

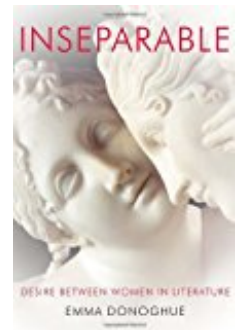
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Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

Our Generalized Amnesia

With Lillian Hellmans 1934 hit play *The Childrens Hour* opening (Feb 9) in Londons West End, the cyberpress is atwitter about catching some on-stage Lesbian love between the plays two stars Kiera Knightly and Elisabeth Moss (*Mad Mens Peggy*). Interviewed in *The Sunday Times*, Moss says her character -- Martha Dobie, a New England schoolteacher accused of an affair with the headmistress (Kiera Knightly) -- isnt exactly a lesbian and the play isnt about lesbianism either. Moss elaborates on Dobie: At the end of the play, shes not, like, Will you be a lesbian and will we get married? Shes saying This is how I feel, help me, be my friend.



Moss clarifies: That type of relationship still exists. I mean, theres an obvious sexual line, but then you can have a close girlfriend you really love, too. Just to be crystal clear about her own position, Moss states that she has wonderful female friends... although Im not in love with any of them.

Mosss combined ambivalence, denial, and excitement at the nature of the female bond is a theme thoroughly examined in *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* by Emma Donoghue (author of many books including the recent prize-winning novel *Room* and *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*). Donoghues latest work of literary history provides examples -- and critical responses to them -- in literature across the ages of women loving women. Written by both male and female authors, the literature cited ranges from the Sapphic Classics through the Coming Out novels of the 70s to contemporary fiction by authors such as Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters. Some of the works are well-known and widely read today, some very popular in their time but long since forgotten, others entirely obscure.

Donoghue describes her book as a field guide to the flora and fauna of lesbian-themed literature though she stipulates that in studying the full spectrum of passionate relationships between women in literature, it is a pointless exercise to erect a fence down the middle, dividing the lesbians from the just-really-good-friends. Donoghue constructs her narrative around the most perennially popular plot motifs of attraction between women: Travesties; Inseparables; Rivals; Monsters; Detection; Out.

She begins with Travesties in which cross-dressing (whether by a woman or a man) causes the accident of same-sex desire. Among her many revelatory examples (from the obvious to the recondite) are Ovids myth of Iphis and Ianthe (ca. 8 C.E.), Guillaume de Bloiss *Alda* (ca. 1170), Ludovico Ariostos *Orlando Furioso* (1532), Shakespeares *As You Like It* (1600) and *Twelfth Night* (1601), Margaret Cavendishs *Matrimonial Trouble* (1662), Théophile Gautiers *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Elizabeth Gaskells *The Grey Woman* (1861), Virginia Woolfs *Orlando* (1928), and Jeanette Wintersons *The Passion* (1987).

By the late-1500s inseparable was a common term for female pairs; from the 17th to the 19th century, Donoghue maintains, there are few plots in English literature more popular than that of female friendship under fire. In her chapter Inseparables, she mentions the Old Testament book of Ruth, Marie de Frances lai *Eliduc* (ca. 1189), Jane Wisemans play *Antiochus the Great* (1702), Jane Barkers *The Unaccountable Wife* (1723), Jean-Jacques Rousseaus *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), *Euphemia* (1790) by Charlotte Lennox, *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Brownings *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Anthony Trollopes *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865), *Work* (1873) by Louisa May Alcott, and Rosa Mulhollands *The Tragedy of Chris* (1903).

In Rivals, Donoghue considers plots of a man and a woman competing for a womans heart; Monsters examines evil women who prey upon the innocent members of their sex; Detection analyzes literature where the crime is same-sex desire; and Out describes texts about a woman discovering she is physically attracted to another woman (Lillian Hellmans *The Childrens Hour* is discussed here). These chapters too are replete with literary example.

Inseparable is a magnificent act of textual archeology, an exquisite excavation of literature. Donoghues focus is on what has been ignored regarding the theme of love between women. She explains: Passion between women has never had a settled status in Western culture, or even a definition with fixed parameters... In every generation it seems writers have asked themselves whether desire between women is unprecedented or omnipresent, holy or evil, heartwarming or ridiculous. (Elisabeth Mosses response to *The Childrens Hour* is a testament to this tension.) Donoghue wonders at our centuries-long neglect of the theme of women in love: How can we have collectively forgotten it, let it slip out of the history of ideas, or not registered it in the first place?

Donoghue could be lamenting equally about womens writing altogether. Our generalized amnesia regarding literature by women is surely a symptom of neurosexism (see my [previous column](#) on this subject). The simplest explanation, asserts Donoghue, is phallocentrism, the notion that nothing really counts unless it involves a penis or the owner of a penis.

Phallocentrism in relation to writing has recently had an encouraging sounding in the media. Novelists Jennifer Weiner and Jodi Picoult raised the issue to a stir when, reacting to the media frenzy over Jonathan Franzens *Freedom*, they [objected on Twitter](#) to the disproportionate critical attention male writers regularly receive compared to their female counterparts; this led to an article in *The Atlantic* by book editor [Chris Jackson confessing](#) that even though his wife owns a bookstore when a female colleague asked him what was the last

book he'd read by a woman, he couldn't remember. In *The New Republic*, Ruth Franklin followed with The Read: The Franzen Fallout, The New York Times shameful treatment of women writers. *Jezebels* Jenna Sauers called for a boycott of *The New Yorker* for its lack of female writers, asserting that the top literary publications all grossly exclude women writers from their pages. And all is sadly confirmed by the shocking statistics just posted by VIDA: Women in Literary Arts.

In Honoré de Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835), the protagonist Paquita obliquely tries to tell her suitor Henri that she is not, as he believes, the sex-slave of her guardian the Marquis de San-Réal but rather of his wife, the Marquise. Paquita tells him, You're forgetting the power of the feminine. For centuries now, we have collectively fallen into the dangerous and insidious practice of forgetting the power of the feminine, especially, but by no means exclusively, in our literature. We do so at our peril.