, "Your genuine self does not want to do things that are utterly foreign to it; it wants to realize its own potential" (p. 44). In Joy (1967), William Schutz contends that attaining this essential self includes the task of shedding the negative influences of others: "[A man] must express and explore his feelings and open up areas long dormant and possibly painful, with the faith that in the long run the pain will give way to a release of vast potential for creativity and joy" (p. 19). Inside each person, the growth books inform, is a special story waiting to happen. Drawing on the Christian notion that each individual is special and unique to God, identity-as-growth books often insist on

spirituality as a key to achieving a sense of contentment with one's self, and harmony with the world.

Identity-as-machine self-help books do not take "problems" as their starting point; instead they present themselves as psychological guides for laypeople who are, authors imply, non-reflective, non-analytical, and thus, ignorant, until they read these books. This group of books was meant to appeal in a manner similar to ads in the backs of magazines for "X-ray" glasses that would little boys (presumably) to see everyone naked. The premise of these books is that other people are operating unconsciously, so gaining an understanding of their motives will put (the exclusive group of) readers way ahead. Life is clearly a competition, as the titles indicated: Games People Play (Berne 1964); Born to Win (James and Jongewood 1971); Looking Out For #1 (Ringer 1971); Winning By Intimidation (Ringer 1974); You Can Negotiate Anything (Cohen 1980), and so forth.

I THINK, THEREFORE I CAN

Identity-as-machine and identity-as-growth books are indebted both to ideas espoused by the Protestant Ethic manuals about rational accumulation and to New Thought proponents' notions of positive thinking and self-control. Both types of modern self-help books center on the premise that individuals are responsible for whatever happens to them. Successful relationships would occur as a by-product of successful self-knowledge. Authors detail ways in which people remained seemingly trapped in unfortunate circumstances because of an ignorance the authors claim to be able to cure simply by pointing it out: people do not realize their potential power to alter the course of

their lives. Todd Gitlin (1987) sees the movement out of which these books grew as a desperate and self-deceptive search for satisfaction and control brought on by the political burn-out of 1960s activism:

The impulse to collective expression, blocked on the plane of human action, gets diverted toward the spiritual. . . . With secular revolution discredited as an escape from the "iron cage" of narrow rationality, individual subjectivity promised to reinvent a shattered world: Act as if the world were not a prison, and your life will be made whole. If society was impenetrable and politics a simple reshuffling of elite credentials, the self could still be transformed at will -- even if, in Zen-like fashion, what was required was the will to wrestle out of the grip of the demon will itself. (p. 426)

Beginning in the 1960s, self-help books revitalized the age-old American notions that material attainment and personal well-being are the results of properly focused desire. Individual destiny is seen as unfolding in accordance with hard work -- but a new kind of hard work in which people turn their efforts inward. Authors promise that, with the proper training, thought patterns, intentions, and enthusiasm, readers could be as emotionally and/or materially successful as they were themselves. But without all this, readers were sure to remain stuck in the same old ruts. Most of all, self-help authors stressed, readers must recognize that, either way, it was their choice!

This belief in people's ability to gain complete control over the conditions of their lives has remained the cornerstone of the self-help genre, even as the original "machine" and "growth" types fizzled out of print. Statements such as the ones which follow, culled from various self-help books of the sixties, seventies, and eighties are typical of the genre:

The self image is a "premise," a base, or a foundation upon which your entire personality, your behavior, and even your circumstances are built. (Maltz 1960, p. 2)

The problems of the world -- and they are chronicled daily in headlines of violence and despair -- essentially are the problems of individuals. If individuals can change, the course of the world can change. (Harris 1967, pp. 17-18)

We are accountable only to ourselves for what happens to us in our lives. (Newman and Berkowitz 1971, p. 22)

The destiny of every human being is decided by what goes on inside his skull when he is confronted with what goes on outside his skull. Each person designs his own life. (Berne 1972, p. 31)

All life is a game of power. The object of the game is simple enough: to know what you want and get it. (Korda 1975, p. 4)

YOU ARE THE SUM TOTAL OF YOUR CHOICES, and ... with an appropriate amount of motivation and effort you can be anything you choose. (Dyer 1976, p. 4)

You and you alone will be responsible for your success or failure. (Ringer 1977, p. 8).

We make our own good fortune. (Brothers 1978, p. 4)

There are really only two ways to approach life -- as victim or as gallant fighter -- and you must decide if you want to act or react, deal your own cards or play with a stacked deck. And if you don't decide which way to play with life, it always plays with you. (Shain 1978, p. 65)

[A]ll power is based on perception. If you think you've got it, then you've got it. If you think you don't have it ... then you don't have it. (Cohen 1980, p. 20)

We are each 100% responsible for all of our experiences. (Hay

1984, p. 5)

When Every Person In The World
Takes Better Care Of Themselves,
Everyone In The World Will Feel
Better Taken Care Of
And Then We May Finally
Begin To Care More
About Each Other.
(Johnson 1985, p. 104)

Authors writing out of both the machine and growth self-help ethics are inconsistent, even contradictory, at times, in the moral systems they espouse. Manipulation and selfishness are often described as necessary tactics in successful human interaction, tactics that have earned a bad name through what authors consider to be extreme manifestations. Learning to manipulate others and to put oneself at the center of all encounters and endeavors is, authors proclaim, a means of achieving effective communications skills and happiness in all aspects of life. And yet, authors often define success as the point at which manipulation would no longer be required, and where selfishness would have no meaning.

In Games People Play (1964), Berne writes that readers' goal should be to achieve a gameless state of mature adulthood (or a state in which only "good games" were played). However, his whole book is dedicated to an analysis of all the existing games then being played. (Berne wrote, "This collection is complete to date (1962), but new games are continually being discovered" [p. 69].) Berne's book is designed to attract readers who want to learn how to analyze the behavior of others -- others who would, presumably, not be privy to these some analytical skills.

In both of his best-selling (and nearly identical) books, Winning By Intimidation (1974) and Looking Out For #1 (1977), Robert Ringer straightforwardly asserts that the goal is winning (in the game of life). According to Ringer, ideally, one ought not hurt one's opponents in the course of the game, but that caveat is overshadowed by his advice not to take losses too seriously because life is simply too short. It follows that one should apply this same attitude to the losses of other players as well, and not feel too badly about bringing them on in the course of the game. Also, Ringer adamantly insists that everyone plays to win, and the reader would be wise to catch up with the rest of the gang. Michael Korda concurs in Power! (1975), writing: "No matter who you are, the basic truth is that your interests are nobody else's concern, your gain is inevitably someone else's loss, your failure someone else's victory. . . . [So] learning to play the power game is a means of self defense" (pp. 4-5). Berne's assertions that we should understand game-playing so that ultimately we could learn how not to play have been left behind in the dust. And according to Ringer and Korda, it's not how you play the game that counts, either. Winning is all.

On the cover of Howard Fast's Body Language (1970), a bland-expressed woman sits in a chair with her legs crossed, her arms crossed on her lap, holding a cigarette, with captions around her: "Does her body say that she's a loose woman?" "Does her body say that she's a phoney?" "Does her body say that she's a manipulator?" "Does her body say that she's lonely?" On the back cover, is printed: "Read Body Language, so that you can penetrate the personal secrets, both of intimates and total strangers." Body language, Fast writes, is a

combination of learned and universally human actions and gestures. Like Berne, Fast promises insight -- secret insight -- because those whose body language readers learned to decode wouldn't know they were being studied because they were non-readers of body language, and thus, safely unaware of the meanings inherent in their own gestures. Fast writes:

The ordinary citizen who understands body language very well, and uses it . . . can relate [these postures] to the emotional states of the people he knows. In this way he can actually keep a step ahead of other people in his dealings with them. This art can be taught to people for it is a function of careful observation but it can only be learned if one is aware that it exists. (p. 117)

The secrets of body language, like Dorothy's ruby slippers in "The Wizard of Oz," were there all along and we just didn't know it. It was with body language that we protected ourselves from each other, while, at the same time, we longed desperately to connect with each other.

According to Fast, a reader's goal should be to utilize his or her knowledge of the body language of others to his or her own advantage (as the prospective male reader might do to get the attention of the generic woman on the cover) -- to "reach through . . . personal space, through the masks we set up as protection, to touch and fondle and interact physically with other people" (p. 68) -- and also to keep "the masks" in place when necessary, by consciously managing one's own body language to "integrate [successfully] into the world" (p. 79).

Life may be a constant competition, but the desire to commune with one's competitors interrupts it. Some self-help books (in the identity-as-machine tradition) encourage readers to treat this desire to connect as one would a business transaction -- rationally, carefully,

making sure one's best interests are being served. Others (deriving from the identity-as-growth tradition) urge readers to seek love, because love means growth. Readers are more often prompted by self-help authors to apply a rational economic model to their lives in order to achieve growth; thus, machine and growth ethics combine into an enlightened pragmatism, a scientific spirituality.

Body language, psycho-cybernetics, looking out for number one, being your own best friend -- all of these strategies require self-knowledge. Authors writing from the identity-as-machine perspective see self-confidence as crucial, whereas identity-as-growth authors stress self-love. Within both types of books, the self seems like a treasure being dug up: it is unknown, waiting to be discovered, a reality each individual should become committed to unearthing. If you didn't like who you were, the books announce, you didn't really know yourself yet. And if you didn't like what had happened to you so far in life, it was because you didn't like who you were. You could change self-fulfilling prophecies by changing your perception of the self, and thus, changing the self itself. Maxwell Maltz writes: "The self-image is a 'premise' . . . upon which your whole personality, and even your circumstances are built. Because of this our experiences seem to verify, and thereby strengthen our self images, and a vicious or a benificent cycle, as the case may be, is set up" (1960, p. 2). Identity becomes a kaleidoscope of possibility.

HIGHER POWERS

An occasional self-help author would combined growth and machine ideals within a religious framework and encourage readers to achieve a

profitable sense of self and a pragmatic approach to relationships with the assistance of a higher power. As New Age philosophy has become increasingly popular in recent years, spiritual ideas have sometimes been woven into popular self-help authors' messages (e.g., Norwood [1985]; Hay [1984]).

Robert Schuller, Harold Kushner, and M. Scott Peck have each achieved bestselling success for their widely divergent religious perspectives. Schuller's writing is facile cheerleading for God. He combines bits and pieces of the machine and growth ethics; the result is a popular-psychological Christianity, which oddly includes both capitalist and anti-capitalist propaganda. Schuller begins Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do (1982) rather inanely, by making a long and drawn out analogy between people and potatoes (of which I include only a small portion): "People are like potatoes. After potatoes have been harvested they have to be spread out and sorted in order to get the maximum market dollar. . . . It is a law of life. Big potatoes rise to the top on rough roads, and tough people rise to the top in rough times" (p. 31). Schuller promises that he will show readers how to be top potatoes, or "tough people." The "secret ingredient" that separates good potatoes from bad is knowing how to perceive one's problems, he writes. Top potatoes "understand the six principles that pertain to all problems," Schuller explains:

1 Every living human being has problems. . . . 2 Every problem has a limited life span. . . . 3 Every problem holds positive possibilities. . . . 4 Every problem will change you. . . . 5 You can choose what your problem will do to you. . . . 6 There is a negative and positive reaction to every problem. (pp. 57-68, bold in original)

Basically, Schuller recapitulates standard self-help fare: he informs readers that they are responsible for their problems, and that all they have to do is manage them prudently and confidently, and they will not get out of hand. He includes "Twelve Principles for Managing Problems Positively," which sweetly combine into a little poem:

1 Don't Underestimate. . . . 2 Don't exaggerate. . . . 3 Don't wait. . . . 4 Don't aggravate. . . . 5 Illuminate (your mind). . . . 6 Motivate. . . . 7 Bait. . . . 8 Date. . . . 9 Sublimate. . . . 10 Now dedicate. . . . 11 Communicate. . . . 12 Insulate
 ["yourself from negative forces and negative personalities."] (pp. 72-85, bold in original)

Schuller continues, detailing "Ten Commandments of Possibility Thinking," ten steps readers could use to win ("Count to Ten and Win") and ends with a catchy "Alphabet for Action."

But the most crucial step toward success, Schuller writes, is prayer. In each of his books he repeatedly entreats readers to pray. God would love anyone who believed, Schuller informs, and if God loved you, then you would never be alone. The underlying message is that readers cannot expect any sort of success, happiness, or love from God or others if they are not willing to become devout Christians. At the end of Be Happy You Are Loved (1986), Schuller writes: "Well then -- Love or Loneliness? -- it's your choice! The secret of happiness is so simple: Become a "God loves you . . . and so do I" person! Accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and best Friend" (p. 256, ellipsis in text). Schuller certainly possesses an ability to come up with gimmicky and peppy slogans, as well as to repeat the same messages in countless ways, but his books lack any real theological substance or specific

advice about problem-solving.

Harold Kushner, however, has written two very thoughtful books, where religious issues are examined humanistically. Unlike Schuller, Kushner does not proselytize; in Why Bad Things Happen to Good People (1981) he challenges readers to examine their own beliefs as he did when his son died. Kushner posits that God may not be an omnipotent force who tests the faith of believers and metes out rewards and punishments accordingly, but rather, a benign and benevolent power offering inspiration for people to become motivated to help each other. ("God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help" [p. 140].)

Kushner concludes that people ought not see suffering as reasonable or just, but rather, that they should work to incorporate its positive lessons into their lives. He asks readers rhetorically: "Can you learn to love and forgive [God] despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learned to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?" (1981, p. 148).

In When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough (1986) Kushner continues his discussion of the search for sense in a seemingly senseless world. Kushner believes people feel the need to invest their lives with earthy, non-materialist meaning:

Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it. (1986, p. 18).

Kushner reminds readers that meaning will not come without a struggle, that a complete existence requires the direct confrontation of difficulty. Our goals should not be to eliminate or avoid pain, because, he assures, we wouldn't know good from bad times if we didn't have both. Instead, we would "become emotionally anesthetized" (1986, p. 97).

In his psycho-religious treatises, M. Scott Peck, like Kushner, has retained the centrality of struggle as the key to a rewarding and/or meaningful life. He writes: "it is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. . . . It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually" (1978, p. 16). Life should be a combination of good and bad experiences, but not of good and evil ones, ideally. As Peck becomes more firmly entrenched as a Christian,³ he directs his attention to the "not nice" subject of evil. "It is in the struggle between good and evil that life has its meaning -- and in the hope that goodness can succeed. . . . Evil can be defeated by goodness. . . . Evil can be conquered only by love," he writes (1983, pp. 266-67).

Religious self-help authors extend secular self-help authors' calls for self-reliance to include reliance on God: without faith, some authors even state, everything else is meaningless. But with it, everything is bound to get better. Other authors conceive of a belief in a supreme power as a sort of extension of self-love. Louise Hay, author of You Can Heal Your Life, suggests that readers use "affirmations" to achieve all varieties of health. Affirmations are New Age prayers; they are chants that praise the self. Hay writes: "Let's use the affirmation, 'I am willing to change.' Repeat this often. . . . You can touch your throat

as you say this. The throat is the energy center in the body where change takes place. By touching your throat you are acknowledging you are in the process of changing" (p. 49). In Hay's New Age treatise, the body becomes a place of such power that it seems magical.

In some cases, self-help authors extend personal control over one's circumstances to include physical well-being. In Your Erroneous Zones, Wayne Dyer tells readers: "You can . . . choose to eliminate some physical sufferings which are not rooted in a known organic dysfunction. . . . There is a burgeoning amount of evidence . . . that people even choose things like tumors, influenza, arthritis, heart disease, and many other infirmities, including cancer" (1976, pp. 19-20). And now, in the late eighties, this idea recurs repeatedly in self-help works, including: Hubbard's Dianetics (1985), Pearsall's Superimmunity (1987), Seigel's Love, Medicine, and Miracles (1988), and again, in Hay's You Can Heal Your Life (1984).

In Hay's book, control has been taken to the farthest extreme. Relying on New Age religious techniques for attaining personal well-being, Hay informs readers that they choose whatever happens to them, beginning even before they are born:

Each one of us decides to incarnate upon this planet at particular points in time and space. We have chosen to come here to learn a particular lesson that will advance us upon our spiritual, evolutionary pathway. We choose our sex, our color, our country, and then we look around for the particular set of parents who will mirror the pattern we are bringing in to work on in this lifetime. (p. 10)

Hay has extended choice so far that it becomes suffocatingly constricting. Though Hay's readers may experience her contentions of

ultimate and utter control as empowering, Hay dangerously does away with social reality. She holds that even "ACCIDENTS are no accident. Like everything else in our lives, we create them" (p. 140).

Hay urges readers to figure out how and why they have caused particular physical and mental problems for themselves, by including a comprehensive chart of such problems and their corresponding mental derivations (which she calls "probable causes"). She provides "new thought patterns" which readers can use to correct their self-inflicted maladies. For example, AIDS, she writes, is a manifestation of "[d]enial of the self. Sexual guilt. A strong belief in not being good enough." AIDS victims are urged to utilize the "new thought pattern": "I am a Divine, magnificent expression of life. I rejoice in my sexuality. I rejoice in all that I am. I love myself."

Hay relies on earlier self-as-growth philosophical pointers. She writes that the keys to happiness are love of self and forgiveness of others (which would lead also to love). Hay draws on developmental psychology, writing that the parents one chooses have free rein to wreak havoc upon one's psyche in the formative years. She urges each reader to baby the "child" who lurks inside her or him and who has longed to come out ever since s/he had been repressed into hiding during infancy:

Almost all of our programming, both negative and positive, was accepted by us by the time we were three years old. Our experiences since then are based upon what we accepted and believed about ourselves and about life at that time. The way we were treated when we were very little is usually the way we treat ourselves now. . . .

Be kind to yourself. Begin to love and approve of yourself.
That's what that little child needs in order to express itself at

its highest potential. (pp. 66-67)

Hay reiterates the identity-as-growth idea that guilt is detrimental to well-being and broadens it to apply to physical health also.

Hay, along with most self-help writers, casts guilt as an unnecessary emotional leftover from past times; there appears to be no such thing as justifiable guilt in the present. Guilt is not a valid way of feeling because each person is responsible for what happens to her or him, so what could there be to feel guilty about? Nor ought we expect that others should feel remorse over distress they have caused us, because there is no such thing in the self-help world as causing another person to do or feel anything. Everyone, remember, is the master of her or his own fate. In One Minute For Myself (1985), Spencer Johnson explains, "The minute any of us looks to a relationship to satisfy our own basic needs, we begin to experience pain. And we believe it's the other person's fault" (p. 81). Self-help authors offer readers a sort of secularized confessional, where reading itself is the act by which they achieve absolution. (Authors ideas about influence become even more complicated when relationships are their stated topics.)

In Superimmunity (1987), Paul Pearsall takes the touchy-feely New Age content of Hay's How To Heal Your Life, and transforms it into catchy "scientific" babbling. He writes: "We can control our health: So it is really how we A-R-E -- our attention to the supersystem, a relaxed and constructive imagery, and an adoption of constructive emotional and thinking states -- that determines the degree to which we control our supersystems" (p. 149). Pearsall stresses bodily connections with mental life (body plus mind equals "supersystem"),

making a person sound like a Milky Way of cosmic activity. He writes: "Each thought and feeling is accompanied by a shower of brain chemicals that affects and is affected by billions of cells. This is our immune system, the constant surveillant of intrusion, of even the most minute malfunction of a cell within our bodies" (p. xi). The "supersystem" is a dramatic battleground for opposing forces within the self itself; Pearsall offers his method -- which basically boils down to the idea that awareness will provide control -- as an antidote to intrusive forces.

SELF-HELP BOOKS ON SEXUALITY

The sex manuals of the 1960s, '70s, and 80s are not, of course, the first sex manuals ever written, and are indebted to their predecessors. Ehrenreich, Jacobs and Hess (1986) write that the "'discourse' on sexuality" underwent a transformation from conservatism and secrecy to a more liberal, even radical political stance after World War II; prior to this, sex manuals primarily negated or underplayed women's sexuality, and moralistically denounced variety in sexual activity.

Kinsey's studies (Sexual Behavior in the Human Male [1948] and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female [1953]) ushered in the trend to consider sex legitimately. Kinsey's work had a leveling effect upon sexual acts, according to Ehrenreich, et al., because he was primarily concerned with counting up incidents of orgasm, a methodology that "carried with it the implicit notion that all routes to orgasm are somehow equivalent or at least equally worthy of note" (1986, p. 44). Kinsey was the first to approach sexuality from the "scientific" angle of a pollster, and helped set the stage for the laboratory work of

Masters and Johnson.

COMING TOGETHER COMING APART

Masters and Johnson were the first to enter the realm of sexuality and make it palatable, even respectable, to the lay reading public. They did so by maintaining a strictly professional tone throughout their first two books, Human Sexual Response (1966) and Human Sexual Inadequacy (1970). Masters and Johnson did not present their findings as explicitly useful for readers in their own sex-lives, nor did they ever acknowledge that readers may have been attracted to their work for personal reasons (beyond a quest for the most up-to-date scientific facts about sex); rather, readers were a tacitly acknowledged audience for the presentation of laboratory findings. Despite the density of the clinical language used in their works, word got out. Nearly every contemporary popular magazine ran articles about or by this dynamic duo (Ehrenreich, et al. 1986, p. 65). With the publication of their third treatise on sex, The Pleasure Bond (1975), Masters and Johnson loosened up a bit, and "in association with Robert J. Levin," produced a much more accessible manual.

