

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 36 Teaching Guide

Sinister Wisdom Teaching Guides

Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities

Summary: *Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities* (Winter 1988/89) focuses on lesbian-feminist responses to and testimonies about psychiatric assault, psychiatric institutions, and mental health within the lesbian community. The poems, essays, and stories in this issue document how psychiatric institutions treated lesbians in the 1980s and in earlier decades. *Sinister Wisdom 36* contains essays by Joan M. Ward p. 33-41, Dee Dee NiHera p. 76-86, and Diane Hugs p. 94-99 about therapism, the capitalist roots of pharmaceuticals and psychotherapy, and the standards and ethics of lesbian/feminist therapy. The poems “Because of These Things” by Margaret Robison p. 9-10 and “In Her Voice” by Tryna Hope p. 11-12, along with the narratives “Don’t Call Me Crazy” by Rebecca Ripley p. 13-14, “Brain Damage” by Winifred E. Eads p. 16-17, and “The Story I Never Write” by Elana Dykewomon p. 64-70, chronicle experiences and emotions that result from being institutionalized.

This issue also explores stigmas that surround mental health, diagnosis, and treatment. The poems “First Admission” by Mary Moran p. 15, “Holding On” by Laura Post p. 21, “to the women who weep” by Chia Heller-Zbloki p. 62-63, “Branded” by Janet Aalfs p. 123-124, and the narratives “I Used to Live in that House” by Feral Willcox p.42-45, “My Mother Played the Accordion” by Bettianne Shoney Sien p. 71-75 discuss the stigmas placed upon lesbians who have mental health problems. Katharyn Machan Ad’s poem “Jane Ann Dutton/Emely Dunton” p. 29-32 provides a perspective about what being institutionalized looks like from the inside versus the outside. Batya Weinbaum writes about the alternative, emotional healing spot at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in her article, “Oasis” p. 92-93. Firsthand testimonials p. 103-116 by women who have been institutionalized are a highlight of *Sinister Wisdom 36*. Sharon Sumpter, Kathy Moorhouse, Karla K., Bethany, Yvonne M. Moonstorm, Lynn Yamaguchi Fletcher, Ruta (Mazelis) Windstar, Cheryl Marie Wade, Linda Stalker, Louise Wischild, Linda Marie, Janelle Lavelle, and Mary Lou Daugherty all offer testimonials of the lesbian experience of surviving psychiatric assault.

Historical Relevance:

Following a campaign by Stonewall-era gay and lesbian activists, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM), the professional guidebook for mental illnesses. Even after removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, lesbianism continued to be stigmatized by mental health providers. Throughout the twentieth century, lesbians were stigmatized with labels such as crazy, deviant, insane, abnormal and aberrant. A psychological war against lesbian women’s minds was waged at this time in order to enforce socially appropriate, heterosexual behavior for women. Lesbians were detained in mental institutions throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and experienced various forms of psychiatric assault.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Do lesbians experience psychiatric assault differently from their heterosexual counterparts? How are these stories and testimonies particular to lesbians? How are they universal?
2. What was the historical context of psychiatric institutions in the 1980s? What is the role of psychiatric institutions today?
3. What stigmas did lesbians who had been institutionalized and/or had mental health problems have when *Sinister Wisdom 36* was published in 1988/89? What stigmas surround mental health now? Have the stigmas changed? How so?
4. How do testimonials of women who have been institutionalized document psychiatric assault? Do these testimonials resonate with contemporary lesbian experience? How can the testimonies be used as historical evidence?
5. How do poems in this issue convey psychiatric assault and being institutionalized? How do short stories in this issue convey those themes? Are there differences between how poems and short stories work in this issue?
6. Why was an issue of *Sinister Wisdom* dedicated to surviving psychiatric assault and creating emotional well-being in our communities? What are the stakes for the lesbian community to chronicle their experiences of psychiatric assault?

Key Words:

- **Therapism:** a cultural ideal of mental therapy that attempts to relieve a group of responsibility by assigning motivation and blame to outside agencies, such as society or brain chemistry, which attributes actions to be outside the realm of moral agency.
- **Pharmaceutical:** a manufactured compound made into a drug for medicinal purposes.
- **Psychotherapy:** a form of therapy in which psychological problems are treated through communication between a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist, and an individual.

