

THE PRIME OF MISS KITTY MACKINNON

by Susie Bright, SEXWISE, Cleis Press, 1995

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Yes, I have read Catharine MacKinnon's *Only Words*. I'm one of the miserable group of reviewers and legal scholars in the country who forced ourselves to read every word of her rotten prose. She is the preeminent legal scholar and feminist activist battling pornography and defining her issue as the high ground of women's liberation--therefore we all watch her. But even if I adored her politics, I would have to say this book is unreadable. Aside from the fantastic pornographic passages ("penises ramming vaginas," etc.), MacKinnon disdains the use of subject-verb in a common sentence. Andrea Dworkin, MacKinnon's collaborator and mutual inspiration, can write up a storm--I ate up *Intercourse* like a box of chocolates. MacKinnon, on the other hand, is the typical academic who must publish but can't write. But it would be unfair to dismiss MacKinnon for her grammar alone. Her content is what rams my vagina and chills me to the bone.

My friend David Ulin says that to review MacKinnon's new book, one simply needs to repeat the title, *ONLY WORDS*, as if it were a command. "That sums up her philosophy, don't you think?" he asks me.

It's true that MacKinnon has a deep distrust of anything that isn't literal. She describes the debut of the camera as if it were the creation of the H-bomb: "In the thousands of years of silence, the camera is invented and pictures are made of you while these things (pornographic acts) are being done. You hear the camera clicking or whirring as you are being hurt, keeping time to the rhythm of your pain."

Pain and sex have a definitive connection in MacKinnon's view of the world, but you may need her special X-ray specs before you can understand the images around you. She told a reporter at *Lingua Franca*, the *People* magazine of the academic set, "What you need is people who see through literature like Andrea Dworkin, who see through the law, like me, to see through art and create the uncompromised women's visual vocabulary."

Once she dons her incredible powers of observation, no one is let out of the building. The introduction to *Only Words* is written in the second person, as if she was absolutely certain that everyone would identify with her vivid description: "You grow up with your father holding you down and covering your mouth so another man can make a horrible searing pain between your legs. When you are older, your husband ties you to the bed and drips hot wax on your nipples and brings in other men to watch and makes you smile through it. Your doctor will not give you drugs he has addicted you to unless you suck his penis."

Wow! What if none of these things has ever happened to you? What if you start laughing hysterically at the last line because it reminds you of the last time you bummed some Children's Tylenol samples from your toddler's pediatrician and he never even mentioned sucking his penis! What if your main violent memories of your childhood are of your mother

smacking you in the mouth whenever she had a bad day at work, and there's no convenient feel-good feminist explanation for it? What if you attended a very interesting workshop about lesbian S/M where you found out exactly what kind of candles you should buy for sex play that won't hurt the skin? (Never buy the colored ones--they really burn.) For that matter, what if you get your legs and bikini line waxed every six weeks?

The presumptions of this second-person tirade are right out of an evangelist's sales manual. Like Muriel Spark's famous character, Miss Jean Brodie, who urged her young students to join Mussolini's cause while sweeping their hormones into her magnificent wake, MacKinnon's best recruits are virgins and naïfs. Unfortunately, when it comes to pornography, few Americans, especially women, know a damn thing about it except it's "bad," and MacKinnon can get away with making statements that are right out of War of the Worlds.

If, like MacKinnon, you have never been on a porn movie set, you may actually swallow such whoppers as how porn "actresses are all overwhelmingly...poor desperate homeless pimped women who were sexually abused as children." As prostitute/activist Carol Leigh recently wrote, sex workers "are rejected unless we come around to (MacKinnon's) anti-prostitution philosophy and become 'recovering prostitutes'...We are not misguided women, although Catherine treats us like that."

MacKinnon claims to have the inside scoop on how porn movies are made because of all the anonymous interviews and surveys she's conducted. She reveals, in her usual "are-you-ready-to-be-thoroughly-shocked-and-appalled" tone of voice, that "In pornography, the penis is shown ramming into the woman over and over; this is because it actually was rammed up in the woman over and over..."

I hate to break this to you, Kitty, but that repetitive shot of the penis going in and out of a woman's vagina is usually the same few seconds of film looped over and over, even though the real action on the set was considerably briefer. This is called "editing."

MacKinnon talks about mundane Hollywood filmmaking techniques and makes them sound like a sadistic ritual. She writes, "To look real to the observing camera, the sex acts are to be twisted open, stopped and restarted, positioned and repositioned, the come shot executed by another actor entirely. The women regularly take drugs to get through it." Twist open what? Repositioned executions? Stunt penises? Prozac? What the fuck (if you don't mind my using one of MacKinnon's favorite words) is she talking about?

MacKinnon draws a picture of pornographic filmmaking as a montage of concentration-camp documentary, high-fashion fascism, and draconian male conspiracy.

