

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Chronicle and Crucible

LINDSY VAN GELDER

INSIDE MS.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement.

By Mary Thom.

Holt. 244 pp. \$25.

It was an audacious thing to do—ballsy even, although in the early seventies “ballsy” was up for re-evaluation, along with the rest of the English language, the medical profession, sex, marriage, motherhood and many other institutions, including journalism. “Gloria Steinem and Pat Carbine wanted to publish a national magazine that commanded attention...attracting readers and creating a public dialogue about feminist issues. That required a glossy magazine that would be expensive to produce,” writes Mary Thom. Their goal sounds utterly reasonable now—a testament to the success of the women’s movement in general and *Ms.* in particular.

But at the time, as Thom reminds us, much of the world found feminism hilarious. News of the first big women’s march down Fifth Avenue in 1970 (an event that helped launch Steinem to stardom) was introduced on WABC-TV with the remark, “And now for another item of trivia.” When feminism wasn’t funny, it didn’t compute. Rape victims in those days were generally assumed to have asked for it. *The New York Times*’s Help Wanted ads were segregated according to gender. Wearing a pantsuit to a Manhattan restaurant was a rebellious act. So, if you were female, was having both a job and a child. The women’s magazines concerned themselves with none of these things, seldom venturing beyond *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* and “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” The day *Ms.* rolled off the presses in the summer of 1972, it was fodder for the network newswits. “I’ll give it six months,” the late Harry Reasoner quipped, “before they run out of things to say.”

Lindsay Van Gelder is co-author of The Girls Next Door: Into the Heart of Lesbian America (Simon & Schuster). She lives in Miami Beach.

Ms. is still kicking, although it has changed ownership several times. Mary Thom was on the staff for more than two decades, rising from researcher to senior editor. I’ve written on and off for *Ms.* during most of its existence (frequently with Thom as my editor) and was on staff as a part-time writer for more than eight years. Although I’ve worked for scores of other magazines, I found *Ms.* uniquely seductive, especially early on. Readers regarded it not just as a source of news but as a giant interactive reality check about the transformations they (and we) were going through. Their letters were wildly personal, cranky, smart, bristling with feedback. As a writer you felt *heard*; your words were changing lives, not lining litter boxes. *Ms.* attracted such gifted

Ms. gave us our first chance to practice journalism with feminism as a given. But we labored under some unusual constraints.

voices as Alice Walker, Barbara Ehrenreich, Jane O’Reilly, Mary Kay Blakely, Ellen Willis, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, Margaret Atwood, Mary Gordon, Molly Ivins, Susan Faludi, Robin Morgan and Marcia Gillespie. *Inside Ms.* recounts a day in 1974 when Anais Nin wandered uninvited into the office, “her cape and her scarves flowing,” to offer the editors her latest diary.

Thom is good at capturing the Girls Reinventing the World spirit of the times. Concentrating primarily on the Steinem-Carbine years (1972–1987), she catalogues the magazine’s shining moments, from the breaking of the Karen Silkwood story to the introduction of important issues like battered women and sexual harassment on the job. She gives behind-the-scenes dish about the angst with which *Ms.* made so many editorial decisions. To illustrate Jane O’Reilly’s story on “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth,” the cover of the premiere issue showed a painting of a many-armed, Shiva-like woman, her skin blue, her hands busy with typewriter, frying pan, phone, mirror, steering wheel, clock, iron and



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feather duster. Letty Pogrebin remembered a long discussion about the cover:

We had one possible image that was a female figure cut up like beef, the segments representing different parts of women's lives. Before we got to the woman with the arms, we were hysterical about how we could get everybody in. What age should she be? What color should she be? Fat? Thin? Glasses? Not? Everything was thought through with such care. I remember when we decided she would be blue what a relief it was. She would be blue and mythic.

