**Review of *The Cosmopolitans* from *Publisher’s Weekly***

With a plot and characters inspired by Balzac’s *Cousin Bette*, the latest from novelist and nonfiction writer Schulman (*After Delores*) is intended in part as a feminist response to James Baldwin’s *Another Country*. Like its realist forebears, the novel offers a rich evocation of its time and place—in this case, Greenwich Village in 1958. Earl, a gay, black aspiring actor, and Bette, a straight, white secretary at an ad agency, have been neighbors and best friends for years, creating a relationship out of shared loneliness (whether it’s the result of their race, gender, or sexuality), one that for Bette, at least, seems fulfilling. But the unexpected arrival of Bette’s vivacious young cousin Hortense offers Bette an unpleasant reminder of the scandalous past that caused her to flee her Midwestern upbringing decades earlier. Earl, who longs for a kind of love that Bette just can’t provide, seizes an opportunity presented by Hortense, also an aspiring actor, setting in motion a series of betrayals that drive a wedge between Bette and him for the first time. Simultaneously a realist exploration of a particular milieu, an illustration of the changing roles and possibilities for women at that time, and a series of thoughtful musings on the nature of companionship and platonic love, Earl and Bette’s story is also a satisfying revenge narrative and a portrait of an unexpected but vital friendship. *Agent: Mitchell Waters, Curtis Brown. (Mar.)*

**From *The New York Times***

“New Yorkers have a special way of moving. They advance ever forward,” says a character in Schulman’s voluptuous novel of Greenwich Village in 1958, when you could catch Carmen McRae at Trude Heller’s nightclub and buy a brownstone on 10th Street for $30,000. Despite their longtime Village pedigree, however, the neighbors and soul mates Earl and Bette are stuck in place. Earl, a gay black actor consigned to working in a slaughterhouse, is hemmed in by the masquerades of the closet and the debasing roles available to performers of color. Bette, a white ad-agency secretary who, at 50, works for a ditsy young man, can’t let go of the grievous treatment she suffered some 30 years earlier at the hands of her Ohio family and former beau.

Enter, with suitcase and copy of Stanislavsky, Bette’s cousin Hortense, a would-be actress with a fire to rival Eugene O’Neill’s barroom agitator Hickey. If this setup nods to O’Neill, Balzac and Henry James, its fringe-dwelling characters channel the lonely-hunter spirit of Carson McCullers (the subject of Schulman’s 2002 biographical play). “The Cosmopolitans” is a book of sighs, for dreams thwarted and for a city that has long since moved on.

Excerpted from “Homages” by Jan Stuart

**Sarah Schulman on her latest provocations**

[Chris Freeman](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?method=doSearch&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&userGroupName=cuny_nytc&inputFieldValue(0)=%22Chris+Freeman%22&inputFieldName(0)=AU&prodId=AONE)

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Full Text:

I FIRST encountered Sarah Schulman in January 1996, when she was a speaker at "Literature in the Age of AIDS" in Key West. That seems a lifetime ago. We met again a couple of years later at UNC-Asheville, where she was beginning to articulate her ideas about "familial homophobia," the central idea in her remarkable book Ties That Bind (2009).

Schulman has spent her whole adult life as a journalist, novelist, playwright, and activist. This year, she has published two new books, a novel called The Cosmopolitans, which came out in the spring, and the powerful nonfiction book titled Conflict is Not Abuse, due out in October. Her integrity as an artist and a citizen makes her a singular presence in American culture.

What follows is excerpted from a much longer transcript, which can be found on the G&LR website at www.GLReview.org.

Chris Freeman: You've been an activist and a writer for 35 years. I first became aware of your early work with the 1994 publication of My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years.

Sarah Schulman: That's my first book of nonfiction, my journalism from before AIDS, through the epicenter of the crisis. [It](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A462507673&v=2.1&u=cuny_nytc&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w)'s about my transformation as I started to understand what was happening. I'm one of the few people who's been [writing](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A462507673&v=2.1&u=cuny_nytc&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w) about AIDS from the beginning. It's an enduring relationship for me.

CF: How do you approach writing nonfiction? Is it different from fiction for you?

SS: I never write about an ongoing conversation. That is to say, every nonfiction book I write is to initiate a conversation. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. For example, Ties That Bind has not been as widely read as Gentrification of the Mind. I believe Ties should have been published by a mainstream publisher. When you are the first person to present an idea, it is not easy to get published.

CF: Your new book is another intervention in nonfiction, bringing together several issues you've been thinking and writing about for the past decade.

