

Margaret  
Cuninggim  
Women's Center

## Women victimized by unrealistic body images

David Schlundt, Asst. Professor of Psychology, Asst. Professor of Medicine

You walk into a party and immediately notice how pretty all the other women look. They all seem more dressed up than you, wearing sexy clothes that show off their sleek bodies to perfection. You feel like a cross between a whale and a bag woman. Feelings of self-consciousness and depression nearly overwhelm you. You wish you could run and hide. Instead, you hold your stomach in and vow to start a diet tomorrow.

Women in America face a serious dilemma. The images of female success and fashion portray the ideal woman as a tall, emaciated figure. The problem is that real bodies bear little resemblance to the media images. Genes determine the basic size and shape of your body. While diet and exercise can alter your body fat percentage to a degree, the length of your arms, legs, and torso and many other elements that contribute to body shape cannot be changed.

Use of the term "body image" has come to be associated with the deep dissatisfaction that many women feel about their bodies. A few years ago, psychologists thought that body image problems were a matter of distorted perceptions, much like staring in a funhouse mirror. Today, we understand that perceptions of ourselves and the world are guided by cognitive structures called schemas. Schemas are organized collections of perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that guide our interpretation of everyday situations. Schemas also contain scripts, or action plans, that tell us what to do. Body image problems occur when women (and sometimes men) use schemas

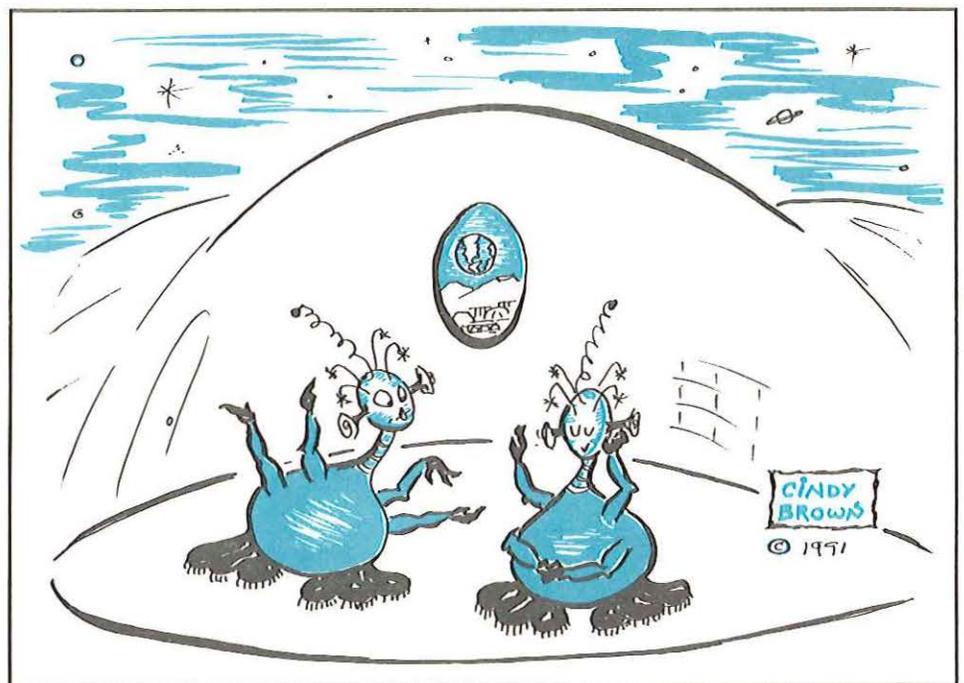
that are loaded with negative thoughts and feelings such as those illustrated in the opening paragraph.

