



Histories of resistance: Joan Nestle and Irena Klepfisz as keepers of memory

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BOOK REVIEW

Her birth and later years: New and collected poems, 1971–2021, by Irena Klepfisz, Wesleyan University Press, 2022, 279 pp., \$28, ISBN 978-0-8195-0016-8.

A sturdy yes of a people: Selected writings, by Joan Nestle, Sinister Wisdom, 2022, 412 pp., \$25.95. ISBN 978-944981-52-5.

While neither mentions the other one directly, the authors of these two collections are both lesbian feminist Jewish women with long histories of activism who began publishing in the 1970s. Joan Nestle's *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings* and Irena Klepfisz's *Her Birth and Later Years: New and Collected Poems, 1971–2021* engage with similar communities and meditate on shared interests in sustaining families, making sense out of memories, and honoring queer women's desires and lived experiences. Reading Nestle and Klepfisz in conversation weaves together their already contemporaneous personal lives and political interests. From an often first-person vantage point, they both address experiences of lesbians struggling to make sense of the world against them while attempting to do some good through their creative work. Nestle's and Klepfisz's writings keep memories of the major and the mundane alike as they intersect with the radical acts of lesbian desire and queer futurity.

Joan Nestle, born in the Bronx in 1940, is perhaps today best known as co-founder (along with Deb Edel) of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA); LHA's mission says it "exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities," and Nestle's career as a writer and editor shares a similar impetus. *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings* spans that life of public work, as well as gives us a glimpse into the intimate moments that have made Nestle's fifty-plus years in the queer community possible.

Irena Klepfisz was born in 1941 in Poland's Warsaw Ghetto and immigrated to the Bronx in 1949. Klepfisz was a key figure in the 1970s U.S. Jewish lesbian and international women and peace movements. Her poetry, in the confessional tradition, describes her experiences during World War II and the effects of Jewish persecution and the Holocaust on her family, community, and ways of navigating the world. Klepfisz frames her self-understanding as in conversation with and a response to these simultaneously global and intimately felt experiences.

Nestle writes on lesbian feminist, butch-fem, queer, and working-class experiences—from life on the street, to grassroots organizational meetings, to the classroom. In the first section, "Liberation," essay topics range from nascent sexual ideas influenced by her mother, older women, and predatory men, to memories of her early days of political resistance. Nestle makes it clear that for her and many queers, to be free means to desire—to show up with our bodies without shame and boldly proclaim what satisfies us (and what we want to do to satisfy others). For Nestle, desire encompasses a dynamic way of being that deserves to be protected, recognized, reexamined, and celebrated. Freedom to desire is the catalyst for her lifelong engagement with politics and herstory. She reminds us that when we fall victim to restrictive laws, warring governments, and close-minded ideologies, what suffers is not only our bodies, but our histories of desire. Sexuality is simultaneously a practice, personal identifier, and political tool.

A key foundational figure for Nestle's worldview is her mother, a complicated source for sorrow in addition to support. In one of her more celebrated and controversial essays (and the first essay of the collection), "My Mother Liked to Fuck," it is clear that Nestle's mother inspires the blending of sexual liberation and working-class attitude for which Nestle has come to be known. The essay begins:

My mother, Regina, was not a matriarchal goddess or a spiritual advisor. She worshipped at no altars and many times scorned the label *mother*. [...] My father died before I was born, when my mother was twenty-nine, and left her with two children to raise. My mother liked sex and let me know throughout the years both the punishments and rewards she earned because she dared to be clear about enjoying fucking. (41)

Just from this short excerpt, we can see some investments for Nestle: women-oriented communities based on expressions of desire, challenging the myths of purity and virtue that shame women into discarding their own bodies, and collecting the little moments of life that eventually build into a lived philosophy. Regina liked to fuck, and so does her daughter Joan.

Nestle explains her overarching goal as a writer, editor, educator, and activist is to create and support an "archive of dissent"; with her mother's story, we find a sense of the beginning of this mission. Nestle puts her own writing in conversation with her mother's letters and articulates the links and conversations about self, trauma, sexuality, and survival that, for much of their lives, never seemed to be uttered to each other. Although the collection can be repetitive at times, with multiple essays drawing from the same excerpts, in this way Nestle crafts for us a beautifully tender personal history that forms a politic of desire and sexuality free of saccharine romanticization or oversimplified shame.

Klepfisz, too, writes of freedom, with a history of liberation specific to and formulated against the context of the Holocaust. Her understanding of liberation emerges especially from poems about her father Michał, killed in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Like Nestle's mother for her, Michał is an indelible figure for Klepfisz; his presence looms over the book whether he is directly mentioned or not, welcomed or not. A biography of sorts emerges as the collection continues: Michał's brief life as husband, student, and activist-hero can be pieced together throughout *Her Birth and Later Years*. This aspect of the book seems to be Klepfisz's attempt at giving life to and communicating with her father, who died when she was only two. In her writings about him, Klepfisz demonstrates her ability to simultaneously mourn, chastise, and celebrate; she often holds two things in both contention and acceptance, and perhaps the most important pairing is her father's social presence as a resistance leader and absence as a figure of the family. She writes in "March 1939: Warsaw, Poland": "I want to whisper:/[...] Michał:/Don't try to be a hero/be my father" (pp. 202–203).

