



Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang

Women and Guns: Politics and the Culture of Firearms in America by Deborah Homsher; Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America by Mary Zeiss Stange; Carol Oyster

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The Women's Review of Books, Vol. 18, No. 6 (Mar., 2001), pp. 20-21

Published by: [Old City Publishing, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4023573>

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Kiss kiss, bang bang

by Claire Bond Potter

Women and Guns: Politics and the Culture of Firearms

in America by Deborah Homsher. Armonk, NY:

M. E. Sharpe, 2001, 246 pp., \$32.95 hardcover.

Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary

America by Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol Oyster.

New York: New York University Press, 2000,

267 pp., \$25.95 hardcover.



I was in my late teens," Carol Oyster recalls in an early chapter of *Gun Women*, "babysitting for my much younger brother. As I tucked him into bed, I glanced up at the window above the headboard and saw a man staring in at me." Oyster screamed and, when the intruder remained there, "smiling oddly," she retrieved the revolver that her father kept in his bedside drawer. "I was still screaming as I pointed the gun at the window. He left. Quickly. To this day I don't know whether the gun was loaded." This is a crucial story to tell at the beginning of Mary Zeiss Stange and Oyster's collaborative study on women gun owners. Similar scenarios recur throughout the book, and in Deborah Homsher's *Women and Guns*, to emphasize the importance of women owning guns and training themselves to kill if necessary. Both books also examine a

range of ways women arm themselves—to hunt, to work, to maintain their Second Amendment right to bear arms, to empower themselves, to enhance bonds with family and community and to just have fun.

Defense of home and family against the anonymous, sexualized intruder is only one story told by gun-owning women who ask "liberal feminists" to come to terms with a natural world which is predatory, and a society in which nonviolence is not an option—particularly for women. Female hunters ask their critics to reevaluate their view of the environment as benign until marred by human violence. Stange herself believes that hunting is "an intellectually honest way of being a meat eater"; another hunter interviewed for *Gun Women* believes that large game is healthier than commercially processed

meat, and a third—formerly vegetarian—said that hunting had given her "a new appreciation of my own connection to nature, and the fact that as human beings, we are not separate from the earth and the animals we share it with." One of Homsher's hunters charges those opposed to hunting with cultural propaganda, offering one of the book's great quotes: "If there's anything I hate, it's Bambi. When a Bambi book comes into my bookstore, I burn it. I don't let it go out into the public."

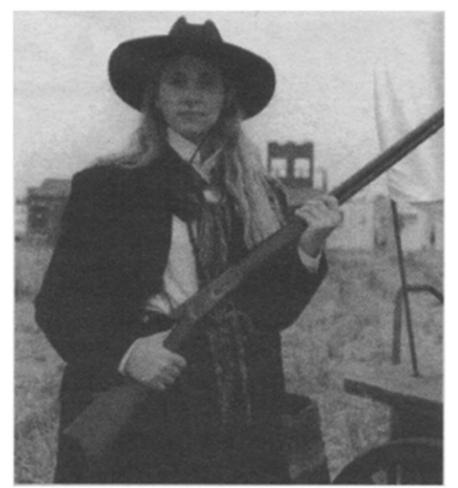
Both books argue that women gun owners and shooters are invisible in the debate over gun violence, partly because of their numbers, but also because proponents of gun control are female, and because "liberal feminists" have incorrectly characterized women as nonviolent. Stange and Oyster, both academics and hunters, have employed a method well established in feminist scholarship by collecting and sharing personal narratives, their own and those of other female shooters. As staunch defenders of the constitutional right to bear arms, they are also "concerned about knee-jerk anti-gun rhetoric, and the tendency for the debate over guns and gun control to degenerate into name-calling between 'bleeding-heart liberals' and 'gun nuts.'"

While Stange and Oyster deplore this, it is worth noting that they only interviewed women who are enthusiastic about the benefits of gun ownership and did no new research to illuminate the concerns of gun control advocates. Homsher's research method is similar, but she also includes the stories of women who have organized publicly against gun violence. To a greater extent than Stange and Oyster, she also situates her study in the history of American freedom and frontier violence that pro- and anti-gun arguments invoke.

Guns are a timely topic, both books maintaining that women bear arms for work and recreation in numbers significant enough to alter the terms of the national political debate. As Stange and Oyster point out in a chapter devoted to women in uniform, rather than being anti-feminists, some gun women have emerged because of feminist political organizing that does not characterize women's nature as inherently nonviolent. Separate female branches of the service were eliminated in 1973; in 1976, by order of Congress, women were integrated into the service academies, beginning a process that would continue with women performing combat duties in the Gulf War. When the draft was reinstated by Congress in 1979, the National Organization for Women came out in favor of drafting women. This same period also saw a rise in the recruitment and training of female police officers; the police academy in New York City graduated its first female officers in 1973 and the NYPD now actively recruits female police cadets.

But female soldiers or police officers are perhaps the easiest cases to think about. Even so, bearing arms and being able to use them competently is but one of a constellation of gender anomalies that the female soldier or police officer embodies. What of the woman who chooses to bear arms for self-defense—or pleasure? What gender trouble does she cause?

