

The **S/A/M/E** Debate

Dear Fat Girl,

I am writing to you because I am having a hard time with the S/M aspect of your erotica, and I would really appreciate a dialogue about it with you and your readers. I would also like you to know, right off, that I have very much enjoyed your articles and stories, ideas and arts, recipes, and much of your photography.

I awaited your first issue with happy anticipation because what I am discovering in my 30's is that I adore my body, my body is my temple, it is just as beautiful as everyone else's, my sexuality is outrageous, and that there are other fat women out there who feel the same way. It was my hope that Fat Girl would get that message out to the millions of women who don't know their own beauty and value, and I am grateful for the ways in which I see you doing that.

When the first issue came out featuring S/M photos, I was shocked, as I suppose, was the intent. I went through my own private check-in around appreciating diversity, and realizing that everyone has their own truth, pleasure, pain, reasons, etc., and reminded myself of the importance of being exposed to as many varieties of expression as possible. I thought it was an impactful first impression, and a look at one facet of our community, but I did not expect it to be the typical or regular focus. I do not think S/M represents the sexuality of most lesbians.

With this last issue, I feel the need to speak up. It makes me very sad that so many people find the need for sex to be painful in order for it to be pleasurable. This is not entertainment for me, it is tragedy. There are those who would argue that enactment of violent sexual scenarios can be in some way healing for survivors of non-consensual sexual violence. I do not profess to know if that is true. I do know that people perceive pain in many different ways, and what is pain for one is not for another.

I am an alternative medical practitioner who has found that close to 80% of the women I treat are survivors of childhood, physical, sexual, or ritual abuse. I am not unfamiliar with these issues, and I can tell you that there are a whole lot of ways that I find my patients healing themselves which involve safety and building trust, learning about soft, gentle, and loving ways to touch and be touched, discovering that they can feel sensations of pleasure without having to numb-out physically or emotionally, and which hopefully will enable them to experience the joy and ecstasy of sexuality as an expression of love (a whole other topic worthy of mention).

I see many of your photographs promoting the infliction of pain, terror, violence, and domination. I consider this sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Though it may be perfectly acceptable for some, for others it is very upsetting. My question is, what does this have to do with being Lesbian, Fat, or Female? If I wanted to see this kind of

material I would subscribe to a sadomasochistic magazine. If this is what you want to be, that is your choice. You will lose me as a reader, and possibly lose others as well. We would ALL lose though, because otherwise I think you have a great thing going, and we need a good forum for lesbians, and fat people, to feel strong, heard, beautiful, erotic, and unified.

I hope that you will publish this letter, partly because I would really like to hear others' responses, but mostly because I would like for you to hear how other readers feel on the topic of S/M in your publication.

Wishing you all the best.

Sincerely,

S J

Santa Cruz, CA

Candida's reply:

"What does S/M have to do with being Lesbian, Fat and Female?"

Well, what does being a lesbian have to do with being fat and female? Meaning, if it's part of your sexuality, and you're fat and female, guess what? It's relevant. It's yours. And most likely, it's all quite interconnected. If dildos don't do it for you, fine. If you instead prefer to indulge in patchouli oil, hot chili oil, chainsaws, Hello Kitty, a Magic Wand, or the Bee Gees while you get off, more power (pardon the pun) to you. None of those things do it for me, personally; in fact, I admit

to finding some of them repulsive. But it seems pretty egocentric to ask what someone's sexual kinks have to do with their identities as fat lesbians. Or do you not see a diverse sexuality as being relevant to a zine for fat dykes and the women who want them?

Being sexual—blatantly, openly, courageously sexual—is a revolutionary act for fat people.

Fat people are not seen much at all in most media (other than in the before pictures of weight loss ads), let alone seen as sexually active or even (gasp)

sexually desirable. We publish what we find hot, and what our contributors find hot enough to send our way: bondage, needles, domination, intelligence, thick-framed glasses, fisting, cleavage, and ice cream of numerous flavors, including vanilla. Send us your picture of fat sexual delight, and unless it involves minors or biological men, chances are we'll print it.

Part of looking at the diversity of fat sexuality is opening your eyes; it doesn't mean that you'll necessarily like what you see.