What Masters and Johnson did for the popular perception of sex was revolutionary in many ways. According to Ehrenreich, Jacobs, and Hess, "Their findings arrived at a time when expert theories of female sexuality ran increasingly counter to women's social experience. . . . Masters and Johnson potentially offered a new social meaning for sex, one that was more consistent with women's emerging sense of independence" (1986, p. 65). They encouraged couples to make their sex lives less goal-oriented, less contrived by traditional notions about

aggression, passivity, and performance. Their work helped to promote an image of women as sexually active; to dispel the notion of vaginal orgasms; to proclaim the clitoris as central in women's sexual pleasure; and thus, to deflate the primacy of penile penetration in lovemaking. Ehrenreich, et al., write, "The implication was clear: Women did not need men for orgasmic sex" (p. 67).

Masters and Johnson did, however, contradict their implications of female sexual autonomy (via the clitoris) by asserting the primacy of vaginal intercourse: they write: "To appreciate vaginal anatomy and physiology is to comprehend the fundamentals of the human female's primary means of sexual expression" (1966, p. 69). Miller and Fowlkes write that Masters and Johnson's comments on vaginal intercourse "must be read basically as a statement of women's heterosexuality and as a rejection of sexual activity that does not involve the vagina" (1980, p. 261). A dismissal of the work of Masters and Johnson such as this, ignores the liberatory potential of their books. Masters and Johnson were, indeed, phallogentric; they demonstrate the confusion that resulted when "old" and "new" notions of sexual practice collided. They held out both potentially empowering and traditionally repressive conceptions of sexuality for women.

Ideologically cloudy though it was, the early work of Masters and Johnson enabled all of the sex manuals which followed; indeed, if they did not make it acceptable for Americans to bring their sex books out of the closet, they made possible large and colorful closet collections. For the most part, however, the manuals which resulted did not go any further than Masters and Johnson had in their analyses of heterosexual dynamics; in fact, most of the authors were overtly conservative in

many ways, while at the same time advancing what they clearly felt would be perceived as liberal, free-thinking recommendations about sexual behavior.

About sex manuals of the 1970s, Meryl Altman writes: "Pushing repression into some distant, murky, non-historical past, these writers create the fiction of a value-free space -- the present -- where discussion of sexuality is invulnerable to challenges that it is repressive or partisan" (1984, p. 117). Indeed, these sex manuals do espouse an understandably schizophrenic ideology of sexual practice. None of the authors advocates sexual contact for its own sake, and yet, they acknowledge that many people are having of sex in this manner, and imply that such behavior should be considered acceptable. Like parents teaching their children about sex, the sexperts all caution that ideally, the activities described should be done by two people who love each other very much. Authors pose as sexually-liberated on the one hand (making informal statements to the effect of: "Anything goes, as long as you want to do it"); but on the other hand, they focus on monogamous heterosexuality (which is nearly always depicted as reaching its ultimate form in marriage),⁴ and upon a heterosexual practice in which men's pleasure shares centrality with women's, but where men remain, for the most part, on top and in command. Women's capacity for sexual pleasure is recognized, but the sexual objectification of women by men is rarely challenged.

Sex manuals draw on the concurrent popular psychology: sex is an exchange, in which a man and a woman attempt to have their respective "needs met"; ideally, they retain and enhance their unique individual identities and self-images even as they merge physically. Achieving

sexual pleasure also necessitates open discussion (gamelessness) and attentive listening. Thus, the same push-pull between a competitive, capitalist view and a connective, communal conception of human interaction displayed in the unisex self-help books surfaces here as well.

ASK THE DOCTOR

One of the early Masters-and-Johnson-inspired pontificators was David Reuben, whose Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex**But Were Afraid to Ask (1969) was a bestseller from 1970 to 1971, followed almost immediately by the success of his Any Woman Can! (1971) from 1971 to 1972. Both books were written as dialogues between a knowing doctor (Reuben) and ignorant and/or befuddled, seemingly inept -- and certainly inexperienced -- patients. In Everything You Always Wanted to Know, Reuben answers a wide range of questions beginning, phallogcentrically, with: "How big is the normal penis?" (p. 5). Then he gradually makes his way through sexuality with (to give a brief sampling): "How does a girl get started as a prostitute?" (p. 251), "What do female homosexuals do with each other?" (P. 269), "Are there any men who would want to wear women's clothes?" (p. 226) and "If these diseases are so terrible, why aren't they better known?" (p. 336). In answer to these questions, Reuben explains that size doesn't matter; that girls become prostitutes because they like sex; that lesbians "were handicapped by having only half the pieces of the anatomical jigsaw puzzle" (p. 269), that indeed, "quite a few" men found women's clothes arousing, because they had been overattached to their mothers, and that ignorance of many "terrible" venereal diseases resulted

because "[m]ost victims are Negroes and homosexuals" (p. 336).

Despite his claims of enlightenment and nonjudgmental attitude about sex, Reuben's view is extremely phallocentric, homophobic, sexist, and racist.

Reuben's second -- even more directed and directive -- work concentrates on rescuing "THE SEXUALLY MAROONED WOMAN," who he defines as: "Any woman who is unwilling or unable to fulfill her destiny as a full-fledged female and thereby enjoy a lifetime of gratifying [hetero]sexual experiences" (p. 1). Reuben's contrived conversation with the sexually marooned patient culminates with advice on how to get married -- advice on how a woman can achieve the womanly state for which she was destined as a woman. Altman (1984) aptly describes Any Woman Can!:

The situation is always the same: a woman is unhappy because she is frigid, or because she is promiscuous, or because she is lonely; she cries in the office of the understanding male therapist; he takes care of her; she undergoes treatment; she makes a successful adjustment -- and marries. This is propaganda for psychiatry, propaganda for marriage, and propaganda for female dependency on male authority. . . . [F]emale sexuality is represented in terms of disease for which proper re-socialization is the cure. (p. 120)

Though Reuben could see women's sexual liberation as possible only within the confines of heterosexual marriage, he did, nonetheless, see it as a possibility. He actually expresses regret that single women could not indulge in sexual escapades without stigma.

KEEPING THE DOCTOR AWAY

A less staid -- but still phallocentric -- approach to women's

sexuality was available, authored by a woman who not only did not guard herself with professional credentials, but who did not use her name at all. The publication of The Sensuous Woman, written by Joan Terry Garrity under the pen name "J," signaled a turning point in tone and style for sex manuals, introducing a new authorial voice, which would remain popular through the seventies. "J" dropped all pretense of treating heterosexual sex with kid gloves. "J" was explicit. She talked dirty, using popular language rather than clinical language. She demystified sex by treating it like any other sport for which players could keep in shape between games.

In 1971, a companion volume to The Sensuous Woman addressed to men was on the market. The Sensuous Man, written by "M," was identical to its predecessor in style and tone. Both authors begin by reassuring readers that they don't have to be beautiful (handsome), thin (muscular), or extraordinary in any way to become wonderfully adept at lovemaking. The authors assure their readers that they, themselves, are living proof; they aren't the least bit exceptional. "J" writes, "I'm not particularly pretty. I have heavy thighs, lumpy hips, protruding teeth, a ski jump nose, poor posture, flat feet and uneven ears. . . . I am not brilliant and I don't have a magnetic personality" (p. 10). "M" is less specific: "If you are handsome to start with, so much the better. I am not so fortunate" (p. 6).

The goal "J" and "M" set for their readers is to learn to please each other; but their respective advice to men and women is quite different. "J" wants readers to know that only by keeping men happy in bed would they keep men interested at all. A sensuous woman should make her man know "that he is the most remarkable man that ever lived" (p. 11).

As part of the bargain women readers are assured they will "reap wonderful benefits . . . such as the enriching experience of a really joyous and fulfilling sex life" (p. 11). But should men's and women's sexual appetites conflict, "J" advises that men's pleasure is most important. If readers cannot respond genuinely to men's advances, "J" urges them to perform -- to preserve men's sense of maleness, and to preserve men's very presence in their lives. She writes:

There are times when you can quite legitimately say, "I love you, but I can't make love right now," but no woman of any sensitivity would refuse to make love to a man she cares for, just because she "doesn't really feel like it." You focus like mad on all the fantasies that stir your sexual juices, concentrate on making your body respond to the highest point possible and, if you really can't get to orgasm, to avoid disappointing him and spoiling his plateau of excitement and sexiness, you fake that orgasm. If you do it well, he won't be able to tell. (p. 179)

Despite her basic assumption that men were worth keeping, they come across in her advice as rather facile, non-communicative, inconsiderate, and ignorant people. Nowhere did "J" suggest that traditional male behavior should change, but only that women should adapt to it.

"M", on the other hand, writes that men's pleasure has for too long been disconnected from women's. "Our selfish, male-oriented sexual mores are said to discriminate against women and deprive them of sexual fulfillment and freedom," "M" writes, acknowledging that this was "probably true" (p. 27). The problem for men however, was that every time they went to bed, they faced potential failure, not in being unable to satisfy women, but in maintaining their fragile male pride, which centered on maintaining an erection. A woman, on the other

hand, could never be a failure in this way. "All she has to do is lie there and let the man do his stuff," "M" writes (p. 27). The goal for sensuous men, then, was not simply to give women pleasure, but to learn how to "get it up and keep it up; "M" assumed that women's satisfaction would follow easily after men had achieved long-lasting erections.

Both "M" and "J" offer extensive advice on creating and maintaining erections, on avoiding premature ejaculation, and on dealing with male impotence, suggesting that sexual activity begins and ends with phallic ups and downs. The early focus of sex manuals on women's "frigidity" or inability to reach orgasm has shifted: now all of the most urgent problems in sex boil down to being men's responsibility. Women are encouraged to participate, but in this phallocentric world, our actions would remain secondary.

SEX AND STATUS IN THE 1970S

Continuing the work of "J" and "M," Alexander Comfort's The Joy of Sex was published in 1972. Comfort organizes his work like an alphabetized cookbook, which ordinary men and women could peruse in their quest for gourmet status as lovemakers. Comfort writes that the only sexual guidelines people should observe were not to do things they didn't want to do, and to try to please each other (p. 14), and that everyone is basically bisexual (p. 225), but his encyclopedic menu centers on the heterosexual couple. Comfort claims that the basis for his book was the sexual experimentation of one gourmet sex-having couple who acted as his informants. (One wonders whether they shared his profits!) Though he acknowledges that group sex and casual sex were becoming more common and acceptable, Comfort feels that good

sex is best achieved by a man and a woman who love each other. They need not be married, but ideally, they should love each other, and presumably, be largely monogamous. He writes:

This book is about love as well as sex as the title implies: you don't get high-quality sex on any other basis -- either you love each other before you come to want it, or, if you happen to get it, you love each other because of it, or both. No point in arguing this, but just as you can't cook without heat you can't make love without feedback. . . . Sex is the one place where we today can learn to treat people as people. (p.9)

His monogamist morality precedes the fear of AIDS which recently began to impinge upon the sexual habits of heterosexuals and gays. Comfort's prose is accompanied by illustrations (pastel colors and black-and-white) of one loving couple, demonstrating various positions and practices as they are described.

Sex manual authors of the 1970s all indicate that they are aware of the resurgence of the women's movement. Some authors affirm a rather watered-down, facile version of feminism in their works. For instance, in The Joy of Sex, Comfort writes, "As to the Women's Lib bit, nobody can possibly be a good lover -- or a whole man -- if he doesn't regard women as (a) people and (b) equals. That is really all there is to be said" (p. 97). And despite authors' commitment to what Ehrenreich, et al., call "equality of orgasm," men enjoy what ranges from a definite advantage to a slight edge in the power dynamics of heterosexual sex. The man-on-top position may have been demoted to one alternative among many, but it is held to be a very special alternative. Comfort writes: "If we come back to the good old Adam and Eve missionary position, with him on top, astride or between, and her

underneath facing -- and we do come back to it -- that is because it's uniquely satisfying" (p.124). And eleven years later, within the covers of a book in which he professes to offer enlightened advice to confused men pursuing now-liberated women, Michael Morganstern exclaims: "It's high time someone said something in defense of the 'missionary position.' For too long, people have reviled it as unimaginative, boring, outdated -- even sexist. I happen to think it's remained the classic position because it remains the most satisfying to men and women alike" (1983, p. 91).

Feminist anger against institutional patriarchal forms and their manifestations is denied validity by most sexperts. Indeed, "M" advises that when looking for women, sensuous men should "eliminate . . . Women's Lib militants" (1971, p. 54). Later, he expands his analysis on feminism, differentiating between "the ultraradical feminists, the dykes and the crazies" on the one hand -- who, he feels, "would settle for nothing short of castration with can openers, scissors, and rusty razor blades" -- and on the other, "attractive and rational women . . . committed to Women's Liberation and dedicated to righting the imbalance between the sexes" (pp. 179-80). It's not clear how "M" decided which feminists fell into which camps, but he was definitely disgusted by women who were not sexually interested in men, or women who were "unreasonably sensitive" about men's actions toward us. But like Comfort, he urges the sensuous man to respect his woman as an equal.

"M" acknowledges that "most men view women solely as sexual objects to be 'used'" (p. 187). "M" believes this attitude is wrong, and tells the sensuous man to "treat her as a whole person, and not as a

sophisticated masturbation machine" (p. 180). Comfort, however, refutes feminist objections to the objectification of women by men by invoking a rather bizarre eye-for-an-eye suggestion for reciprocity:

The Women's Lib bit about sex objects misses the point -- sure the woman and the various parts of her are sex objects, but most men ideally would wish to be treated piecemeal in the same way. . . . It isn't the same for the two sexes because male turn-ons are concrete, while many female turn-ons are situational and atmospheric. (p. 72)

Comfort also minimizes male violence against women, a focus of the then-blossoming women's rights movement. Though he describes rape negatively, albeit glibly, as "a frightening turn-off," he instructs women: "Don't get yourself raped -- i.e. don't deliberately excite a man you don't know well, unless you mean to follow through" (p. 248). Comfort upholds traditional notions of women as responsible for male desire, and of men as uncontrollable once they fall under the spell of seductive femininity.

In the bestselling sequel to The Joy of Sex, More Joy of Sex (1973), Comfort addresses adolescent sexuality by reinforcing gender stereotypes. He describes how girls may entice boys without even knowing the trouble they are inciting -- and, in Comfort's view, inviting. He writes:

The main thing about boys' responses is that girls are often unaware just how fast a really horny boy can be turned on. . . . Quite a few cock-teasers don't intend to be so, they just don't know enough boy physiology: the sight of nice breasts and a few kisses will produce an erection in most males. If this happens, and she doesn't want intercourse, she should tell him she has her period and offer an alternative. A boy can be given an orgasm by hand and if she doesn't know how, she should let him show her. (p.

111)

Despite Comfort's previously stated conviction that men should see women as equals, he shows much more clearly that he also believes that men's desire is far more urgent and that it can be dangerous for women to spark men's sexual interest, especially because they might do so unintentionally. He urges women, from girlhood on, to learn to cater to men's potentially uncontrollable sexual desires. Comfort keeps coming back to biological differences between women and men, which, despite his liberal facade, he sees as instrumental in determining sexual behavior:

There is something basic in the fact that she has to let him in. . . . Sex is external to a man, located in an offshore peninsula like the state of Florida, and he puts forth; it's internal to a woman -- a visit or an invasion -- and she has something external left with her. This doesn't mean that women unconsciously see all intercourse as a violation. . . . Being deeply penetrated by a man you love and trust, who treats you as an equal and loves you back, is about the best of all feminine experiences -- it marks the end of any anxieties about who is entering whom. At that point the penis is joint property and a lot of infantile fears get resolved. (p. 129)

Comfort seems uncertain about what, exactly, this inner and outer genital orientation means; but he is clearly quite taken with the act of penetration, and believes that women are also (and if we're not, we should be, to help resolve those infancy issues).

Reacting against the then-current masculinist wisdom about sexuality, The Boston Women's Health Collective published Our Bodies, Ourselves in 1971. Less a sex manual than a political guide to health and sexuality, Our Bodies, Ourselves epitomizes the feminist approach

to health care for women that gained visibility and popularity throughout the 1970s. Eleven women, who met for the first time in 1969 at a conference in Boston, formed the collective. They write that they "had all experienced similar feelings and frustrations toward specific doctors and the medical maze in general" (p. 11). Their continued meetings grew into a book in which they hoped to provide the knowledge about women's bodies which had been denied women by patriarchy, especially as it manifested itself in the institution of medicine. Our Bodies, Ourselves focuses on understanding and negotiating sexuality, rather than on improving sex, as past manuals did.

Taking feminist values as her starting point, Shere Hite wrote The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality (1976) and The Hite Report on Male Sexuality (1981). Though these books, like Masters and Johnson's early work, are not structured explicitly as self-help manuals, Hite clearly intends her works to serve didactic purposes. In her preface to the first Hite Report, she writes:

The intention is to get acquainted, to share how we have experienced our sexuality, how we feel about it -- and to see our personal lives more clearly, thus redefining our sexuality and strengthening our identities as women. This book is also meant to stimulate a public discussion and reevaluation of sexuality. (p. 11)

And in the preface to her second volume, Hite set out "[t]o find out what American men are feeling, thinking, and doing" (p. xiii). In both works, Hite sought to uncover the relationship between gender socialization regarding sexuality and sexual practice.

Hite's books were marketed as definitive and newly-revelatory sex

manuals in the tradition of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson. Reviews on the back cover of the first Hite Report proclaimed: "Women who read [this] are likely to be reassured . . . and men should be pleased to have so much specific information about what women really want" (Newsweek); "The biggest sex study since Masters and Johnson" (The National Observer); and "read The Hite Report if you want to know how sex really is right now" (New York Times Book Review).

In the first Hite Report, women respondents reveal that they are decidedly disappointed with their sex lives, while men sound incredibly callous, inconsiderate, even violent (men sound like this even in their own accounts, in Hite's second volume). Few of Hite's respondents are happy with the status quo of heterosexual relationships, Hite writes, because the power imbalance between men and women in American culture provides an unhealthy environment for creative expression in every conceivable way. She wrote, "We must begin to devise more kind, generous, and personal ways of relating which will be positive and constructive for the future" (1976, p. 11).

THE MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

Irene Kassorla's Nice Girls Do-- (1980) is addressed to women, and centers on women's pleasure, rather than their pleasure-giving. Kassorla believes that everyone harbors sexual guilt and repressed sexual fantasies as a result of parental anti-sex messages we receive in infancy and/or childhood. She writes that women, especially, are taught in early childhood that sexual pleasure is wrong. Kassorla urges readers to engage their sex partners in her therapy, which she calls "the pleasure process," assuring that, "In the PLEASURE PROCESS you

will learn how to orgasm in countless ways and in countless numbers" (p. 16). She counters male-oriented approaches to sex, such as those of Comfort and "J," by advising women: "Don't assure your partner that you are happy and satisfied when it isn't true; don't pretend to be in ecstasy when you can't wait until he dismounts. And above all, don't feign orgasm or there isn't a chance for you to learn how to be a happy and healthy person sexually" (p. 87).

Alice Kahn Ladas, Beverly Whipple, and John D. Perry combined efforts the following year to revolutionize sexuality with their presentation of four mysteriously new "scientific" sexual phenomena in The G Spot And Other Recent Discoveries About Human Sexuality (1981). They write: "[T]he evidence we present indicates that women and men are more alike sexually than had been previously imagined. This may help to remove barriers between people and bring about a greater understanding of human sexual behavior" (pp. xv-xvi). Based on research which is only vaguely described throughout the book, Ladas, et al. herald a new sexual era centering upon women's "G spots," (G stands for Grafenberg, the doctor who first proposed that such an area existed). G spots, the authors explain, are "relatively small and difficult to locate" invisible areas on the front interior vaginal walls, which were best stimulated by "firm upward pressure" (p. 44). Their descriptions of the G spot include convincing jargon, but end up quite vaguely: they write that "The G spot is probably composed of a complex network of blood vessels, the paraurethral glands and ducts, nerve endings, and the tissues surrounding the bladder neck" but that "[t]he cellular structure of the G spot is, at this time, unknown" (p. 42).

Ladas et al., claim to have supervised an experiment in which 400

(unidentified) women volunteers were examined by doctors or nurses. Each and every one of these women had G spots! When stimulated, Ladas et al. wrote, the G spot would swell and become hard, and this could result in an orgasm more intense than clitoral orgasm (and often followed by ejaculation of a mysterious clear or milky substance). Ladas et al. suspected that all women had G spots, but just didn't know it yet.

Ladas, Whipple, and Perry were well aware of the implications of their research. They knew they were reviving the Freudian concept of a vaginal orgasm that was best achieved through penile penetration, and they knew about the opposition with which the Freudian phallogentric ideology of sex had met from feminist critics and laboratory researchers. They knew that the validity of Freud's vaginal theories had been publicly shattered by the research of Masters and Johnson, most notably. So they couched their argument within an all-inclusive theoretical framework, and deceptively non-judgmental language, and they accused Masters and Johnson of disregarding any evidence of G spots they found. But, they assured confused readers, all the previous theoreticians, according to their "unifying" research, could be right in the end. There were vaginal (G spot) orgasms. There were also clitoral orgasms. They weren't going to say that one type was better than another; they were only going to present the evidence.