Why is it that so many women feel dissatisfied with the way they look? The total answer is complex, but there are three main sources of experience that contribute to these negative schemas: culture, family upbringing, and peers. Cultural influences include the constant bombardment of images and information we receive from magazines, television, and movies. Women's magazines, for example, typically feature emaciated models and articles on how to lose weight (so you, too, can look like their models). The gender roles of our culture teach

women that appearance is more important than performance and that beauty equals success. Gender expectations are first taught in the family where fathers and mothers treat girls and boys differently. Many mothers also pass on their weight anxiety to their daughters. From grade school to college, the peer culture further reinforces the images of the thin ideal woman and the fat self.

The gap between the schemas of the ideal woman and of the self has several negative consequences for women. First, the emotional consequences include anxiety, depression, helplessness, and self-hatred. Feeling too fat and wanting to be thin motivates weight loss attempts. Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa, are the most serious manifestations of compulsive dieting. Although most women never develop a serious eating disorder (between five and ten percent of college women do), chronic dieting is very widespread and occasional binge eating is common among women of all ages. Too much time and energy are wasted on

*(continued page two)*



*Oh Astra, I just can't go. My pinnae are all streubly — and look at my qorn. My blippers are completely gejonked. It isn't fair. You always look perfect.*

# Book criticizes standards of 'ideal' female beauty

*The Beauty Myth*  
by Naomi Wolf  
reviewed by Michael Sims  
(reprinted courtesy of  
BookPage ©1991)

This important new book suggests that, as women have shaken old power structures and acquired more material freedoms, society has responded with ever narrower images of femininity: unattainable ideals that help keep the sexes estranged. As Naomi Wolf points out, now that the once-sacred virtue of domesticity has expired, it has been replaced with a new ideal of perfect beauty.

She starts with the obvious: Americans are obsessed with female "beauty." Not with a celebration of its variety, but with a quest for a made-up-to-airbrushed-perfection, surgically-modified plastic goddess. Wolf chronicles the humiliation and pain to which many women submit in pursuit of this ideal. Every era has its own standards, but never before have female beauty and sexuality been so inextricably tied to a minute scrutiny of the body. Nowadays the ample models of Titian and Rubens couldn't land a walk-on in a Levi's ad. For that matter neither could Marilyn Monroe.

Our current code demands slenderness approaching anorexia, adolescent youthfulness, and even a uniform tan in defiance of cancer warnings. Those who pass muster for a few years exploit this trend. Thus some gain power — and as usual power is what this is all about — but often only by trading their integrity and freedom.

Naomi Wolf was interviewed during a recent segment of *20/20*. She contended that the glorification of the artificially perfect woman cripples women's self-esteem and limits their acceptance in our still male-dominated world. The skeptical (male) interviewer, missing the irony, commented on Wolf's own appearance. Helen Gurley Brown, editor of *Cosmopolitan*, actually rebutted Wolf's assertion that many models suffer diet-related disorders. And Barbara Walters not only scoffed but even suggested Wolf's entire thesis may be a "croak."

These hecklers — two of them women, one of those even a pioneer television journalist — suggest what Naomi Wolf is up against. The assumptions of the beauty myth pervade our thinking. And like her predecessors Friedan, Greer and company, Wolf demands nothing less than a revolution in our thinking. Her book is audacious and uncompromising. It examines the role of the myth in surprising aspects of our lives — religion, hunger, violence. And over and over she returns to the presentation of women in advertising. "Advertising aimed at women," she writes, "works by lowering our self-esteem. If it flatters our self-esteem, it is not successful."

The controversy greeting this book doesn't question Wolf's accuracy. The facts are undeniable. No one claims women aren't rated by their appearance. No one questions that the interdependent cosmetic/diet/fashion industry is a multi-billion-dollar concern in our lives. No one denies that plastic surgery is one of the fastest growing medical specialties. The disagreement is one of opinion — of whether such psychological debilitation and physical harm is acceptable. Naomi Wolf argues passionately that it is not. ■

