

Marilyn Yalom and Theresa Donovan Brown. *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2015. Pp. 386. Paper. \$15.99.

Marilyn Yalom (1932-2019), Professor of History and Gender Studies at Stanford University, collaborated with acclaimed author and fellow Stanford scholar, Theresa Donovan Brown to argue that female friendship, characterized by affection, self-revelation, physical contact, and interdependence, has facilitated dialogs that would normally not occur. Although women led the suffrage movement, the salons in Revolutionary France, and the beginning of mass democratic participation in early America, historical writing has largely ignored, trivialized, or regarded female friendships with outright hostility. The authors cover an enormous time period from ancient western history to the present, focusing on Western Europe and the United States.

The book is divided into three sections consisting of primary source writings coupled with analysis. Part One begins with a brief introduction of male friendships portrayed positively in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers and western religious figures. This is contrasted with the total lack of focus or writings about female friendships. Part Two is the strongest, most comprehensive portion of the book, chronologically and topically summarizing the emergence and character of female friendships in Western Europe and America, from the Middle Ages into the twentieth century. Part Three is the weakest, as Yalom changes focus into the present day she neglects critical analysis, instead addressing multiple topics and circumstances without much detail or connection.

Yalom excels in writing a rich, detailed cultural and social history for the first two portions of the book, drenched in a variety of primary sources, from the biblical era to the present day. The author weaves this enveloping collection of diaries, journals, letters, and novel excerpts from a list as diverse as the eras covered. Yalom illustrates the intimate thoughts and details of women through their own words. Pre-modern nuns, aristocratic women, and secret lesbians are a few of the examples. Her theme of the four traits of affection, self-revelation, physical contact, and interdependence come across clearly in the writings left behind. These traits allowed women to create and suggest concepts and

arguments not initially accepted or understood by the societies of their era. Their work and writings led to a more modern understanding of ideas such as equality and independence. The stories of their trials and tribulations make the reader understand the magnitude of female friendship and feel an incredible level of empathy. Yalom critically analyzes the inherent contradictory beliefs held by the societies of the time, and how the individual and collective actions of women proved how incorrect those cultural norms were.

Despite these strengths, the book nearly falls apart in the final section due to a very narrow and superficial analysis on modern female friendship that is not historical in its structure, sources, or analysis. The strength of the book lies in the personal communications between women and the subsequent intimacy. The third part suffers due to the modern-day interviews with female corporate executives who come across as dry, safe, and bland. The human connection becomes lost. Yalom mentions in mere passing a variety of topics she does not critically explore, ranging from the modern market economy, to the effects of the internet on female friendships. Most of the book reaches its conclusions based on historical records and analysis, but part three is too rushed with perfunctory conclusions and result in sweeping generalizations not centered on historical thought.

As much as there is left to be desired near the end, the book is still worthy of a hearty recommendation due to its engrossing summary of female friendship. It should be read at an undergraduate level due to the quantity and quality of primary sources not commonly found in one location.

*Gerald Mendoza*