One man wrote in:

Since my wife learned about the G spot and female ejaculation, she refuses to allow me to play with her clitoris with my finger or my tongue. . . . Now she insists that we have intercourse without much foreplay (which I enjoy a lot) and she berates me for being a bad lover because I don't help her to ejaculate. (p.

168, entire letter italicized in original)

Strangely but surely, women who knew how to work their G spots tended to take on the exact sexual posturing which Hite's women so resented: they were obsessed with vaginal penetration, and they wanted it fast and hard. Women with G spots even climaxed too quickly. For most men partners of G spotted women (unlike the man cited above), the new discoveries were wonderful, and had led to unimaginable heights of sexual compatibility, the authors contend.

Ladas, Whipple, and Perry's "discoveries" of the newfound physiological similarities of men and women strongly implied that women were just like men, and all the previous attention to women's special sexual needs was rather needless. To counter the phallocentric implications of G spot centrality, Ladas et al. include testimony from lesbians, whom, they state, are more likely to know about their G spots and to ejaculate than heterosexual women. It was easier to locate G spots with fingers than with penises, they assert; but the majority of the comments they include from "subjects" attest to women's preference for the latter as G spot stimulators.

Another "discovery" which Ladas et al. explore is the excitability of the prostate gland in men, which could, they recommended, be best stimulated anally. Ehrenreich, Jacobs and Hess contend that "The G Spot . . . presented the insidious notion that women's clitoral obsessions were driving men to homosexuality." The recommended position for optimal coital stimulation of the G spot, they point out, was "suspiciously similar to one used for anal sex" (p. 184).

The discovery of the G spot caused a spot of media hoopla which accompanied the success of Ladas, Whipple, and Perry's book. The

sensation died down as quickly as it had erupted, and sex manuals went back to proffering advice on various means of clitoral stimulation and fellatio. Occasionally, an author would mention the possibility of the G spot's existence, but only in a most tentative manner.⁵

SEPARATING THE MEN FROM THE WOMEN

A decade after "J" and "M" proffered their brand of definitively raunchy sexual wisdom to masses of eager would-be sensual men and women, a second pair of gender-specific manuals, followed by a unisex manual, were released to guide sexually confused heterosexuals through the 1980s: Alexandra Penney's How To Make Love to A Man (1981), Michael Morganstern's How To Make Love to a Woman (1982), and Penney's How To Make Love to Each Other (1982).⁶

After a friend told Penney about a sexual encounter with a man during which she was encouraged to take an active part in setting up the nightly activities, Penney became inspired to investigate men's concerns about sex. She began by reading sex manuals (including those by Comfort, "J" and "M"). Penney discovered that men were culturally programmed to be the directors of sexual activity, and yet, ironically, their needs were neglected in the process:

Most everything . . . seemed to take for granted that the man was basically the initiator in sex, that he should be sensitive to a woman's needs, take a lot of time, and help a woman achieve an orgasm or even many orgasms if she needed them.

But what, specifically, did men need besides an erection and a good climax? What were the finer pleasures that men responded to? No book or person had ever clearly revealed to women what making love to a man was all about. (p. 19)

Penney believes women have experienced a sexual revolution, that their pleasure has become central in heterosexual love-making, and that in the meantime, no one has been paying attention to the poor men. Men's pleasure has been taken for granted, even ignored altogether: "Think how many women suffered in silence until men learned what women needed physically and emotionally," she writes (p. 21). As "J" had done a decade earlier, she asserts that women should take action, and return the favors they had been reaping from sexually-sensitive men. Penney agrees with "J" that a woman need not be exceptionally beautiful to please men well in bed; but she should be very clean, carefully dressed, and well-coiffed. Penney describes many ways in which women could set the stage for sexual encounters, favoring lots of candle-lit bathtubs preceded by carefully prepared favorite meals (his). She reminds women that "the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach" (p. 69).

Ehrenreich, Jacob and Hess write that How To Make Love to a Man "expressed, more than any other manual, the growing physical alienation between heterosexuals" because Penney translated sex into such a carefully orchestrated performance, in which men's pleasure and women's pleasure were distinctly different phenomena. "This was theatrical sex, so tightly scripted that there was little room for spontaneous heterosexual impulses to destroy a scene" (Ehrenreich, et al., p. 101). The "close-your-eyes-and-think-of-England" approach to sex becomes unimaginable; Penney tells readers to plan sexual encounters compulsively, and to make sure everyone has a good time while they're at it.

Morganstern writes that his sequel for men, How To Make Love to a

Woman, was designed to help men cope with the confusion brought on by the combined forces of the women's movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s.

There's been so much change . . . that most men don't know quite what to think anymore. . . . When we first began trying to give women what they wanted (and for years before that), they wanted a MAN -- in capital letters. They wanted to have their dinners paid for, their chairs held, their doors opened, their cooking complimented, their virginity preserved, and their rings quickly. . . . Then, suddenly . . . things began to change. In what seemed like only a matter of days, women wanted none of the above. Instead, they wanted free sex, no children, equal pay, our places in law and medical schools, and our jobs afterward. (p. 2)

It wasn't that women weren't having enough attention paid to their pleasure, but that women were becoming more difficult to give pleasure to, because they were so aggressive and fickle.

Morganstern describes his own confusion about how to treat women. He laments that romance seemed to have disappeared with the onset of women's equality (which he believes has been achieved). But he reassures his readers that his "hundreds" of interviews with women indicate that "[R]omance has returned" (p. 5). Men need not be intimidated by women's progress; indeed, he writes: "Recognizing the full potential of women doesn't have to mean giving up old sex roles" (p. 7). Femininity, he consoles his readers, is alive and well underneath the business suits women have donned.

Penney writes that the the letters she received from readers and the questions she was asked during the tour promoting How to Make Love to a Man led her to write How to Make Love to Each Other (1982). Women and men seem to have different basic concerns about each other,

she writes, concerns which she hopes to reconcile with her work. Women are concerned with keeping men interested in the relationship, while men are concerned with keeping women interested in sex (pp. 17-18). In her new book, Penney reiterates the graphic techniques she presented for women to use on men in her first book, and supplements them with corresponding instructions for men. She urges women to "let him know that you are truly interested in sex," by "[s]ending sensuous signals" especially by catering to men's interest in "visual effects," which could range from wearing black lacy underwear to buying soft core pornography. Penney urges men, on the other hand, to focus on "Romance, romance, romance, romance"; she tells them to "really listen" to women, and to "talk" to them (pp. 119-124). Penney's unisex manual confirms Morganstern's assertions of a return to the comforts of traditional ways, with a dollop of discussion thrown in -- despite the scary, yet necessary, changes brought on by the women's movement. Men, it seems, were smart enough never to change their minds; they still wanted the same thing: women dressed up in slinky costumes like out of a pornographic magazine to cater to their imaginative tastes.

BEYOND BODY PARTS

Paul Pearsall's Super Marital Sex (1987) is an interesting blend of egalitarianism, conservatism, and New Age philosophy. Pearsall promises readers that he has already been successful in helping one thousand couples to revitalize their sex lives with his super marital sex program at two Detroit hospitals. Pearsall writes that he is indebted to Kinsey and to Masters and Johnson, and he recycles some of their advice in his own book. But he also promises more for couples

who are monogamous and who follow the program:

Super marital sex is the most erotic, intense, fulfilling experience any human being can have. Anonymous sex with multiple partners pales by comparison, an empty imitation of the fulfillment of a sexuality of intimacy and commitment to one person for life, a "fourth perspective" based on an entirely different model of sexual functioning, physiology and interaction between husband and wife. (p. xvi)

Pearsall promises no less than a religious experience of newfound sensuality. Couples can have "psychasms" together, which he explains, are much more sophisticated and enriching than all that old muscle-spasming people settled for back in the 1970s. Pearsall recommends achieving "psychasms" by practicing "the posture of the future" (sitting facing each other, with legs overlapping, against two separate stacks of pillows, basically) and making contact between the back of the penis and the clitoral area. The key to supermarital sex, according to Pearsall, is that telepathic communication takes precedence over mere genital sensation, and thus, phallocentrism is seemingly banished. Attention to the process of sexual interaction supplants the goal-oriented nature of the old kind of sex. One husband-convert told Pearsall:

I can tell you now that it just cannot be described. We insert the penis sometimes, I ejaculate sometimes, we have orgasms, psychasms, breastasms, I tell you, we just merge. . . . If you would have told me that erection or insertion was not necessary weeks ago, I would have thought you were going crazy. (p. 224)

Pearsall's subjects come alive in a way that Masters' and Johnson's never did: they praise his methods left and right, even as he denied

them an intense focus on bodily reactions. Pearsall wants sex to be free and beautiful, an out-of-body experience with curative powers for marriages that had grown unhealthy and/or dysfunctional.

Sex manuals have traveled from the laboratory-grounded, highly physical explanations of sexual phenomena of Masters and Johnson back into the laboratory from which Paul Pearsall's "psychasms" have now emerged. Sex has gone from technical to earthy to theatrical to otherworldly. None of the more recent bestselling sex manuals received the same attention or caused the same controversy as the earlier books (written by Masters and Johnson, Reuben, Comfort and Hite). The incognito, mysterious sexperts "J" and "M" who beckoned to American women and men with visions of broadened and naughty sexual experimentation have been replaced by the highly visible, high-strung "Dr. Ruth," whose primary concern seems to be whether adolescents are using contraceptives. Recently, avoiding pregnancy has taken a backseat to people's fears of contracting AIDS; "safe sex" has supplanted good sex. Good sex, as the only sex manual author (Pearsall) of the past five years to gain bestseller status, imports, is for married couples only.

Unlike unisex self-help books, which propose more general programs for successful living and self-reflection, sex manuals -- except for the more politicalized feminist ones -- do not pretend to tell readers how to live their lives. But the ethos that each successive author conveys regarding sex is closely related to the moral frameworks that generic self-help authors outlined for their readers. Sexuality becomes a player in the game of identity- building: sex manuals incorporate both

the machine and growth models developed by generic self-help authors: one could learn techniques to gain sexual success which centered on clearly-delineated action (pressing the right buttons), and/or one could expand one's horizons as a person through the creativity of sexual experimentation.

Despite each ensuing manual author's claims that s/he had the answers to sexual problems, the proper techniques, or the key to attaining the necessary frame of mind for sexual success, the men and women depicted in the sex manuals keep drifting apart, resenting each other, fighting or stagnating, despite each successive author's attempts to bring them together. And when these men and women get out of bed, their animosity toward each other takes center stage. It is in self-help books addressed to women that heterosexual relationships in their totality are deconstructed most fully.

chapter six

SHELF LIFE, PART TWO: SELF-HELP BOOKS FOR WOMEN, 1963-88

During the summer of 1987, a Barnes and Noble bookstore in Greenwich Village displayed Susan Forward's Men Who Hate Women And the Women Who Love Them (1986), Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much (1985), and Cowan and Kinder's Women Men Love Women Men Leave (1987), along with several other recent arrivals in its window, with the caption "Women who read too much" beneath the books. This display was ironic and somewhat peculiar, given the fact that bookstores usually attempt to attract buyers for their wares. Lisa Ann Marsoli and Mel Green's sardonic little paperback, Smart Women Stupid Books: Stop Reading and Learn to Love Losers (1987), hit the bookracks at about the same time (albeit briefly). Its authors direct their clever insults differently than the bookstore window designer: they parody the books themselves, rather than the women who buy them. They begin: "It's not your fault! Men are stupid and smart women know it! It's time to stop worrying and start enjoying them for what they are -- which will always be less than you want. This book welcomes you to the age of the 'user friendly relationship'" (p.1).

Commentary on self-help books addressed to women has made its way into editorial columns, feature stories, and even comic strips. At nearly every turn, the recent wave of self-help books addressed to women has met with disdain or mockery from non-using reviewers who are appalled at the simplistic limp prose; the tautological nature of authors' arguments; misrepresentation of what (in the opinion of the critics) reading women want or need; a skewed presentation of current

sexual dynamics; and/or offensive recommendations for change.

During the summer of 1987, "Cathy," the ultimate neurotic American woman comic-strip character, was reading a pile of self-help books on the beach. In the first frame, she explains to her boyfriend Irving, "IT'S A WHOLE NEW LINE OF BOOKS THAT HELPS US STUDY THE NEEDS AND MOTIVATIONS OF THE OPPOSITE SEX SO WE CAN WORK TO CREATE MORE MUTUALLY FULFILLING RELATIONSHIPS." Cathy pauses. "WHAT ARE YOU READING, IRVING?" He replies, "HOT ROD WORLD." In the next frame, Irving, still smiling under a pile of mangled books, protests, "I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO UNDERSTAND ME." Cathy, walking away -- can of diet soda in hand -- retorts, "I ALREADY KNOW TOO MUCH." Cathy's creator (and namesake), Cathy Guisewite, draws attention to the unreciprocated nature of women's efforts to "understand" men, and implies that there may be very little, indeed, worth understanding -- or, perhaps, that ignorance would be more blissful. Self-help books can be only a waste of time, she implies, like the men they claim to decipher.

In February, 1988, Berke Breathed's syndicated comic strip "Bloom County" showed Opus the Penguin (a male character, incidentally) staggering under a pile of self help-books (with titles including Everything You Don't Know About Yourself, Hug Yourself, Women Who Love Bad Dogs and G-Spot Blues), while he exclaims: "AREN'T THEY WONDERFUL? A VERITABLE TOWER OF PSYCHOBABBLE! MY GOODNESS, IT'S GREAT TO LIVE IN AN AGE WHERE THE EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CAN SO EXPERTLY TREAT THEMSELVES!" In creating an analogy between self-help books and the Biblical tower of Babel, Breathed depicts the usage of self-help books as a fruitless and silly

exercise -- as yet another example of the misuse of faith by the faithful.

In the less overtly comical area of journalism, experts have been cited in feature stories, voicing the various charges that are often leveled against current self-help books: Susan Reverby explains that "[w]omen read these books because they are having genuine difficulties in relationships. . . . But what they get are simple psychobabble answers" (Lawson, 1986 [New York Times]). Hannah Lerman believes the books lay all blame and responsibility for making relationships work on women readers: "This fantasy feeds on women's low self-esteem and on their being programmed to think they have to perfect themselves endlessly" (Lawson). Betty Friedan exclaims that "women shouldn't be such patsies' for romantic advice books. They aren't going to get anything out of them" (Lawson). Vogue writer Susan Bolotin exhorts, "It's time that women said no to the majority of self help books. . . . It's time they said no to feeling responsible for everybody's happiness. It's time that women put blame on the men who deserve it and thank (and love) the ones who don't" (1987, p. 254). Paula Caplan concurs with the view that though self-help books profess to help women, they ultimately end up blaming them: "Too many of these books are saying 'The real cause of the trouble is you, sweetie' " (Landi 1987, [Mademoiselle], p. 247). Gerald R. Rosen warns more charitably that, "[w]ell-intentioned instructions can turn out to be structured in such a way that nobody follows them. . . . If you combine that possibility with the exaggerated claims, publishers are selling products that nobody might be able to use and that might leave them feeling more upset with themselves for failing" (Hinds, 1988 [New York

Times)).¹ At best, critics doubt the promised effect of self-help books on readers and see them as a waste of time. At worst, they label them as politically backward, narrow, and even potentially damaging to more gullible readers.

Objections to authors' writing styles are often raised in derogatory reviews of recent women's self-help bestsellers. Bolotin writes off the sub-genre as "drivel," bemoaning authors' "sing-song" contradictory advice and titles "with the cadence... of a pitching sailboat about to keel over" (p. 254). In a group review of four self-help books addressed to women (by Norwood, Forward and two by Cowan and Kinder), Joyce Maynard complains that the books run together, writing: "I feel a bit like a person who has sampled every flavor at Baskin-Robbins and can no longer distinguish between chocolate and coffee" (1987, Mademoiselle), p. 92). Reviewers claim the books lack sophistication, originality, and individuality; thus, how can they be expected to assist their readers in gaining these qualities?

It is clear from my participants' comments that readers do not necessarily turn to self-help books because they expect the books to deliver all they promise, but because they want some comfort, some insight, some information, and they hope to find such things by reading. The same stylistic maneuvers that reviewers find intellectually offensive comfort many readers; others, though, may indeed perceive the writing as being beneath them. Though reviewers see self-help books for women as providing pat answers which recur from one work to another, authors often take readers through complex (sometimes contorted or contradictory) arguments before making recommendations.

Self-help books for women are filled with labels that authors have

applied to people in their attempts to codify behavior. Readers may come to wonder, after being bombarded left and right by these catchy phrases, whether there are connections to be made between them. Is the "woman who loves too much," "the man addict," or the "mouseburger" the kind of "wom[an] men leave" because she is caught up in the "cinderella complex," the "wendy dilemma," or "the feminine mystique?" Why does she get involved with men suffering from the "peter pan syndrome," with those "who can't love," or even with "men who hate women" in the first place? How can she become a "liberated woman," a "total woman," a "smart woman" who doesn't make "foolish choices," or a "smart cookie" who doesn't "crumble"? Can she eradicate her "man-addiction," and cure his "commitment-phobia" simultaneously? If such women do exist in droves, as the popularity of current self-help books might suggest, what is the meaning of such male-orientation in what has been called the Post-Feminist period? And if the women and the men in the books are all the same people, why are there so many books?

Common bonds are everywhere to be found in this branch of the self-help genre because, for the most part, authors attack the same problems in their quests to disentangle the web of problems they believe women experience in intimate relationships, or in our attempts to form them. Men and women do emerge seeming quite incompatible. In fact, reading these books one after another sent images from Thurber cartoons flitting through my mind -- images of men and women alternately smirking at and cowering from each other while crouched behind the living room furniture, as they engage in out-and-out outrageous warfare (1931, pp. 389-99).

THE PERILS OF CHILDHOOD FOR GIRLS AND BOYS

Self-help books which attempt to decipher and improve heterosexual relationships present a strange picture of women and men. Based on the same popular psychology that characterized the unisex self-help books and the sex manuals, those addressed to women are unique in that they focus on problems of gender in American life -- though often, attention to this subject is not the author's stated area of interest.

Self-help books for women about relationships lead readers down a twisted and overgrown path to the breeding ground for heterosexual relational problems: childhood. Quite simply, the message being spread is that our parents screw us up. And since women are the ones who do the bulk of the parenting in this culture, mothers reap most of the blame for screwing up children in self-help books. Barbara Katz Rothman writes (of literature with a more scholarly bent than self-help books):

Every now and again, someone discovers that children are raised by women, and writes a book about it. The point of the book is to blame mothers, or mother rearing, for the evils of the world, most especially for the evil that men do. The basic argument of such books is that boy children, because they are reared by mothers, have to separate themselves, consequently rejecting the mother and the womanliness in themselves, and dominate women and the world. (1989, p. 211)

Self-help authors are continually rediscovering women's complicity in the shortcomings and wrongdoings of their children. Sometimes, authors take a different -- yet ultimately as derogatory -- tack, and claim that the mindlessness of mothering work leads to a lack of personhood, a void of identity in women. Women and men raised by

mindless mothers can grow up to be social misfits. Self-help authors implicate fathers as causing problems also, but the root of men's problematic behavior as fathers lies in their upbringing, so the vicious circle leads back to mothers. In other words, men are usually let off the hook because they were raised by women.

Most self-help writers see separation from mothers as a crucial step in achieving individuality and growth in adult life. This kind of thinking raises a number of questions: If separation is the only means of achieving adulthood, should all connections be seen as immature or dangerous? And if all connections are immature or dangerous, what kinds of interactions should we strive for? If our parents' ties to us threaten our growth, how should we prevent ourselves from doing the same things to our children? Authors seem, for the most part, oblivious to the implications their arguments raise; however, at times, they do provide seemingly unintentional "answers" to these questions, as their narratives unfold.

The formulation of women's problems as maternally-induced is also problematic in terms of the books' raisons d'être: why would self-help authors -- who are often women themselves, and more often than not, people who see themselves as feminist in some manner -- blame women so vehemently, while at the same time, they claim to be able to help them? Wouldn't contempt, however mild, for one's "clients" be antithetical to the whole act of offering help? Part of the answer to these questions is that the self-help genre operates on the premise that people cause their own problems. Readers are taught that to change whatever it is they want to change about their lives, they have to buy into the idea that it is within their power to do so; this concept

forms the core of most unisex self-help books. To see themselves as in control of their problems, readers must, to some extent, accept that they have played a part in creating them, according to authors. Without such an acknowledgement, there can be no hope of improving. Also, blaming clients for their problems can be seen as a possible outcome of therapeutic relationships, in which the "expert" hands down knowledge to the ignorant patient below; some authors' indicate (by their tone) that they view their "relationship" with readers in this manner.

Authors' assertions of reader-blame range from overt to subtle to contradictory descriptions of women's participation in their own and others' pathologies. In some books, women certainly sound like masochists; in others, we are depicted as unintentionally acting as our own worst enemies. (Authors do not touch on the possibility that reading self-help books that encourage them to blame themselves may be a masochistic activity, itself.) All self-help authors advise that other people's behavior cannot be controlled, while assuring readers that a change in their in their own behavior will force others to change. The problem must first be traced to its source in readers' lives, so that readers proceed with an understanding of how they, because of their upbringings, have become adults who get into problem situations with others.