"What pornography does, it does in the real world not only in the mind," she says. "In pornography, women are gang-raped so they can be filmed...women are hurt and penetrated, tied and gagged, undressed and genitally spread and sprayed with lacquer and water so sex pictures can be made. Only for pornography are women killed to make a sex movie, and it is not the idea of a sex killing that kills them."

Yes, for MacKinnon, porn is snuff and snuff is porn. She acts like it's just business as usual to go down to your corner video store and pick up a copy of an X-rated movie depicting a cinema verite' murder. She believes this despite the fact that the origin of her anguish, the original movie titled Snuff, was long ago exposed as a fraud, a low-budget horror F/X grossity with a helluva marketing angle.

I remember interviewing the man who came up the "snuff" ad campaign. Chris Rage was a gay filmmaker who died of AIDS a couple of years ago. "Don't you have any idea what a monster you created?" I asked him. "This wasn't even a porn movie, but it will haunt the X-business for the rest of its days!"

"Well we didn't know that," he said. "The film was a total mess. We had no idea it would be such a hit--but the sensation was all in the title."

Sometimes I wonder if MacKinnon has simply been driven mad by all the sick things that people do to one another. I too recoil in pain and incomprehension whenever I hear about the latest psychopath who has shot his mother, machine-gunned his co-workers, raped his daughter, slashed a prostitute. I notice that such men are more likely to have read the Bible than pornography, but I do not hold either script responsible for their actions.

If I could know that pictures were responsible, that masturbation and erections are liable for the physical harm caused by these nightmarish men, I would be on MacKinnon's side. Everyone would be on her side--there would be no side at all, and she would be out of a career.

But in fact, no one honestly understands why men, or women, become brutal, unfeeling, cold-blooded, or sadistic. It's a far different criticism to note that porn is sexist. So are all commercial media. That's like tasting several glasses of salt water and insisting only one of them is salty. The difference with porn is that it is people fucking, and we live in a world that cannot tolerate that image in public.

MacKinnon has picked up a drum to beat that is already as American as apple pie, the devil-made-me-do-it bandwagon, where every erection is a threat, where sex is men's domain and women's suffering. It's puzzling why she thinks this is radical or iconoclastic. Her work has dovetailed nicely with the most right-wing fanatics in the country. Her influence on legislation as important as the Canadian obscenity statue has resulted in thousands of books and magazines being banned, including authors like myself, Kathy Acker, David Leavitt, and even her dear comrade, Andrea Dworkin. (A Canadian customs official took one look at Dworkin's book title, *Woman Hating*, and dumbly using the MacKinnon criterion of banning anything that "degrades women," refused the book entry.)

Yet MacKinnon acts like she is the outcast, the martyr. Her book is published by Harvard University Press--which, as reviewer Jonathan Yardley said in a *Washington Post Book World* review, "is vivid evidence of the very free speech toward which MacKinnon is so cavalier." She has a tenured position at Michigan Law School. She posed for a lovey-dovey

pictorial with her paramour Jeffrey Masson on the cover of New York magazine in such fawning poses that, even if you didn't know who she and Masson were, you might find your feminist aesthetics turning a little green around the gills. She gets called a genius and a brilliant mind by all sorts of mucky-mucks, and then she has the nerve to act like she's the Harriet Tubman of the underground survivor's network.

Sure, MacKinnon has the ACLU to contend with and plenty of booksellers are bohemians who are going to argue with her in public. But she has plenty of company among those who are offended by some kind of sex and believe that what they are offended by should be legislated against. It's the easiest thing in the world to be disgusted by sexuality--we've been raised to do it by rote. It's quite a different matter to embrace sexual diversity or, as a woman, to say that female orgasm is crucial to female power.

MacKinnon has never liberated masturbation. She indicts sexuality like a traditionalist, stating boldly that "Pornography is masturbation material. Men know this."

But what about women? MacKinnon apparently finds the idea that women masturbate, perhaps even using sexy words and pictures, altogether unbelievable or yet another symptom of a pimp's brainwashing. It's this arrogance and condescension that make women, not men, MacKinnon's fiercest critics and bitterest enemies.

Virtually all men feel slandered by MacKinnon's descriptions of their gender, including a number of the judges she's been up against. But many of them also feel guilty about porn and sex, and when they see the evidence of men who have gone off the deep end, they often privately thing to themselves, "There but for the grace of God go I." Such is the nature of the American Puritan mind: men feel that if they could have the pleasure they wanted, they would all go to hell in a hand basket.

Women, on the other hand, are so new at creating their own erotic market, so unaccustomed to finding that they can buy a vibrator in any department store in America, that many are eager to come out of the erotic closet. Lusty women have rebelled against the double standard, and they're hardly worried that sex is going to drive them to violence and mayhem.

