

lesbian
chic:
I feel
pretty
&
witty
&
gay

by
**Rachel
Giese**

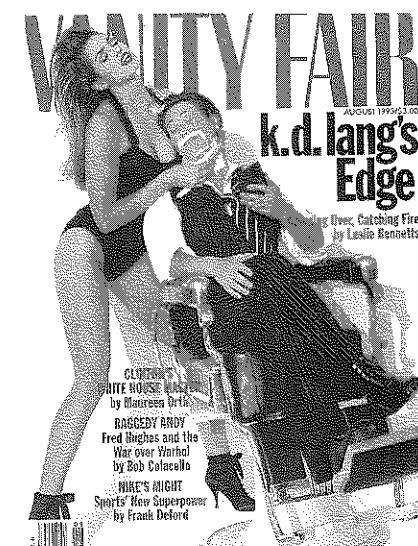
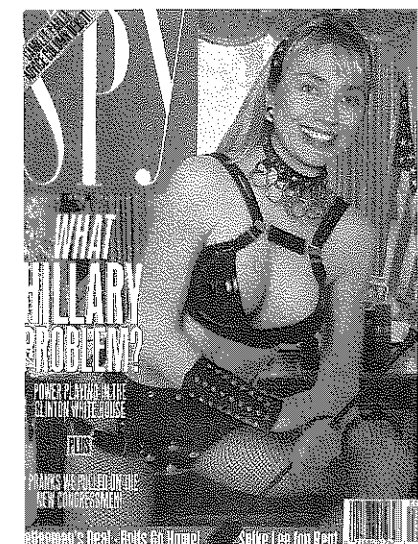
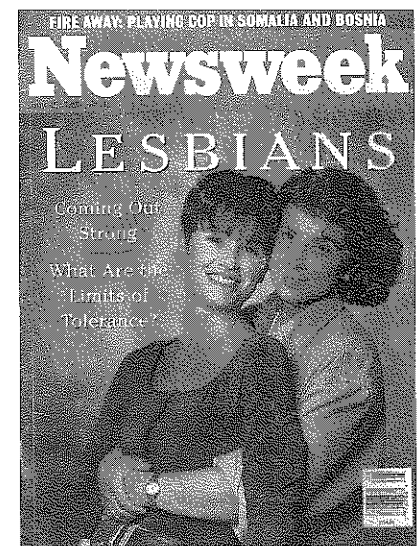
Once upon a time,

in the 1970s, gay men ruled. In the urban centres of San Francisco, New York and LA, they gave the best parties, designed the best clothes and choreographed the best shows. Modern day Noel Cowards, they could always be counted on for the wittiest remarks and the dishiest gossip.

Then came the 1980s and with the shadow that AIDS cast on them, gay men were no longer so attractive. Heterosexuality came back in with a vengeance. Women like Nancy Reagan and Joan Collins became the drag queens of choice. Straight people took over the clubs and started finding their own connections to cocaine. The decade was still about excess, but it was financial in nature, not sexual.

The high living of the 1980s gave way to the recessionary 1990s and the world needed a new sexual orientation to give meaning to the decade. The media seized upon lesbians. They were the perfect image for the scaled-down, nesting 1990s. Their sex was safe and their relationships were long lasting. According to the media, lesbians had shed the negative image that had plagued them in the 1970s—as man-hating separatists. In the intervening years, lesbians had apparently discovered sex, Nair and Armani. And the media was ready to discover them.

The beginnings of the Lesbian Chic phenomenon can be traced back to when Sandra Bernhard got together with Morgan Fairchild on *Roseanne*. Glued to our sets,



we barely made it out of our livingrooms to buy the *National Enquirer* with its story on Northampton, Mass., a town that "10,000 kissing and cuddling lesbians call home."

Then Lea DeLaria screamed "I'm a big dyke" on *Arsenio Hall* and won the hearts of America. *New York* magazine, already famous for breaking both the New Yuppie and the New Couch Potato trends, scooped again. This time with a cover story on the New Lesbian. "Lesbian Chic," shrieked the headline above the cover photo of k.d. lang, "the bold, brave new world of gay women."

Other media were quick to pick up on this trend. *Newsweek* magazine asked the burning question "lesbianism—what are the limits of tolerance?" Geraldo and Phil interviewed panels of "lesbians who don't look it" and Julia Phillips, author of *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*, is about to release a book about the dykes who run Hollywood.

