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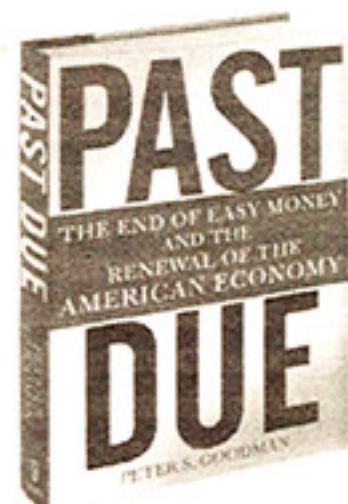


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# Faithless Love

Catherine M. shares her pain over the sexual life of her partner.

BY TONI BENTLEY

THE photos lying on her lover's desk depicted a young, naked, pregnant woman photographing herself, legs apart, in front of a mirror. In his notebook, also lying open (or was it closed?), beside the photos, was an entry about "Blandine" — not the pregnant woman, another one — where he wrote of his great desire for her. "She's so beautiful!" Thus Catherine Millet's hellacious ordeal began with not one but two women, naked, fertile, beau-

## JEALOUSY

By Catherine Millet.  
Translated by Helen Stevenson.  
185 pp. Grove Press. \$23.

tiful and, of course, younger. When she confronted her partner, Jacques Henric, on the phone with her discovery of the two women, he generously promised, when he returned from a trip, to "tell me all about the affairs he had had with five or six women." Alas, the hollandaise has already thickened. And so Millet is catapulted down the rabbit hole of jealousy, from which there is little chance of return — and never to innocence.

Millet, as you may recall, is the French art critic and editor who wrote "The Sexual Life of Catherine M.," which was published in France in 2001 and caused a sensation of titillation and sales around the world. She is always described in her P.R. and interviews as an intellectual. Is this because a sexual "intellectual" can't be a slut, so the sex has more literary gravitas? (Though who wants gravitas ruining his or her sex?) Or is it because she is the founder and editor of a French magazine called Art Press? With declarations like "Is there, for human beings, any other source of pleasure than that of obscenity?" one feels more in the company of a schoolgirl aiming to shock than of Simone de Beauvoir's heir.

Millet's sexual memoir, an extensive laundry list cataloging her promiscuity, was, in fact, so "intellectual" that she actually succeeded in taking the sexy out of sex, surely her greatest obscenity. She had so much salacious detail to report that perhaps there simply was no room in the bed (or the Bois de Boulogne) for that slippery erotic organ called the heart. Her book made the Marquis de Sade look like a hopeless romantic (not to mention an actual intellectual). It was all wham, bam, merci ma'am, sex and nothingness — and oodles of both.

Now we have Millet's inevitable follow-up, another memoir, titled "Jealousy."

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books, including "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir."

Here she mourns that she has "no doubt" that her wide "range of experiences" held back "the development of my libidinal personality." As a woman, I feel her concern — but isn't there a 12-step program for libidinal personality disorder?

"I focused a lot on responding to the desires of my partners," she writes, "while rather haphazardly satisfying my own." These are the words not of a true hedonist but of that common tragedy: a woman who does not value herself. Readers of the first memoir may recall that virtually the only scene featuring Millet's own orgasm — one "of the purest quality" — had her alone in the company of a multispeed dildo. "It is almost impossible for me to reach orgasm," she explains in "Jealousy," "in the presence of a witness." Got it, guys? Leave the room if you want to please your lady. Millet has acquired for herself, like Anaïs Nin, a reputation for sexual prowess, though both admit, in the not-so-fine print, to finding their own pleasure infrequently and with considerable difficulty. Maybe bad girls do "go everywhere," but the dirty little secret is that they don't always enjoy it.

"Jealousy" — which has been translated by Helen Stevenson — tells of Millet's "crises," the nearly three years of agony



*Maybe bad girls do 'go everywhere,' but the dirty little secret is that they don't always enjoy it.*

she suffered after discovering her lover's lovers. Divine retribution, you are thinking. Hang on — it might not be so spiritual, but merely conjugal. When she confronted him, "he pointed out my own behavior, the fact that I had never stopped going to orgies and that, above all, for long periods I had desired other people, not him." While this romantic tit for tat may have its own kind of poetic justice, rationality has never prevented the torture of jealousy from taking over like a virus. Millet says it was only after "I'd met a thousand others" that she knew Henric was the one. (Would this information be a high or a low point for the man in question?)