Most self-help authors are not clear in their articulations of who should accept blame for problems or responsibility for their amendment. Authors often don't appear to want to blame mothers -- or women in general -- at all. But their explanations become muddled because they have not resolved conflicting frameworks for evaluation; sociology and psychology, various strands of feminism and

anti-feminism, conservative and radical thought collide together. And though some authors do question and critique the mutually-exclusive gender spheres they present, radical proposals for change -- such as the abolition of gender as a social and sexual construct altogether -- are not advanced. (Such ideas are perhaps more than the market could bear.) Even authors who claim to believe wholeheartedly in gender-exclusive realms of behavior for men and women get confused about who is to blame for problematic relationships when they set out to advise women.

Because girls and boys are treated differently in infancy and childhood, many self-help authors begin, they emerge into adulthood with contrasting beliefs and behaviors which often become irreconcilable with each other. When we are babies, our mothers dress us up in pink or blue depending upon our gender. They pin our hair up in barrettes if we are girls, or buy us baby bow-ties if we are boys. They tell us to cross our legs, or not to play with dolls. They teach us to cook, clean, and care profusely, or they teach us not to. And thus, women -- as mothers -- are the social construction-workers of gender, for both future men and future women.

Mothers do not fare well as role-models for girls in self-help authors' formulations -- the idea that mothers could function as role models for boys is not even considered -- because mothers teach their girl children compliance and passivity. Fathers, through the examples they set, enable their sons to become similarly distant or authoritative husbands and fathers themselves. But fathers are not seen as initiators of gendered behavior for men; rather, they are depicted as mere transmitters, reifiers, passive agents, really, in the work of

maintaining gender. The prevailing message authors convey is that the destructive aspects of gender identity are born at home, beginning at birth, and that these proliferate like sneaky viruses which cannot be curbed without heroic effort.

Self-help authors do not portray women's gender socialization of children as social work; their conception of the indoctrination process focuses on individual behaviors about which generalizations can be made. Occasional references are made to culture or society and to institutional maintenance of socialization, but on the whole, self-help authors seem to conceive of society as a mass of family units, each dilligently doing its part to contribute to a uniform whole. Unlike West and Zimmerman (1987), who write about "doing" gender as a deeply-embedded social activity, self-help authors treat gender as a psychological given: each of us learns prescriptions and proscriptions pertaining to our particular gender, and as we have inherited these rules for behavior, so we will pass them on to our children.

Most authors are unwilling to give up the idea that a certain amount of difference according to gender is desirable or a "normal" result of "normal" development. For the most part, it is the extreme cases with which authors are concerned. But they also describe these extreme cases as quite plentiful, even epidemic, at the times in which they are writing. Thus, authors suggest that it may not be that something has gone too far in the process of child-rearing, but rather, that something is wrong with the very core of child-rearing practices themselves. Though they may, at times, lean toward a grand indictment of American family life, ultimately authors are trapped within the narrow

psychological frame they have so carefully crafted.² Thus, individual mothers are held responsible for the individual men (the commitmentphobes, the misogynists, the drunkards, the lovers and leavers) who will become problematic in relationships with other women's individual daughters. And individual mothers are seen as creators of the individual women (the clingers, the overinvesters, the passive-aggressives, and so forth) who will become problematic in relationships with other women's individual sons.

Self-help authors create a bizarre portrait of women in which they are omnipowerful, and yet powerless. Men are no less peculiar. They learn to feel powerful -- especially over women -- from the mothering they receive, yet paradoxically, they also learn that mothers are ultimately the powerful ones, and that men are, consequently, powerless. Perhaps most ironic of all, the majority of the mismothering mothers and their daughters and sons don't have the faintest idea about what's going on, according to self-help authors. That's where the books come in.

All this confusion contributes to the contradictory nature of self-help authors' recommendations for improvement or problem-solving. Authors usually acknowledge that men should be different, and yet, they believe that men might very well be unchangeable. Authors urge women to adapt by adopting men's strategies for conducting involvements, even though such strategies seem to be rather inept. Thus, the same women being reduced to (wronging) mothers are instructed to emulate the distanced jerks they have (wrongly) been creating. This is the composite -- and often confusing -- story that self-help books report about heterosexual

relationships. Each book may not reproduce all of this amalgam, but steady readers will be exposed to many -- if not all -- aspects of this composite.

Participants in my study would sometimes demonstrate their belief in the validity of this composite view when they talked about what they learned from books they considered influential in their lives. For instance, Val said that she read Women Who Love Too Much to see if she was "one of them," and found out "I kind of was, although I hate to admit it." She read Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them to gain insight into a man she had recently broken up with; "he is definitely one of them," she said. She drew on the contents of the book to explain why she selected the book in the first place:

I was concerned about that [loving too much] because my husband had had many affairs, and I am concerned about my children and how they are going to form relationships. . . . I mean, you know, why -- why did I choose a man who was going to double-cross me? I probably did that intentionally, very honestly. . . . I think that was her [Norwood's] point. . . . I felt I was a product of a family of women who loved too much, because my mother covered for my father, and I had done the same thing. . . . And I also didn't want to get trapped in the same thing again.

The readers I interviewed often demonstrated their support for the idea that one's behavior in relationships is patterned on one's parents' relationship with each other; several participants described their struggles to transcend or deemphasize parental (especially maternal) influence in their lives.

THE PROBLEM GETS A NAME

The recent spate of self-help books for women began with the

pioneering work of Betty Friedan. Though they have been influenced by unisex self-help books over time, current self-help books for women still concern themselves with the core issues that Friedan raised in 1963, with the publication of The Feminine Mystique. Friedan -- writing to an assumed audience of middle- and upper-class housewives, urges women to seek meaning outside their homes and separate from their families, by joining the male-dominated labor force, which she idealizes into challenging, autonomous, personally satisfying, and remunerative professional pursuits.

Friedan's starting point for the deconstruction of women's homebound lives is the activity of mothering. She criticizes psychological research for its negative focus on mothers (pp. 189-205), and then begins her own attack. In her efforts to show the ill effects of the traditional gendered division of labor within middle class households, Friedan enthusiastically denounces women's work as housewives and mothers. Full-time housecleaning and child-rearing are depicted as degrading and stultifying activities, which, at their worst, could and would produce children who lacked the skills necessary for healthy adulthood, Friedan believes.

The psychological task of separating from The Mother was held to be of paramount importance by Friedan. This important developmental accomplishment could be frustrated by mothers who were unconsciously determined to live vicariously through their children (since their own lives lacked purpose). The development of everyone involved would be thwarted by clinging motherhood. Friedan writes :

These mothers have themselves become more infantile, and because they are forced to seek more and more gratification

through the child, they are incapable of finally separating themselves from the child. Thus, it would seem, it is the child who supports life in the mother in that "symbiotic" relationship, and the child is virtually destroyed in the process. (pp. 289-90)

The closeness of mother and child, albeit encouraged by social programming, is the lynchpin of Friedan's argument that full-time housewifery should be ended. She implies that the symbiosis in which most mothers engage with their children could create emotionally immature, promiscuous, and/or academically unsuccessful children. Friedan believes that a boy might become a homosexual as a result of his desire to flee the all-consuming mother, "who attaches her son to her with such dependence that he can never mature to love a woman, nor can he, often, cope as an adult with life on his own" (p. 275). Friedan bemoans the increasing visibility of gay men in the 60s, and lumps homosexuality together with a litany of societal ills created by "parasitical mother-love" (p. 276). Ironically, she considers it more immature for men to chose men as lovers than to choose women -- whose childish and dangerous methods of loving she devotes her efforts to detailing. Though Friedan questions some long-standing institutions, others (heterosexuality among them) remain unchallenged by The Feminine Mystique.

Overinvestment in her children could lead a mother to beat them, as well as to accept beatings herself from an angry husband. "There is no doubt," writes Friedan, "that male outrage against women -- and inevitably, against sex -- has increased enormously in the era of the feminine mystique" (p. 273). Men's anger at overinvesting mothers, Friedan implies, is somehow justified. She calls for action to stop all of the miseries being inflicted upon and by women: housewives must

extricate themselves from the "comfortable concentration camp[s]" that are their homes (p. 307).

I do not mean to diminish the importance of -- or the very definite feminist sensibility -- in Friedan's work. Clearly, as readers' letters to her indicate, her work was experienced as incredibly liberating for many women. By examining the ideological inconsistencies and underlying conservatism in The Feminine Mystique, I do not mean to imply that its status as a feminist literary milestone was not earned, but rather, I hope to show some interesting ways in which Friedan -- and many other early feminists -- deconstructed her -- their -- own arguments.

Germaine Greer offers an interesting twist to Friedan's argument in The Female Eunuch (1970). She encourages women not only to leave their homes, but to pull them up from the ground as they go. Greer casts patriarchal capitalism as the problem impeding women's liberation in a way that Friedan does not. Greer wants revolution for women: "The old process must be broken, not made new," she writes (p. 352). Despite her clearly-articulated sociological frame, Greer's anger at women's situation still spills over onto the "victims" themselves. Like Friedan, she sees mothering as a warped institution:

Even if [research] . . . were to prove beyond a doubt that the child's acquisition of all faculties is retarded tenfold or a hundredfold by the role he must play as Mother's product, her toy and her achievement, [the] conclusions would be ignored by a culture which insists upon mother-domination as a requisite for character formation. The child's attention must be weaned away from exterior reality on to [this] introverted relationship of mutual exploitation which will form the pattern of his future compulsions. (pp. 69-70)

Much further into her narrative, Greer provides some autobiographical information about her own parents, which must have helped shape her belief that women, because they are miserable being wives and mothers in a world where their work is devoid of status and prestige, grope for whatever power they can get. In her own family, she writes:

My father had decided fairly early on that life at home was pretty unbearable; and he lived more and more of it at his club, only coming home to sleep. My mother did not protest about this, as it gave her an opportunity to tyrannize the children and enlist their aid to disenfranchise my father completely . . . (p. 304).

Relations between men and women in The Female Eunuch sound far more embattled and embittered than those Friedan presents. Like Friedan, Greer shifts her sympathies back and forth, identifying alternately with women and with men.

Friedan and Greer both assert that men would prefer women's liberation to women's oppression because women would be better, more interesting people if they were free, and men would enjoy being with them more. Greer's idea of freedom is more radical than Friedan's; but in both cases, the question of who will do the housework and child-rearing after women liberate themselves is handled only vaguely. Friedan implies that women ought to be able to hire help, and she never confronts the fact that this would no doubt mean that different women would be employed to be oppressed by the feminine mystique. Greer also mentions hiring help, and throws in a few references to communal living, or what she calls "cooperative enterprises," in which privatized marriage and parenthood would become socio-psychological constructs

of the past.

In The Total Woman (1973), Marabel Morgan reacts against the budding feminist movement which had, by the time of her writing, enthusiastically incorporated the works of Friedan and Greer as doctrine. Despite her political and religious ultra-conservatism, Morgan's advice is strangely tinged by feminist fallout. Underlying her reiterations of the Biblical imperative that men take charge of everything and women comply with their righteous dominance is an opposing strand of thought. She encourages readers subtly to control their marriages, by carefully manipulating their husbands into a situation where they would feel all-powerful, but would really be playing into their wives' hands, and would buy them all sorts of gifts and adore them unceasingly. Morgan stresses the goodies that would accrue for scheming willing victims of hegemonic rule; women would come to know our place so well that it could not help but improve. Men, it seems, would be oblivious to women's maneuvers, and if we planned carefully enough, our acting would become real.

Shortly after Morgan's anti-feminism became a bestseller, out of the women's movement a new trend of anti-feminist feminism erupted. The passivity of women and the complicity of men in ensuring women's passivity that enraged Friedan and Greer and fueled their powerful writing devolves into a self-centered whine in Colette Dowling's The Cinderella Complex (1981), which is basically a reiteration of Friedan's core argument. Dowling sees mothers' socialization of girls as detrimental to women's futures; she writes: "girl babies learn that help comes quickly if you cry for it. . . . Bit by bit [a boy baby] learns to become his own emotional caretaker" (p. 105, emphasis in original).

According to Dowling, as girls, we were being taught fear of real life -- outside the home -- by our mothers, and would undoubtedly grow up and teach this fear to our own daughters, and so on. She writes:

Often, fear begins in little girls because of attitudes held by their mothers. Anxious mothers instruct their children to avoid behavior that might make them -- the mothers -- anxious. Teaching her little daughter to avoid risks, the anxious mother inadvertently prevents the child from learning how to deal with fear. (p. 107)

It would seem that a less attentive mother would produce a more independent daughter -- that is, that it would be beneficial if mothers would mother girls the same way they mother boys -- but not necessarily. Dowling describes how an under-attentive, betraying mother, in league with an "intense, overbearing father" would create a daughter who had "difficulty in growing up and getting free": "The Elusive Mother . . . sins by omission, by not supporting her daughter's efforts to move out on her own" (p. 122). Either way, in Dowling's view, mothers take the blame and daughters are damaged by mothers, because the intense mother-inflicted mother-daughter bonds are so difficult to break. "Inside, the woman feels like a child expecting that something bad will happen if she takes that step toward independence -- separated from her mother and going her own way," she writes (p. 198).

So, according to Dowling, women are trapped by our mothers, and like our mothers, we will go on to ensnare men, who, like our fathers, we hope will protect us (like the handsome prince did Cinderella, too). Dowling describes how women unwittingly make family life into "a web of children and relatives and carefully selected friends in which the husband is ensnared, a stiff and shiny-winged fly" (p. 147).

It remains unclear in Dowling's portrait of a normal -- yet maladjusted -- woman's development, why men would put up with such manipulations. And Dowling never explains why women did not turn to other women, rather than men, for protection. It would seem a logical developmental step since mothers were the ones who originally shielded girl babies from the traumas of real life, that women would seek mothering from women in later life, especially since men don't know how to do it. But like Friedan and Greer before her, Dowling takes heterosexuality for granted and does not pick up on the implications of the utility of lesbianism which are included in her own argument.

In self-help books, men and women suffer differently from an inability to separate from their mothers. Men, it seems, simply go in search of replacement mothers, with whom they continue the dialectical battle of obtaining motherlove while defining themselves as men in opposition to their new mother figures -- wives. Even at their worst, it seems that men's over-connections with their mothers would cause women far more harm than they would the men who engaged in them. On the whole, self-help authors see men as able to integrate their search for the comfort of the womb with a rewarding and worthwhile life in the real world.

Women, however, are viewed by self-help authors as stunted in their growth as individuals when they do not separate from their mothers. Close ties with unrelentingly clinging mothers are portrayed as draining, and ultimately, emotionally unrewarding for all concerned parties. Rather than seek replacements for mothers in lovers only, as men do, women look to a whole host of significant others to latch onto, especially daughters. Nancy Friday describes this phenomenon in My

Mother/ My Self (1977): "Emotionally unseparated from mother, just as afraid as she was, we repeat the process with our own daughters. . . .

Being cute and helpless, clinging, clutching, holding on for dear life, becomes our method for survival -- and ultimate defeat" (p. 61).

Though mothers might be the cause of many of women's future troubles, they are also the source of all good, according to Friday, who is one of the few authors to include explicit appreciation of motherwork in her book. Perhaps it was because Friday devoted an entire book to mothering that she had enough space to consider it from more than one side. In praise of mothering, Friday writes: "We get our courage, our sense of self, the ability to believe we have value even when alone, to do our work, to love others, and to feel ourselves lovable from the strength of mother love for us when we were infants -- just as every single dyne of energy on earth originally came from the sun" (p. 55).

Smother-mothering, which even Friday's kind words do not erase, remains a problem through the 1970s and into the 1980s within the self-help genre. The flip side of smother-mothering, undermothering, comes into its own in the 1980s. Women who don't pay enough attention to their children's needs can cause just as much damage as those who are overly attentive. Early self-help writers who addressed women (such as Friedan and Greer) didn't write about undermothering because it didn't fit into their formulation of the problem; to them, less mothering would have been a desirable end. As the sub-genre of self-help books for women aged -- while women entered the paid labor market in greater and greater numbers -- the character of the neglectful mother emerges with more regularity in self-help narratives. Susan Forward (1986), for example, details how a lack of

mothering could lead to misogyny in men:

In addition to withholding love and attention and thereby frustrating her son, a cold, rejecting mother will often punish him for his normal needs of her. From this he gets the message that his neediness is unacceptable and shameful. . . . Many misogynists use bullying and macho behavior toward women to defend against these unacceptable feelings of vulnerability. (p.119)

In other words, women can often be held responsible for misogyny if we are underattentive mothers. There seems to be no happy medium. Boys can become damaged in the process of separating from their mothers, Forward explains, when they are unable to do so smoothly or easily. "Unlike a girl, who can stay close to her mother while she finds her own identity, a young boy must pull away from his mother in order to grow up as a healthy adult" (p.111).

Mothers who hamper boys' efforts to separate from them also contribute to the production of misogyny in our culture, according to Forward. She writes, "The suffocating mother . . . restrains and constricts her son's development by overcontrolling him and by making him feel inadequate and helpless" (p.111). Such over-mothered boys would eventually suffer from deeply-internalized fears of women's all-consuming passion as they became men. The theme of women entrapping men recurs throughout the relationship-oriented self-help books of the 1970s and '80s.

Authors may or may not themselves believe that women are out to ensnare, envelop, or engulf men, but they strongly believe that men feel women are out to gain power over them. Forward writes that a typical misogynist "harbors a hidden belief that if he loves a woman, she will

then have the power to hurt him, to deprive him, to engulf him, and to abandon him" (p. 99). Before she can destroy him, a misogynist will defend himself; he "sets out, usually unconsciously, to make the woman in his life less powerful" (p. 99). He wants to weaken her, to make her dependent on him completely to disempower her with the force of his hatred; he may even abuse her physically to gain this end. Forward's explanation of how misogyny works resonates with Susan Griffin's analysis of the ideology behind pornography (1981). At the root of the "pornographic mind," Griffin writes, is men's fear of their own feminine side (culture's fear of eros); at the root of Forward's argument, femininity comes dressed up as everyone's mother. According to Forward, each man will view every woman with whom he comes in contact through the lens of the first woman in his life, whom he both loves and loathes for her power -- as well as for her lack of it.

Fathers can reinforce misogynist behavior, Forward writes, by being women-haters themselves, or by not setting an appropriate masculine example at all. "Tyrannical" fathers teach their sons to follow in their footsteps, while "passive" fathers leave boys to rely all the more on their dangerous mothers. "Neither [type of] father is able to offer his son the help he needs in the difficult task of separating from Mother," Forward writes (p.114). Somewhere between tyranny and passivity lies the proper realm of fatherhood, Forward implies; but she never explains exactly what this is.

Fathers can also hurt daughters, and a corollary to the argument that boys look for their mothers in the women with whom they become involved when they grow up is voiced by Forward (among others): girls look for their fathers in the men with whom we become involved when

we grow up. Self-help authors see parental influence as working in one of two ways: some believe each of us seeks whatever treatment we received from our opposite-gendered parent, however unhealthy it was, because that is how we think relationships are supposed to work; other authors believe we strive to attain the love we never felt in childhood -- which, because the lack of it has been festering in our heads over the years, can never be delivered by any mortal man. Either way, it seems, women are doomed to be unhappy in the heterosexual relationships we form.

Norwood (1985) and Forward (1986) both describe how some women choose men who are detrimental to their health (emotional and physical) because their fathers neglected or abused them when they were younger, and may well have also neglected or abused their mothers (with whom they overidentify, because they have not forged a mature separation). Forward writes: "Women who wind up with misogynists usually come from backgrounds. . . . [where] there is a tyrannical, controlling father and a passive, dependent mother" (p.146). On the other hand, Cowan and Kinder (1985) write that it isn't that women are choosing the wrong men, but that we have unreasonable expectations which formed as a reaction to our lack of fatherlove. They feel that "smart women" are engaging in "stupid" behavior in relationships, because:

No man, no matter how much he would like to, can make up to a woman what she lacked as a child. That kind of love can only be given to a child by a parent. . . . Women who engage in this quest know only that they always end up feeling disappointed by men -- but it's not because the men they choose are inadequate. It's because their expectations are distorted. (p. 37)

What remains unanswered in Cowan and Kinder's explanation, is why would fathers be distant and unloving enough to create such a large scale problem in their grown-up daughters' lives if most men are not really inadequate? Cowan and Kinder seem to view men and fathers as two distinct categories. They waver between letting men off the hook (as in the quotation above) and tentatively implicating them -- along with women -- in relational problems. But the reasons for men's inadequacy -- however they manifest themselves -- can be traced back to mothering. Boys learn that dependence upon The Mother, however wonderful it might feel, is a very dangerous and anti-masculine characteristic. Normal male development necessarily involves fear and/or resentment of the Mother, which will later become generalized against women as a group, according to Cowan and Kinder. They write: "In adulthood, when men are drawn to intimate attachments with women, they experience both pleasure and fear -- the pleasure of being nurtured . . . and fear that these deeply ingrained feelings of helplessness and dependency will overwhelm them" (p. 67).