One of the most interesting questions Thom raises is whether it was possible to be a mainstream, ad-dependent *feminist* magazine. She devotes an entire chapter to the hapless adventures of the women who tried to convince corporate America to market its wares in *Ms.* At sales calls, "They were hanging out of their doorways to see what the freaks and weirdos from *Ms.* looked like," according to Cathleen Black, who today is president of Hearst Magazines. "Sometimes, they'd blow up at us," says another ad saleswoman. "For example, if they were divorced, they thought it was our fault—*Ms.* magazine—that their wife left them and got a job." Some of those who did advertise created other problems. "We would get ads that said things like 'Ask your doctor what he thinks,'" recalls publisher Carbine. "And we could suggest, only suggest, that they make changes."

Alice Walker abruptly left *Ms.* in 1986. In her letter of resignation, she cited her family's alienation when the magazine arrived every month "with its determinedly (and to us grim) white cover." Thom refers to the incident but fails to mention that the editors believed that black people on the cover would depress newsstand sales, compromising the magazine's circulation base and therefore its ad rates. As a lesbian, I was on a similar collision course with *Ms.* The first article in which I came out was held in inventory for nearly four years. *Ms.* unfortunately had reason to be cautious: Ad sales staffers from *Cosmopolitan* had "gone through every issue of *Ms.* and, with a yellow highlighter, hit any reference to lesbians." They used the results to persuade Chevrolet not to advertise in pervert-friendly *Ms.* The year that Walker resigned, I came close to doing the same. In a press release to the advertising community boasting that I had been named a semifinalist in NASA's Journalist in Space competition, *Ms.* deleted a reference to my life partner. (It had been clear in my application that I

was gay; hence I was left with the odd inference that NASA was more liberal than *Ms.*) Thom feels bad about this and the other compromises the magazine made. But she ultimately concludes that it was the prestige garnered by *Ms.* during its slick years that made it possible for it to survive when it eventually changed to its current ad-free format.

Inside Ms. is less direct when the villains are closer to home than crass male advertisers. It's not that Thom is afraid to air dirty linen in public, but that she airs it here and there, without any overarching analysis to clothespin it to. Much of the book is organized chronologically; *Ms.*'s critics and problems tend to surface sporadically in the book, as they came up in real life. Ellen Willis quits in Chapter 4, calling *Ms.* a "propaganda organ" with a "sentimental idea of sisterhood" and "very little independent thinking." Editor Mary Peacock quits in Chapter 5, complaining that "the conflicts between the popular and the political were resolved in favor of dullness too often." In Chapter 7, some junior staffers say they "felt their creativity squelched when they tried to write for the magazine. They shared a bit of black humor among themselves with the line 'M.S.: the cripple of young adults.'" That these three examples might be part of a larger theme is never tackled.

Ms. was relentlessly nonhierarchical—in theory. Thom rightly acknowledges that Suzanne Levine was the executive editor during the Steinem-Carbine years, although the title-free masthead failed to credit her as such. The author is somewhat less forthcoming on the prickly subject of money. It's noted early in the book that salaries were awarded in part on need. "Were you supporting kids?... The result was a salary structure without the chasm typical in publishing between the lowest- and highest-paid employees." It was also a salary structure where *nobody* made a lot of money. Chapters later, in a description of annual staff retreats, Thom mentions that editor Harriet Lyons, a single mother, "dared to suggest that beneath the egalitarian *Ms.* exterior, some staff members were being exploited while others were using speaking engagements and other extracurricular activity to build tidy careers for themselves." And that's the end of *that* discussion.

