

Catherine Millet, *Jealousy: The Other Life of Catherine M.* Trans. Helen Stevenson (Serpent's Tail, 2009)

Before you read Catherine Millet's *Jealousy*, it is worth reading her earlier book *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* if only to gain a sense of the 'other life' referred to in the subtitle of *Jealousy*. Without prior knowledge of the first, the ironies will not be apparent and it may be difficult to ascertain what the point is of the second. In *The Sexual Life*, Millet writes an autobiographical account of her sex life as a libertine. She makes herself available to virtually anyone anywhere and participates in all manner of sexual scenarios, including orgies and open air events involving car bonnets, headlights, and queues of men.

A variety of reviews offer quite different opinions on the first book. On the one hand it is viewed as cheap pornography, but on the other hand it is lauded as a treatise on female desire. Initially, the sentences seem long and rambling and logical connections between paragraphs are few. The pages are filled with a catalogue of sexual exploits, played out with an ever-changing cast of supporting actors. The descriptions are hardly titillating, rather they lack emotion and human presence. The sexual partners are often faceless and numerous and Catherine, while she claims to derive pleasure from her pursuits, often gives the impression that she has vacated her body and is merely a willing piece of meat, to put it bluntly. One begins to feel pity for this sad woman intent on debasing/erasing her self.

Nevertheless, there are moments when a 'literary' quality can be detected and the writing becomes philosophical. This is particularly evident when Millet is musing on the concept of space and the body's relationship to it. Naturally this involves turning the lens on the psyche and some brief excursions into psychoanalysis.

By the end of the book one might wonder why it was written or why the sex life of Catherine Millet should be of interest to the reader. It's not as though Millet was a well known public figure in Australia before the release of the English translation. In fact an advanced Google search of Australian websites in English, in the past 12 months, yields only 36 results post-dating the publication of two books. In Europe she is better known as an art critic and founder of the magazine *Art Press*, but even so she's not Picasso. Why do we care? Perhaps it is simply that she was brave enough to write in detail about her sexual adventures and the reading public who bought over a million copies were curious as to how the life of a libertine, living in an open marriage, might work.

The Sexual Life will be disappointing if the reader hopes to be aroused by it, being more an intellectual exploration than a seduction, and approached with an intense but almost clinical and solipsistic observation, rather than an exposé of universal feminine desire. It is however a necessary precursor to a reading of *Jealousy*.

Jealousy: the other life of Catherine M. focuses on the 'crisis' that the author struggles through when she discovers that her husband, author Jacques Henric, has been engaged in several affairs. After reading in *The Sexual Life* that Catherine and Jacques have an open relationship and on more than one occasion participate in group sex, and that Catherine enjoys the freedom of a libertine without Jacques, it is perhaps as surprising to Catherine as it is to her readers that she experiences jealousy when

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she learns of her husband's secret affairs. But why should this be so surprising? The psychology of human beings is complex and individuals are, often by their own admission, full of contradictions. There is room in the psyche for both the desire for sexual freedom and the festering of jealousy. The dilemma raises many questions but *Jealousy* might have explored them more thoroughly.

The crisis begins when Catherine stumbles across a photograph, among her husband's belongings, of a pregnant and naked woman reflected in a mirror. In the course of the book she also finds several letters from women and deliberately reads her husband's diary, piecing together the mystery clue by clue. Eventually she confronts her husband but his reaction seems non-plussed and lacks sympathy.

Jacques immediately reacted with an angry interjection. He had had enough of my 'masochistic jealousy', my 'morbid harping'. I warily pointed to the strictly anodyne nature of my approach: if he would just confirm it I would let it drop. But Jacques had stopped listening to me, he had suffered too, he was suffering even now. (122)

She then finds herself trying to make him feel sorry for her, arguing that he is 'stigmatizing' her mature body and depriving her of the 'paternal attention' he displays in his relationships with other, younger, women. In desperation she condenses all her feelings and insecurities into the one phrase: 'My mother's death has broken me', referring to her mother's suicide, and Jacques' response is to answer: 'What kind of cliché is that?' (122-3).

Catherine continues to ruminate and investigate, occasionally referring back to her other life, which *does* appear to be in the past unless her jealousy has merely shifted her focus away from her own adventures onto Jacques'. There are references to sexual freedom being *her* 'thing' as though by having affairs her husband has encroached on her territory. Her brother's death and her mother's suicide also enter the text during a period of psychoanalysis but it is unclear whether these events are being offered as a reason for her psychological crisis, or whether the pain caused by Catherine's jealousy is transferred to them.

Catherine relates the sexual fantasies that she builds upon visions of her husband with another woman. She explores her own psychological reverberations around the theme of exclusion and makes connections with childhood events. Catherine and Jacques continue in their marriage and there seems to be no resolution or redrawing of boundaries by the end of the book. This might have been different, Catherine muses, if she had begun to share her fantasies with Jacques.

Perhaps he would have understood better if, instead of using clichés and getting into a twist over the minor distortions imposed by my fantasies on the insignificant facts of everyday life, I had started by sharing these fantasies with him. This never occurred to me, because my unconscious would never, I imagine, have been prepared to run the risk of trusting Jacques with the secret of my masturbatory visions, visions of him making love to other women. (125-6)

There are events in Catherine's childhood that are drawn into her crisis,

notably a vision of her mother in the arms of a man who is not her father. This past event is mirrored in her visions of Jacques with another woman but Catherine fails to understand its significance and it is left to the reader to construct a hypothesis from the psychological data presented throughout *Jealousy*.

Debra Zott