Let's take a quick look at Henric, this lover-cum-husband of Millet's — they met

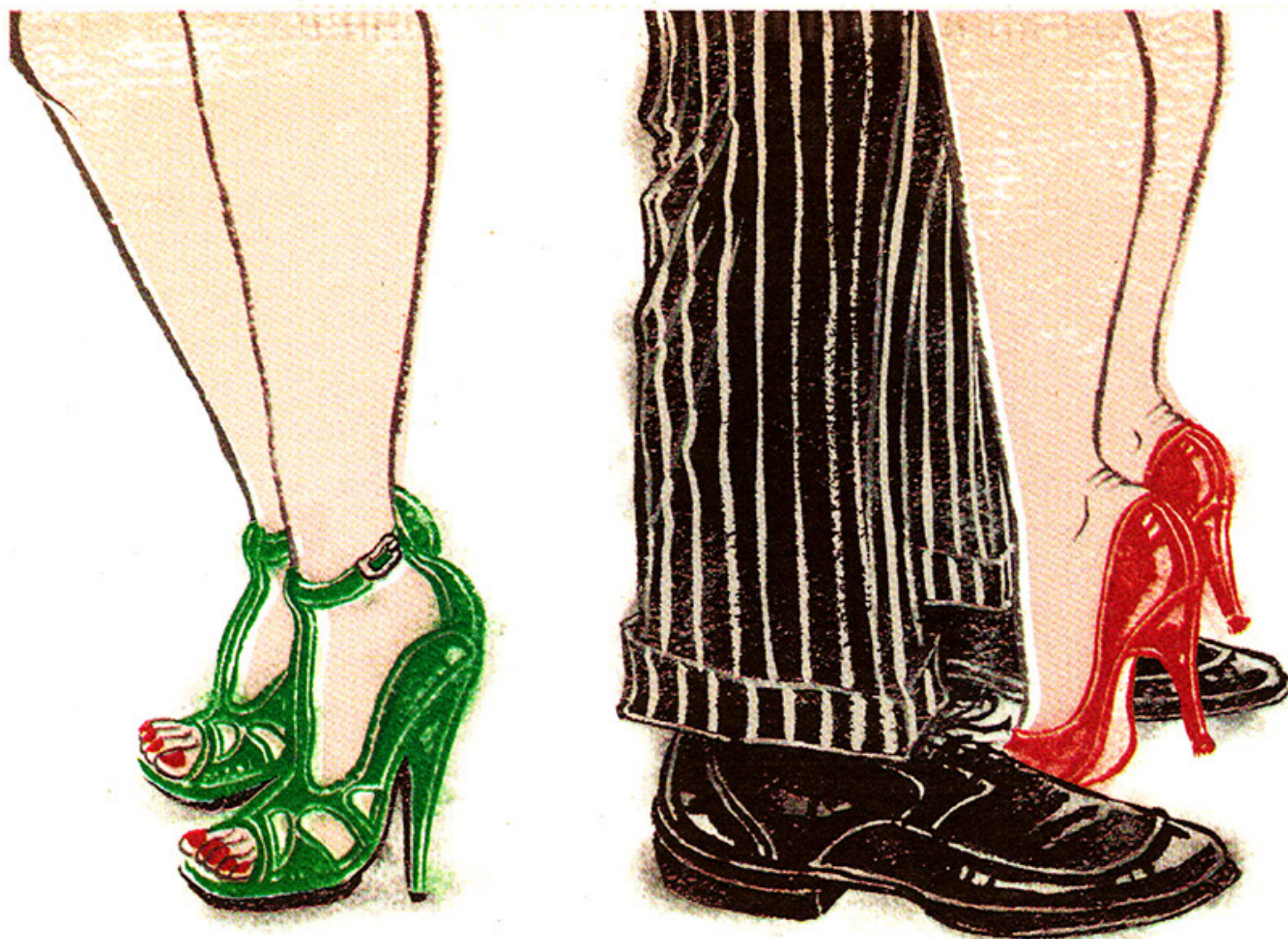
in 1972, when she was 24, and married in 1991 — since he is in the central, though dubious, position of being the inspiration for the grand misery endured by Catherine of a thousand and one men. He also figured as background support in her sexual memoir: all her reported transgressions took place while living with him, with his knowledge. Oh, those funny French!

HENRIC, born in 1938, is 10 years older than Millet, and has run Art Press with her for decades, as well as publishing a number of novels and essays. His claim to fame, however, has come late, and will forever be as the man who stood by while his wife slept with all of France — and then, setting aside his early Communist beliefs, capitalized on her notoriety by publishing a book of nude photos he had taken of her. (His book was reissued in France last year, coinciding, again, with the publication of his wife's latest memoir.)

In "Légendes de Catherine M.," he writes concise paragraphs like: "A photo is in the present. Love is in the present. Period." He too, it would appear, is an intellectual. Henric does, however, clear up one pressing question: why are there so few photographs of Millet and himself having sex? Because, he confesses, one has to "dare confront the sidelong looks of the photo lab personnel" when "you ask for an enlargement" of that "close-up of a vulva caressing a penis." Sweet, really, the man married to "Madame Sex," as she is called in France, being so shy about asking for an enlargement of his close-up.

The 32 amateur nude photos of his not unattractive wife are unflattering. She looks frumpy and interminably bored, with the single beautiful image underscoring the beastly nature of his backhanded tribute. This is no Man Ray and Kiki, or Stieglitz and O'Keeffe, though Millet, strangely, calls his book "a declaration of love." Men work in mysterious ways. And cuckolded husbands more so. How do you say "passive-aggressive" in French? Did I mention that Millet found the photos and notebook that alerted her to Henric's affairs when he "asked me to fetch something from his desk"? All in all, they seem to be a well-matched couple.

