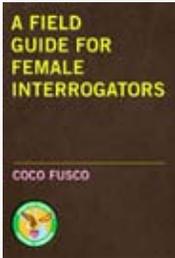


Pioneering Women

Great reads on intriguing equality issues. | **By Rachel Pepper**

Performance artist Coco Fusco invents a field guide to comment on the place of women in the military, and singer Janis Ian recounts her pioneering life in the music business in this month's must reads.



***A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, Coco Fusco (Seven Stories Press):** What does it really mean for feminism that women are soldiers in places like Iraq? Does it lead to behaviors in women—such as torturing and humiliating others—that many of us would feel are just as unseemly as when practiced by men? Is this equality?

These are some of the questions that interdisciplinary artist Coco Fusco asks in her new book, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*. Fusco, an associate professor in the Visual Arts division at Columbia University and the author of several books, including *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings*, is also a filmmaker and performance artist, and was recently featured in the 2008 Whitney Biennial in New York City.

In 2005, Fusco and several friends took a course that was led by former U.S. military interrogators and was specifically designed for civilians who wanted to learn military techniques for extracting information from prisoners. The women were then ambushed, captured, strip-searched, separated, made to wear black hoods and subjected to several rounds of interrogation. Several women broke down in tears and all found themselves very disturbed by the process. Afterward, the participants were instructed on how to perform interrogations themselves. Fusco filmed the entire experience and some stills are available at cocofusco.com.

This course inspired Fusco to wonder how female interrogators use their sexuality to humiliate male prisoners. In this book, she provides a series of steps that women (especially white women) could be called upon to use to break down men (especially Muslim men) as occurred in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. Most of these methods involve physical contact designed to shame the men, leading us to ask under what circumstances women could or would perpetuate violence using their sexuality as a weapon.

In one of the book's essays, "Torture: The Feminine Touch," Fusco notes, "The more access American women have to the

exercise of political power and the use of deadly force in war, the more apparent it becomes that we aren't using it very differently from men." She chastises the feminist movement for not speaking up more on the issue of military women who torture, and suggests that participatory female soldiers are fully part of a culture that embraces sexual and cultural stereotypes, even while it empowers women to behave as badly as men. So, is this equality? No, says Fusco, who writes that "every justification I find for these actions seems cynical, inhuman and profoundly unjust." While she may not have a solution to the issues she raises, this book will surely get us to think about female soldiers, and the practices of war, in a new and disturbing way. (sevenstories.com)

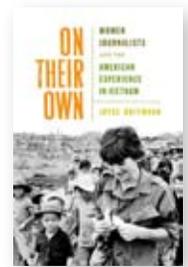


***Society's Child: My Autobiography*, Janis Ian (Tarcher/Penguin):** To get an idea of how great a singer-songwriter Janis Ian is, one has to look no further than YouTube, where anyone can watch a video of a very young Ian performing "At Seventeen." Now in her late 50s, Ian was inspired by the music of Odetta as a child, and decided to become a singer. By age 15, she was already a star, launched into fame in the 1960s after writing the anti-racist ballad "Society's Child." Although the turbulent politics of the time meant she was just as often heckled as applauded, nevertheless, the song, about an interracial love affair, soon led to other hits like "Jesse" and "At Seventeen," which became the mantra for anyone who stood outside the "in crowd." In this autobiography, Ian recounts her rise to fame, her often volatile relationships with both men and women, her involvement with the St. Marks Baths, her roller-coaster ride with finances (including having the IRS seize all her assets), her bout with cancer, her scholarship foundation and her same-sex marriage ceremony to partner Patricia Snyder at Toronto's City Hall, which earned her notoriety as the first out celebrity to wed there.

And throughout, she gives us an intimate look at the ever-changing music business, complete with unscrupulous managers, two-timing band members and a great cast of characters who would feel at home in any novel. Readers most likely to pick up this book are already Ian fans, but one certainly does not have to be a fan to appreciate her story. Indeed, any reader will quickly note from the book's first pages that Ian's life has been well-lived, and that music like hers can bring about joy and monumental social change. (us.penguin.com) ■



Coco Fusco



EDITOR'S PICK

***On Their Own*, Joyce Hoffmann (DaCapo Press):** When the United States' fight against terrorism looks frighteningly similar to its fight against communism in the 1960s, Joyce Hoffmann's collection of biographies, *On Their Own*, offers a candidly personal look at the Vietnam War and the women journalists who covered it. Feminism's first wave was just cresting back home, but in Southeast Asia—and in the cut-throat world of journalism—female correspondents had to fight tooth and nail to get a beat outside of the usual "women's angle" assigned by their male editors. Chronicling the work of some of the most ambitious, talented journalists of their time, Hoffmann's book breathes with the determination, thrill and horror of the women who covered the biggest story of their generation.

(dacapopress.com) — Rachel Beebe



Janis Ian

KAMBUJ OLUJIMI (FUSCO), PETER CUNNINGHAM (IAN)