SS: It's called Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair. It's about three realms where I feel that conflict is misrepresented as abuse, through the overstatement of harm: the interpersonal realm, the criminalization of HIV, and Israel/Palestine. I define conflict as "power struggle" and abuse as "power over." My thesis is that when we deny our participation in creating conflict and instead claim that we are victims of abuse, the power of the state is enhanced. So with the criminalization of HIV, for instance, these laws encourage people to call the police on someone who didn't disclose their HIV status, regardless of their health, viral load, or whatever. For the past thirty years, the HIV-negative person has been seen as being responsible for that status and for maintaining it. With criminalization, the HIV-positive person becomes the "abuser," while the negative person is now the victim who has been criminally wronged. It is a state apparatus exploiting a new social trend of our not taking personal responsibility for our role in situations of conflict. Or, to give a different example, New York City has 200,000 cases of domestic violence [per year], so when someone overreacts to conflict, claiming abuse when it is not abuse, they redirect resources away from those who need them most.

My final example is an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza. Again, we see the externalization of interior anxiety, negative group loyalty, the refusal to face one's own role in creating conflict. All of these elements converge on the murder of over 2,000 people in Gaza. The same tropes that an individual uses to claim "abuse"--because they misunderstood something or were made uncomfortable by an email--become the tools of government propaganda. There is a direct relationship between the private refusal of accountability and the nationalistic projection. If we shun or bully the people we know because they say something or exhibit difference in a way that makes us uncomfortable, how will we be able to make peace, or welcome refugees, or win justice? These two actions are antithetical.

CF: You seem quite willing to engage in quite strenuous debate on these controversial issues.

SS: I talk to people constantly with whom I disagree about Israel, for example. I feel that it's my responsibility to do that. The occupation is being carried out in my name on two grounds: because I'm Jewish and American. When I talk to really extremist people on this issue, it becomes immediately clear that they are grossly uninformed. Usually they have never had real experiences with Palestinians and have not listened to what they have to say about their own experiences. In the U.S., this information is not passively acquired.

CF: Your new novel, The Cosmopolitans, is set in Greenwich Village in 1958. We follow a woman. Bette, who is fifty, from Ohio, and she has a kind of small life in New York. Her best friend and neighbor is Earl, a black, gay actor whose life is more dramatic than hers. Late in the book, we find out that they live in the building on 10th Street where you spent some years growing up. That's a fascinating crossing between fiction and autobiography.

SS: This is all very layered, as is the book. It took me thirteen years to write it. It's a look back at my urban origins, but also it's a portrait of pre-gentrification New York. I wanted to evoke the New York that was a refuge for people from uncomprehending backgrounds. The performance artist Penny Arcade has this joke about how we all left home and came to New York to get away from the most popular kids in school, and now, with gentrification, they've all moved to New York. It is the very people who couldn't survive in their small towns who made New York a center for the production of ideas for the world, the very people who are getting squeezed out now. The novel shows neighbors and relationships, what apartment living produced. Suburbanization privatized these human relations.

The literary look back is to Balzac's novel Cousin Bette, which I studied at the University of Chicago in a class on 19th-century French realism. In it, a spinster is betrayed by her family and wants to get revenge, so she destroys everybody and everything--and in the end she wins. Earl and Bette are out there on their own, without the benefit of feminism, the gay rights movement, or the Black Power movement. The idea of a community thinking out loud about their own condition has not yet occurred. They had to figure it out themselves.

Also from the late '50s, early '60s, is James Baldwin's Another Country--black and white and gay and straight--on these same streets, but the women in the book are not real people. Balzac, Baldwin, and 1950's kitchen-sink realism are all called "real," but how can that be so? The artist in me was intrigued.

CF: Bette has Valerie, a first-generation ad executive, as a female ally.

SS: Well, kind of, but to me, women who went into advertising in the 1950s and '60s are sort of like the women who became psychoanalysts fifty years earlier. New fields have room for women; old fields do not. But the irony of women in advertising is that they ended up making a lot of money and getting a lot of autonomy, but at the expense of women in general. Advertising is the enemy of women. The woman [Shirley Polykoff] who came up with the [Clairol] campaigns, "If I have one life to live, let me live it as a blonde" and "Blondes have more fun," was a Jewish brunette contributing to white supremacy. So you get this kind of "power feminism," which came at a high cost for women, though not for individual women.

CF: The kind of community you depict in The Cosmopolitans will never happen again, not in the contemporary cities. So what do we have now--Facebook?

SS: For me, personally, Facebook is very rich. I've gotten so much out of it on so many levels. The international information is extraordinary. In a matter of seconds, I can find things out from all over the world, and not from news media. I've been able to put out ideas and get many, many responses. Conflict is Not Abuse is a book that I basically wrote using Facebook. I'd put out a thought and get so many suggestions and responses. But you also have to practice restraint. The cruelty between the Hillary and Bernie people has been outrageous, but I don't delete or block that stuff because it's part of what I'm working on. The pro-Israel crazy people do horrible things to me: they alter my Wikipedia page, they post vicious things. But what I have realized is that if I just let them express their opinions and move on, nothing terrible happens. I'm not diminished in any way. Only when I get on their level do I get diminished.

Chris Freeman, a longtime contributor to The G&LR, teaches English and gender studies at USC.

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