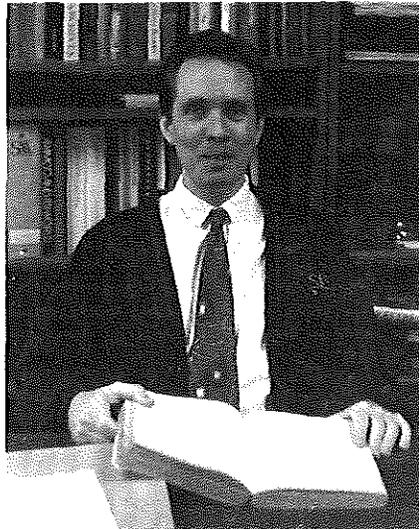


photo by Marni Lessa

Michael Sims  
Special Collections and Archives

## Image (continued from page one)

the impossible task of pursuing the ideal appearance and thus are diverted from other important life goals. It is important to remember that education, career, friendships, love, family, financial independence, good health, citizenship, social activism, and spiritual growth are all part of being a whole person. Unrealistic cultural ideals, gender stereotypes, and negative self-schemas create obstacles to personal growth.

What steps can women take to free themselves from this "monkey on their backs?" The first step involves coming to terms with your body by realistically viewing your genetic shape and accepting it as you. Study photos of yourself, your parents, your siblings, and other close relatives to get a sense of your family genes for body shape.

The next step involves getting to know your self-schemas. What situations are difficult for you? How do you feel? What do you think? These reactions are almost unconscious, so it will take some effort to articulate how you think and feel about your body. Modifying the old schemas and building more positive ways of seeing yourself takes persistence. For example, a thirty-five-year-old woman may have to practice grasping the realization that her body is settling into a new, more mature shape; she should no longer hold unrealistic expectations of looking the way she did at twenty years of age.

If you have made a healthy self-assessment and need a realistic change in your weight, the third step involves setting personal goals that are not established by society or others. Make positive lifestyle changes that include becoming physically fit, eating a healthy low-fat diet, and giving up drastic weight loss strategies which never work. An exercise plan that focuses on strength, endurance, and flexibility will help you make the most of your genetic potential. Focus on fitness, not thinness.

The final strategy is to build a broad base of self-esteem. Examine your goals and values. What is truly important to you? What do you do well? What kind of person would you like to become? Redirect your energy from wanting to look perfect to working on being a whole person, thus building a broad base of self-esteem. ■

SEP  
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BER  
1991  
*Calendar  
of  
Events*

Margaret  
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Women's  
Center



*September 4 (Wednesday)*

**Women's Center Writers Workshop** will meet to reorganize for the fall semester. New members who are interested in sharing what they've written with other writers are invited to attend. 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Kennedy Center, MRL 241.

*September 11 (Wednesday)*

**Dissertation Writers Group** will meet for a preliminary planning/organizational session at 5:00 p.m. in the Women's Center. All women at the proposal stage and beyond in any school or discipline are invited to attend. The Dissertation Writers group is task oriented, providing problem solving, trouble shooting, and moral support needed to complete a dissertation. Nancy Ransom and Katharyn May act as advisors to the group.

If you cannot attend the organizational meeting but wish to be included in the fall group, please phone the Women's Center at 322-4843.

*September 13 (Friday)*

**International Coffee Hour** will be held 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the McTyeire Living Room. Co-sponsors are ODC and Women's Studies.

*September 16 (Monday)*

**Book Group** will discuss *A Lesser Life* by Sylvia Hewlett. Facilitator is Kirstin Lorenz. 5:15 to 6:15 p.m., Godchaux Living Room.

*September 19 (Thursday)*

**Noontime Seminar: *Equality and the Bill of Rights***. Susan Ford Wiltshire, Professor of Classics and Chair of the Department of Classical Studies. December 15, 1991 marks the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights. The seminar addresses gender in relation to the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution. 12:15 p.m. to 1:15 p.m., Sarratt 118.

*September 25 (Wednesday)*

**Lunchtime Book Review**, Phyllis Frus, Assistant Professor of English, will review *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, this historical novel about a runaway slave girl offers a look at women's history. 12:15 p.m. to 1:15 p.m., Sarratt 118.