For Stange and Oyster, gun women cause trouble across the political spec-



Single-Action Shooting Society member Jubilee Montana with Model 1894 Winchester Rifle. From *Gun Women*.

trum. They begin *Gun Women* with a concept that they believe is virtually unspeakable among feminist scholars: that they "are interested in the positive impact of firearms on the lives of these women," and that theirs is a "feminist study." Furthermore, they claim that when the voices of American gun women are heard, they challenge "conventional ideas about women's capacity for taking instruments of power into their own hands, ideas with which feminists and antifeminists have often been equally comfortable."

But Stange and Oyster, and Homsher too, really seek to position gun women against what is variously called the "anti-gun" or "liberal feminist" position. It is a weakness of both books that, having set out to investigate what their authors see as a polarized gun debate, they tend not to escape the terms of that polarization. Nonetheless, the data has potential. The interviews expose ecofeminists, maternalists, Democrats, Republicans, liberals and conservatives. The personal stories reveal a range of philosophies that are reasonably feminist; collectively these women highlight the difficulty of naming or categorizing any of the multiple political positions across the spectrum of the debate over guns.

Both books make what Ann Snitow has called a "difference feminism" argument: in other words, they advocate for female gun ownership on the basis of needs and social roles that are rooted in women's nature. I appreciate the importance of this political tradition in American culture; however, neither book highlights it, and both miss an important opportunity. What I wish is that all these authors, rather than situating their gun women in a frontier tradition, had recognized that gun owners and gun controllers make more sense if you figure out where they fit—as individuals—in the history of feminism. As I read the forceful, articulate stories in each book, I thought of Faye Ginsburg's insight that the struggle between women over the right to abortion in Fargo, North Dakota, was the struggle between liberals and conservatives over the meaning of feminism; of Jane DeHarte and Don Mathews' study of the failure of the ERA in North Carolina, which yielded a similar analysis; and of Gayle Rubin's work on S/M sexuality, which shows violent sex play as a route to pleasure and power for women.

Feminist as it may be, the argument that women use guns differently, and more wisely, does work to domesticate violence. But since part of the logic for female handgun ownership is that women who are being stalked and beat-

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en are not well protected by the police, a pro-gun position that violence is already domestic resonates. Stange and Oyster argue that women's ownership of guns does not contribute to a more dangerous society. They say that women are safer and more disciplined shooters than men, although they acknowledge that the evidence is purely anecdotal, and since fewer than ten percent of gun owners are female, it's hard to know. They, and Homsher, produce better evidence of female shooters' belief that guns support traditionally female roles in the home and in the environment.

The interviews in both books, and the personal essays that Stange and Oyster place between chapters, elaborate on gender differences that make female gun ownership a different proposition from male gun ownership, although in most cases women's stories are linked to men who introduce them to the community of shooters. Writing about guns allows women to amplify other themes in their lives: motherhood, family tradition and heteronormativity. In most of the stories it is a boyfriend, father or husband who shares guns as part of a loving and respectful relationship, thus demonstrating that male gun owners are not inherently anti-female or violent. Many of the hunters describe their pleasure at being able to nourish their families with the meat they bring home (or as several say, "harvest") from land hunted by their forebears. While Stange and Oyster regret the annual deaths associated with handguns and cite safety programs available to families, they resist the "liberal feminist" notion that "if women take an active role in protecting themselves, they are 'escalating' the violence."

But who are these liberal feminists? This is a big problem for *Gun Women*. Stange and Oyster too often make important arguments by assertion, by mischaracterization, or by attributing the opposite position to an unnamed, but ill-informed or naive, opponent. Vera Norwood, for example, is written off for having a "personal bias...against hunting," when in fact the passage they cite does not censor hunting but rather explicates the problem of female self-representation in nineteenth-century hunting narratives.

Stange and Oyster haven't introduced any new evidence about whether gun proliferation causes gun violence, and they implicitly blame victims of accidental or purposeful death for not having taken an NRA training course or not carrying a gun for self-defense. They also fail to convince me that many prominent anti-gun figures are actually liberal or expressly feminist. Sarah Brady, the chair of Handgun Control, Inc., whose husband James was disabled by a handgun during the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan in 1981, may be anti-firearm, but she isn't a liberal. And events like last year's Million Mom March are intended to unite liberals and conservatives against gun violence in the name of family and community, not feminism.

Stange and Oyster also mar an occasionally eloquent book with rehashed arguments they have published elsewhere and ill-conceived attacks on others. A passage they quote from Wendy Brown's 1989 *Yale Law Review* essay on the Second Amendment, in which Brown tells of encountering a man wearing an NRA cap, and her realiza-

tion that feminist self-defense skills would not prevent rape, provokes a rather mean-spirited response: "The option of arming herself to forestall the sort of assault in the circumstances she imagines here obviously never occurred to her." Well, I don't know Wendy Brown, but my guess is that someone who has gone to the trouble of learning self-defense is nobody's fool, and that for the time being, shooting somebody is not an option her ethics can sustain. Similarly, Stange and Oyster should at least take into account that some people don't hunt, and some reject animal products altogether, as a deeply felt ethical position. Personally, they may think it is a dumb choice, but as researchers they ought to represent others more fairly and completely, or not represent them at all.

