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Heroines (Semiotext(e) / Active Agents)



Synopsis

I am beginning to realize that taking the self out of our essays is a form of repression. Taking the self out feels like obeying a gag order--pretending an objectivity where there is nothing objective about the experience of confronting and engaging with and swooning over literature." -- from *Heroines*

On the last day of December, 2009 Kate Zambreno began a blog called *Frances Farmer Is My Sister*, arising from her obsession with the female modernists and her recent transplantation to Akron, Ohio, where her husband held a university job. Widely reposted, Zambreno's blog became an outlet for her highly informed and passionate rants about the fates of the modernist "wives and mistresses." In her blog entries, Zambreno reclaimed the traditionally pathologized biographies of Vivienne Eliot, Jane Bowles, Jean Rhys, and Zelda Fitzgerald: writers and artists themselves who served as male writers' muses only to end their lives silenced, erased, and institutionalized. Over the course of two years, *Frances Farmer Is My Sister* helped create a community where today's "toxic girls" could devise a new feminist discourse, writing in the margins and developing an alternative canon. In *Heroines*, Zambreno extends the polemic begun on her blog into a dazzling, original work of literary scholarship. Combining theories that have dictated what literature should be and who is allowed to write it--from T. S. Eliot's New Criticism to the writings of such mid-century intellectuals as Elizabeth Hardwick and Mary McCarthy to the occasional "girl-on-girl crime" of the Second Wave of feminism--she traces the genesis of a cultural template that consistently exiles female experience to the realm of the "minor," and diagnoses women for transgressing social bounds. "ANXIETY: When she experiences it, it's pathological," writes Zambreno. "When he does, it's existential." By advancing the Girl-As-Philosopher, Zambreno reinvents feminism for her generation while providing a model for a newly subjectivized criticism.

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Customer Reviews

Reading Kate Zambreno's essays is a little like reading her blog, *FRANCES FARMER IS MY SISTER*. The constant literary references can be breath-taking, if a bit distracting. Sometimes she sends me off on bookish rambles, two or three at a time. Sometimes she makes me wish we could have lunch, or at least a long telephone chat. The mind of this woman is vast. That being said, there is a moment of murkiness on p. 259 when it seems as if either Zambreno or her grad student friend thinks that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote *THE AWAKENING*. I know this can't be true, and prove it to myself by finding at least a dozen references elsewhere in the book to Kate Chopin, but this one flaw bothers me in an otherwise stellar book. Is it an editing issue, and if so, how did it slip past? One of the reasons I love Zambreno's work is that you can see her (and hear her) editing herself, all the time, so I had to wonder what happened. I wouldn't expect her to catch every comma splice on the blog, but a book of essays is more formal, and with only a print edition so far, more written in stone. Perhaps it's a paltry question to ask about a truly brilliant collection, but I do hope it will be cleared up in the electronic edition, which is surely underway. This is one of those books one wishes to have available on all devices, for moments of waiting in traffic or offices. Something approaching delight or insight is on every page - proof that feminists can be funny as well as cerebral.

Fantastic book. If you're thinking of buying it, do it.

This book is brillo, Zambreno a zavant. Read it on trains and cross-town buses. Read it in airports and bundled up in cafes. Stick it on your shelf between Bowles (Jane) and Markson (David). Or else pass it on to someone you esteem. Above all, speak breathlessly about it, rave about it - this book which is certainly some kind of remedy.

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