



Author Lise Weil (centre) pictured with feminist writers and friends at a 1988 conference on women and words in Dubrovnik.

Passionate Times

Memoir Rekindles Era of Revolutionary Lesbian Writers

by **SVEA VIKANDER**

In her memoir, *In Search of Pure Lust*, Lise Weil takes us back to the heady times of the radical feminist lesbian movement of the late 1980s. It was an era of lesbian poets, feminist thinkers and radical philosophies. Published by Inanna Publications (Canada) and She Writes Press (U.S.), *In Search of Pure Lust* revisits the era's bars, study groups and dances. With Weil as our guide, we make love to the movement's visionaries—and have our hearts broken along the way.

Based in Montreal, Weil is a writer and editor and the founder of the magazine *Trivia* (1982–1991 and 2011–present). In 2014, she founded *Dark Matter: Women Witnessing*, an online journal

about inter-species and non-human informed responses to ecological collapse.

I first met Weil at a Montreal meditation centre in 2011 and was immediately taken by her frankness, her kindness and her irrepressible enthusiasm for introducing everyone she knows to, well, everyone she knows. I caught up with Weil on her book tour to talk about the theme of lesbian Eros that is at the heart of *In Search of Pure Lust*.

HERIZONS: Writing a memoir can be hard, socially. Have people from your past contacted you since the book was published?

LISE WEIL: Oh, God. I showed it to a couple of people before it was published to make sure it was okay with them. One of them was extremely generous even though she doesn't come across very well in the book. She just said, "The writing's so good that I can't hold it against you and, actually, the portrait is pretty accurate." I was grateful for that. I have to admit that Zonzon [Weil's partner, who goes by Z in the book] hasn't been able to read the last part—even though, if anything, it's a great tribute to her. She just can't bear to remember our fighting. But everyone else seemed okay with it.

HERIZONS: Were you able to reach all the people in the book?

LISE WEIL: [laughs] No, I'm not talking to most of them.

HERIZONS: Right! There's a lot about female friendship in the book. The part where a friend, Maxine, has said some unkind things about you and your relationship stands out because, in your telling, you're the first to forgive her. While your girlfriend and friends veritably reel from the betrayal, you bounced back.

LISE WEIL: Well, you know, I saw that she was in love with my girlfriend. I've been jealous so much in my life that I am completely ready to see that and forgive it in other people.

HERIZONS: Was that accepted? For a woman to be jealous?

LISE WEIL: Oh yeah, even though we had a sort of polyamorous ethic. And we were smart enough to know that you can't just wish it away. You have to talk through it.

HERIZONS: You describe your relationship with a woman named Bella, who was also your teacher. What do you think about this now? Do you think that it was ethical?

LISE WEIL: I wouldn't do it now because of the teacher-student thing. We now know it's not a good idea. At the time, there was nothing secretive about it, and it really went together with the ethic of the place—that lesbian Eros is a precious resource and should never be wasted. And it should never be blocked. She didn't lie, she had a partner and she was completely open with her. And she told me that it wasn't going to last. So, I have to say that if you're going to be non-monogamous, and if you feel like the student-teacher thing is not a boundary, then I think that no, there was nothing unethical about it. It just ended up being extremely painful.

HERIZONS: What do you think about this idea now, about lesbian Eros never being wasted?

LISE WEIL: The book is kind of a meditation on that, on desire. Desire was my guide, partly because of this women's writers centre where this happened. [Greek poet] Olga Broumas was one of our visiting faculty members. At one reading, she said that the hardest discipline is the discipline of following your own desires. For young women, mostly in our 20s, this was an incredible thing to hear. And it made sense. This was the body speaking, right? I really didn't have a sense of a strong inner direction and desire felt like a good thing to go with. My body spoke so loudly,

you know. I mean, when I desired, it was big. The whole world was in it.

HERIZONS: And it was so painful at the end.