*September 26 (Thursday)*

**Journaling Workshop: *Visiting our Mothers Through Journal Writing***, Miriam Bassuk, L.C.S.W., 5:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., David K. Wilson Hall, room 112. Fee \$10; \$5 students, registration required by September 23, limited to 35 registrants.

Please save and post. Individual flyers for these events will not be sent.

# News quotes

## Balancing work and family with employer help

Companies that help employees balance work and family have reduced turnover and absenteeism and increased productivity, according to a Conference Board analysis of more than 80 research studies.

At Union Bank, an on-site child-care center in Los Angeles lowered absenteeism and shortened maternity leaves. A year after the center opened, employees using it had been absent 1.7 fewer days than parents with children in other child care.

Such benefits boost productivity by making people feel their employer cares, says Dana E. Friedman, co-president of Families & Work Institute in New York.

Moreover, work-family issues increasingly affect men as well as women. Du Pont found that while only twenty-four percent of its work force is female, seventy percent of its employees with children under thirteen need some form of child care.

*Wall Street Journal*  
June 13, 1991

## More women included in health research

After years of neglect by health researchers and the federal government, women may finally find out what's ailing them. The National Institutes of Health's new Office of Research on Women's Health is set to spend up to \$500 million to study the major disabling and fatal conditions women face, including breast cancer and osteoporosis. And scientists receiving money from NIH must now include women in studies — or justify leaving them out.

No one knows, for example, if high cholesterol is as much of a risk to women as it is to men, even though heart disease kills roughly equal numbers of both sexes. Nor do researchers understand why women are twice as likely to suffer from depression. Without clear reasons, more women now develop two devastating diseases. AIDS cases soared thirty percent in women in 1990 and only eighteen percent in men. Breast cancer now strikes one in every nine

women, up from one in ten in the 1980s.

Some answers may be in store. The reason: the recently introduced Women's Health Equity Act of 1991, a package of twenty-two bills designed to ensure that federal funding is directed toward research that deals with women's health concerns.

Spearheading many of the changes are women in top health posts for the first time. Antonia Novello is surgeon general; Gail Wilensky runs the Health Care Financing Administration, which oversees the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and cardiologist Bernadine Healy is at the helm of NIH.

*U.S. News and World Report*  
May 20, 1991

## Neurosurgeon accuses Stanford Medical of sexism

The resignation of a pioneering female neurosurgeon after what she said was a quarter-century of subtle sexism at Stanford Medical School has tapped a vein of resentment among women there.

The resignation has also prompted discussion across the nation about how women are demeaned in the world of academic medicine.

The pattern of behavior described by the surgeon, Dr. Frances K. Conley, runs from insensitive language to physical harassment and is  
*(continued page five)*



## Norplant offers new option in birth control

*Beth Colvin Huff, RN, MSN*  
Dept. OB-GYN

A new option in birth control is now available to American women. Norplant is an implanted device which provides contraception for a five year period. Although it has received a lot of media exposure, many women are still unaware of this new method.

Oral contraceptive pills are generally made up of two hormones our ovaries naturally produce — estrogen and progesterone. These are taken on a daily basis to prevent the ovary from releasing an egg (ovulation). The majority of major complications (blood clots, stroke, liver tumors) and minor complications (nausea, headaches, fluid retention) are related to the estrogen component in the pill.

Unlike birth control pills, Norplant only contains progesterone. It is implanted under the skin where a continuous, low dose is absorbed.

Studies have shown that this method is highly effective for five years at pre-

venting pregnancy. Anytime a woman desires pregnancy, the implants are removed and fertility is rapidly restored.

The insertion procedure is relatively simple: a local anesthetic is injected in the underside of the upper arm. When the skin is numb, six small silicone capsules containing the progesterone are inserted in a fanlike pattern under the skin. Once inserted, the capsules are not visible but can be felt with palpation. The insertion procedure takes twenty to thirty minutes. For a few days the arm may be slightly bruised or swollen, but these side effects soon disappear.