Homsher presents anti-gun positions much more sympathetically. As part of her research, she took the trouble to learn to shoot at one of the "Becoming an Outdoorswoman" conferences sponsored by the NRA, other shooting organizations and several gun manufacturers. She also devotes an entire chapter to anti-gun organizing among African American mothers in Camden, New Jersey, whereas Stange and Oyster really avoid urban violence altogether, except as a good reason for women to be able to carry concealed pistols legally.

Homsher has a different problem, which there is no way around: she needed an editor, an argument and a better research design. She seems to have chosen some people for interviews because they were available, and even when the data is interesting, it doesn't produce questions that inform a larger theme or argument. In an attempt to ground her findings in an American historical tradition she wanders off topic for pages, generalizes and produces some odd analysis. "The history of women is various," she concludes, in one of the stranger accounts of Algonquin preindustrial life I have ever encountered—don't even ask why this is relevant to a chapter on female sport shooting among white women in post-industrial America. The book unravels completely in an extended conclusion, where she notes that "every genuine search for America should commence with bewilderment, and keep coming back to it." Well, whatever, as my vegetarian niece would say.

Thinking about what these books did and did not accomplish, I would argue that more and better research needs to be done on gun women. If Second Amendment debates collapse discussion of all guns into one category, researchers shouldn't—long guns, handguns and automatic weapons present contextual differences that are politically and socially significant. Women who bear arms because of their work are more unlike than similar to women who keep a handgun in the bedside table to fend off a crazy ex or rapist.

One of the things feminist scholarship has established pretty definitively over the last thirty years is that "women" do not constitute a coherent category; I would argue, in response to the personal stories in these books, that "guns" and "gun violence" are not particularly coherent categories either. Both of these books try to do too much and ultimately sell the topic short; however, they also expose how much work needs to be done, and the possibilities for reframing the debate.

Defying the Emperor

by Lori J. Marso

Ten Years of Exile by Germaine de Staël, translated by Avriel H.

Goldberger. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press,

2000, 308 pp., \$45.00 hardcover.



While harboring deep suspicion of all intellectuals, Napoleon Bonaparte singled out Germaine de Staël when she published *De la littérature (On Literature Considered in Relation to Social Institutions)*, a cosmopolitan piece inherently at odds with his reactionary goals. While he ensured that her work was increasingly attacked in the press, over the next several years Staël's salon became a primary meeting place for dissident intellectuals and government officials. In 1803 Napoleon banished Staël from her beloved Paris; *Ten Years of Exile* is her memoir of that banishment. In order to save the manuscript and others from Napoleon's censors, Staël was obliged to write in code (a fascinating example is contained in an appendix to this edition) and relied on the help of friends to transcribe the text and smuggle it across borders.

Ten Years of Exile was left unfinished upon Staël's untimely death in 1817. Though her son, Auguste, included it in his mother's *Complete Works* published in 1821, the version was a significantly diminished and heavily edited manuscript on which the 1972 first English translation was based. Avriel H. Goldberger's new translation is a much needed and anticipated authoritative work based on the critical 1996 French edition. He includes an analytical biographical introduction to Staël's life and work, extensive historical annotation, an invaluable map of Staël's 1812 trek through Russia and a detailed chronology documenting events pertinent to the book.

The travails in the lives of exceptional women, often persecuted and vilified, were a familiar theme for Staël, who sought to analyze their lives in order to assess the health of the political body. She created two exceptional women in her popular novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, and even went so far as to publish a defense of Marie Antoinette in August 1793 at the time of her trial. Propaganda at the time had painted

Marie Antoinette as foreigner, prostitute, adulteress and coquette. Staël connected the personal with the political in recognizing that Marie Antoinette was not simply a fallen queen but rather a symbol of the too-powerful and too-political woman.

Staël was a direct witness to the major events of the French Revolution, including the Terror, and to Napoleon's rise to power. She documented her reactions to these events in essays, novels and major political and historical analyses. Though she condemned the Jacobins as fanatics and judged the Revolution's treatment of its women as blatantly misogynist, she never ceased to defend revolutionary ideals and was unwilling to sacrifice them to the elusive call for "order" that drove Napoleon's popularity.

One might initially conclude that *Ten Years of Exile* is less a book about Staël's own life than about her obsession with Napoleon's character. But the two are so intertwined that the latter serves to illuminate the former. In the first lines of the book, Staël clearly links personal fears for herself and her children with the danger haunting Europe. "It is not to draw public attention to myself that I have set out to relate the circumstances of my ten years of exile," she begins. But the Emperor has "persecuted me with such meticulous care and inflexible asperity at an ever-increasing pace" that "through my relations with him, I came to know what he was long before Europe had found the key to the enigma and, failing to guess what it meant, let herself be devoured by the sphinx."

The Emperor was, of course, not Staël's enemy alone; he was also a menace to the liberty of the entire continent. Staël writes poignantly of the situation of exiles, remarking that the "decree of exile" means that "this one dies far from the family that would have restored him to life; that one cannot be

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