The plot, such as it is, of "Jealousy" is a relentless report of the tears, tantrums, interrogations, wall hitting, shaking, "glacial waves," dread, physical collapses, vertigo, tranquilizers, fights, nightmares, imaginings, more-frequent-than-before sex, and Millet's constant, secretive, obsessive returning to his notebooks and photos for more evidence to fuel her fanatical green-eyed monster. And then psychoanalysis. She reveals, interestingly, that during this period she found herself "for the first time in my life" in "a one-on-one sexual relationship with Jacques." But since she doesn't deny the orgies he mentioned in his own defense, and in an interview two



years ago she said that at this time she had whittled down to a mere “two or three partners,” perhaps this notable monogamy was just a bearable hour or two.

She writes that on discovering his lovers, she cried “on his shoulder” for the first time, ever. Ever? They have been a couple for decades. If true, this is one of the saddest things I’ve ever read. Sadness, in fact, pervades Millet’s milieu. She mentions, though briefly, that her younger brother, her only brother, with whom she was close, was killed (in a car accident), and her devastation was such that she entered analysis for the first time. Sometime after this (she is deliberately vague on dates) her father, a driving instructor, also died, and then a few months later her mother, who had a history of depression, committed suicide by jumping out a window. She informs us that she grew up in a household of “constant arguments, punctuated by shouts and blows, between my father and mother.” Both parents made little secret of their respective adulterous affairs, and their daughter learned to make “no connection between love and sexual pleasure.” Given this damaging, disconnected familial background, signing up for some serious group sex, where her “consenting passivity” could bask “in the anonymity of the great body of humanity,” is more than understandable. I’d venture a wild guess that participating in a bustling orgy could really obliterate one’s pain for a while.

Millet is, without doubt, a woman who elicits one’s compassion, but she is so humorless and grandiose as a writer that it is difficult to maintain one’s friendly attitude. As when she compares herself to

“the Eiffel Tower, straddling” Jacques Henric — and this image doesn’t do much for feminism’s anti-penis-envy movement either. Or when she claims to be “fairly indifferent to status symbols,” and to illustrate her egalitarian nature, she writes, “Though I had joined in orgies in the Seventh Arrondissement of Paris, I could still feel at home at a wedding reception in a small village hidden away in Umbria.” Such versatility! (But do keep that bourgeois wedding “hidden away” in Umbria.) “Thought is like a cupboard,” she writes elsewhere, “which, from time to time, in the true sense of the word, needs airing.” Quite. Let’s take a walk.

**S**HE compares her “gift for observation” to that of Salvador Dalí — she published a book titled “Dalí et Moi” in 2005 — and gives this example: “In the Métro, I cannot help but notice the drooping hem of the woman climbing the stairway ahead of me.” A moment of art that many of us philistines overlook, no doubt — though wouldn’t Dalí have seen, not a hem, but an eyeball, or merely time itself, drooping? “Are travelers always interested,” she asks, “airing” a thought, “in the middle of their journey?” This banality is typical of the “intellectual speculation” Millet confesses to enjoy, which signifies nothing. She becomes, on the page, a seemingly vacant woman cloaked in opaque remnants of self-importance. Catherine Millet truly does have no clothes. Thank God she’s an intellectual!

Don’t, by the way, buy this book for the sex: there is little to none, but for one dire masturbation situation. Millet tells

us about the tremendous loss she bore, during her crisis, of her formerly very elaborate fantasy life. While jealous she developed masturbatory “inhibitions,” and was demoted to a bit player in her own sexual fantasies: “I was the extra, ignored and shunned by the lead.” For a woman not even to be the star of her own homespun porn is a very real indicator of just how far she has fallen. The only thing that could bring Millet to orgasm, she tells us, was the image of Henric’s back as he thrust into another woman “with the determination of someone struggling with a stubborn drawer in a dresser.” Ah, the perverse effect of jealousy on one’s libido, not to mention on one’s metaphors! How wondrously the dogged erotic mind will take a painful image of humiliation and yet still find its way to triumph. And how perfectly it mirrors the psychic loss of self when the beloved’s gaze turns elsewhere — and worse, how easily the self vanishes from its own faithless gaze.

Millet explains at the end of her book that the idea for her first memoir “crystallized during the crisis.” It is telling that a woman gutted, erased by the jealousy of her husband, would respond by writing a detailed account of her own, far more numerous, sexual exploits. Between Millet’s two memoirs, hanging precariously over the unseen, undocumented abyss, lies a haunting story of fragile female identity, sexually gained, violently lost, and the Sisyphean attempt to regain it through an accounting. What a pity this is not the story she chose to tell in either book, but perhaps in living it she could not see it. Like love, living is so often done blind. □

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