Unit Teaching Activity Ideas:

1. List negative words people have called you, as well as the stigmas associated with those words. Then, write a poem or a story about a time you were called one of these words, describing how it made you feel.
2. Divide into four groups and select an essay by Joan M. Ward, Dee Dee NiHera, and Diane Hugs, as well as the “Notes for an Issue.” Create a list of discussion questions for each article, and then discuss those questions.
3. Research a mental health issue you have heard about or have experience with, write stories and poems about these issues, and then compile the poems and stories into a class journal. Collaboratively, write a forward to your class issue on what your journal is trying to say about modern mental health and why you have deemed it important enough to make an issue about.

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History of Sinister Wisdom:

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal founded by Catherine Nicholson and Harriett Desmoines in 1976. Since then, *Sinister Wisdom* has been published three to four times a year and has documented lesbian experience through poems, prose, politics, theory, and art.

About a Contributor: Elana Dykewomon

Elana Dykewomon is a Jewish lesbian, activist, award-winning author, editor, and teacher. She is best known for her Lambda award-winning historical novel, *Beyond the Pale*. Her first novel, *Riverfinger Women*, is on the Publishing Triangle's list of *100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels*. She has also won the 2009 Duggins Outstanding Mid-Career Novelist's prize.

Elana Dykewomon was born in 1949 in New York City, where she lived until her family moved to Puerto Rico when she was eight years old. She studied fine art at Reed College and received her BFA in Creative Writing from the California Institute of Art. She now lives in Oakland and offers private writing classes and editing.

Elana Dykewomon was the editor of *Sinister Wisdom* between 1987 and 1994. Her poems and stories, which place lesbians as the central, active figures, have been widely anthologized. *What Can I Ask: New and Selected Poems 1975-2014* is the third title in the *Sinister Wisdom/A Midsummer Night's Press Sapphic Classics* series. Her narrative, "The Story I Never Write," appears in *Sinister Wisdom 36: Surviving Psychiatric Assault & Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities*. In "The Story I Never Write," Dykewomon briefly documents her struggle in writing about her time being institutionalized for being a lesbian, and she reflects upon the other women that she met in the institution.

Bibliography:

Riverfinger Women. Daughters, Inc., 1974.

They Will Know Me By My Teeth. Megaera Press, 1976.

Fragments from Lesbos. Diaspora Distribution, 1981.

Nothing Will Be As Sweet As the Taste. Onlywomen Press, 1995.

Beyond the Pale. Press Gang Publishers, 1997.

Moon Creek Road. Spinster's Ink Books, 2003.

Risk. Bywater Books, 2009.

What Can I Ask: New and Selected Poems 1975-2014. Sinister Wisdom and A Midsummer Night's Press, 2015.

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Resources:

Herek, Gregory M. "Stigma, Prejudice, and Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men." In *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy*, 60-80. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991.

Discusses the institutional and personal hostility toward lesbians and gay men in the United States. http://psc.dss.ucdavis.edu/faculty_sites/rainbow/html/spssi_91_pre.PDF

Morrow, Deana F. "Older Gays and Lesbians: Surviving a Generation of Hate and Violence." In *Hate Crimes*, 151-170. Philadelphia, PA: Haworth Press, 2001.

This article documents the rise of psychiatric assault among the gay and lesbian community in conjunction with other hate-crimes targeting the same population. <http://sageatl.org/docs/hatecrimes.pdf>

Meyer, Ilan H. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin* (2003): 674-697. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674.

This article examines the prevalence of mental disorders in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs), using meta-analyses to demonstrate that LGBs have a higher prevalence of mental disorders than heterosexuals do. Meyer offers a conceptual framework for understanding this excess in prevalence of disorders in terms of *minority stress*—explaining that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2072932/>

Sinister Wisdom is happy to provide, free of charge, classroom sets and reading group sets of journal issues. For people who are able to make a contribution to cover the cost of postage, we will provide an invoice; postage reimbursement is voluntary though greatly appreciated.

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