Self-help authors rarely address women readers as mothers. (Fathers are never addressed, of course, because they are not expected to be reading these books.) The position of the child in the mother-child relationship seems to lend itself more readily than that of the mother to an argument which is centered on the self's struggle to achieve identity. Psychologist-writers consider the experience of childhood to be far more influential in achieving a sense of self than the experience of mothering children. Also, the examination of women's passivity easily initiates a discussion of the role of the child, because though mothers may be seen as passive women in many ways,

they are not considered passive as mothers.³ Even mothers' apathy is perceived as active behavior by its recipients, according to the popular psychology voiced by self-help authors.

Authors occasionally feel uncomfortable about blaming mothers too heavily for the neuroses of their children, and a few offer caveats to temper their arguments. For instance, Nancy Friday writes: "Blaming mother keeps us passive, tied to her. It helps us avoid taking responsibility for ourselves. All any mother can do is her best" (1977, p. 83). But for the most part, authors are not overly reticent about pointing fingers at the "generalized mother," the source from which life and all its problems spring.

Most self-help authors at least acknowledge culture as a co-creator of the problems which mothers cause, but this is primarily lip service. Forward and Norwood each comment upon the undesirable power dynamics inherent in a culturally-imposed dependence of women upon men:

Our culture reinforces this idea [that men's masculinity depends on their ability to dominate women] by depicting women as appropriate targets for men's hostilities. In literature, movies, and television, women are used by men as shields, foils, and hostages. They are raped, beaten, and shot with frightening regularity. Pornography implies that a woman's inherent seductiveness justifies any sadistic and/or sexual act a man wishes to commit against her. (Forward, pp.121-22)

Everything happens in a context, including the way we love. We need to be aware of the damaging shortcomings of our societal view of love and to resist the shallow and self-defeating immaturity in personal relationships that it glamorizes. We need to consciously develop a more open and mature way of relating than what our cultural media seem to endorse, thus trading turmoil and excitement for a deeper intimacy. (Norwood, p. 64)

Though both of these authors implicate social mores in the continued subjugation of women, these mores appear to reinforce the parental misdeeds the authors spend much more space chronicling, rather than to have caused them. In a similar vein, Carter and Sokol (1987) briefly mention the cultural messages fed to girls which teach them to expect that someday their princes will come, sweep them off their feet, support them financially, and protect them from the experiences of adulthood: "Your only fault is that you have been sociologically groomed to respond favorably to a man who acts like the Knight in shining armor, the hero who is going to pull you up onto his horse and take you riding into the sunset," they write (p. 35). If cultural explanations had remained central to these authors' expositions, women's "only fault" of successfully absorbing messages which are part of "normal" socialization would seemingly leave them blameless. This, however, is not what happens; psychology prevails.

At the root of psychologically-oriented self-help books about relationships is the idea that there are certain patterns of behavior in which we engage primarily because we share psychological characteristics, rather than because of the social nature of the patterns. Theodore Isaac Rubin presents a prime example of this reasoning in One to One: Understanding Personal Relationships (1983):

The intensity and quality of relationships are dictated largely by the character structures of the participants. These patterns sometimes change in response to the relationships themselves or to the influence of unpredictable outside forces, but such changes are seldom profound or permanent. This is the result of the relatively fixed nature of the character structure of each participant and the tenacity of interpersonal transactions once

they become established and familiar. (p. viii).

Attention to our own individual situations will help improve the world in the long run, Rubin states, because, malfunctions at home are the basis for malfunctions in the societal system at large: "We must increasingly understand these core relationships if we wish to remedy a very sick society," he writes (p. x).

Authors also seem to feel that exposure to their books themselves makes a reader's living in the dark inexcusable. Once a reader sees the "truth" (the writing in the book) she should get to work on herself. If she doesn't, it means she is not fulfilling her true potential as a human being, they write, reiterating the central message of identity-as-growth generic self-help books.

The bottom line of the childhood-centered theories espoused by self-help authors is that if one's parents, especially one's mother, behave appropriately -- and what, exactly, good parenting should be may very well elude self-help readers, because there are so many fine lines hazily marking the divisions between over and underdoing it -- one will grow up happy. If one's parents, especially one's mother, behave inappropriately, one will be damaged in some way. Authors are vehement about the inescapability of our parents as models for future personality development. However, there is some good news: reading and understanding self-help books could help one to break unhealthy precedents, authors allege.

NEGOTIATING GENDER AND SELFHOOD

Adult men and women are like two distinct species in self-help books. The same pattern that surfaced in the sex manuals recurs in

relationship-oriented books, but here, books about men and women are addressed primarily to women seeking to understand themselves and the men with whom they are involved. (Perhaps sex is important enough for men to warrant reading about, but the more mundane, non-orgasmic aspects of relationships is women's work.) Authors range widely in their attitudes about the severity of the operational differences between men and women that cause problems when they get involved with each other. A minority holds that men and women are basically motivated by the same desires and impulses; it is simply that these manifest themselves differently. Most, however, believe that motivations, behavior, desires, needs -- in short, everything -- separates men and women. Joyce Brothers exemplifies this view:

Are men and women really so different?

They are.

They really are. I spent months talking to biologists, neurologists, geneticists, research psychiatrists, and psychologists -- the scientists who are opening new frontiers in the study of humankind -- in preparation for this book. . . . What I discovered was that men are even more different from women than I had known. Their bodies are different and their minds are different. Men are different from the very composition of their blood to the way their brains develop, which means that they think and experience life very differently from women. (1981, p.4)

As a result of growing up amid the complex and detrimental configuration of parental authority described by self-help authors, most women become male-identified: we center our lives around others -- especially men. As a result, we experience problems with self-esteem and identity. Men, however, become self-centered as a result of normal development. To many self-defined feminist self-help

writers (such as Friedan, Greer, Dowling, Friday, Norwood and Forward), women's primary desires to form relationships with men and to keep these relationships at center stage are seen as the base upon which all problems between men and women rest. Men, according to self-help authors, don't put relationships first in their lives, don't obsess over problems in relationships, and don't fall to pieces when their relationships do. And rightly so! authors exclaim. If women could only emulate men, authors seem to believe, and could only deemphasize the importance of our relationships with men, we would be better off in every way. Dowling writes:

It is the thesis of this book that personal, psychological dependency... is the chief force holding women down today. I call this "The Cinderella Complex" -- a network of largely repressed attitudes that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full uses of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives. (p. 21, italicized in original)

Women's insecurities and miseries revolve around the mother-propelled myth of male salvation, according to Dowling. Male salvation may have been necessary once, when people lived in caves and men's protective strength was all that stood between the weaker sex and "the wild," but now, Dowling writes, the time is ripe to purge ourselves of the princess fantasy, because it holds women back from realizing our true potential. (She writes: "[S]uch a wish is no longer appropriate or constructive. We do not need to be saved" [p.18].)

Dowling's message for American women is: Get a life! (my paraphrase). She describes women's attempts to explain our situations as a result of patriarchal rule as a misguided endeavor to displace

blame, maintain the status quo, and remain sheltered. Women's oppression is imposed from within, she announces. In her analysis, then, oppression ceases to exist; there can be no such thing as self-oppression, really, because there is simply no reason for it. "Consciously, we blame men for not changing, but unconsciously we're quite willing to have them stay the way they are," she writes (p. 210). Women are simply creating and maintaining problems, holding ourselves back from the opportunities awaiting us: "Women are continuing to choose low-paying careers. . . . Women are not just being excluded from power. . . . We are also actively avoiding it," Dowling asserts (p.36). Or worse, women are hoping to cash in on free handouts with complaints of unfairness or discrimination: "[W]omen use the unfairness with which they've historically been treated to wall themselves off from further negative treatment" (p. 131).

Women are not proper adults, according to Dowling; we are childlike in our dependence on men. But adulthood, to Dowling, is really a masculine phenomenon. Dowling describes women who had engaged in successful male adulthood -- by pursuing careers -- as possible Cinderella Complex victims waiting to happen. These women were "phobics," they lacked fulfillment and a true sense of identity. They covered up their fears with a "counterphobic facade." They gave the appearance of being strong and invulnerable; they had "an inner need to feel superior" to men, and tended to overachieve because they couldn't face up to their deep feelings of inadequacy and helplessness (pp. 66-68). After reading The Cinderella Complex, one might wonder whether any woman can grow up free from the neurotic problems Dowling describes; it seems that we are all in need of therapeutic

realignment.

Helen Gurly Brown, author of Having It All (1982) does not see women's problems as a result of complex psychological misdeeds from the mother-controlled past, but rather, as caused by a lack of self-confidence that will be easy to shake under her direction. What Marabel Morgan did for married women working at home, Brown does for single women who have ventured into the paid labor market. Brown presents her advice in the form of a schmoozing pep-talk for women who are interested in "Having It All," finding access -- as Brown claimed she had -- to "love, success, sex, and money." Brown encourages women not to develop man-like qualities in order to find our true identities (as Dowling thinks we should), but to exploit (stereotypical) "feminine" traits if we want to achieve success on par with men in business or in bed. Brown recommends masking her method of cut-throat competition with pandering smiles, and sexual innuendo. She defends the wily manipulation of (horny) men as simply good business sense, and perfectly ethical, because everyone involved will gain from women's performance: "To be a pleaser and a charmer is not selling out; it is investing in happiness (yours!) through the process of making other people glad to be around you," she writes (p. 33). The business world should not be stripped of sexual tension and made into an androgynous arena, but rather, sexuality should become a useful part of the games being played, Brown feels.

If you can make a man. . . feel more masculine because of the way you look at him when he talks -- then do -- you'll listen just as attentively to other women. Rapt attention between the opposite sexes does tend to have sexual quality, however, and so, to some

extent, one could accuse you of "using sex" in business. . . . That's okay. The sexual you is part of the whole you and doesn't snap off -- God, we hope not, anyway! -- between nine and six. (p. 34)

If men and women work together, according to Brown, sexuality will enter the workplace; it would be naive to imagine it could or should be kept out. To Brown, opportunities for sexual fulfillment are everywhere, and women everywhere are ripe for fulfilling. "As for not sleeping with the boss, why discriminate against him?" she wrote (p. 35).⁴

Brown sees relationships between men and women as challenging and fun, energized by sexual tension, rather than embattled and embittered -- as past advisors had portrayed them. The real enemy for women is other women, not men, and the real goal is personal fulfillment, not revolution, according to Brown. "You will be in full bloom when other women are losing their husbands, children, and confidence," she writes (p. 29). Women ought to treat men as boyish and harmless objects of acquisition, all of whom are eligible for seduction. Brown urges women to plan carefully our pursuit of men for our own gain.

According to Brown, all a woman needs to do to "have it all" is to be clear about her goals, and to put them into action diligently. She need not be beautiful or especially intelligent. Using her own success story to inspire other unassuming "mouseburgers," Brown exclaims: "I hope I've convinced you -- the only thing that separates successful people from the ones who aren't is the willingness to work very, very hard" (p. 27). Brown revamps the work ethic for women. Achieving success becomes far more simple as Brown conceives of it, as compared with

prior authors advising women readers; it is no longer bound up with deep psychological issues, but merely a matter of strategy. Brown sees gender not as problematic, but as a thrilling manipulant in "new" techniques for pursuing an exciting life.

THE INSIDE STORY: MEN AUTHORITIES

Men authors reveal deep-seated beliefs in the viability of gender stereotypes, and often display these views at the same time that they attempt to show how sensitive and politically aware they are. When describing the romantic failures of his case studies, Steven Carter, co-author (with Julia Sokol -- but Carter narrates the book in the first person, and Sokol's voice is not discernible) of Men Who Can't Love (1987) repeatedly stresses the seeming superiority of the women he "studied": "I began by interviewing approximately fifty single women. All of the women were attractive, desirable, contemporary women who had a lot to offer any man (p. 20, emphasis added). Though Carter asserts that he "used the same criteria" in selecting men for his "study" as he did for selecting women, he describes the men as "intelligent, normal" and "well educated," but he uses none of these adjectives to describe the women. Underneath Carter's alleged non-sexist methodology, one can sense that sameness for men and women really means difference.

Similarly, Cowan and Kinder temper their finger-pointing with flattery in their opening chapter, "Being Foolish." They write: "We find, so often, that the more intelligent and sophisticated the woman, the more self-defeating and foolish her choices and her pattern of behavior with romantic partners" (1985, p. 6). Readers are urged to identify with

these superior, and yet, misguided, women -- women who have been helped by the authors.

Like women authors, men authors of relationship-oriented self-help also detail male fears of female entrapment. Dan Kiley, author of The Peter Pan Syndrome (1983) and The Wendy Dilemma (1984) describes how the combination of men's fears of commitment with women's desperate needs to connect often result in a fine mess for all those who participate. Men are far less likely to be judged as suffering from the "PPS" than women are to be found maladjustedly practicing Wendyish behavior. About potential Peter Pans, Kiley writes: "You have to be careful in labeling an adult male as a victim of the Peter Pan Syndrome. . . . The presence of one or two attributes of the PPS doesn't make a man a victim any more than being unconscious make a person dead" (1983, p. 15). But Kiley informs women readers, "The question is not whether you mother your man, but how often and whether you're aware of it. Remember, women fall into the Wendy trap without realizing it" (1984, p. 10). Kiley must assume that women are the ones reading both of his books, and he hopes to enlist us as agents of change, by encouraging us to apply the "Wendy" label.

Though Carter and Sokol take men as their starting point, their conclusion is the same as self-help books which make women's perspective central, in that they believe it is women who must amend our behavior if heterosexual relationships are ever to succeed. As dynamics between men and women indicate, women's methods simply are not working, the authors assert. Women put men off with our desperation, scare them away with our demands. Women who, at first glance, appeared to Carter to "have a lot to offer any man" were foiled

because they didn't understand how to deal with these normal men (p. 19). Normal, everyday guys, it turns out, are often "commitmentphobics," Carter explains. Carter writes of his discoveries about the male psyche after conducting interviews with fifty typical men:

I was shocked by what men told me. . . .

- When a relationship gets too close, men who fear commitment, often behave in a totally irrational fashion.
- These men look for excuses and faults in the women to help them feel better about their behavior.
- Most of these men know deep down that their constant emphasis on negatives is only a means of rationalizing that allows them to avoid looking too deeply at their own major flaw -- the inability to commit. (p. 21)

Carter and Sokol do not show how to turn an uncommitted man into a committed one, as they originally promise they will; they show only how to identify, respond to, and ultimately leave such men -- because it is unlikely these men will be capable of change. A true commitmentphobe, according to Carter and Sokol, needs professional help, yet has personality traits which make it unlikely that he will be willing to seek it. Drawing on Ehrenreich's The Hearts of Men (1983), Carter and Sokol describe men as deeply threatened by marriage (or any long-term commitment that resembles marriage). They write that a woman who "acts like a wife" will merely reinforce male indifference in the men she pursues, because men don't really want someone looking after their needs, and don't really want self-sacrificial understanding and nurturance. Yet, these same men are torn by a conflicting need to rely fully on women (owing to the time when they were dependent upon their mothers), according to Carter and Sokol. The upshot of the

dialectical nature of men's needs is that they are unable to to be intimate in the ways in which women are. Thus, the kind of intimacy that Carter and Sokol believe women desire is held to be impractical, as well as nearly impossible to achieve.

Carter and Sokol encourage women to tailor our behavior to men's needs in a way that they believe will foster independence for us, but in a way that also ensures that women will never have our (impractical, intense) love reciprocated. And yet, ironically, the authors seem to be in favor of reciprocal love and gender equality -- as long as the intensity is carefully muted. Christopher Lasch writes that in recent cultural commodities (such as self-help books) "An everpresent undercurrent . . . is the insistent warning that closeness kills" (1984, p. 98). And indeed, Carter and Sokol seem to believe this to be true, because the men they knew certainly experienced women's love as threateningly dangerous. They advise women to relax their grip on the men with whom we are involved: "Think of it [your relationship] as a sickly plant. . . . If you just keep trying to water it, it will drown" (pp. 226-7). Clearly, if women are the waterers in this analogy, men -- not relationships -- are the waterlogged ferns. Norwood describes women's love as self-damaging rather than dangerous to men (as in Carter and Sokol's poor drowned man-plant); she warns her readers: "Whatever the apparent cause of death, I want to reiterate that loving too much can kill you" (p. 218).

GETTING IT RIGHT: THE ECONOMY OF THERAPY

How can self-help reading women differentiate between loving too much and loving just the right amount? The answer lies in identity

development, which self-help authors unanimously see as the key women should utilize to avoid overinvolvement with others. Women are urged to become more "masculine" in the application of our affections -- less other-directed, more self-involved, and more reliant on our newfound reading-inspired sense of self-satisfaction.

Authors continually bombard women readers with the message that if we don't care about ourselves, no one else can be expected to care about us either. The first step for any change comes from the identity-as-growth philosophy: learn to know and love oneself. Norwood writes: "What we manifest in our love is a reflection of what is deep inside us: our beliefs about our own worth, our right to happiness, what we deserve in life. When those beliefs change, so does our life" (p.161). Women are led by self-help book ideology to believe we can gain complete control over whatever happens to us; we simply have to elect to begin the process of change that will inevitably mean a better life, and until we do so, we are "not fully mature human beings, but rather . . . dependent and frightened children in adult bodies" (p. 255).

As Dowling had done earlier, Norwood reifies the view of women as dependent snivelers, reluctant to give up the security of protected life. Women's love, under such circumstances, Norwood explains, is not the real thing, but another example of neurotic behavior: "Most of the 'giving' we did when we were loving too much was actually manipulation. Now we are free enough to be able to give freely. Our own needs are met and we are full of love" (p. 260).

Over and over again, authors reiterate that underlying any healthy relationship with another person is a strong sense of self. If a woman

has a strong identity, she will not experience a desperate need to get involved with men. If she does not experience this desperate need, she will be more likely accidentally to bump into a man with whom she can form a good relationship. If you weren't looking so hard, self-help authors tell their readers, you'd find what you wanted. And once you find it (by actively not seeking it), the relationship will be better than you could have ever possibly hoped for (in the past, when you were busy hoping), because you will be less personally-invested in it. In the best relationships, Maggie Scarf writes, "autonomy and intimacy are experienced as integrated aspects of each partner's personhood and of the relationship that the two of them share" (1987, p. 402, emphasis in original). In this ideal type of union, no identity conflict is experienced; women and men achieve a sort of inter-independence.

Lynn Shahan, author of Living Alone and Liking It (1981), writes that the sense of self, by its very nature, is threatened by involvement. She tries to cheer those who find themselves on their own by commending them for the important self-developmental work they will have the opportunity to undertake, and informing them that alone, they have the opportunity to maintain an intact identity:

Living alone offers you an unparalleled opportunity for developing a solid personal identity. . . . Experiencing solitary living gives you a chance to know yourself intimately; a chance to draw upon untouched personal capacities; a chance to find out who you are and what your strengths are. . . . There are people who never have the chance in their busy, peopled lives to meditate, to ponder their mistakes, or to examine the direction their lives are taking. Stagnation sets in and personal growth is stunted. In contrast, the person who lives alone can capitalize on an optimum opportunity for self-awareness. (p. 26)

What threatens women's identities in their involvements with men, according to self-help authors, is that they feel rather than think. Forward writes that "[w]omen have to learn to assess their feelings, and to differentiate between thoughts and feelings." She sees women's problems as stemming from their overinvestment in the emotional realm of life; this poses a danger toward maintaining a sense of self. "Once you have your emotions under control, logic, instead of fear and anxiety will dominate your life. You will begin to think clearly about yourself, your relationship, and where you are headed" (p. 172). Thoughts, presumably, are easier to manage and control than emotions are; and proper thought-control can lead to power over dangerous or dysfunctional feelings.

In a classic example of the early feminists' search for rationality, Dowling encouraged women to apply market economy evaluative techniques to their constant reassessment of themselves and their involvements. Dowling writes that a liberated woman should "[leave] no stone unturned in examining [her] motives, [her] attitudes, [her] ways of thinking about things" (p. 218). She should take stock of her life the same way a man would take stock of his finances. Dowling, herself, claimed to have begun using this method of managing her own personal affairs:

Keeping a running balance is not just good financial policy: it's good emotional policy. It means maintaining a day-to-day, or even moment-to-moment, contact with reality. It means not letting a wellspring of anger develop toward the children, or the man with whom I live. It means not letting things slide, when I'm depressed, but stopping, sitting down, and checking things out. . . . Does the energy output meet the gratification income, or is there an unbalance? Am I spending more than I'm getting, and

if so, how can I get more? Keeping a running balance in my psychic account makes it less likely for me to retain a distorted, unrealistic picture of things. (p. 222, emphasis in original)

Within this framework, as it has developed since Dowling gave her advice, author after author has advised readers that the ideal relationship is one in which neither partner gives more than the other: an economic balance is essential. In their bestselling guide to negotiating, Getting to Yes (1981), Roger Fisher and William Ury write that "any negotiation primarily concerned with the relationship runs the risk of producing a sloppy agreement" (p. 8). Though their books seems to center on formal, professional decision-making, they claim that their methods are easily applicable to all relationships. Thus, they urge that "competitors" (in this case, men and women) take care not to allow our involvement with each other to get in the way of rational bargaining. Woititz encourages readers of Adult Children of Alcoholics (1983) to ask the following questions in evaluating their relationships with others: "What is in this for me? What is the payoff? Why do I maintain this relationship? Who is this other person to me?" (p. 87).

