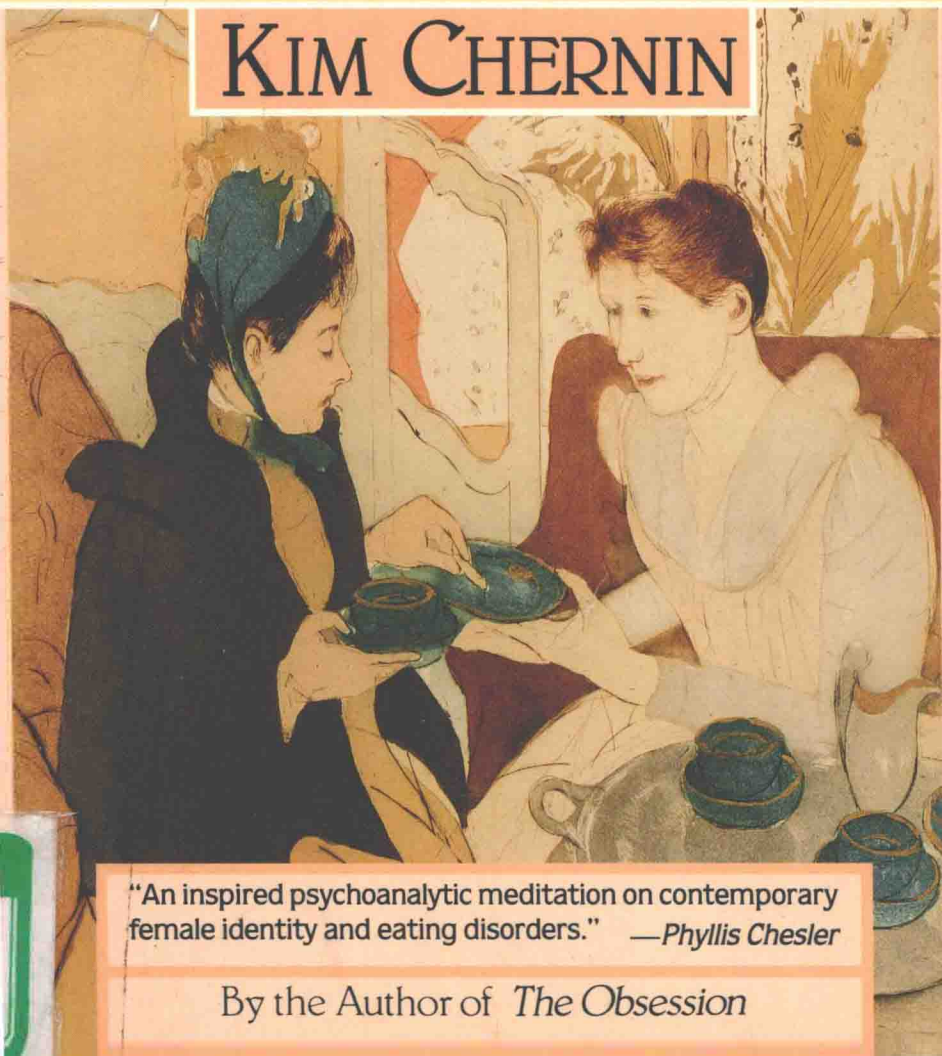


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# THE HUNGRY SELF

WOMEN, EATING & IDENTITY

KIM CHERNIN



"An inspired psychoanalytic meditation on contemporary female identity and eating disorders." —Phyllis Chesler

By the Author of *The Obsession*

# THE HUNGRY SELF

*Women, Eating, and Identity*



KIM CHERNIN



Harper & Row, Publishers, New York  
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco  
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

A hardcover edition of this book is published by Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc. It is here reprinted by arrangement with Times Books.

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First PERENNIAL LIBRARY edition published 1986.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chernin, Kim.

The hungry self.

1. Appetite disorders. 2. Women—Mental health.  
3. Identity (Psychology) 4. Mothers and daughters.

I. Title.

[RC552.A72C44 1986] 155.6'33 85-45627

ISBN 0-06-097026-X (pbk.)

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90 MPC 10 9 8 7

## THE HUNGRY SELF

*Books by Kim Chernin*

THE OBSESSION

THE HUNGER SONG (*poems*)

IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

THE HUNGRY SELF

*For Roz and Mike and Lil*

## *Preface: The Hunger Knot*

THIS IS A BOOK about women's entry into culture and society. As such, it could have been written about the contemporary struggle for a new, female identity without mentioning the current epidemic of eating disorders among women. But this is also a book about women and food, for a troubled relation to food is one of the principal ways the problems of female being come to expression in women's lives.

