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*Gender Affairs*

## So what's a girl to do?

A gritty anthology questions the nature of femininity itself Femmes strut their femaleness in black lace and red lipstick

JOY PARKS

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### **Brazen Femme:**

#### **Queering Femininity**

Edited by Anna Camilleri and

Chloë Brushwood Rose

Arsenal Pulp Press, 175 pages, \$21.95

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The wonderfully defiant, angry, sexually powerful and, yes, brazen writings in *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* give the collective impression that even within today's diversity-celebrating, gender-bending-and-breaking gay and lesbian community, femininity still can't get a break. Which means its probably isn't getting much respect anywhere.

In case you aren't well versed in sexual slang, the traditional definition of "femme" is a feminine lesbian, one who differs from, but attracts and is generally attracted to, more masculine or butch lesbians. She is known to wear skirts and make-up and much to her chagrin, may frequently be mistaken for a heterosexual woman. So while it is reasonable to assume that *Brazen Femme* is targeted to a specific subset (femmes and those who loved them) of a rather narrowly focused readership (lesbians), there's something about the ideas that come through in *Brazen Femme*, something in the lofty thinking that floats above the pages, that speaks a much larger message. Much like a femme, this book appears to be one thing, but in truth, it is something totally different.

These personal essays, stories, poems, photographs and even comic strips authored by femme lesbians, bisexual femmes and even non-biological femmes (for example, male drag queen Sky Gilbert), pose huge and demanding questions about the nature of femininity, of gender itself. The writers explore in various ways how aspects of female gender manifest and reveal themselves when taken beyond such traditional "feminine" cultural indicators as marriage and maternity. A femme is a woman out of context; she must invent herself as she goes along. Perhaps most enlightening is how this collection demonstrates the shape-shifting nature of gender, depicting femininity as something that can be altered, refit, reconstructed and re-purposed to fit the needs of both women and men who live outside the mainstream boundaries of gender and sexual desire.

Many of the writings in *Brazen Femme* also illustrate the lack of respect afforded not only to femmes, but also to femininity itself; how the traits traditionally associated with femininity are constantly de-valued and trivialized. *Brazen Femme* begs the question: What is so enormously powerful about femininity that makes it something to be feared?

There are so many wonderfully intense, honest pieces of writing in this collection. Editor Anna Camilleri's "Cut From The Same Stone" looks at how being "high femme" is a celebration of the hardness her life requires; it is her way of becoming untouchable.

Kathryn Payne's "Whores And Bitches Who Sleep With Women" reminds us that many femmes in the '50s urban gay communities were prostitutes, a fact often pushed underground in the sanitized history version of lesbianism that has surfaced in recent decades. Her accompanying sidebar dealing with her experiences in the sex trade defiantly stares down feminism's refusal to deal with the reality of female sexuality.

"Big Fat Femme: Squeezing A Lot Of Identity Into One Pair Of Control Top Nylons" by Abi Stone and Allyson Mitchell is a gritty look at body image and the politics of fat/femme image.

So what's the difference between femme-ness and feminism? Plenty. Feminism often downplays female sexuality, suggesting that the cost of equality is genderless-ness. Femmes strut their femaleness in black lace and red lipstick and fishnet hose. They know that their ability to inspire desire (but not necessarily satisfy it) is their primary source of power and identity. They turn their vulnerability inside out, stretch it taunt until it becomes a weapon. Feminism is about the policies that govern sameness; femme-ness is about the politics of female sexuality.

Perhaps what is most important about *Brazen Femme* is that it stands traditional thinking — about femininity, masculinity and the unnamed genders that lie between — on its ear. It frees us to look at the world from the position of the so-called sexual outlaw, the rebel, she who will not be confined. *Brazen Femme* is a loud, brave and extraordinary book that comes crashing through our preconceived notions like a stiletto heel through plate glass, stirring up a cascade of sharp shivers, a brilliant gritty substance that teases the mind open.

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*Joy Parks is an Ottawa-based freelance writer.*

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