Her father's story is prominent enough in the collection that it can seem hard to find Klepfisz's own; however, in telling us about Michał the author also tells us about herself. She fears confinement—bodily and philosophical—and worries about everyday wins and losses alongside hate and pain that seem unthinkable, but proven possible by history. The final line of the poem "about my father" succinctly explains his significance to Klepfisz's identity as a Jewish lesbian poet: "he believed in resistance" (18).

Her Birth and Later Years is in some ways a catalog of what Klepfisz herself has resisted. A prominent Yiddishist, Klepfisz's dual-language poems in Yiddish and English deny complacent consumption of ideas and challenge the ownership and

notion of a single story. In lines like “my grandmother too rode her cossack lover/ [...] pulls out the butcher knife/begins slashing till his hands severed he falls back” (from “herr captain”), Klepfisz dispels simplistic myths of victim and virtue. Instead, by articulating and imagining their stories, she builds a community of women joined together at uncomfortable but productive crossroads of sex(uality) and violence. Klepfisz counters homophobia in “they’re always curious” and resists internal confusion despite others’ misconceptions of queer life, without sugar-coating its difficulties in the name of pride:

they’re always curious about what you eat as if you were
 some strange breed still unclassified by darwin [...]
 but they’re more curious about what you do when the urge
 is on & if you use a coke bottle or some psychedelic dildo [...]
 & they always cluck over the amount of space you require
 & certainly the extra bedroom seems unnecessary [...]
 & they kind of probe about your future & if you have a will or
 why you bother to accumulate all that stuff [...]
 ... & i try to explain i live for myself even when in love but
 it’s a hard concept to explain when you feel lonely (37)

Klepfisz’s own history of resistance is at the intersection of her Jewishness and her lesbianism. For Klepfisz, it seems the two identities are bound together by an urgency to understand self and community. In this search, she avoids romanticizing or tidying up difficult histories, admitting instead, “it’s a hard concept to explain when you feel lonely.”

As two “keepers of memory,” Klepfisz and Nestle never let us forget that every small story connects to the capital-H History we receive elsewhere. Often, for both authors, the small stories commemorated are moments of intimacy and descriptions of sex, at various times celebrated, condemned, and confused. Klepfisz’s “dinosaurs for larger issues” outlines the progression of a lesbian romance, night by night:

1. & 2. the first two nights
 she lay diagonally across
 the bed clutching at the blankets
 she refused me room & warmth
 3. the third night [...]
 i slept in the living room
 4. the fourth night
 she [...] moved
 close to me
 5. the fifth night
 she did not speak about
 it (27)

This poem is exemplary of Klepfisz’s attention to bodily presence and palpable tension. The gaps throughout the poem honor both the difficulty of making connections despite misunderstandings and the nervous, exploratory energy of discovering desire. Her presentation of desire as a list of facts, instead of intangible and ineffable, calls attention to the fallibility of language—so much so that by the end, the lover “did not speak.” The poem captures complicated and coexisting successes and failures of difference and desire. The tension in these lines can be found throughout Klepfisz’s poems, and her linguistic skill is demonstrated through this movement of succinct, endlessly suggestive lines to the play-by-play of bodies in the dark.

Likewise, as the introductory essays of *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings* discuss, Nestle is known for her frank and detailed depictions of sex, particularly in

butch-fem relationships. Nestle fondly refers to herself and others writing sex as pornographers, and the classic “Esther’s Story” and its companion essay, “Rereading Esther’s Story,” are included. While there are doubtless sexy descriptions and erotic flourishes that bring out the beauty of bodies meeting in desire, we also encounter Nestle’s struggle to reconcile the effects of cancer on her sex life and connection to lovers. Like Klepfisz, Nestle reflects on her life of desire alongside her experience of aging: “Illness, like sex, gives the body another dimension, makes it transparent. I could feel the chemotherapy liquid enter my veins, trace its burning journey through my arm, just as I used to feel a lover’s tongue curl down my neck” (236). Nestle’s and Klepfisz’s works join together as meditations on embodiment, the material presence of want, disappointment, pleasure, and pain.


Irena Klepfisz’s *Her Birth and Later Years: New and Collected Poems, 1971–2021* and Joan Nestle’s *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings* are both powerful and necessary collections that demonstrate the perfect marriage between personal remembrance and public consciousness. They keep memories: of the murdered and survived, of class struggles, and race relations, of epidemics and war, of community builders and their oppositions, of bodies and their desires. They keep these memories, and more, not in the way non-conforming histories have been destroyed, manipulated, and silenced, but in the spirit of transformative, creative justice work. For lesbian studies, these collections are social, political, and personal projects that fill in gaps of our history and invite us to speculate about a more sustainable future.

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Notes on contributor

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