But the media's infatuation with us isn't over yet. *Vanity Fair* recently featured a cover photo of lang getting a shave from supermodel Cindy Crawford. *US* magazine ran another lesbian story and everyone is waiting for Gus Van Sant's film, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, with its lesbian sub-plot, to be released.

On one hand, this sudden attention is welcome. While gay men have had to put up with public outings after wash-room raids and swishy hairdresser stereotypes in film and television, lesbians have suffered an opposite fate—a severe lack of exposure. For the first time in history not only does lesbianism have a high profile, it's also been getting positive coverage. Sexy, sapphic and media-friendly, today's dyke is a babe who can give good soundbites.

In fact, she's almost *too* good to be true. If reports are correct, the lesbian of the 1990s is highly educated (no doubt at Smith, Wellesley or the Parson's School of Design), liberal minded (a

friend of Bill's who has a wicked crush on Hillary) and earns \$48,000 a year (as a model, entrepreneur or lawyer). And, almost without exception, she's white. Linda Villarosa, the one black face in the sea of white chicness, is an editor at *Essence* magazine. She's beautiful, feminine, highly successful and very non-controversial. One wonders how she's managed to find time to do her own writing with all the media attention focussed on her. You can almost hear editors yelling "I want a story on dykes! Those new fashionable ones! And be sure to get an interview with the black woman!"

The Village Voice's Deb Schwartz calls this sanitized, media-version of lesbianism, "Homosexuality Lite." Devoid of any political or historical context, it's all style but very little substance.

The *New York* article, while it attempted to address some pertinent political issues, focussed mainly on fashion and social mores. A trip to a trendy lesbian bar reveals attractive Luppies (lesbian urban professionals) sipping wine spritzers and planning their holy unions. An interracial couple (Jewish and African-American) smooth over their differences by purchasing identical engagement rings at an upscale department store. And Madonna's and Sandra Bernhard's dirty dancing at a lesbian club gets far too much credit for bringing the lesbian movement to maturity. It was as though the Stonewall Riots, the feminist and civil rights movements and the creation of a rich feminist/lesbian culture of writing, film and music, never existed. Instead, a new generation of lesbians was presented, born of an Immaculate Conception, radically different from their foremothers, with no political or social issues more pressing than deciding on a shade of lipstick.

The *Newsweek* piece is equally as guilty of the twin sins of omission and sanitization. The cover features two well-accessorised babes (a denim shirt

with pearls) cuddling. The reader is later to find out that the pair are lovers and that one is a recovering alcoholic studying to be "a therapist for homosexuals." How perfect. How 1990s. For the lesbian-impaired, *Newsweek* provides a lexicon—giving definitions for "butch," "femme," and "vanilla." My favourite, however, is the one for "lipstick lesbian." This woman is described as "part of the Madonna aesthetic. Dolls up, wears makeup and skirts and has long nails." The whole article has the tone of an anthropological paper or a cheap pulp novel—*explore the strange twilight world of women who love women.*

Interestingly, no one in the mainstream covering the Lesbian Chic trend has identified herself as a lesbian. In fact, judging from the response in the lesbian and gay press, most lesbians are suspicious of the hype. Most are afraid we'll suffer the same fate as the new couch potato and the new yuppie—we'll soon find ourselves in another magazine on a list of the year's worst trends. *Out* in both senses of the word.

Perhaps it's just a matter journalistic objectivity that most of the reporters aren't lesbians. But it's another matter entirely when they try so hard to make it clear to readers that THEY'RE NOT DYKES. In the *US* story, the author points it out in the *first sentence*. She writes, "I'm standing alone, the only straight woman in motorcycle leathers, among a throbbing, grinding, drinking, smoking, dancing, kissing group of long-haired, red-lipped, perfect-bodied, little-black-dressed lesbians in Girl Bar in Los Angeles." Obviously the author has not kept up with the news, or else she wouldn't have made such a fashion *faux pas*. She must have been thinking of the *old* lesbians as she picked out her undercover get-up for the night. In dyke bars only the straight girl reporters wear leather, pants and no makeup. Unfortunately, what may be lurking beneath this objective facade is a nasty

case of homophobia. While lesbians may be cool to talk about, look like or even know, actually being mistaken for one fills most with trepidation.