MacKinnon is utterly disconnected from these women, many of whom are her peers but who are typically of a different generation. The majority of work that MacKinnon's influence has stifled or censored is the work of people under 30, the "slackers" and generation X'ers who publish the 'zines that are thrown out of Canada in the spirit of MacKinnon's beliefs that they degrade women. They are filmmakers who get their work tossed out of galleries because MacKinnon devotees think they are dangerous to women; they are the authors of small press books who are ignored, hidden, or attack ed by the doctrinaire school of feminist bookstores.

My friend Roxxie is a perfect example of this feminist generation gap. She talks about MacKinnon as if she were a pair of bell-bottom pants: "Andrea Dworkin and Kitty MacKinnon are just another part to that 1970's trip of finding the perfect theory that

explains everything," she says, calling it 'Everythingism,' the Big Bang theories from the perfect macrobiotic diet to the perfect feminist analysis."

"I don't understand you," I said. "Don't you think people are still looking for answers?"

"What I see is a lot of anger and cynicism...young people feel like all the Boomers' big theories went bust and left a mess. No one buys the crap that there's one self-centered way to look at things anymore. That was a 70's luxury item."

Roxxie is the editor of *Girljock*, a 'zine that is definitely an example of an attitude rather than a solution. GJ is inspired by lesbian athletes but wide open in terms of readership and reactions.

MacKinnon is oceans away from the girljocks, the out-of-the-closet crowd, the rock and roll girls, the bisexual activists, the ACT UP zappers, the twenty-something dadaists who understand *The Brady Bunch* in a way that MacKinnon will never fathom. Because Kitty has nothing positive to say about sexual adventure or imagination, she is cut off from anybody for whom such experience is vital.

Ironically, she is the fiancée of Jeffrey Masson, the author and psychoanalytic critic who has had incredible and numerous sexual adventures of his own. One of his ex-shrinks reportedly described him as "mount(ing) any woman that moved."

Masson considers his sexual past to be like an illness, and he readily applauds MacKinnon's theories, even though he admitted to New York reporter Dinitia Smith that he had never read pornography when he was growing up thereby missing direct contact with the poison MacKinnon describes. He says living with Catharine is like living with God, which I would find rather overwhelming, but which he finds sublime.

MacKinnon herself rarely speaks autobiographically. Tougher cookies that she have eschewed any sort of love life because they could not bear to have that kind of vulnerability exposed. But MacKinnon has been unabashed in her love for Masson, promiscuous past and all. She's proud to be with him, and he fell in love with her not just because she was a firebrand, but because he could see her as a woman, a sensual woman. "I think Catherine is beautiful," he told Smith. "I don't think that's wrong."

What a curious thing to express in the negative: appreciating your lover's beauty is "not wrong," rather than flat-out right and natural.

MacKinnon, too, explains her relationship with Masson with a series of n-words. When Smith asked her how she could justify marriage when she has written that equal relationships between men and women are impossible in an unequal society, MacKinnon answered this way: "Does one not have any relationships simply because society is hierarchical? We do our best. He's not not a man, and I'm not not a woman."

Not not, knock knock. Can MacKinnon extend the same generosity and opportunity to other women to discover how they can be sexually satisfied in a hierarchical society? Can other relationships, a wide variety, be given a chance?

MacKinnon has expressed her conditions for gender relations in a systematic attack on the legal status quo, particularly the First Amendment. It's become a bore to debate the rationale for MacKinnon's legal argument, even though that's exactly what her book is devoted to. She's already been taken to pieces by a cadre of lawyers who think she's a crackpot.

What I'm interested in more is her CAUSE. As a lawyer and a political animal, MacKinnon is obviously going to use the tools she knows to win. If I believed that her cause was simply to make the world a safer, egalitarian place for women, I would take her aside and whisper, "I think you've overlooked a few things."

But she's already been asked to listen to other women's ideas of sexual equality and liberation, and she has rejected them. Her declarations are so wild and her righteousness so dense, you can't help but wonder, "What else is at stake here?" When I look at MacKinnon's work, I feel like I'm at the scene of a crime with the physical evidence well in hand, but with an utterly puzzling motive. What is it? Intense ambitions? Opportunism? Bizarre psychosexual underpinnings we'll never discover unless she and Masson marry, break up, and have the divorce trial of the century?

Why is it so important to her not only to stop men from masturbating, but to shut women up? Why do we have to keep our legs crossed for her?

I could criticize pornography until the cows come home, but I will not criticize the power of pictures and words to arouse me: to arouse passion or ideas, erections or damp panties, fears, curiosities, unarticulated yearnings, and odd realizations. Sexual speech, not MacKinnon's speech, is the most repressed and disdained kind of expression in our world, and MacKinnon is no rebel or radical to attack it.

Counselor MacKinnon has not respected sexual speech, she has not found her sexual voice, except to say, quite sincerely, that she is "not not a woman." And perhaps, for Catherine MacKinnon, that is not at all a small thing to admit.

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