LISE WEIL: But you weren't thinking of the end! You were just thinking about how this was the most amazing thing you had ever felt, because it had possibility in it. It wasn't just sexual desire for another woman. The desire for another world was contained in your desire for this woman. I don't know if it happens anymore but back then, we were going to remake the world together. It was going to be completely different because of how we loved each other.

HERIZONS: And though the relationship with Bella went so terrible for you—you really suffered—it seems like you were still following that same—

LISE WEIL: Ethic. I continued to follow that same ethic. That desire was my guide.

HERIZONS: You didn't let that deep pain dissuade you.

LISE WEIL: I didn't. It was only looking back and seeing this trail of broken hearts behind me that I thought, *Something's wrong here because I'm a feminist and my life is devoted to loving women.* Presumably. And in my intimate relationships I was not able to do it. I was not able to love in a way that inspired trust or confidence. That was my moment of truth. It coincided with when I started to sit [in Zen meditation]. In Zen, you don't act on every desire that comes through you. You learn to sit with it and look at it.

HERIZONS: And that was around the time you moved to Montreal, right?

LISE WEIL: Well, in 1988 there was this extraordinary event that took place. Montreal's International Feminist Book Fair was just—for me—the most exciting thing. There were incredible writers there, Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott, Mary Meigs, Erin Mouré, Michele Causse ... and the largest gathering of Indigenous women writers in Canada that had ever happened. It changed my life to hear them.

We devoted two issues of *Trivia* to the fair. One was on Québec women writers and the



other on writing and difference and included Gloria Anzeldúa and Lee Maracle. I had this circle of acquaintances, all these writer people, who excited me so much. They weren't just philosophical thinkers—their thinking was grounded in their writing.

When I realized I needed to leave Massachusetts, Montreal was the logical place to go. I moved there and started spending time at the bookstore L'Essentielle. Every visiting feminist would read there. And often they would be directed to my apartment afterward, because my roommate worked at the bookstore and we would host parties.

HERIZONS: Is that how you met Zonzon?

LISE WEIL: She's the one that was different. She wasn't a lesbian revolutionary like my other lovers had been. She didn't want to read my lesbian books; she didn't want to listen to my lesbian music.... It just didn't fit! But I couldn't help it, I was so attracted. She was an astrologer I had gone to see when I moved to the city. I asked her about love, "Am I gonna meet someone?" And she later admitted that she felt something weird was going on. But she said, "Well, it looks to me like the people you are drawn to are unavailable." "Pas disponible" she said in French. And I laughed out loud because at that point, it was true. I was in love with a woman who was completely unavailable. It took a year before Zonzon and I started to see each other. We had a very long courtship. We've never lived together.

HERIZONS: This is unusual.

LISE WEIL: It's one of the things that saved us. We travel together, and we're always so happy that we get to be together. We can live together in a tiny little bungalow when we're travelling. But we return to our regular lives and we have separate homes. In the summer, we share a cabin in the wilderness north of Montreal, and we spend weekends together and we love that, too. It's been 25 years!

HERIZONS: Very cool. How was she in terms of you writing this book?

LISE WEIL: This book took me 15 years to write, and there were many periods of extreme self doubt. I would sit down and ask the cards with her. Zonzon and the cards helped me to keep going. Like the song goes, "Fell in love with the fortune teller, now I get my fortune told for free."

HERIZONS: [laughs] And she painted the cover.

LISE WEIL: Which I love. There's this line in an Adrienne Rich poem, "Culture and Anarchy" [from letters written by Susan B. Anthony to Elizabeth Cady Stanton], "Our work is one, and we must be together." And I had always thought that was the most important thing to feel about your partner. But I never felt this about Zonzon! And that seemed like a problem: we don't have a "third thing" in the world of lesbian revolution. It's so interesting that now, 25 years later, my book comes out with her artwork on the cover. So our work has become one in a way I could never ever have imagined. ❀



Lise Weil at the International Feminist Book Fair in Montréal, 1988. (Photo: Courtesy Lise Weil)

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