But journalists aren't the only ones recognizing our current cachet. News of us has been selling magazines, but we're also being recognized as consumers. In the past few years, market research has shown that gays and lesbians have large incomes and expensive, well-educated tastes. Companies like Absolut vodka, Banana Republic and Toyota have targeted ads towards the lesbian and gay market (see Steven Maynard's article in this issue). Banana Republic even used a real lesbian in their "Chosen Family" campaign—Ingrid Cassares, the ex of both Madonna and Sandra. It's certainly flattering. And these ads may do more to increase our visibility than any number of marches on Washington. But again, it's our alleged financial clout, not any belief in our basic rights, which has inspired these ads.

To a certain extent, lesbians themselves may be responsible for the sudden hipness. There is some truth in the media revelation that the new generation of lesbians is different from the past. In the film, *Thank God I'm a Lesbian*, author Sarah Schulman explains that lesbians who came out in the late 1980s have an entirely different relationship and different expectations of popular culture than in the past. While Stonewall lesbians felt alienated from popular culture and 1970s feminist lesbians protested against it, younger lesbians are demanding a place in it, says Schulman. We buy Madonna CDs, we read hip lesbian and gay magazines like *OUT*, *10 Percent* and *Deneuve* and watch films by out lesbian and gay filmmakers. This might even be seen as a rebellion against the perceived prudishness of the old guard. Shaving legs, wearing lipstick, reading porn and calling each other girl (never womyn, wimmin or womon) has become the new way for lesbians to be radical.

A straight friend of mine told me she first heard of the Lesbian Chic trend on the Maury Povich show. Povich had on a lipstick lesbian couple who charmed the audience with their non-threatening attitude and good looks. Both of their fathers were in the house and they stood up and told Povich how proud they were of their daughters. However, Povich had also invited an old-school feminist lesbian who was practically booed off stage for her politics and, one can presume, tacky fashion sense.

My friend said it was a win-win situation for the lipstick lesbians and the audience. The audience could pat themselves on the back for their liberalness—sure they could accept homosexuals when they were as cute as these girls—and the lipstick lesbians could gain societal acceptance from distancing themselves as much as possible from the less desirable elements of the lesbian community. My friend said it was a perfect example of a controversial issue made palatable with the benefit of good packaging.

The loser of course, was the older feminist lesbian. Set up as a straw woman and an out-dated cliché, she was rejected even by members of her own community. This divide and conquer routine is often used on minority groups. And now we're seeing the good lesbian pitted against the bad lesbian, with the media lesbian screaming "These are the 1990s, accessorizing is in. Organizing is out." While for the time being she's winning hands down, in the end we all lose.

We lose our history of butch and femme women (dykes in the 1990s weren't the first to wear lipstick) and the history of radical and brave feminists of the 1970s. We lose the strength of diversity in our communities. And most importantly we lose the ownership of our own sexuality. The Lesbian Chic hype has turned our politics into t-shirt slogans and our sex into a soft-core *Playboy* spread. The "chic media lesbian" is sexy

but never has sex. And she never articulates the desire for women which has led her down an often dangerous, lonely and precarious path.

At a time when gay rights are being fought for in the military, in the courts, in Washington and Ottawa and on the streets, the "chic lesbian" is apolitical. While she is making the covers of mainstream magazines her own magazines are being stopped at the border.

Lesbian author Jane Rule once explained why she wrote for *The Body Politic*, a now defunct gay liberation magazine. While Rule had gained mainstream respectability she said she would continue to defend the controversial magazine because as long as one homosexual was marginalized and silenced, we all were. She refused to hide behind her reputation and allow others to be pushed to the fringes.

There is nothing wrong with being chic. There is nothing wrong with lesbians finally being able to move into the mainstream. And perhaps it is inevitable that in its first attempts to explore the lesbian experience, the media hasn't done a thorough job. Maybe that is a task best left up to lesbians themselves.

There is a cost, however, in the whirlwind romance the media is having with us. We're not always going to make good copy. And while the media may ignore our strengths, our politics and our community, we had better not. Or we'll be left, like brides at the altar, scratching our heads and wondering what happened, when we're no longer front page news.

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