We must wonder, of course, why this is so. Why an obsession with food? And why now? Why do we find debilitating conflict when we might expect freedom and liberation? Why, in short, is there an epidemic suffering among women at this extraordinary moment when women are stepping out to claim a place for themselves in the world?

I am well aware that most people coming upon this book without preparation will be surprised to discover an association between eating and the struggle for identity. This sense of astonishment accompanied my own process of research and writing. My pages began to fill with references to the feminine mystique, the childhood struggle for identity, Marcel Proust's famous bite of Madeleine, the type of metaphor common to descriptions of religious experience, and the rites of initiation practiced in tribal societies. Indeed, these far-ranging associations presented themselves to me whenever I sat down to think

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or talk about women and food. Consequently, it has become my method in this apparent madness to claim for eating problems the same worth, seriousness, and distinction that compelled Freud, when writing about sexual problems, to evoke Oedipus and to support his findings about the universal nature of the oedipal problem by a daring excursion into the totemic ritual of earliest tribal culture. Merely in associating sexuality and neurosis with the oldest stories and ritual of human beings, Freud implicitly established the historic importance of our sexual fantasies and the seriousness of what he believed was our culture's sexually originated, persistent malaise. Why not, therefore, use the same approach where eating is concerned?

The women whose stories appear in these pages came to speak with me about food. Many stayed to talk about their problems with love and work, their difficulties with their mothers and families, their dreams and aspirations, their incomplete and imperfect understanding of what it means to be a woman in our time. In presenting them I have, of course, taken pains to disguise them. Occasionally I have brought the stories of two women together and made a composite portrait that protects their identities and highlights the common themes of their lives. But their voices have been faithfully recorded so that they may speak here with the same urgency I first heard in my consultation room, where together we began to explore the unexpected meanings to which an obsession with food was leading us.

The topic of women and food—it is one of those marvelous, unraveling threads that can take us back to the origins of human culture, to the earliest experiences of every human life, through myth and rite and tale and fantasy, without ever departing from an essential relevance to contemporary women's lives. I therefore invite the reader, whether or not she is already fascinated by questions of childhood memory and tribal rite, to examine with me these troubled, tragic, and still unresolved de-



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velopmental issues brought to our attention by eating problems.

Liberation from an obsession with food and weight takes place slowly and tends to move an individual through certain primary insights. These basic steps in understanding form the major sections of this book. For we are involved here in the same gradual process of decoding that informs the hours of conversation in a consultation room—peeling away surface appearances, the disguise of symptoms, and the confusion of compulsive behavior to reach the underlying meaning from which our liberation ultimately will arise.

To begin with, then, we will investigate the way a troubled relationship to food frequently hides a serious problem with female identity in an age when women are invited by social circumstance and individual inclination to extend the traditional idea of what it means to be a woman.

But this problem with female identity hides in turn a profound mother/daughter separation struggle, which becomes particularly acute when a daughter is required to surpass her mother. We can understand a great deal about this struggle by looking at the adult lives of mothers and daughters, but we shall also need to explore the roots of these adult conflicts and dilemmas that limit female development.

Consequently, the third step in this process requires us to explore childhood—to figure out how communication about identity takes place through food, to experience again how mother/daughter bonding is related to food, to examine hidden angers and needs and rages, and finally to understand the way food, in our adult lives, both leads us back to early childhood experiences and at the same time keeps us from reliving them.

Once this basic pattern has been grasped, we shall be able to see that the food obsession of contemporary women has all the elements of a rite of passage but that it fails to accomplish a

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rite's essential purpose—to move the individual from one stage in the life cycle to the next. Since neither the participants nor the healers in this collective ceremony fully understand what is being sought by the eating behavior, the obsession with food is split off from its true significance and therefore cannot serve to evolve a new type of female identity.

In the consultation room this pattern is never glimpsed as clearly as I have presented it. There, the precise order of insights and understandings can never be predicted. We move less often in a stage-to-stage progression, more frequently in a spiral, going in circles, meeting the same themes over and over again. But the process of understanding is basically the same: a question of correctly naming, stripping back, finding the roots, moving beyond that skein of impulse and inhibition, troubling fantasy, lost memory, and hidden desire that ties us to the past. This is the hunger knot, in which identity, the mother-separation struggle, love, rage, food, and the female body are all entangled. It is this we must unravel, patiently, meticulously, strand by strand, until we know ourselves.

I feel confident that a reader who follows me through the twists and turns of this discussion will be amply rewarded by her perseverance and that she will come, at the very least, to glimpse the possibility of transforming an obsession with food into an authentic ritual of transformation. Not that I mean to exclude men. There is much here that will serve to clarify their concerns with growth and development. But men tend to express their mother-separation struggle through a preoccupation with sexuality rather than eating. And my principal concern is with women and our struggle to claim a new female identity at this moment in history when we are for the first time in such large numbers creating our place in the world.