Even in economically-balanced involvements, expressiveness is strongly valued, especially in the relationship-oriented self-help books' trajectory through the 1970s and early 1980s. Merle Shain (1978) tells her readers that all healthy -- or what she calls "feeling" -- relationships share the following qualities: "expression of feelings, wisdom and maturity, an orientation to struggle, an acceptance of deprivation, a tolerance for fair fights, passion, and room for apology and gratitude" (p. 215). Participants in intimacy should be moderate in

their displays and expectations, according to Shain, and should understand that any relationship will have its crests and peaks, which "wisdom and maturity" will help partners to weather.

Shain writes, "We are all afraid of being swallowed up by love, of ceasing to exist except through someone else, so we rush toward love with open arms and hide from it when it comes to us" (p. 12). The fear of -- and desire for -- unity with others is a life-long struggle for and against a return to the comforting and all-powerful -- thus intimidating -- womb. Shain, like many other self-help authors, urges her readers to seek love, but to be careful consumers. She cautions, "We have only so much emotional currency, it isn't an unlimited supply, so you've got to invest it wisely if you want to make it grow" (p. 98).

The use of financial language in authors' discussions of self and relationships began in more purely identity-as-machine self-help books, and gradually spilled over into identity-as-growth books. Bellah et al. (1985), see this sort of language as representative of a therapeutic ideology which stresses personal profit, and which is unable to recognize any collective power not based in individuality:

A deeply ingrained individualism lies behind much contemporary understanding of love. . . . Such a utilitarian attitude. . . . is one solution to the difficulties of self-preservation in a world where broader expectations may lead to disappointment or make one vulnerable to exploitation. Then love becomes no more than an exchange, with no binding rules except the obligation of full and open communication. A relationship should give each partner what he or she needs while it lasts, and if the relationship ends, at least both partners will have received a reasonable return on their investment. (p. 108)

What Bellah et al. call the "therapeutic attitude" derives from the

more powerful ideology of capitalism. Capitalism creates a culture where the purchase and consumption of goods are held to be activities of paramount importance, but where benevolent rhetoric proliferates regarding profitlessness -- volunteerism, a thousand points of light, and so forth. In a culture where some women seem able to permeate the bastions of male power and attain autonomy and prestige, and yet where a majority of female-headed families live beneath the poverty level; in a culture where inequity in sexual interaction has supposedly been leveled, but where women repeatedly see ourselves represented on the covers of pornographic magazines and in headlines reporting rape; in a culture where men have "role models" as disparate as Rambo and Bill Cosby -- it is no wonder that identity complexes and ideological confusion has ensued for women and men. Daily we encounter anti-capitalist capitalism, anti-feminist feminism, anti-patriarchal patriarchy, and their inverses.

Bellah and his co-writers continue their discussion of how therapy has influenced our culture by relaxing their indictment; they write that it must be taken into account that "the therapeutic view" also incorporates "expressive individualism, an expanded view of the nature and possibilities of the self." This means that "[l]ove then becomes the mutual exploration of infinitely rich, complex, and exciting selves" (p. 108). What happened to the therapeutically-recommended relationship as individualistic need-meeting exchange? Ultimately, the argument Bellah et al. offer about the infusion of therapeutic ideology into our culture is no less confusing than that offered (about maintaining relationships) by the most enthusiastic practitioners of the therapeutic ideology -- self-help authors themselves.

The result of such confusion (in terms of the advice authors offer) is that women are urged not to get too close to others, for fear of losing, or never finding, what is most valuable within ourselves. Christopher Lasch (1984) sees the contradictory fears and desires of interactions as an indication that identity is uncertain. He sees this as a problem endemic to our particularly "narcissistic" culture:

The minimal or narcissistic self is, above all, a self uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union. The current concern with "identity" registers some of this difficulty in defining the boundaries of selfhood. (Lasch 1984, p. 19)

Self-help books offer evidence of the dilemma Lasch highlights. At the root of his concept of narcissism is insecurity. Men involved in heterosexual relationships, according to self-help authors, are torn between their own feelings of inadequacy in relation to women and their conflicting fears of women's power to engulf them, like giant womb-monsters. Women involved in heterosexual relationships suffer from a different form of insecurity: we don't know who we are, and don't know where we stand in relation to the men in our lives.

Since relationship-oriented self-help books are often written by therapists, it is not surprising that authors often recommend therapy as a possibly desirable option for their more troubled readers. Authors realize that many readers have "come to them" in lieu of consulting a professional in the flesh, and thus, their recommendations are always couched in casual and non-threatening terms. Some authors also try to demystify the experts, by cautioning readers against certain types of therapists. Forward writes: "Unfortunately, misogynists are alive and

well in all professions, and psychotherapy has more than its share"

(p.243). She tries to educate her readers to be careful consumers:

"Don't be afraid to shop around. . . . More important, don't be afraid to trust your instincts" (p.242, emphasis in original).

Norwood urged women-addicts to go for help, either by enlisting a professional therapist, or joining a self-help group. She ends Women Who Love Too Much by describing how interested women could set up their own self-help groups, based on the principles for "recovery" she details. Norwood recommends that if women decide to consult therapists, we select women because, "We share the the basic experience of what it is to be a woman in this society, and this creates a special depth of understanding." Also, in therapy with a woman, Norwood writes, dangerous sexual dynamics could be avoided (pp. 223-4).

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Most recently, self-help authors have taken the ideal relationship of loosely-linked autonomous individuals a step further, and turned it into a situation where women, especially, have to restrain ourselves, and deemphasize our interest in our involvements with men. Carter and Sokol urge women: "If you are going to be successful with a commitmentphobic, you are going to have to get back to the way you were in the Beginning, when he wasn't that important to you and when you were busy and happy without him" (p. 226). They recommend that women reduce their overinvolvement to a more healthy disinterest. No matter how assertive wome are, they write, men will interpret our actions as aggressive attempts to snag them as husbands (which the

authors see as a correct interpretation of our behavior). Eventually, Carter and Sokol recommend that women be completely non-demanding in a relationship; "Just . . . don't ask anything of him" (p. 242). The corollary to "good things come to those who wait," is "move, and ye shall lose." Carter and Sokol advise that women take control of our situations by actively doing nothing.

Carter and Sokol imply that men avoid involvement with women because of what women have become as a result of the women's movement. Men's fear of commitment, they write, is "clearly attributable to the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Liberation Movement, consciousness-raising, and other important components that brought us to the 'new equality'. . . . [T]he very changes that helped to bring men and women closer together are simultaneously tearing them apart" (p. 68). So, in response to those readers who thought that women were the ones oppressed by patriarchy and its insidious ideology, Carter and Sokol explain the situation differently. As a result of the sexual revolution and the women's movement, men have found the keys to unlock the prisons forged by their marriages to women. They write: "Metaphorically speaking, men have been let out of the cage. And regardless of how warm and loving that environment could be, to the man it is still a cage. So, like any other animal who sees a cage, his first instinct is to run" (p. 70). (Meanwhile, women wait, holding the doors to the cage open, and wondering what the problem is.)

Despite Carter and Sokol's claims that there are nice, good men out there who do want to form relationships with women, their descriptions of these men's basic characteristics make men -- in general -- sound like sex-crazed, stupid creatures. For instance, they

describe a man's actions when he is first interested in a woman: He acts quite attentive, thoughtful, and caring; but, they contend, "He is simply acting on impulse, with no thoughts about what his actions mean or how they will be interpreted" (p. 217). In other words, apparently, he is merely engaged in mindless sexual conquest, and is basically insincere.

Carter and Sokol advise women to play the traditional roles of sex-stoppers, indicating their belief that men may be interested in women only for the challenge of orchestrating a sexual encounter: "Don't rush into bed: The more he is pushing, the more you should be slowing him down. If he gets impatient and leaves, he would have done the same thing later, causing you far greater heartache" (p. 207). They advise women to control sexual behavior because men cannot be expected to. "Make sure you've always got one foot on his brakes and another on yours, they write" (p. 210), and: "Know that he doesn't think the way you do. Before saying the kind of things he says, you would weigh your words very carefully. Don't assume that he is doing the same thing" (p. 213). Men, as Carter and Sokol describe them, sound like thoughtless jerks.

Women have to be very careful about sex, according to self-help authors. Cowan and Kinder caution "smart women" against "sexual aggressiveness" with men, writing that "the need to perform sexually is at the core of some men's fear and defensiveness toward women who are sexually assertive, and women need to understand this to deal sensitively and successfully with men" (pp. 76-77). In their second book, Women Men Love Women Men Leave (1988), Cowan and Kinder applaud "a natural swing back toward more traditional sexual values"

(p. 95) and reiterate, "When a woman is sexually aggressive . . . it can be very intimidating to a man" (p. 97). Cowan and Kinder do not tell women to practice the stereotypical female activity of resisting sexual intimacy, as Carter and Sokol did; rather, they suggest vaguely that women ought to be careful about "timing," should we choose to play the parts of aggressors. Clearly, they see traditional gender roles as beneficial to sexual relationships; and according to traditional arrangements, women are supposed to first wait, and then refuse men's advances.

Women authors sometimes confirm the view of men as sex-starved, and play down women's interest in things sexual. In What Every Woman Should Know About Men (1981), Joyce Brothers writes: "Whatever a man thinks about sex, you can be sure that he thinks about sex almost constantly" (p. 142). Sex is seen as a tool which has to be very carefully controlled by women. Margaret Kent, author of How to Marry the Man of Your Choice (1984), cautions: "If you either have sex too soon or delay too long, you will lose the man for marriage" (p. 213). She adds, "since sex is the greatest gift you may offer a man, you must carefully build it up beyond other natural pleasures to have it work to your advantage" (p. 217). Like Brown ("J" and Penney), Kent sees relationships between men and women as best achieved through careful orchestrations, a direct contradiction to the group of authors discussed earlier who see relationships as resulting only when women aren't trying so hard.

Sexual relations are often beside the point according to self-help authors. Many authors advise that it is much more important that women and men get along outside the bedroom, and that good sex is

useless if there is no basic rapport. Rapport is difficult to gain. Forward's descriptions, for example, depict relationships between men and women as precariously constructed over a hotbed of seething resentments. Women tend to turn anger in on themselves, while men are apt to extend their anger outward and direct it against women in displays ranging from "obvious intimidation and threats to more subtle, covert attacks which took the form of constant put-downs or erosive criticism" (p. 5). Men, then, suffer very little, while women are subject to all sorts of psychological and physical ailments as a result of men's anger towards them (pp. 153-57). Part of why men don't suffer as much as women (from their obvious problems) is because men, generally speaking, are childlike and childish in their interactions with women. They become romantically involved with women in the first place seeking a sort of replacement symbiosis with a mother-figure, according to Forward: "He enters into a relationship with a woman very much as a hungry, demanding infant does, with the unspoken expectation that she will be totally giving and will meet all his needs" (p.38, emphasis added). When men's childish needs are being met, much of their suffering is alleviated.

Forward urges women to remember that we are dealing with people who look like adults, but who have never learned to act like them. Adult behavior, in Forward's formulation of the problem, eventually ceases to be a masculine quality. Brothers writes, similarly: "if a woman is aware that there is a child hidden within every man, it is a giant step toward understanding the male mystique" (p. 49). Forward explains that when women begin to change, the child-men with whom they are involved will not accept alterations in the relationships

easily:

When you question or threaten an infantile, insecure person, his response usually will be to escalate his old behavior in an attempt to return the situation to its former state. . . .

Therefore, expect your partner's abuse to increase. . . . [R]emind yourself that you have a great source of power in the relationship: he is enormously dependent on you. (Forward, p.226, emphasis in original)

It is often unclear -- while reading many self-help authors' descriptions of heterosexual relationships they have observed, studied, or heard about (e.g., Forward's, Carter and Sokol's, Kiley's, Cowan and Kinder's, Brothers') -- why any woman would stay involved with such men, much less love them. As they are depicted in self-help books, men seem to want things only their way, and to be very averse to changes or compromise. They often can't communicate on any level, except maybe sexually -- and then only sometimes (other times, they may be sexually inept, disabled, or abusive). Authors do not stress the cultural patterns underpinning men's inabilities to interact; but rather, favor psychological explanations, which don't really show what women might have to gain from staying in such relationships, or how men might benefit from persevering in such immature patterns of behavior. It appears, then, that women are too emotionally helpless to break their cycle of suffering (passed down by our mothers); that men are so obsessed with their love/hate dilemma with women (mother figures); and that a real cure for dismal heterosexual relations is not in sight.

YOU MIGHT AS WELL FACE IT: YOU'RE ADDICTED TO LOVE

Recently, women's cravings for commitment in our involvements

with men have been described as addictions by self-help writers. Inspired by the methods employed by the A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) movement, and beginning with books about the effects of alcoholism, specialized self-help books began promulgating the notion that psychological phenomena fit into the same frameworks as physiological disease. Woititz's Adult Children of Alcoholics (1983), a slim volume, gained unexpected success (according to one of the editors I interviewed) and set the trend for books of this type. Though addiction models use the language of pathology, this language is undercut by a dedication to non-judgmental language. Woititz instructs readers that normalcy does not exist, no matter how hard they have worked to emulate their perceptions of it:

Normal is a myth like Santa Claus and the Brady Bunch. It is not realistic to talk in terms of normal, since it is something you have been fooled into believing exists. Other concepts like functional and dysfunctional are more useful. . . . The task, then, is not to find out what normal is, but to discover what is most comfortable for you and for those who are close to you. (p. 55)

The words "functional" and "dysfunctional" have a distanced, clinical ring to them, and Woititz insists that these terms are not universalistic in meaning; a plurality of functional relationships could exist, and none would be preferable to any other.

In Codependent No More, Beattie writes about all the people whose behavior enables addicts to maintain their addictions. Being codependent means being addicted, in a sense, because the dynamics of the relationship with the addict become necessary to the codependent as well. Codependents might be said to be addicted to other people's

continued addiction. I have classified Woititz's and Beattie's books as relationship-oriented because their starting point is dysfunctional relationships readers are having with alcoholics, or with other practitioners of obsessive behavior.⁵ Codependents are urged to forge a separation from the addicts to whom they are attached -- at least emotionally -- and to take responsibility for only their own behavior. Woititz writes:

If the child of the alcoholic, not unlike the alcoholic, is ever to mature, there must be accountability. Part of having a strong sense of self is to be accountable for one's actions. No matter how much we explore motives or lack of motives, we are what we do. We take credit for the good, and we must take credit for the bad. The key is to take responsibility for all our behavior. (pp. 21-22)

It was not until Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much (1986) became a bestseller that the problem of addiction was stripped of its chemical origins and moved into the realm of heterosexual interaction.⁶ Recasting interactional problems between men and women as addiction-related, as Norwood does, legitimizes them, in a sense, by deemphasizing the responsibility of the "victim" and by framing the problem within the medical language of pathology. Like physical addicts, psychological addicts and codependents can't be held at fault for their problems, advisors explain, but they can be held responsible for orchestrating their own cures, once they realize they are addicts or codependents. Addictions become individual problems, which can be ameliorated only by individual action. People are held responsible for amending their "dysfunctional" addictive situations, just as they were held responsible for fixing their problems before.

Norwood anticipates resistance to her addiction framework for explaining of women's intimacy problems early on in her book; writing:

We don't like the word [addiction] and we don't want to apply the concept to the way we relate to men. But many, many of us have been "man junkies" and, like any other addict, we need to admit the severity of our problem before we can begin to recover from it. . . . We who love obsessively are full of fear -- fear of being alone, fear of being unlovable and unworthy, fear of being ignored or abandoned or destroyed. We give our love in the desperate hope that the man with whom we're obsessed will take care of our fears. (p. xiv)

Norwood could not emphasize enough how important it was that women face up to the severity of our problems. Addictions may not sound nice, she knew, but there they were. Like a reliance upon alcohol, women had been reliant upon men to vanquish our monumental fears. Like alcohol, men wouldn't work as a solution to life's trials and tribulations. Norwood invites women to measure ourselves against a checklist she provides so we may determine whether we are, indeed, "man junkies." (This list is far less appealing than Brown's "mouseburger" requirements.) A "woman who loves too much" commits the following tell-tale misdeeds:

She asks the question "How much does he love (or need) me?" and not "How much do I care for him?". . . . She confuses anxiety, fear, and pain with love and sexual excitement. . . . She takes her excitement from his excitement. She doesn't know how to feel good for herself . . . she is threatened by her own feelings. . . . She yearns for physical closeness, but because she fears being enveloped by another and/or being overwhelmed by her own needs for nurturing, she is only comfortable with the emotional distance created and maintained by stress in the relationship. She becomes fearful when a man is willing to be there for her emotionally as well as sexually. She either runs away or drives

him away. (Norwood, pp. 39-40)

Norwood invites readers to accept the label of "addict" before moving on to treatment. She writes, "I am thoroughly convinced that what afflicts women who love too much is not like a disease process; it is a disease process, requiring a specific diagnosis and a specific treatment" (p. 208).

In an interesting parallel, Carter and Sokol extend disease status to men, rather than women. They argue that men, rather than being seen as the victimizers of women (as Forward argues) deserve readers' empathy, for they are pitiful creatures engaging in "phobic" behavior, and they can't help doing what they do. "Commitmentphobia is a true phobia, replete with all of the the classic physical and psychological phobic symptomatology," they proclaim (p. 55), wielding medical language to endear commitmentphobes to readers' hearts. Kiley does the same sort of fancy labeling in describing the "Peter Pan Syndrome;" women's problems are not quite as dignified when entitled "the Wendy Dilemma."

Norwood encourages women man-addicts not to blame themselves for their problems. She writes that self-blame is the way in which women who love too much try to feel that they have power over their situations (when they really don't). Women want to feel in control more than anything, according to Norwood, and self-blame is a method which only masks the problem, and which cannot lead to any real power.

All in all, the woman who loves too much is asea in contradictions. She longs for -- but deeply fears -- the right kind of men; she is afraid of "her own feelings," and thus, relies upon the man in her life (and the wrong kind of man, most likely, given her inability to judge properly) to

feel for her, "taking her excitement from his excitement." She may even have some strange sexual habits and/or hang-ups, since she can't distinguish between "love and sexual excitement" or between "fear and pain." She sounds every bit as confused and conflicted as the men described by Kiley, Cowan and Kinder, and Carter and Sokol. But unlike these men, she has presumably picked up a self-help book. And if she can identify and admit that what she suffers from is man-addiction, she will have taken the first step toward recovery.

Norwood concludes that the very nature of passion is dangerous (for women especially), viewing it as a need that forever builds on itself, and which, therefore, should be limited by women: "In order for passion to exist, there needs to be a continuing struggle, obstacles to overcome, a yearning for more than is available. Passion literally means suffering, and it is often the case that the greater the suffering, the deeper the passion" (p. 45).

FIGHTING THE TIDE OF PESSIMISM

Leo Buscaglia has maintained that love should be exuberant and of primary importance in people's lives throughout his successful career as a self-help writer. In his first bestseller, Love (1972), Buscaglia laments the "world's" seeming resistance to real connection between people:

To live in love is life's greatest challenge. It requires more subtlety, flexibility, sensitivity, understanding, acceptance, tolerance, knowledge and strength than any other human endeavor or emotion, for love and the actual world make up what seem like two great contradictory forces. (p. 191)

Buscaglia reiterates this "love is all you need" theme endlessly in his works, encouraging readers -- despite the stream of contradictory advice out there -- that to undertake "the challenge of human relationships" (as Loving Each Other is sub-titled) would be the the most productive step they could take as human beings. One of the maxims Buscaglia offers in Loving Each Other (1984) is: "Don't be afraid of giving. You can never give too much, if you're giving willingly" (p. 152).

Buscaglia objects to the cool calculations recommended by Dowling and others; but in other ways, he agrees with them, repetitively informing readers that in order to get others to love them, they must first love themselves, for instance. He urges readers to end destructive relationships and begin productive ones, as other self-help writers do, but never presents a cogent analysis of why certain relationships fail and others don't. He omits any consideration of gender-related issues in heterosexual relationships, also. Where Buscaglia differs from other self-help writers is in his analytical frame: he has none. Instead, he offers readers upbeat and sugary sermons on how nice loving, trusting relationships can be. Apparently, these pep talks are in great demand. Buscaglia has spent more time on the bestseller lists than any other self-help author writing during the past quarter-century; in fact, he had three books on the bestseller lists at the same time during 1983, 1985, and 1986.

Despite their pessimism about change on a large scale, feminist authors call for fairness in relationships, and hope for happy endings. Forward, for example, reiterates Shain's definition of an ideal relationship as mature and evenly-balanced. Men and women who

achieved such a relationship together have to transcend traditional gender behaviors. She writes:

A good relationship is based on mutual respect and a relatively equal balance of power. It involves concern for and sensitivity to each other's feelings and needs, as well as an appreciation of the things that make each partner so special. . . . [L]oving partners find effective ways of dealing with their differences; they do not view each encounter as a battle to be won or lost. (p.175)

As always, in the self-help genre, the war between men and women can come to an end only when people believe they have the power to stop it.

Norwood promises readers that once they have dealt with their addictive behavior successfully, they will no longer need to get involved with men who seek dysfunctionality. Their relationships will certainly not be as passionate, exciting, and dangerous; they may, in fact, be a bit boring, but far more stable and satisfying in the long run.

