

# A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings

Joan Nestle

A Sapphic Classic from  
Sinister Wisdom

*A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings*, by Joan Nestle.

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# Foreword: In Bed with Joan Nestle



Carolyn D'Cruz



While Naarm/Melbourne became the most locked down city in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, I went to bed with Joan Nestle several nights a week. If you hook up with her here, she'll also touch you. Every time I read her erotica (or is porn the better word?), I relive the joy of legs spreading and lips parting, of feeling hot and getting wet, of bodies opening, holding on, and letting go. A lover of words, even as language fails, Joan Nestle finds enough space for flesh to speak. Besides taking us through bars and streets to all that steamy sex, Joan gifts us a political and scholarly heritage. She shares her methods for collecting archives, recording history, and commemorating places, events, and those people we need to listen to if we want to build a more just world. She guides us through the heritage of solidarity building between social movements. Her words beckon us to pay attention to how narratives of desire, power, and justice are told—or not. Our work is to learn how to tell what's missing and amplify those voices that have been too readily suppressed. Working from the margins, or “history from below,” Nestle is a shape-shifting storyteller who gracefully reminds us of “what we are in danger of forgetting” (p. 331).

The first Joan Nestle article I read was “Butch- Fem Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s.” It was 1989. My girlfriend at the time wanted to discuss it. She didn't call herself butch, but like Joan's Emma in “Lesbian Memories 3,” she had cropped hair, wore tight white T-shirts and Levi 501s.<sup>1</sup> She was much

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1 Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987), 147.

hungrier than I was to find a feminism that was not swallowed up by heterosexuality. “Butch-Fem Relationships” captured so much of what we were debating in our own lives: the categories we used to name ourselves, the entanglements between sexuality and gender identity, our reckonings with pornography, even the politics of what we did with one another in bed. Decades later, I would come to appreciate how Nestle’s heartfelt tone in that piece betrayed the level of political and historical complexity she prompted us to wrestle with.

### **Fighting our way to sense: shifting definitions and challenging acceptable history**

For Joan Nestle, it’s not just a quest to articulate what *butch-fem* means or had first meant to her, living through the oppressive conditions of McCarthy’s 1950s. It’s also what butch and fem *look* and *feel* like for those who have some attachment to these categories. Throughout her own work, Joan marks the significance of the minutiae of dress and style, as do so many of the writers she gathered into her collections of lesbian fiction and the 1992 anthology *Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. Butch-fem relations are primarily about sex, rituals around wooing one another, and community; they show us a heritage where fucking and kinship, aesthetics and politics, meet in the zigzag history of a counterculture.

Many of us will recognize in these pages what we understand as “butch,” with its historical relations to passing women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through to what some of us call “masc,” among other things, today: the short, slicked-back hair (what Joan calls the DA style, which till now I didn’t

know stood for duck's arse, or duck's ass, depending on your accent); the white shirt; the black pants; the tough body and dexterous hands, which have learned to touch and fuck with care and competence. I'm taking these details from "Esther's Story," of course; but the beauty of Joan's writing allows us to substitute her proper names with our own. So many of us gasp when we utter the name of the Puerto Rican taxi driver, Esther, because we too have played the role of one of the main characters in that story: "I was standing between her legs as she sat with the lights of the bar at her back. Her knees jutted around me, and I worried that I could not hold her attention" (p. 201). From the bar to the drive home, there is erotic charge right down to the point of holding a cigarette (probably a soft pack, Camels) and steering "with ease, one hand on the wheel." I bet Esther could have lit a Zippo with a one-handed flick of their wrist as well. The situation and context give us the switch that turns so many of us on when instructed to "raise our hips" or "to be a good girl." These repeated codes of style and behavior can be understood through what Judith Butler calls "gender performativity,"<sup>2</sup> a concept that confirms Nestle's belief that it is politically and socially important to explain why this erotic play is not reducible to the heterosexualized models of man and woman.

Joan Nestle's writing showed me how to exit the kind of feminism that could not see this, without losing my politics. My own eighties' feminist experience was loaded with a uniformity in dress, style, and politically correct fucking that inadvertently took away my right to sexiness and liberated sex. When I passed from the straight to lesbian and queer world, Joan's writing

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2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

helped me find a new kind of freedom, a freedom that allowed me to feel within my own skin when I put on short dresses, V-neck sweaters, and made up my face with heavy eyeliner and lipstick. Like Joan, I've got my own black slip that can summon sex like magic. I'm yet to wear it on a panel like Joan did, though; and it will never be, and nor should it, as famous as hers. Joan is the Queen of Fems. She's given so many of us a lifeline and the simple permission to flaunt it. Her pages are littered with joyful sexual communication through putting one's self on: not submissively, as stereotype, or dismissively, as parody—but powerfully, as flamboyance. On rereading what Joan gathers in her own and others' writing, I can better see how erotic taste connects with what is also a politics of style and a style of politics—a politics that underscores our own bent right “to be.”

Flaunting is one way of telling one another and the rest of the world who we want to attract and what we want to repel. It's not a simple case of dividing one column for butch and one for fem, or any two markers we may contrast through inadequate understandings of masculinity and femininity. In Joan's day there was also “butchy fem,” “femmy butch,” or “feeling kiki (going both ways)” (p. 103). The language has expanded today, while the mix-and-match-y style of bending rigid categories of gender through sexuality and sexuality through gender continues to be expressed through tattoos, flannel shirts, chunky watches, leather wristbands, and baseball caps. In other spaces there are bow ties, suits, and kooky cuff links (sexier with painted, manicured fingernails). Some of us still have our generic leather and denim jackets, surviving with their unique markings of wear and tear, badges and brooches, and sewn-on patches; it's not just our hearts but our politics that are worn on our sleeves. I'm pausing so long on the politics of dress, for these are the