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Book Review: A Lot to Learn: Girls, Women, and Education in the 20th Century

S. M. Belcher

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A Lot to Learn: Girls, Women, and Education in the 20th Century. Helen Jefferson Lenskyj. 2005. Toronto: Women's Press. 181 pp. (+ xii, Index). \$18.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by S.M. Belcher¹

A Lot to Learn is a feminist, autobiographical, social history focusing on the experiences of girls and women as students, parents, and teachers within the educational systems in Australia and Canada. Rising from working class origins and heterosexual marriage and motherhood, Lenskyj discusses her evolution both personally and professionally to that of an independent, feminist, lesbian, tenured education professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

The book is organized into two parts, the first of which is a mishmash of historical events and reflections of the author's personal experiences as well as details about her parents, grandparents, and great grandparents as recorded in oral histories, personal papers, and newspaper accounts. In addition, Lenskyj also intertwines feminist theory and references to feminist analyses of gender and sexual orientation in the historical text, citing quotations from some of the sources. Although the author's intention seems to be to provide a comparison of her own analysis of her experiences and those of her relatives with analyses presented in academic feminist scholarship, there are only weak, if any, linkages between these different types of text, making the reading rather jarring and a bit confusing.

Lenskyj also quotes from autobiographies written by Australian women, some of whom had attended the same private school as the author, comparing and contrasting their experiences, interpretations and analyses with those of her own. These passages work better than the more theoretical interjections. Thus, in this book, Lenskyj tries to span 173 years of her relatives' experiences in brief passages mixed with references and excerpts from feminist theory and other Australian women's autobiographies.

Another problem with the first part of the book is that it is not organized in a chronological order of events. Lenskyj moves back and forth between different time periods and generations so much that it is very difficult for the reader to follow any of the stories. This is a much more serious drawback than the interjection of references to theory and quotations from academic feminist texts.

Chapter Three, the last chapter in the first part of the book, is the most coherent. It is a historical, sociological analysis of the author's private school with some examples and insights from the author's personal experiences there. Lenskyj includes some examples and comments made by other Australian women about their personal experiences at this same school as well as at other Australian private girls' schools. These interjections are much more integrated into the text, adding rather than detracting from the author's narrative.

¹ S. M. Belcher is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Trade in the College of Business at Feng Chia University in Taiwan. Belcher is a sociologist whose research is on the use of bodies in outdoor advertising and their influence on women and men in general. She has worked in sociology, women's studies, and now in international trade departments for the past 30 years. Currently her research is comparative, looking at differences and similarities in the use of bodies in outdoor advertisements in Egypt, Taiwan, and the English-speaking Western countries (USA, Canada, UK, Australia, NZ).

This last is organized by themes, as are all the chapters in the book, but the themes in this chapter are much more tightly constructed and linked together, making it much more readable than the previous two chapters. Here Lenskyj explores the school structure, administration, curriculum, teaching methods, composition of the student body, inter-school competitions and relationships, relationship between school and parents as well as community, and student outcomes. She reflects on the positive and negative aspects of her own experiences at the school and comments on those of others who attended it.

Lenskyj traces the historical development of the school and observes the differences between education today and her own education and the implications that these differences have for women's status and opportunities in society. This is a very useful section for high school and university students so that they are better able to understand the changes that have occurred in society as well as the challenges that women still face.

Part Two of the book addresses Lenskyj's development of feminist consciousness while living in Toronto and her later involvement in feminist activism, and ends with her experiences as an education professor at OISE. Lenskyj's account of her participation in community development activism conducted by parents concerned about education is written from the point of view of Lenskyj as a mother and yet is informed by her later professional status and involvement in the development of feminist pedagogy and advocacy for gay and lesbian rights at OISE. Thus, the time periods of the 1960s through to the 1990s are conflated to present the reader with both a feeling for what it was like for Lenskyj to go through this evolution of consciousness and activism as well as an analysis of it, including references to relevant feminist scholarship.

The amount of detail in the discussion of Lenskyj's involvement in various organizations pushing for changes to pedagogy and curriculum in the Toronto schools as well as at OISE is overwhelming unless the reader is particularly interested in this history. However, Lenskyj's strategies and affiliation with various organizations provide a good example of how community development and social change are created and experienced by committed citizens and useful for undergraduate students and others interested in pursuing such activities.

Lenskyj emphasizes the point that it is one thing to change the curriculum in schools and universities, but having teachers understand, accept, and implement the curriculum as it was intended is another thing entirely. Even gay and lesbian teachers, according to Lenskyj, were reluctant to "come out" in favour of the new curriculum for fear of retribution by other teachers, administrators, and parents. Thus, the work for social change is a continuing process as evidenced by the fact that homophobia is still a major social problem in Canada today.

Lenskyj also relates her involvement in the development of women's studies at OISE and the struggles she waged with feminists and non-feminists alike. This is a fascinating history and one that is still evolving. Issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion are addressed in relation to the development of women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, as well as the community development movement advocating changes to the Toronto schools curriculum. Furthermore, Lenskyj sets her discussions in the context of the social and economic environment of the times. Thus, the book is a sociological as well as an historical account.

A Lot to Learn will be of interest to undergraduate students in the social sciences and education. It is particularly useful as a textbook for courses focusing on curriculum and pedagogy in schools and universities. As it is set in Australia as well as in Canada, it is also useful for comparative education courses. People involved in and/or interested in advocacy of gay and lesbian rights, women's studies, education in general, and community development will also find the book interesting and useful.