Norwood also believes that spiritual development is an essential part of building self-esteem and identity: "Without spiritual development, it is nearly impossible to let go of self-will, and without letting go of self-will you will not be able to. . . . stop managing and controlling the man in your life. . . . You will not be able to surrender control of this life to a force higher than yourself" (p. 236). She encourages readers to make use of the New Age practice of chanting affirmations, while looking at themselves in a mirror. She writes: "Repeated diligently, positive affirmations actually have the power to cancel out destructive thoughts and feelings, even when the negativity has been going on for years" (p. 292). She gives examples for readers to use (such as "I am free of pain, anger, and fear. I enjoy perfect peace

and well-being" [p. 292] and "God loves me. God blesses me. God is working in my life" [p. 293]). Apparently, wishing will make it so, in Norwood's conceptualization of attaining happiness. Paradoxically, in order to feel in control of her life, a woman who loves too much must be willing to recognize that a "force higher than [her]self" really holds the reins; Norwood alleges that realization itself will make everything easier.

SELF-HELP CULTURE

Gender issues underlie self-help authors' analyses of problematic relationships between men and women. Identity, for women, is especially difficult to define. Sometimes, according to self-help authors, we need a lot of changing; at other times we need self-acceptance. Acceptance, in fact, becomes a sort of paradoxical basis for accomplishing change. Identity becomes a messy compilation of past experiences, which need to be sorted through, and re-prioritized. The changes advocated by self-help authors for women have changed very little since Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique in 1963: women have been encouraged to place less value in their involvements in others, and to pay more attention to their own personal development.

Self-help authors' ideology regarding identity and interaction fit together quite coherently with other media manifestations of advice for women. Excerpts from bestselling self-help books often reappear (or pre-appear) in women's magazines, and even when bits and pieces from the books are not published, similar self-help articles abound, offering advice which centers on managing relationships as well as

improving self-image. Problems which seem to manifest themselves in the lives of women are dissected month after month.

In soap operas, the therapeutic culture proclaimed by self-help authors also permeates, and offers itself up to consumers as an effective methodology for self-analysis; Ruth Rosen writes:

Problems are not only personal; they are also interpreted -- and cured -- through psychological insight. Therapeutic redemption has replaced religious salvation. Evil is no longer unexplained; it is understood through an excess of psychobabble. Characters continually ask each other how they "feel" about everything. Couples are encouraged to "communicate" . . . because marriage will falter without "open discussion". . . . The danger of psychological repression is ubiquitous. (1986, p. 62)

Though soaps themselves are not therapy in any traditional sense, they offer mini-stories which dispense therapy with approval. Tonia Modleski sees the appeal of soap operas as lying in "expectation [and] . . . in (familial) disorder," while they simultaneously "offer the promise of immortality and eternal return -- same time tomorrow" (1982, pp. 88-89). So like self-help books, soap operas are reassuring, both in the very reliability of their recurrent existence, and in their reification of the therapeutic model of problem solving. And like self-help books, soaps feed into an ironic pattern of dispensing hope for a better future, while ultimately diffusing any radical reevaluation of the status quo. According to Modleski's reading of soaps, they "convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability to realize this ideal and bring about familial harmony" (p. 92).

Similarly, in her evaluation of readers' involvement with romance

fiction, Radway concludes that since romance reading enables women to conceive of a perfect world where men are "neither cruel nor indifferent, neither preoccupied with the external world nor wary of an intense emotional attachment to a woman," repetitious reading is born "not out of contentment but out of dissatisfaction, longing, and protest" (1984, p. 215).

Part of the appeal of self-help literature lies in the reassurance of hearing about the worst-case scenarios, and realizing one is better off -- so my readers have told me. Authors of self-help material have an uncanny ability to present extreme cases -- and extremes who, with their help, have gotten better, of course. Nowhere are extreme cases paraded with more enthusiasm than on day-time talk shows.

While I was working on this project, I happened to see Cowan and Kinder on "Donohue" promoting Women Men Love, Women Men Leave. As part of the show, the audience and callers could question two women, whose first names appeared on the screen, along with identifying captions reading, "Has Successful Relationships With Men," and "Has Unsuccessful Relationships With Men." So, I thought, is this what it comes down to? There are two kinds of women in the world today? (I also wondered, where do they find these women? but that is really someone else's dissertation.) The point is that this is the version of reality women are still being handed by advisors, who fit very neatly into the one-dimensional afternoon-television milieu.

But why do these things exist? Why do they appeal? Oprah interviews couples who have had extra-marital affairs and no longer trust each other, and come on television to tell the world; Phil hosts a fashion show featuring transvestites, and dresses up in a housedress

and a frowsy hat, taking calls from repulsed men and tearful wives-of-transvestites who want to hear their voices on national TV. Oprah interrogates women who have no moral qualms about sleeping with married men, while Phil questions men who have led -- some of them, up until the morning of the show -- double lives, replete with double families, while Sally Jesse Raphael devotes a show to husband-beaters. And the audiences participate, enthusiastically and angrily, in turn -- but always loudly. Why?

Watching the show where Cowan and Kinder handed down their expertise to an audience of women, I began to think about the messages of self-help books in terms of their defensibility. This is the line most critics take in evaluating what offends them culturally: they say such cultural objects appeal to the lowest common denominator, that they exists to feed their audience's (or the masses') desire for pure sleaze and/or inanity. And while this line of attack has its appeal, it misses something. Yes, there is a lot to condemn, a lot that is objectionable about our culture -- and in this particular instance, about self-help books, women's magazines, and talk show subjects. But, users are not sopping "trash" culture up like the super-absorbant paper towels that pay for "Donahue" or "Oprah" to stay on the air. Rather, they are constructing meaning as they view, just as readers construct meaning as they read.

Shows like this, and their radio equivalents, are invitations to "the visual or audio-reader" to be a participating voyeur in the privacy of her own home, to identify and to cringe, to admire -- but more often -- to feel superior to any number of human exhibits. Such shows work well as advertisements for self-help books, not only by featuring "experts"

who happen to write self-help books, but by creating an atmosphere where oddity can be celebrated and booed, where normalcy can be contested and affirmed.

"Caller, are you there? Caller?" Phil says.

"Phil, I just want to say one thing," the caller demands, and rambles on until Phil cuts her off.

Now, I'm not going to conclude that the reason for all of this cultural consumption is that women are lonely, because that's not all it is (and men are lonely, too). But women do feel culturally alienated: so participants in this study have said. And women and men are often alienated from each other, as well. And so women, because they bear the brunt of the responsibility for connections, turn to the forms that exist for assistance, reassurance, and sometimes amusement -- books, television, whatever it takes. And there is a lot to choose from, a lot to buy. It's rather bizarre that while we are so alienated, we have also come to believe so wholeheartedly in talk -- talk shows, therapeutic talk, heart-to-heart talks -- as a curative measure in our personal lives. The problem, as I see it, is that we often place too much faith in psychological rhetoric which allows us to conceive of individual action as a cure-all, and in consumerism, which encourages us to believe we are entitled to buy the answers to our problems.

In his reading of soap operas, Robert C. Allen refers to this genre as both "commodity and commodifier" (pp. 45-60). Audience members are quite literally sold to advertisers; just as editors must decide whether to "buy" the proposed marketability of each self-help book proposal they see. Self-help books, because they are didactic guides, commodify

readers while they read, by urging them to make themselves into objects of analysis and improvement. The authors, of course, do not explicitly advise self-objectification, but achieving the goal of reading -- whether it be learning how to pursue ideal growth, becoming an ideal woman, or attaining the ideal relationship -- involves the purchase of whatever new ideal the author is peddling.

Self-help books propose to help women find out about ourselves, to teach us effective ways of being. Authors operate on the assumption that we don't know how to do this on our own, and that this is understandable. Lasch writes that uncertainty about identity is part of participating in consumer culture: it makes us make ourselves into commodities.

When people complain of feeling inauthentic or rebel against "role-playing," they testify to the prevailing pressure to see themselves with the eyes of strangers and to shape the self as another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market. . . . [Commodities'] value lies not in their usefulness or permanence but in their marketability. (Lasch 1984, pp. 30-31)

One of the participants in my study, Lauren, talked about how self-help books offered personae readers could "try on." One of the techniques upon which self-help ideology relies is the make-over, which has special salience for women in this culture. If you don't like it, change it; dress up your assets, and hide the ugly parts. The message being conveyed by books that tell women how to make ourselves over is not covert: self-help books encourage women to see ourselves as mutable, correctable, a product of various influences in constant flux. In books on relationships, men are rarely variable, however much women might wish they were. But they are no less

commodified in the self-help world. They are obstacles that women work around as we attempt to forge meaningful relationships in what sounds (in self-help books) very much like a war zone.

It is no wonder that defensiveness has come to signify the demeanor in which ideal relationships ought to be conducted, now, at a time when social problems are commonly referred to as wars to be fought (e.g., the war on poverty, the war on drugs, the war on AIDS, and so forth), and when ideas about individual actions producing (earning) individual consequences have been mainstreamed into American thought have been emphatically embraced by Republican leadership. The prevalence of addiction-rhetoric assists in de-socializing social problems, so that anything that goes wrong can be broken down into individual cases of pathology (which, when treated, will yield many singular cases of recovery).

In general, the ideology of self-help books, like the capitalist and patriarchal ideology that is dominant in our culture, denies connection and community-oriented action. Self-help books rarely recommend socially-oriented solutions, yet they don't kill off readers' hopes for connection, either. What is most remarkable, then, about the applications of this genre, is that readers feel it allows them to tap into a community of sorts; they "feel less alone" when they read. Ultimately, I believe, the form of the self-help book does not prohibit new or radical formulations of problems; but currently, its extension of therapeutic and individualistic solutions provides only an illusory cure for what ails us, collectively, as a culture.

APPENDIX **PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE**

This questionnaire is part of a research project about the impact of reading on women's lives. Please feel free to skip over any questions you don't want to answer. I very much appreciate your help.

Sincerely,
Wendy Simonds
City University of New York

1. Do you read any magazine(s) regularly? yes ____ no ____
If yes, which one(s)?

2. Approximately how many books do you read, on average, in an month?

☐ none	☐ 6-10
☐ 1-5	☐ 10 or more

3. What types of books do you read? Please check all categories that apply:

FICTION

- ☐ none
- ☐ popular novels
- ☐ romances
- ☐ mysteries
- ☐ science fiction
- ☐ other fiction: please list titles of these books:

NON-FICTION

- ☐ biographies
- ☐ history
- ☐ self-help or self-improvement
- ☐ cookbooks
- ☐ other non-fiction: please list titles of these books:

4. About how much television do you watch, on average, in a day?

☐ none	
☐ 1 hour	☐ 5 hours
☐ 2 hours	☐ 6 hours or more
☐ 3 hours	
☐ 4 hours	

5. How often do you watch talk shows on television?

- ☐ never
- ☐ occasionally
- ☐ often

If you checked "occasionally" or "often" above, which talk shows do you watch?

6. How often do you listen to talk shows on the radio?

- ☐ never
- ☐ occasionally
- ☐ often

If you checked "occasionally" or "often" above, to which talk shows do you listen?

7. How do you become interested in reading a book? Please check all of the following ways which apply to you:

- ☐ friends' or relatives' recommendations
- ☐ seeing them in the library
- ☐ seeing them in bookstores
- ☐ seeing them in supermarkets or drugstores
- ☐ seeing advertisements for them
- ☐ receiving mailings from book clubs
- ☐ reading book reviews
- ☐ seeing them discussed on talk shows on television
- ☐ hearing them discussed on talk shows on radio

8. Please check all of the books below which you have read or begun to read:

- ☐ Women Who Love Too Much by Robin Norwood
- ☐ Fit For Life by Harvey and Marilyn Diamond
- ☐ Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them by Susan Forward
- ☐ Dianetics by L. Ron Hubbard
- ☐ Loving Each Other by Leo Buscaglia
- ☐ Smart Women, Foolish Choices by Cowan and Kinder
- ☐ Men Who Can't Love by Steven Carter and Julia Sokol
- ☐ The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck
- ☐ Having It All by Helen Gurly Brown
- ☐ Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst
- ☐ The Cinderella Complex by Collette Dowling

9. Are there any other self-help books not on the list above which you have read recently? ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, what are they?

Which, if any, of the books listed on p. 2 would you say have had any effect on your life or your thinking?

10. How old are you? _____

11. Are you: married or living with a lover _____ single _____
divorced or separated _____ widowed _____

12. Do you have any children? yes _____ no _____
If yes, do your children live with you? yes _____ no _____
How old are they?

13. Do you read any newspaper advice column(s) regularly?
_____yes _____no If yes, which ones?

14. What is your race?

15. What is your occupation?

16. How far did you go in school?

17. What is your religion?

18. What is your annual household income?	How many people does this income support (including yourself)?
_____ under \$15,000	_____ one _____ five
_____ between \$15,000 and \$30,00	_____ two _____ six
_____ between \$30,000 and \$45,000	_____ three _____ seven
_____ between \$45,000 and \$60,000	_____ four _____ eight
_____ between \$60,000 and \$75,000	_____ or more
_____ above \$75,000	

THANK YOU for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.
During the next few months, I am planning to do several in-depth interviews, also about the place of reading in women's lives. Each interview will take about an hour. If you would be willing to help, please write your name and phone number and/or address in the space below. If you have any questions, please call me at (718) 636-4802.

Name _____

Phone number _____

Address _____

INTENSIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

What was the first self-help book you can remember reading?

What made you decide to read this book?

Can you describe what you remember about this book?

How did you like this book? What made you (like, dislike) it?

What, if anything, did you learn from this book?

How, if at all, do you think it helped you?

What was the self-help book you read most recently?

What made you decide to read this book?

Can you describe what you remember about this book?

How did you like this book? What made you (like, dislike) it?

What, if anything, did you learn from this book?

How, if at all, do you think it helped you? (. . . and so forth, until the participant seems comfortable talking about her reading.)

What attracts you to a book?

What keeps you reading?

Do you ever talk to anyone about self-help books that you have read? Who? What types of things do you talk about?

Do you ever recommend self-help books to other people? What about a book makes it recommendable?

How would you define "self-help"?

What about a situation makes you seek help?

What other ways do you use to get help?

Which of these do you think are effective, and why?

What is the special appeal of self-help books?

What do you think interests other women in this type of reading?

Have you found that reading self-help books can lead to improving relationships?

(If yes), how? What types of relationships?

Can you give an example of something specific that you read that helped to improve a relationship?

What, generally speaking, do you think makes a relationship successful?

How, if at all, do you think your view on this has been influenced by reading self-help books?

Have you found that reading self-help books can lead to improving work/home life? (If yes), how?

Have you found that reading self-help books can lead to improving the way you feel about yourself? (If yes), how?

Have you found that reading self-help books can influence your political views? (If yes), how?

Have you found that reading self-help books can influence your religious views? (If yes), how?

What do you think makes so many women (much more so than men) read self-help books?

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

NAME	AGE	RACE	MAR.	REL.	ED.	EMP.	INC/*SUPTD	FREQ	TYPES RD.
1. Mona	37	B	div	Episc	coll	sales	15-30000/3	rare	gen
2. Emily	46	B	mar	Bapt	some coll	counselor	45-60000/4	med	gen
3. Marianne	36	W	div	Prot	some coll	sec	under15000/1	med	rel
4. Val	34	W	sin	Luth	some coll	sec	30-45000/2	oft	gen
5. Carol	36	W	div	Cath	some coll	sec	15-30000/1	oft	gen
6. Sandy	26	W	mar	Cath	m (ed)	teacher	60-75000/2	med	gen, fem
7. Sarah	27	W	sin	Jew	msw	s.w.	15-30000/1	oft	gen, na
8. Allison	26	W	sin	Cath	coll	sales	30-45000/1	rare	gen
9. Nell	40	W	mar	Cath	m (hist)	admin.	over75000/2	med	gen
10. Amelia	37	B	div	Prot	coll	manager	30-45000/2	med	gen,rel
11. Liz	28	W	sin	Cath	coll +	admin. asst	15-30000/1	med	gen
12. Joan	52	W	div	Episc	m (ed)	teacher	45-60000/2	oft	gen,fem
13. Nancy	41	H	lwl	Cath	hs	tel-int'er	15-30000/1	rare	gen
14. Abby	27	W	lwl	Jew	msw	s.w.	45-60000/2	med	gen, na
15. Evelyn	57	W	div	Jew	ba	sec	15-30000/1	oft	gen
16. Lauren	23	W	sin	Jew	ma +	grad student	under15000/1	med	gen, rel
17. Rena	59	W	mar	Jew	ma +	ret'd teach	60-75000/2	med	gen
18. Anna	31	B	lwl	none	mfa, msw	s. w.	15-30000/2	med	gen, ast
19. Celia	36	W/AI	mar	Cath	some coll	paraprof	30-45000/3	oft	gen, na
20. Hillary	30	W	sin	Jew	msw	s.w.	15-30000/1	rare	gen,wk,fem
21. Janet	24	B	sin	Cath	coll	off. manager	---	rare	wk
22. Pat	47	W	mar	Jew	ms	teacher	over 75000/5	oft	health
23. Lucy	47	W	div	Cath	some coll	admin.asst	---	oft	gen
24. Cindy	34	W	mar	Jew	mfa	artist-sales	over 75000/2	oft	bio, fem
25. Melissa	30	W	sin	Cath	m	arch. cons.	15-30000/1	med	gen, na
26. Bonnie	40	W	div	Jew	m	teacher	45-60000/1	oft	gen
27. Molly	28	W	div	none	some coll	arch. cons	15-30000/1	oft	gen
28. Diane	47	W	div	Jew	coll	med. off. man.	30-45000/2	oft	rel
29. Shelley	41	W	mar	Jew	phd	professor	over 75000/6	med	gen, rel
30. Gloria	48	H	div	Cath	some coll	nurs asst	under 15000/2	med	gen

KEY: RACE: W=White/B=Black/H=Hispanic/Ainl=American Indian MARITAL STATUS:lwl=living with lover
 EDUCATION: coll=college (4 years) /+ = more than, but no advanced degree /m=master's
 EMPLOYMENT: s.w.=social worker / arch.cons=architectural conservationist /sec=secretary med off man=
 medical office manager / admin=administrator FREQ: oft=often / med=medium SUPTD= supported
 TYPES READ: gen=general/ na=new age/ rel=religious/ bio=biography/ fem=feminist/ ast=astrology

TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHIC TOTALS

AGE		EMPLOYMENT	
mean:	37	Teaching:	6
median:	36	Counseling:	5
		Secretarial:	5
RACE		Sales:	3
Black:	5	Managerial:	3
White:	22	Administrative:	3
Hispanic:	2	Paraprofessionals:	2
Mixed:	1	Arch. Conservation:	2
		Grad. Student:	1
MARITAL STATUS		TYPES READ*	
Married:	11	General:	25
Single:	8	Religious:	5
Divorced:	11	New Age (inc. astrology):	5
RELIGION		Health:	1
Protestant:	6	Work related:	2
Catholic:	11	Biography:	1
Jewish:	11	Feminist:	4
None:	2		
EDUCATION		FREQUENCY OF READING	
High school:	1	Often:	12
Some college:	8	Medium:	13
Coll. grad:	6	Rare:	5
post-grad (any):	15		
HOUSEHOLD INCOME		NUMBER OF PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY H.H.	
(in \$1000s)			
INC:		One:	12
Under 15:	3	Two:	11
15 - 30:	10	Three:	2
30 - 45:	5	Four:	1
45 - 60:	4	Five:	1
60 - 75:	2	Six:	1
75 and up:	4	No info. given:	2
no info. given:	2		

*Total does not add to 30, because many read more than one type.

TABLE 3: BESTSELLING SELF-HELP BOOKS BY YEAR
 Compiled from The New York Times Book Review Bestsellers Lists

HARD COVER NON-FICTION	MASS MARKET and TRADE PAPERBACKS
1963 Friedan. <u>The Feminine Mystique.</u>	1963 No listings
1964 No listings	1964 No listings
1965 Berne. <u>Games People Play.</u>	1965 no listings
1966 Berne. <u>Games People Play.</u> Masters & Johnson. <u>Human Sexual Response.</u>	1966 Maltz. <u>Psycho-Cybernetics.</u>
1967 Berne. <u>Games People Play.</u>	1967 Berne. <u>Games People Play.</u> Maltz. <u>Psycho-Cybernetics.</u>
1968 No listings	1968 Berne. <u>Games People Play.</u> Maltz. <u>Psycho-Cybernetics.</u>
1969 Goodman. <u>Linda Goodman's Sun Signs.</u>	1969 Schutz. <u>Jou.</u>
1970 Fast. <u>Body Language.</u> "J." <u>The Sensuous Woman.</u> Masters & Johnson. <u>Human Sexual Inadequacy.</u> Reuben. <u>Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex...</u>	1970 No listings
1971 Fast. <u>Body Language.</u> Greer. <u>The Female Eunuch.</u> "J." <u>The Sensuous Woman.</u> "M." <u>The Sensuous Man.</u> Reuben. <u>Any Woman Can.</u> ---. <u>Everything You Always Wanted...</u>	1971 Fast. <u>Body Language.</u> "J." <u>The Sensuous Woman.</u> Reuben. <u>Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex...</u>

HARD COVER NON-FICTION

1972

Harris. I'm OK, You're OK.
 O'Neill(s). Open Marriage.
 Reuben. Any Woman Can.