I was one of those who had other sources of income, but I remember editorial assistants who had to cadge invitations to media events in order to eat. Some feminists (those without a man to depend on, for instance) couldn't afford to work for *Ms.* There was a certain amount of fester-

ing even among those who could. Thom alludes vaguely to "resentments" that surfaced during an all-day editors' group therapy session at the close of the Steinem-Carbine era; what she doesn't say is that some of them were about salary disparities that had quietly arisen over the years. The author does acknowledge the magazine's notorious problems paying its freelancers, many of whom were accepting below-market rates specifically because they believed in *Ms.*'s ideals. Mary Kay Blakely is shown desperately trying to take care of her children while she waits in vain for a check. She wonders, "How could a feminist magazine be doing this to me?" but then graciously adds that lack of money is, after all, a common "movement phenomenon." Thom is suitably regretful. I think the real question is whether a publication that justified everything from tobacco ads to lily-white covers on the basis of its commercial aspirations can fairly claim that it's also a utopian socialist experiment.

Ms. was actually a mass of contradictions. One that loomed large for me (I had been a wire service and newspaper reporter before I worked for *Ms.*) was whether it was possible to practice both journalism and advocacy. Most of the staff was in the advocacy camp. Thom quotes editor Joanne Edgar after a particularly nasty confrontation with right-wing women during the New York State conference on International Women's Year (I.W.Y.) in 1977:

I hated the conflict.... I hated the fact that they seemed to have so much power behind them and so much money, and we didn't. I hated the idea of losing, that our issues could be wiped out. It was okay from the magazine's point of view—as a journalist, it was really interesting, but as a participant I hated it.

My first assignment at *Ms.* was the national I.W.Y. conference later that year in Houston. While I interviewed delegates on both sides, my colleagues cranked out position papers against the Schlaflyites. During the day, one of the movers and shakers I followed around was Gloria Steinem. At night, Steinem and I shared a room in the *Ms.* crash pad. When we got back to New York, she edited my piece, modestly excising a truthful but unacceptable reference to the heroic role she played helping the bickering women-of-color caucus craft its plank.

If this sounds horrendous, it really wasn't, at least most of the time. After all, my previous employers thought my belief that women were equal human beings was

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There is persistent pressure on Israel to bring "sacrifices for peace." It is understood that these "sacrifices" refer to greater "flexibility" in dealing with the Arabs, but mean primarily that Israel should allow its dismemberment, in order to bring peace to the region.

What are the facts?

A Bizarre Concept. The concept to bring "sacrifices for peace" is a new one that has never before found application in world history. It was created by Arab propaganda to induce Israel to agree to its dismemberment, to give strategic assets to those who are determined to destroy it.

Since its creation in 1948, Israel has been subjected to almost constant Arab terror; to unceasing Arab aggression, and to three major wars. In the Six-Day War, it recovered its heartland of Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") and the eastern part of Jerusalem; it captured the Golan Heights from Syria, which had been used for decades to shell and spread terror over much of northern Israel; and it conquered Gaza and the Sinai Desert that had been used by Egypt as staging ground and invasion route to Israel.

Many Sacrifices for Peace. In order to achieve peace with its neighbors, Israel brought sacrifices for peace that have no precedent in the history of the world. For peace with Egypt, Israel returned the entire Sinai. There is little thanks on the part of Egypt for this generosity and this sacrifice for peace. The controlled Egyptian press spews daily anti-Israel venom. President Mubarak has never visited Jerusalem. It is the coolest possible peace. A sacrifice for peace brought in vain—probably a major act of folly on the part of Israel.

Israel made sacrifices for peace by signing a peace treaty with Jordan. In that

peace, Israel granted Jordan a large yearly allowance of fresh water from its own dwindling and meager resources and accepted a petty demand for "border rectification"—yielding of land. As for Syria, no offered sacrifice for peace seems to be sufficient to satisfy its dictator, President Hafez Assad. He is unwilling to consider even an ice-cold peace, except for Israel's total surrender of the Golan Heights. Fortunately, under the current Israeli government such a surrender is not in the cards.

