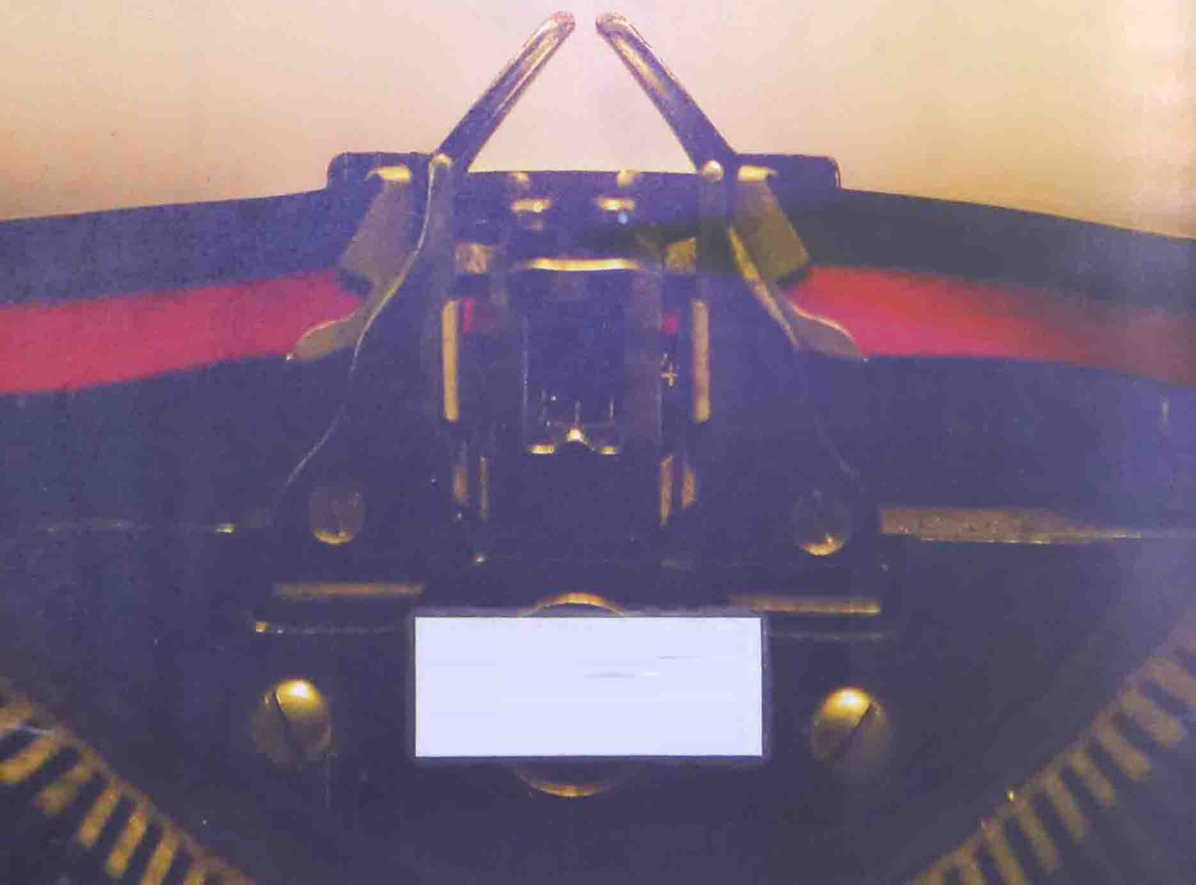
Between the Sheets

The Literary Liaisons of Nine 20th-Century Women Writers

Lesley McDowell



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To Irene McDowell,
Andrew McDowell,
and Lynda Mathieson.

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Introduction

"Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists." So wrote Sylvia Plath on February 26, 1956. It was the night after she first met Ted Hughes at a college party. He had kissed her "bang smash on the mouth" and "ripped off" her red hairband. She responded by biting him on the cheek, drawing blood. Writing years later about Rebecca West, Fay Weldon endorsed Plath's view of women, willingly lying down for, not with, male artists, when she described West's acquiescence to her lover, H. G. Wells: "If young women lie down in the path of this energy, what do they expect? They will be steamrollered!"

Not only are these women victims of "energy" and "violence," but they have chosen to be. No one is forcing them to "lie down." They are chasing their own victimhood when they chase after their male literary partners, for isn't it true that Plath "chased" after Hughes ("whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room")? They put up with their male partners' refusal to recognise them publicly, as West did with Wells, even after she bore him his son. They put up with the worst kinds of infidelity: Elizabeth Smart's partner, George Barker, betrayed her with other women, refused to help support their four children, took money from her, and pushed her into alcoholic dependency. Hughes abandoned Plath for another woman, Assia Wevill, an act many have since viewed as contributing to her suicide seven months later.