The efficacy rates are quite high; approximately the same as tubal ligation. Efficacy does decrease with increasing weight and it is generally recommended that women weigh 155 pounds or less to be eligible for Norplant. Side effects are mostly related to menstrual cycle changes and irregular bleeding.

While Norplant does not solve the dilemma of female contraception, it does give us another alternative to consider. ■

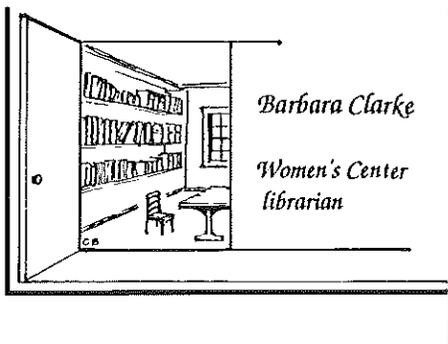
## Summer additions

# Library announces new readings

Some interesting new books on a variety of topics were received during the summer.

*Women at Thirtysomething: Paradoxes of Attainment* edited by Clifford Adelman is based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. The survey shows that, although women and girls received better grades than men and boys in college and high school, the men received higher salaries in almost all occupations. The difference cannot be explained by the women's child-rearing responsibilities, as even women without children earned an average of 31.9 percent less than did men. On the whole the women had equal or better qualifications, and showed more positive attitudes toward education and work. Adelman found that not only does American society exploit women, but it under-utilizes the talents of half of the population.

*Winning Women Into Mathematics*, edited by Patricia Clark Kenschaft, is a new publication from the Committee on Participation of Women of the Mathematical Association of America. The work discusses what could be done to recruit more women into the field of mathematics, to retain those women, and to acknowledge and publicize their contributions to the discipline. The book includes cartoons and skits, as well as sections on historical information, on minority women, and on the cultural reasons why so few women become mathematicians.



The library. This two-volume work contains data on hundreds of European women authors who wrote during the past thousand years. The biographies were written by experts from all over the world; each biography includes a list of works and most have a bibliography.

Christine L. Williams' *Gender Differences at Work: Women and Men in Nontraditional Occupations* is a study of occupational sex segregation. The writer focuses on women in the military and men in nursing.

Anne Witte Garland's *Women Activists: Challenging the Abuse of Power* contains articles on a number of American and English women who have worked to make a difference in society or in their own community. The women, most of whom are not well-known, have been activists in such fields as education, civil rights, toxic waste, and automotive safety.

*Real Rape* by Susan Estrich is a study of most aspects of rape in the United States. The writer, a professor of law at Harvard Law School, concentrates on the injustices of past and present rape laws.

*The Secret Eye: the Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, edited by Virginia Ingraham Barr, is the diary of a woman who was born in 1834 and who was a member of the Deep South planter elite. Barr is the great-granddaughter of the diarist, who wrote on plantation life in Georgia, of the slaves and her attitudes toward slavery, on women's rights, and of the Civil War and its aftermath. Some years of the diary have been lost, probably in a house fire, and the extant volumes have been edited for this fascinating book, which includes a section of family photographs.

Other new arrivals include: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston; *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* by Jean Bethke Elshtain; *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy* by Susan L. Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson; *Feminism Without Illusions: a Critique of Individualism* by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Making Connections: the Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* by Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer; *Street Woman* by Eleanor M. Miller; *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* by Stuart Ewen; and *Belle Starr and Her Times* by Glenn Shirley. ■

**Problems or Opportunities: Creative Responses for Women in Higher Education** is the title of a conference hosted by the Tennessee Committee of the American Council on Education's National Identification Program for Women in Higher Education on Friday, October 11 at Vanderbilt. Registration begins at 8:00 a.m. in Sarratt Cinema. The conference will open at 9:00 in the Cinema with an address by Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb, President Emerita of California State University, Fullerton. Those who register before October 1 will be charged \$35, which includes luncheon. On-site registration will cost \$45. On Thursday evening, October 10, conferees will be treated to a special reception for Mary Purcell, following a short meeting of Women in Higher Education in Tennessee (WHET). Ms. Purcell is president of the International Association of University Women, and is former national president of the American Association of University Women.