The greatest sacrifice for peace that Israel has brought was the resuscitation of the bankrupt and moribund PLO terror organization and the acceptance of it "chairman" Yasser Arafat as a negotiating partner. In this ill-advised process, foisted on Israel by world pressure and by its previous government, Israel has made far-reaching and existential sacrifices and concessions. It has yielded control of the Gaza Strip and of all major "West Bank" cities

Here are three good sacrifices that the Arabs could bring for peace: (1) Abandon the insistence on recovering the Golan; (2) Stop the clamor about the division of Jerusalem; (3) Disarm the Palestinian "police."

to the Palestinian Authority and has agreed to detailed plans to grant further autonomy to the Palestinians. In what is probably the ultimate folly in this process, Israel has tolerated the formation of a Palestinian "police force" (actually an army) of 40,000 men—the largest police-to-population ratio in the world (!)—and has equipped this "police force" with a complete arsenal of automatic weapons. As the world now knows, these weapons were turned on Israeli soldiers and civilians at the very first opportunity that the Palestinian leaders provoked.

The Arab countries, not Israel, are killing peace in the Middle East. The PLO, apart from the bloody crimes that it has committed against Israel, has now established a virtual dictatorship in the territory allotted to it. In Egypt, thousands of Copts have been killed and their churches burned. President Assad of Syria has occupied Lebanon and has killed and tortured thousands. Iraq, under its dictator Saddam Hussein, is a rogue state attacking its neighbors and killing its own citizens. Saudi Arabia is a monarchical tyranny. Sudan is engaged in the systematic slaughter and enslavement of its black African people. How strange that nobody asks the Palestinians or any of the Arab states to bring any sacrifices for peace. Here are three good sacrifices that the Arabs could bring for peace: (1) Abandon the insistence on recovering the Golan; (2) Stop the clamor about the division of Jerusalem; (3) Disarm the Palestinian "police." Billy clubs are good enough for London Bobbies. Why should any more be needed to patrol Nablus, Hebron and Bethlehem?

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evidence of a lack of objectivity. *Ms.* gave me and other journalists who were willing to push for it our first chance to practice our craft with feminism as a given. But we labored under some unusual constraints. Not the least of them—and one that *Inside Ms.* barely touches on—was Steinem's dual role as editor and movement leader. Steinem is one of the most generous, *good* people I've ever known, and as a *Ms.* staffer she was almost ludicrously self-effacing, even sharing an office with Pogrebin and Edgar. But it was understood that she had certain alliances in the movement and that she stood for certain positions. Not that there was a great deal of dissent. Those who lasted at *Ms.* tended genuinely to share Steinem's views. (Most of the staff even menstruated on the same schedule.)

What this meant was that *Ms.*, for all its advocacy journalism, was less and less the

house organ of the entire movement. Feminists who had doubts about the ethics of abortion or who liked porn or who passionately admired Betty Friedan were seldom given a forum. Thom cites a 1985 *Blakely* story on the pornography debate as proof that *Ms.* did operate a big tent, but the issue had actually been on the movement front burner for a decade. By the time the founders gave up the ghost in 1987 and sold the magazine to an Australian conglomerate, it was too radical for most advertisers and too predictable for many feminists.

And yet *Ms.* is still the most influential feminist publication in history, both crucible and chronicle. For those of us who were touched by it, Thom's book (lack of warts and all) is a reunion with old friends. For other readers, it's a reminder that women with grit and talent have changed at least a corner of the world. ■

Spirit Worlds

DIANE SIMON

AMRITA. By Banana Yoshimoto. Translated by Russell F. Wasden. Grove. 366 pp. \$22.

Call it wanton pessimism, or Manichean perversity, but don't deny literary truth: There was no Paradise before the parking lot, and Eden was just a hothum jungle before the serpent arrived. It's a lesson mastered by our sternest authors—Paul of Tarsus, Milton—but one that found its pithiest expression in the disillusionment rock of the late sixties. *You don't know what you've got till it's gone.* And then you pine after it in stanza after stanza.

Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto has long understood the importance of loss to literary enterprise. Despite their vigorous optimism, *Kitchen* and *N.P.*, Yoshimoto's first two novels, are infused with endless longing and marked by their accounts of deep, profound grief. Contrary to the Gen-X stereotype, which counsels an expectation of authorial nihilism and pop-cultural pastiche, Yoshimoto has never been afraid of trauma. Her characters are immersed in a youth culture that owes more than a little to our notoriously shallow, decadent *fin de siècle*. They sleep around, eat street-stand ramen and listen with pleasure to Nirvana (*Lizard*, a book of stories published in 1996, is dedicated to the memory of Kurt Cobain), but their lives are also marred by old-fashioned timeless tragedy. They lose their jobs and marry unsuccessfully; the people they love die before their time.

Diane Simon is a writer who lives in Queens.

The point of departure for *Amrita* is precisely this kind of loss. Still reeling from grief after her younger sister Mayu's suicide, Sakumi, our narrator, falls and hits her head on icy concrete steps. When she awakens, she realizes that though she is able to recognize people, her memories of her past are dim, shallow, at times nonexistent. "Something that should have been clear and lucid," she says, "was cloudy and unclear." Previously diffuse, even sublimated, her mourning for Mayu takes on form and purpose after her accident; it becomes her memory loss. When Sakumi triumphs over this spiritual amnesia, she is also conquering her grief, making peace with her past and with the memory of her troubled sister.

After the accident, Sakumi is "forced to live a haphazard life, a balancing act, so to speak." Since she is unwilling to admit the extent of her memory loss to her family and friends, she must constantly improvise. She hides her surprise when a friend tells her that it's been years since she visited her home; she gives in to her urge to sleep with Mayu's lover, Ryuichiro, when he returns from a trip abroad, even though she can't

recall if she had romantic feelings for him before he left. In a dream, a woman who is also having difficulty with her memory confides in Sakumi: "The me that's only me is the only me that I can't remember." Unable to recall her "only me," Sakumi relies on instinct to invent her.

In the Prologue, which takes place before Sakumi's accident but after Mayu's death, Yoshimoto signals the slippage that will finally occur between Sakumi's past and her present. Subtly, she offers a taste of the deepening intimacy between Sakumi and Ryuichiro. At the same time, she foreshadows the distance Sakumi must travel on her road to health. When Sakumi receives a small statue of Nipper, the RCA dog, from Ryuichiro, she wonders in vain what message he has for her. Thinking it might help her understand Ryuichiro's purpose, Sakumi tips her head and bares her ear in imitation of Nipper's pose. "Just as I imagined," she says, "I couldn't hear a thing."

Amrita is the story of Sakumi's recovery—from grief, from amnesia, from her sometimes crippling sense of loss. It is also a meditation on conversational potential: what is and might be heard and understood. Though Sakumi begins her journey unable to hear the distant notes that stir Nipper, by its end she is tuned to receive sounds far more ethereal. With the guidance of her 11-year-old brother, Yoshio, and a host of new friends (one is named Mesmer), Sakumi travels deep into what we might call the "psychic realm." Together with Yoshio, Sakumi learns to communicate without speaking: She receives guests in her dreams and is physically and emotionally haunted by the roaming spirits of the dead.

It is in this ghostly realm that Sakumi makes peace with Mayu and with the responsibilities of remembrance. On the island of Saipan, where one of the bloodiest battles of World War II was fought, and where she and Ryuichiro have gone on vacation, Sakumi's relationship with the spirit world takes on a historical dimension. A friend tells her that the thousands of sea cucumbers that lie curled on the beach and the ocean floor are "the spirits of those who died in the war." Initially disgusted, Sakumi later finds herself inspired by their presence: "Natural whispers of thousands of spirits rising ever so silently over the waters—silent voices without sound." Saipan, with all of its worldly and spiritual associations, becomes for Sakumi a repository of found treasure, a sun-drenched path to painful memories.

In the end, though, it is neither a melancholy seascape nor psychic encounters that usher Sakumi into a détente with her past:

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