1973

Comfort, Alexander. The Joy of Sex.
 Harris. I'm OK, You're OK.
 Newman & Berkowitz. How to Be
 Your Own Best Friend.

1974

Comfort, A. The Joy of Sex.
 ---. More Joy.
 Krantzler. Creative Divorce.
 Newman & Berkowitz. How to Be
 Your Own Best Friend.

1975

Bloomfield. TM.
 Benson. The Relaxation Response.
 Korda. Power!
 Masters & Johnson. The Pleasure Bond.
 Morgan. The Total Woman.
 Ringer. Winning Through Intimidation.

1976

Benson. The Relaxation Response.
 Dyer. Your Erroneous Zones.
 Hite. The Hite Rept. on Women's
 Sexuality.
 Korda. Power!
 Ringer. Winning By Intimidation.
 Sheehy. Passages.

1977

Dyer. Your Erroneous Zones.
 Hite. The Hite Rept. on Women's Sexuality.
 Newman. How To Take Charge of
 Your Life.
 Ringer. Looking Out For #1.
 Sheehy. Passages.

MASS MARKET and TRADE PAPERBACKS

1972

Greer. The Female Eunuch.
 "M." The Sensuous Man.
 Reuben, D. Any Woman Can.

1973

Berne. What Do You Say After
 You Say Hello?
 Harris. I'm OK, You're OK.
 O'Neill(s). Open Marriage.

Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 Harris. I'm OK, You're OK.
 James & Jongewood. Born To Win.
 Lair. I'm Not Much, Baby, But I'm All
 I've Got.
Our Bodies Ourselves.

1975

Bloomfield. TM.
 Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 ---. More Joy.
 Denniston. The TM Book.
 Newman & Berkowitz. How To Be
 Your Own Best Friend.

1976

Bloomfield. TM.
 Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 ---. More Joy.
 Morgan. The Total Woman.
Our Bodies, Ourselves.
 Ringer. Winning Through
 Intimidation.

1977

Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 Dyer. Your Erroneous Zones.
 Hite. The Hite Rept. on Women's
 Sexuality.
 James & Jongewood. Born To Win.
Our Bodies, Ourselves.
 Sheehy. Passages.

HARD COVER NON-FICTION

1978

Dyer. Pulling Your Own Strings.
 Friday. My Mother / My Self.
 Ringer. Looking Out For #1.

1979

Brothers, J. How To Get Whatever
 You Want Out of Life.
 Goodman. Love Signs.
 Landers. The Ann Landers Encyclopedia A to Z.

1980

Dyer. The Sky's the Limit.
 Goodman. Love Signs.
 Scarf. Unfinished Business.

1981

Cohen. You Can Negotiate
 Anything.
 Dowling. Cinderella Complex.
 Dyer. The Sky's the Limit.
 Kassorla. Nice Girls Do.
 Penney. How To Make Love to a Man.
 Hite. The Hite Rept. on Male Sexuality.
 Shahan. Living Alone and Liking It.
 Sheehy. Pathfinders.

1982

Brothers. What Every Woman
 Should Know About Men.
 Brown. Having It All.
 Buscaglia. Living Loving Learning.
 Dowling. The Cinderella Complex.
 Kushner. When Bad Things
 Happen to Good People.
 Morganstern. How To Make Love to a Woman.

MASS MARKET and TRADE PAPERBACKS

1978

Dyer. Your Erroneous Zones.
 ---. Pulling Your Own Strings.
 Friday. My Mother / My Self.
 James & Jongewood. Born To Win.
 Our Bodies. Ourselves.
 Ringer. Looking Out For #1.
 Sheehy. Passages.

1979

Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 Dyer. Pulling Your Own Strings.
 ---. Your Erroneous Zones.
 Friday. My Mother / My Self.
 Landers. The Ann Landers
 Encyclopedia.
 Our Bodies. Ourselves.
 Winston. Getting Organized.

1980

Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 Landers. The Ann Landers
 Encyclopedia.
 Shain. When Lovers Are Friends.
 Winston. Getting Organized.

1981

Comfort. The Joy of Sex.
 Dyer. The Sky's the Limit.
 Goodman. Love Signs.

1982

Buscaglia. Love.
 ---. Personhood.
 Cohen. You Can Negotiate Anything.
 Comfort. The Joy Of Sex.
 Dowling. The Cinderella Complex.
 Kassorla. Nice Girls Do.
 Penney. How To Make Love to a Man.

HARD COVER NON-FICTION

1982 continued

Penney. How To Make Love to a Man.Sheehy. Pathfinders.

1983

Brown. Having It All.Budoff. No More Hot Flashes and
Other Good News.Buscaglia. Living Loving Learning.Hayden. How To Satisfy A Woman
Every Time.Kiley. The Peter Pan Syndrome.Kushner. When Bad ThingsHappen to Good People.Rubin. One To One.Schuller. Tough Times Never Last
But Tough People Do.

1984

Buscaglia. Loving Each Other.Kassoria. Go For It!Kiley. The Wendy Dilemma.---. The Peter Pan Syndrome.Peck. People of the Lie.Schuller. Tough-Minded Faith for
Tender-Hearted People.---. Tough Times Never LastBut Tough People Do.

1985

Buscaglia. Loving Each Other.Cowan and Kinder. Smart Women
Foolish Choices.Friedman. Smart Cookies Don't
Crumble.Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much.Schuller. The Be (Happy) Attitudes.

1986

Buscaglia. Bus 9 To Paradise.---. Loving Each Other.Cowan and Kinder. Smart Women
Foolish Choices.Forward. Men Who Hate Women and the
Women Who Love Them.Johnson. One Minute For Myself.Kushner. When All You've Ever Wanted...Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much.Robbins. Unlimited Power.

MASS MARKET and TRADE PAPERBACKS

1983

Buscaglia, L. Living Loving Learning.---. Love.---. Personhood.Fisher & Ury. Getting to Yes.Kushner. When Bad ThingsHappen to Good People.Peck. The Road Less Travelled.

1984

Buscaglia. Living, Loving, Learning.Kiley. The Peter Pan Syndrome.Peck. The Road Less Travelled.Schuller. Tough Times Never Last...

1985

Buscaglia. Living Loving Learning.---. Love.Kassoria. Go For It!Peck. The Road Less Travelled.

1986

Buscaglia. Love.---. Loving Each Other.Cowan and Kinder. Smart Women...Hubbard. Dianetics.Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much.Peck. The Road Less Traveled.Woititz. Adult Children of Alcoholics.

HARD COVER NON-FICTION

1986 continued

Schuller. The Be (Happy) Attitudes.---. Be Happy You Are Loved.Viorst. Necessary Losses.

1987

Carter. Men Who Can't Love.Cowan & Kinder. Women Men Love.
Women Men Leave.Forward. Men Who Hate Women and
the Women Who Love Them.Kent. How to Marry the Man of
Your Choice.Pearsall. Superimmunity.Peck. The Different Drum.Scarf. Intimate Partners.Siegel. Love, Medicine & Miracles.

1988

Pearsall. Supermarital Sex.Siegel. Love, Medicine and Miracles.

MASS MARKET and TRADE PAPERBACKS

1987

Buscaglia. Bus 9 To Paradise.Cowan & Kinder. Smart Women. . .Forward. Men Who Hate Women. . .Hubbard. Dianetics.Kushner. When All You've EverWanted Wasn't Enough.Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much.Peck. The Road Less Traveled.Viorst. Necessary Losses.Woititz. Adult Children of Alcoholics.

1988

Beattie. Codependent No More.Burns. Feeling Good.Cowan & Kinder. Women Men Love. . .Hay. You Can Heal Your Life.Hubbard. Dianetics.Kushner. When All You've Ever. . .Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much.Scarf. Intimate Partners.Siegel. Love, Medicine and Miracles.Viorst. Necessary Losses.

**TABLE 4: BESTSELLING SELF-HELP BOOKS BY SUBJECT AREA,
and years on bestseller lists**

UNISEX

- Berne. Games People Play (1965-68).
 Maltz. Psycho-Cybernetics (1966-68).
 Goodman. Linda Goodman's Sun Signs (1969).
 Schutz. Joy (1969).
 Fast. Body Language (1970-71).
 Harris. I'm OK, You're OK (1972-74).
 Berne. What Do You Say After You Say Hello? (1973).
 Newman & Berkowitz. How to Be Your Own Best Friend (1973-75).
 James. Born To Win (1974, 1977-78).
 Krantzler. Creative Divorce (1974).
 Lair. I'm Not Much, Baby, But I'm All I've Got (1974).
 Benson. The Relaxation Response (1975-76).
 Bloomfield. TM (1975-76).
 Denniston. The TM Book (1975).
 Korda. Power (1975-76).
 Ringer. Winning By Intimidation (1975-6).
 Dyer. Your Erroneous Zones (1976-79).
 Sheehy. Passages (1976-78).
 Newman. How To Take Charge of Your Life. (1977).
 Ringer. Looking Out For # 1 (1977-78).
 Dyer. Pulling Your Own Strings (1978-79).
 Brothers. How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life (1979).
 Goodman. Love Signs (1979).
 Landers. The Ann Landers Encyclopedia A to Z (1979-80).
 Winston. Getting Organized (1979-80).
 Dyer. The Sky's The Limit (1980-81).
 Cohen. You Can Negotiate Anything (1981-82).
 Sheehy. Pathfinders (1981-2).
 Buscaglia. Personhood (1982-83).
 Kushner. When Bad Things Happen to Good People (1982-3).
 Fisher and Ury. Getting To Yes (1983).
 Schuller. Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do (1983-4).
 Peck. The Road Less Traveled (1983-87).

Peck. People of the Lie (1984).
 Schuller. Tough-Minded Faith for Tender-Hearted People (1984).
 Kassorla. Go For It! (1984-85).
 Schuller. The Be (Happy) Attitudes (1985).
 Johnson. One Minute For Myself (1986).
 Robbins. Unlimited Power (1986).
 Schuller. Be Happy You Are Loved (1986).
 Waititz. Adult Children of Alcoholics (1986-87).
 Hubbard. Dianetics. (1986-88).
 Kushner. When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough (1986-88).
 Peck. The Different Drum (1987).
 Pearsall. Superimmunity (1987).
 Seigel. Love, Medicine and Miracles (1987-88).
 Beattie. Codependent No More (1988).
 Burns. Feeling Good (1988).
 Hay. You Can Heal Your Life (1988).

ABOUT SEXUALITY

Masters & Johnson. Human Sexual Response (1966).
 Masters & Johnson. Human Sexual Inadequacy (1970).
 *"J." The Sensual Woman (1970-71).
 Reuben. Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex (1970-71).
 **"M." The Sensual Man (1971-72).
 *Reuben. Any Woman Can! (1971-72).
 Comfort. The Joy of Sex (1973-82).
 Comfort. More Joy of Sex (1974-76).
 *Our Bodies Ourselves (1974, 1976-8).
 Masters & Johnson. The Pleasure Bond (1975).
 Hite. The Hite Report on Women's Sexuality (1976-77).
 Hite. The Hite Report on Male Sexuality (1981).
 *Kassorla. Nice Girls Do (1981-2).
 *Penney. How to Make Love to a Man (1981-82).
 **Morganstern. How To Make Love to a Woman (1982).
 **Hayden. How to Satisfy a Woman Every Time (1983).
 Pearsall. Super Marital Sex (1988).
 *Books specifically addressed to women. **Books specifically addressed to men.

**RELATIONSHIP-ENHANCING
OR ADDRESSED SPECIFICALLY TO WOMEN**

- Friedan, B. The Feminine Mystique (1963).
 Greer, G. The Female Eunuch (1971-2).
 ***O'Neill(s). Open Marriage (1972-73).
 Morgan. The Total Woman (1975-76).
 Friday. My Mother/ My Self (1978-79).
 Scarf. Unfinished Business (1980).
 ***Shain. When Lovers are Friends (1980).
 ***Shahan. Living Alone and Liking It (1981).
 Dowling. The Cinderella Complex (1981-82).
 Brothers. What Every Woman Should Know About Men (1982).
 Brown. Having It All (1982-3).
 ***Buscaglia. Living Learning, Loving (1982-85).
 ***Buscaglia. Love (1982-83, 1985-85).
 ***Rubin. One To One (1983).
 ***Kiley. The Peter Pan Syndrome (1983-84).
 Kiley. The Wendy Dilemma (1984).
 Cowan and Kinder. Smart Women Foolish Choices (1985-87).
 Friedman. Smart Cookies Don't Crumble (1985).
 Norwood. Women Who Love Too Much (1985-88).
 ***Buscaglia. Bus 9 to Paradise (1986-7).
 Forward. Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them
 (1986-87).
 Viorst. Necessary Losses (1986-88).
 ***Carter. Men Who Can't Love (1987).
 Kent. How To Marry the Man of Your Choice (1987).
 Cowan and Kinder. Women Men Love, Women Men Leave (1987-88).
 ***Scarf. Intimate Partners (1987-88).
 *** Books whose titles would not "exclude" men readers.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Journalists' -- and others' objections to self-help books are documented most fully in Chapter Six.
- 2 Belenky et al. have been criticized for replicating a hierarchical system of thinking, although, ironically, they claim it is this they are challenging in the first place, and for repeatedly comparing their work with other studies on men thinkers only, when they claim their aim is to focus on, and value, women's experience and ways of constructing knowledge (Crawford, in press).

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

- 1 They write:

The survey revealed that 73 percent of Americans feel they have "more freedom of choice" on how to live than their parents did. Only 8 percent believe they have fewer choices; 17 percent report the same level of choice . . . 2 percent are not sure. Furthermore, an overwhelming 80 percent feel confident that they will be able to carry out these choices and live their lives the way they "truly want to live." An almost equal number (75 percent) claim that they are at least as happy as their parents or happier (only 20 percent say they are unhappier). (1981, p. 57)

- 2 A more detailed discussion of problems of identity and blame as they are seen by self-help authors will be provided in Chapter Six.
- 3 Scogin's work is presently unpublished.
- 4 This ideology is explored in depth in Chapters Five and Six.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 1 Authorial intent and motivation are explored more fully in Chapter Four.
- 2 Friedan's papers are housed at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I thank the library for granting me permission to cite from the letters written to Friedan.
- 3 Maternal malpractice thrives in self-help books addressed to women, and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

- 4 In an interesting anomalous -- and rather amusing -- letter, an academically-oriented reader criticized Friedan for taking the name of Talcott Parsons in vain:

Your quotations from Talcott Parsons . . . are accurate, but are completely out of context. . . . The way in which you refer to the structural-functionalist point of view in your discussion, betrays either a lack of sophistication, or a lack of honesty. You take the writings of distinguished people, distort them, and transmute them into popular slop . . .

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- 1 Forty percent of the bestselling self-help books of the past twenty-five years advertise the advanced degrees of their authors on the covers.
- 2 In a rare confession, Robert Ringer acknowledges that he writes self-help to make money. He prefaces Looking Out For #1 (1977) by remarking: "Anyone who is familiar with my philosophy would be disappointed if I didn't say that my sole reason for writing this book was to make as much money as possible" (p. 7).

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 Over the course of time, the bestseller lists varied: from 1963 to May, 1965, there was no weekly paperback bestseller list. From July, 1971 to December, 1974, I consulted lists from the second week of each month because paperback lists were not always included in the first Sunday's listings. Beginning in January, 1984, a separate listing of "Advice, How-To, and Miscellaneous" was added to both hardcover and paperback lists; prior to this, the paperback category was divided into "Trade" and "Mass Market" books. When the advice category was added, trade and mass market books were lumped together into one category, "Nonfiction," on the paperback bestsellers lists.

In 1963, the New York Times bestseller lists were composed of "reports from more than 125 bookstores in 64 communities throughout the United States." Now, their bestsellers listings "are based on computer-processed sales figures from 3,000 bookstores and from representative wholesalers with more than 38,000 other

retail outlets, including various stores and supermarkets. The figures are statistically adjusted to represent sales in all such outlets across the United States." (This note is included with each week's listings.) Clearly, their methodology has become more complex, and more accurate.

- 2 Though these books would certainly be relevant to the themes developed by the more psychologically oriented self-help books that I have examined, I am primarily interested in books which center on emotional well-being, rather than its sheer physical manifestations. I see these others as how-to --rather than self-help -- books, which are less philosophical and more concerned with issues of physical self-marketing than with ideas about self. The self-help books which will be discussed here also often provide advice on physical presentation also -- advice which I felt would have been duplicated by how-to books on relating topics.
- 3 Peck informs readers in the introduction to People Of the Lie: "After many years of vague identification with Buddhist and Islamic mysticism, I ultimately made a firm Chirstian commitment -- signified by my non-denominational baptism on the ninth of March 1980, at the age of forty-three (1983, p. 11).
- 4 An exception to this rule was Open Marriage (1972), in which the O'Neills propose that monogamy is unnatural, and recommend that love and sex be practiced in a more diffuse, less selective manner. This book, despite its racy reputation, is not really a sex manual, but a deconstruction of traditional marriage.
- 5 Michael Morganstern (1982) renames successful G-spot stimulation "the peritoneal orgasm" in How To Make Love to a Woman. He describes its elusive but exceptional qualities, and advises men on how they might attempt to produce one in a woman:

Less well known, somewhat controversial, but more and more talked about is the fourth and final kind of female orgasm: the peritoneal orgasm. This orgasm can give a woman deep, ecstatic pleasure. It involves the sensitive lining of the abdominal cavity. . . . [It] can only be achieved by the deepest possible penetration To give a woman this kind of orgasm, avoid elaborate foreplay (especially stimulation of the clitoris) . . . (pp. 114-15)

In How to Make Love to Each Other (1982), Penney writes: "Exact

location of the spot is unknown and indeed the G-spot itself is far from being universally acknowledged" (p. 74). And in Supermarital Sex (1987), Paul Pearsall writes: "Publicity for a G spot far exceeds the actual 'product' performance" (p. 166).

- 6 How To Make Love to Each Other was not a New York Times bestseller, but it was a Publishers Weekly bestseller. These two periodicals share most of the books on their lists, but because their methods are slightly different, these lists are not identical. It is also possible that my sampling method allowed a few books -- such as Penney's second -- to slip by. In any case, How to Make Love to Each Other remains of interest because it capped off the trilogy.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

- 1 According to the articles from which this criticism emerged, Susan Reverby was director of women's studies at Wellesley College; Hannah Lerman was "a Los Angeles psychologist specializing in women's issues"; Paula Caplan was a "professor of applied psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and author of The Myth of Women's Masochism"; and Gerald Rosen was "a Seattle psychologist who is the chairman of the [American Psychological Association's] Task Force on Self-Help Therapies," as well as author of his own self-help volume, Don't Be Afraid.

- 2 On occasion, authors may see psychological patterns as buttressed by biological imperatives. Carter and Sokol write, for example:

The most powerful force driving a woman to commit has to be her maternal instincts -- her biological need to couple and reproduce. The survival of the species depends entirely on the continuation of the species, a task that Mother Nature has relegated primarily to women (a wise choice, no doubt). With few exceptions, all other fears and desires pale in the face of this most potent biological force. (p. 78)

- 3 Judith Viorst (1986) provides an exception to the rule by addressing women readers as mothers. She encourages women to loosen their maternal grip:

We sometimes may not be aware that it is hard for us to separate from our children, and that we are holding on to them too tightly. And this absence of awareness can sometimes make our separation problem their problem. . . . For

believe it or not, there is a creature called the "too-good mother," the mother who insistently gives too much, the mother who stunts development by not allowing her child to feel any frustration. Furthermore such mothers may hasten to empathize so totally and immediately that their children can't tell if their feelings are really their own. (pp. 230-1)

- 4 Brown scoffs at ideas of discrimination against women in the work place. Of sexual harassment on the job, she comments: "Of the millions of naughty suggestions made my millions of male employers to their "defenseless" female employees yearly, I'd say half cheered the girls up, half brought the girls down, but probably nothing bad has come out of most of them" (p. 34).

- 5 In her forward, Woititz writes:

Adult Children of Alcoholics was originally written only with children of alcoholics in mind. Since its publication, we have learned that the material discussed here applies to other types of dysfunctional families as well. . . . It appears that much of what is true of children of alcoholics is also true for others, and that this understanding can help reduce the isolation of countless persons who also thought they were "different" because of their life experience. (p. ii)

- 6 Norwood, however, was not the first to link love and addictions together. Stanton Peale's Love and Addiction (1975) -- which never achieved bestseller status -- laid out the basic ideas that Norwood would apply to women's relationship-problems a decade later. Peale describes addiction as a manner of behavior that is encouraged by our culture: "Addiction is not an abnormality in our culture. It is not an aberration from the norm; it is itself the norm" (p. 6). He sees obsessive behavior as a resulting from a lack of moral direction and stability. He bemoans the complete transience and unreliability of modern life (like Toffler), concluding that addictive behavior arises from a deeply felt lack of control, and fears of impending momentous unpredictability. While Stanton's focus on institutional weakness as a precursor to anomie can be seen as a sort of speculative and sketchy update of the philosophical views Durkheim presented in Suicide (1897), Norwood's argument is firmly embedded in psychological theories of individualistic treatment.

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