For further information or to obtain a registration form, stop by the Women's Center or call 322-4843.

## News (continued from page four)

said by experts of both sexes to be common at medical schools, where women are well-represented in the classrooms but rare in the corridors of power.

*The Tennessean*  
July 14, 1991

## VU professor awarded major neuroscience grant

Elaine Sanders-Bush, Ph.D., has received a \$500,000 grant to study neurotransmitters in the brain, in hopes of finding new strategies for treating psychiatric disorders.

The grant, awarded annually by Bristol-Myers Squibb to an individual involved in neuroscience research, entitles Sanders-Bush, professor of Pharmacology and Psychiatry at Vanderbilt, to receive \$100,000 per year for the next five years.

Kristi Wyble  
VUMC Reporter  
July 26, 1991

# Announcements et cetera

**Call for papers on Technology and Feminism.** The special theme for volume thirteen of *Research in Philosophy and Technology* will be "Technology and Feminism." The deadline for receipt of manuscripts is September 15, 1991. Direct inquiries to Dr. Joan Rothschild, 460 W. 24th Street, Apartment 8D, New York, NY 10011, (212) 645-8339.

**The Rape and Sexual Abuse Center** is seeking volunteers to serve as telephone counselors on the twenty-four-hour Crisis Line. Volunteers answer the Crisis Line from their homes, providing invaluable information, emotional support, and crisis intervention to sexual assault victims and their families. A twenty-five hour comprehensive training course will be held September 19 through 28. The training is held on three week nights and two full Saturdays. If you are interested in becoming part of this community service, call Ginger Miller at 259-9055 by September 4.

**The Association for Women in Development** announces its fifth international forum, *Learning Together/Working Together: A South-North Dialogue*. The international forum will provide a venue for considering empowerment strategies in more depth and for linking with others to

advance common agendas. The symposium will promote a dialogue amongst practitioners, scholars, and policy makers. Dates for the event are November 21 through 23, 1991 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C. Questions regarding the Forum should be directed to the Conference Office at (913) 532-5575.

**Women Helping Women Through Decisions.** Women volunteers (faculty, staff, and students) are needed for a course in positive decision-making and life planning skills at the Tennessee Women's Prison. Would you work one-on-one with a prisoner/partner for an hour weekly during the eight-week course, September 23 through November 18? Volunteer training is scheduled for September 14 and 15. For information, call Candy Markman at 383-6393.

**Call for participation.** Proposals are sought for the April 1992 conference "Reassessing the Grounds for our Struggle: Connecting Women's Lives in Theory, Practice, Performance." Possible formats include research papers, panel discussions, literary

readings, workshops, and performance arts. Deadline for proposals is September 15, 1991. Address inquiries to: Lynn Walkiewicz, Women's Studies Program at Bowling Green University, (419) 372-2620.

**The First International Conference on Sexual Assault on Campus** will be held October 3 through 5, 1991 at the Holiday Inn International Drive Resort in Orlando, FL. Those interested may call (800) 222-1525 for information and reservations.

Mark your calendar. **Fourth Annual Margaret Cuninggim Lecture** will be given on Wednesday, October 30 by Anne Firor Scott, W.K. Boyd Professor of History Emerita, Duke University. This 8:00 p.m. lecture entitled "Ladies of the Club: Unlikely Revolutionaries" will be in David K. Wilson Hall, room 126.

**Lynne Rienner Publishers** seeks authors for a series on gender and politics. The series will encourage work that moves beyond the use of feminist theory as critique, seeking to develop positive, proactive theories that employ feminist insights. Inquiries should be directed to: Lynne Rienner, LRP, 1800 30th Street, Suite 314, Boulder, CO 80301.



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