From the beginning, we must be aware of this crucial relationship between an eating obsession and that urgent moment

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in which women move into society and attempt the type of social and self-development we have, as a culture, more frequently assumed to be the privilege of men. Why the turmoil of this movement should come to expression in a disordered relation to food—that is one of the principal questions we must raise. For it shall become apparent that in raising the problem of an eating obsession we are opening a way into the most serious concerns of women's lives.

Indeed, we might go even further and assert boldly that an examination of our relation to food is the best possible way to discover the profound ambivalence and disguised guilt that are part of female self-development. It is in this sense precisely that our preoccupation with eating might well come to be that *royal road* to the unconscious that dreams proved to be for Freud. If this is true, we can understand our tendency to neglect and trivialize the psychological meanings in our eating behavior as a means of turning away from aspects of our emotional life we have not yet dared to confront. "I have an eating problem," we say, and we imagine that we are referring to a tormenting but circumscribed cluster of behaviors and attitudes. Yet, in reality, the moment we find the courage to look beyond the surface of this obsession, we come straight up against the most spiritual and political and deeply psychological issues that women face today.

I had originally intended to write only one book on the subject of women's obsession with food. I found, however, in the course of writing, that a single book could not adequately explore the theme of women's entry into culture. In *The Obsession* I present the issue of weight and body size as a cultural problem with female power. In the present book, I extend the analysis to include the mother/daughter bond and the issue of failed female development. In focusing my attention on the daughter's relationship to the mother, I do not mean to suggest that we can af-

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ford to slight the difficulties of the father/daughter bond in understanding either eating disorders or, more generally, the obstacles that arise when women claim power. Indeed, this theme of father/daughter confrontation will require a book in its own right and sufficient space to explore the relationship between eating obsessions and the prohibition against female creativity, which is common in a father-dominated culture. For that book, the next in the series, I shall take up the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden—a woman forbidden both food and knowledge by a father who claims to have created her without a female procreative counterpart.

My strategy here should be apparent. In all these books I wish to place women's struggle with food and eating within the largest possible context of meaning. We cannot heal ourselves until we understand the hidden struggle for self-development that eating disorders bring to expression in a covert way. We cannot indeed even begin to think about self-healing until we stop using the words "eating disorder" to hide from ourselves the formidable struggle for a self in which every woman suffering in her relationship to food is secretly engaged. We are a generation crossing over into the male sphere of self-development and social power. As a "generation" we include women of every age who undertake the struggle for a new sense of self. Women ten or twenty or forty years older than the adolescent girl afflicted with anorexia join this generation, regardless of age, if their anguish and need for a self, their aborted quest for identity, their need to undertake such a quest, make them unable to go on with life in the hallowed, traditional female ways. We are caught in a most serious dilemma, as we attempt to move beyond those revered notions that have always defined the "true nature of women." We are in trouble (and how else could it be, considering the magnitude of our task?) as we attempt to shape for ourselves a future unprecedented in what has

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been, indeed, until now, the history of man. Clearly, we need every bit of help and divine guidance and practical cunning we can find. For in our hands, these hands that lift children to our breasts and open books and pull us up unconquered mountains and cut wood and spice food and place that food in our mouths and in the mouths of our children, the future identity of generations of women is being prepared.

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PART ONE

*Identity*





# I

“I READ YOUR BOOK,” she says. “I found . . . I found . . .” She gives it up, shrugging. She looks helpless, as if it’s already clear she will not be able to express herself. But the silence is making her uncomfortable. Now she breaks it with a rush of words. “You’re just like me, that’s what I thought. Only, a little bit ahead. You’ve suffered the same things, you know? Running around eating, making yourself . . . get rid of it. But you understand it. You have the answers . . .”

I don’t think of myself as having the answers and I tell her so.

“What then?” She challenges me boldly, measuring me, probably not aware how much hope and suspicion are in her gaze.

“The right questions, maybe?”

She relaxes perceptibly, sitting back in the chair, but still on guard, still cautious. But now she is smiling. “That’s it?” she says, mocking herself as much as me. “No cure, no therapy, no answers? Just questions? I came here for more questions?”

Anita is a tall woman, with dark, exhausted, wary eyes. In the weeks to follow, as she enters and leaves this room, I feel the way she towers over me and I am aware how persistently she hunches her shoulders and drops her head forward, whenever she stands next to me. I am about to mention this to her, but she, in a way I already recognize as typical, gets there first.