These victims endure lies and deceit and more: Martha Gellhorn was physically and mentally abused by Ernest Hemingway toward the end of their marriage; Jean Rhys was cast aside by Ford Madox Ford after their affair and succumbed to alcoholism; Anaïs Nin was financially bled dry by Henry Miller; H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) was betrayed by her fiancé, Ezra Pound. Katherine Mansfield allied herself to a weaker partner, John Middleton Murry, out of illness and fear of death, while Simone de Beauvoir pimped her female lovers out to Jean-Paul Sartre, who not only deceived her, but also left his papers in the care of another woman after he died. Such things are done to women who are victims, and that's what makes them victims.

When these women are as much artists as their male partners, the problem only appears to be compounded. Then, they feel compelled to act out the role of literary handmaiden as well as victim. They spend laborious hours typing up the words of their writing partners, as Plath did for Hughes, or they manufacture special books of their beloved's words, as Smart did for Barker. Sublimating their own literary desires in order to support the writing career of their male partners, they make victims of their art—and of themselves—in the process.

Or, at least, that's what we've been told, over and over again.

No one has ever been able to work out exactly why these women of genius, literary pioneers all of them, were attracted to men who only seemed to do them harm, or why, once the harm was proved, they stayed with them. The only answer has been: they were victims. They lay down. They were steamrollered. It was their own fault.

The aim of this book is to show that the opposite of this story is true. It sets out to demonstrate that none of the women artists mentioned here were victims at all, but that they chose their own fates knowingly and without the taint of victimization;

that they chose such relationships in order to benefit their art and poetic consciousness. These women artists may have made a Faustian pact when they fell in love with their writing partners, but it was a pact freely chosen and only occasionally regretted in the dark watches of the night many years later, when they were alone and momentarily doubting themselves.

The women featured here were all writers before they met their literary partners, and most of them had great ambitions for their writing from the very beginning. What is hard for us to understand now—in a time when women have the vote, can own property in their own right, be heads of corporations, and the like—is that so many of them believed they needed a writing partner. These women didn't believe they could do it alone—they really believed that they needed a partner in order to achieve their literary goals. "I must marry a poet, it's the only thing," wrote a young Elizabeth Smart, long before she met Barker. "One would dance with him for what he might say," wrote H.D. of Ezra Pound. And Pound was a terrible dancer. What we must try to understand is why they believed that such humiliation was worth it, that what they gained far outweighed what they lost—or surrendered.

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The idea for this book has its roots in two sources: one, appropriately enough, in personal experience. At the beginning of 2005, I began a relationship with a male writer. I had just had my first short story accepted for publication, after being short-listed in a national short story competition. I had written a poor historical novel that I couldn't get published, and I was wondering whether to start another book or try to make this one better.

I didn't chase my writer boyfriend: I had no plan, as Smart or Plath or Nin all had, from an early age, to marry a poet. We met at a publisher's dinner; he took my number. Then, a few days later,

no longer able to wait, I called him and we arranged a date. On that first date, I learned that he had separated from his wife some months before and had two small children, and that both he and they lived very close to me. He was also dating about "five to six" other women. I made up my mind on that date not to see him again: too much emotional baggage, too little interest in committing himself to one person after the end of his marriage, too many other women in the picture. And it would have stayed that way, had we not, halfway through the date, begun to talk about writing.

What made me stay in a relationship with a man who dismissed monogamy, was seeing other women, had a soon-to-be ex-wife and very young children, and was emotionally shaky, relying on antidepressants and drinking heavily every day? What made me want to be with someone who didn't want anyone to know that we were seeing each other, as it would upset his ex? What made me put up with being denied in public, with being dropped at the last minute, then picked up again? What made me run round to his flat every time he called, with bags of wine and food, an extra expense that, on my freelancer's salary, I could barely afford?

A female friend told me at the time that it was simple: I loved him. Yes, I did love him. But it wasn't enough. What I was getting from this relationship was something I had never had before: a constant dialogue about writing, both his and mine. Someone who knew about writing, whose first book was about to be published, was talking to me about my work, reading it, encouraging me, making me take it more seriously than I had taken it before. Someone who knew about writing thought I was a good writer—no, he thought I was a really good writer. My self-esteem and my self-confidence—which should have been compromised and damaged by the secrecy of our relationship, by his refusal to be faithful, by the emotional demands from people in his life far

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