Selena's reply:

The main reason FG publishes S/M erotica is because we're perverts and we think it's hot and sexy. Shocking folks is not a goal. I'm not going to argue that S/M represents the sexuality of most lesbians, and FG has never claimed that it does. But it's here in the zine to stay because it does represent the sexuality of many lesbians and other

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dykes, including the women who work so hard to put FG out there.

It may be news to many of our readers that FG does not have huge numbers of erotic photo-layout submissions and modeling prospects to wade through. If you want to see more vanilla/non-S/M sex in the zine, send us your photos! Put your ass where your mouth is! The wider the variety of smut we have, the better. But there's no way that we're going to not print stuff because its too kinky. If you wanted to see S/M photos of fat women you'd look at S/M magazine? There are few enough to choose from, only one is dyke-oriented, and none of them show fat women. If you want a magazine that doesn't show S/M, you could pick up one of the many lesbian publications that share your views on the subject. Or start your own zine, and exclude everyone you damn well please, but it's absurd to ask a bunch of women who don't share your prejudices to reflect them in their work.

I think this is partly about the difference between a magazine and a zine. A magazine is a product designed to appeal to a target audience and make money.

If that's what we were about it would make a lot of sense to ditch the S/M content, along with the more explicit or "hardcore" sex. We could increase our distribution and

appeal to more people. There are a lot of lesbians out there who are offended by any representation of sex at all—if we dropped the sex out of FG entirely we might be able to sell to them, too. But FG is a zine, and a zine is more personal than that. FG does not presently make money or pay those of us that work on it. Our pay is making a zine that we love, filling a gap in available publications, and touching like-minded souls. The more women we reach, the more women who find FG and like it, the better. The inclusion of S/M sex is not accidental or incidental to what we are doing here. It's included because lots of us are S/M dykes, and we're not about to marginalize ourselves. But FG is not intended to be an exclusively S/M oriented publication—I hope (and believe) that we can appeal to open-minded dykes of various sexualities. If our smut doesn't turn you on, turn the page.

As for the specific comments that you make about S/M—they contain a tiring number of unfounded assumptions and contradictory statements. (Which partially accounts for my somewhat sharp tone here.) I'm not even going to try to address all of them. Suffice it to say that S/M, like other kinds of sex, can be loving, caring, and full of trust and intimacy, and those of us who have sex that way are no more insecure, numbed-out, or incapable of experiencing pleasure than anyone else.

But I figure I'm probably not the first to tell you that, and I'm not interested in the same old lesbian sex wars debate. The level of discourse in that argument has been disappointingly low. Your characterization of S/M sexuality as sexual exploitation and abuse but yet "perfectly acceptable for some" is a case in point. Exploitation and abuse are never acceptable, and consent is the line that divides them from acceptable behavior. Fucking someone without her consent is rape. Hitting someone without her consent is abuse. But I don't believe that hitting is inherently abusive any more than fucking is.

As for what S/M has to do with being fat or being a dyke—it's something that some fat dykes do, just like cooking, vanilla sex, or buying clothes. Therefore they all have a place in FaTGIRL.

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I, too, would like to see FG be a place for "lesbians" (and bi women) "and fat people to feel strong, heard, beautiful, erotic, and unified," but unity gained through exclusion would be an illusion, and people who can only feel strong and heard when they don't have to listen to others might as well pick up a different magazine.

April's reply:

I work on FaT GiRL because I feel the work is important. My hope is for the 'zine to be both a refuge and a catalyst, for every fat dyke to look inside and, somewhere, see herself reflected. I hope we will inspire, encourage and challenge our readers and—by our very existence—change the world.

I believe we can achieve these goals only by telling the truth about ourselves and our lives.

I would not presume to estimate the number of fat dykes who share my experiences or my desires, but when I write a piece I know that my responsibility is to be as honest and true to my life and my sexuality as I can. I am a bi-racial, fat, femme, S/M dyke. All of these characteristics inform every part of my life. All of these characteristics are as important to me as breathing.

I think it is unfortunate that you see only pain and terror in photos where others see deeply intimate, loving and joyous sexual relationships. I think it is *tragic* that you are considering cutting yourself off from FaT GiRL simply because we will continue to publish expressions of sexuality which challenge your own.

FaT GiRL is committed to producing a high-quality 'zine representing the broadest possible range of fat dyke realities and sexualities. If you feel that your sexuality is underrepresented it is your responsibility to change the situation.

Our next submission deadline is December 15, 1995.★

