

Q&A: Joanne Fleisher

Gay After Marriage

By Victoria A. Brownworth

IN HER NEW BOOK, *LIVING TWO LIVES:*

Married to a Man and in Love With a Woman (Alyson Books), psychotherapist Joanne Fleisher delves into the issue of women who marry men, only to discover their latent lesbian desire. Fleisher, a lesbian who has been with her partner for 25 years and raised two daughters, has been counseling women, lesbians and couples for more than two decades. Her Web site lavendervisions.com is an online counseling resource for women, and she moderates Ask Joanne, a message board for married women attracted to other women.

**Why are you so interested in this topic?**

My interest started 27 years ago, when I found myself falling in love with a woman after being married to a man for 12 years. It was the 1970s and there simply were no resources. The gay hotlines acted like, "Well, what's your problem?" And I couldn't talk to straight friends about it. I wanted to provide a resource for other women that never existed for me.

How is this phenomenon between women different from the "down-low" experience so many married men are engaged in?

Dramatically different! Men are brought up in our culture to be more sexually oriented. Women are the romancers. Women are more likely to fall in love – that's their point of discovery of lesbian desire, usually. The things you hear women agonizing about are not wanting to hurt their husbands or the women they have fallen in love with. The sexual component is

usually secondary.

Why do so many women marry men and then discover their lesbian sexuality?

There are a lot of internal and external homophobic forces that work against young women. We think that adolescence is a time that we learn about our sexuality, but it's also a time when we are expected to fit in. There are some women who don't discover it until they get married. They respond to what they think they're supposed to.

What's the most important aspect of doing this work with other women?

I try to communicate that they are not alone, that this is not an abnormal experience. Sexuality comprises a lot of different things; it's who you have fantasies about, who you are in love with, who you actually have sex with. I try to have women explore the other facets until they know exactly what they do want and what feels right and authentic. ■