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Lisa Duggan. *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. 310 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2617-5.



Reviewed by Barbara M. Freeman (Carleton University)

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Sapphic Slashers is an ambitious pioneering attempt to cast light on the development of American ideas of modernity and nationhood by examining the ways in which the law, science, literary convention and the press of the late 19th–early 20th centuries dealt with the sensational topic of lesbian murderers. Most of the book actually focuses on one such case in Memphis, Tennessee, and its cultural antecedents and repercussions. In January 1892, nineteen-year-old Alice Mitchell slashed the throat of the woman she claimed to love, seventeen-year-old Freda Ward, as Ward was about to board a boat out of town. The case made headlines in New York, San Francisco, and abroad.

The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the actual case, and the second dealing mainly with the prior and subsequent treatment of lesbians in the press, scientific literature and novels. Using legal and newspaper records, Duggan, who teaches History and American Studies at New York University, reconstructs in fascinating detail the events leading up to the Mitchell-Ward murder case and the subsequent court hearings. From these sources, we learn about the passionate relationship between the two young women, their plans to elope with Mitchell passing as the husband, their emotional difficulties and their families' interference with their plans. Within this narrative, Duggan supplies in-

sightful and important historical context regarding gender, class and race in late 19th century Memphis society, conflicting American values about democracy and segregation, questionable legal and journalism practices, and popular scientific ideas regarding sanity and sexuality—all these components being important to the outcome of the court hearings. She also provides two very interesting and useful appendixes—one with the defence's hypothetical recounting of the case and the other with letters written by the lovers.

In part two of the book, Duggan provides additional historical background, examining more briefly earlier and concurrent tabloid stories about other real or imagined “sapphic” crimes and social transgressions by lesbians of different class and races. Then, drawing on the latest historical literature, she effectively links highly contradictory 19th century scientific theories about human behaviour based on evolution, development and heredity—most of which upheld elite, white supremacy—to the sexologists' attitudes towards male homosexuality and lesbianism, and their comments on criminal cases such as the Mitchell-Ward murder as they read of them in the press. In the next chapter, she tackles European and American novels written before and after the Mitchell-Ward case, noting how their plots intertwined with press accounts and the scientific literature in the social con-

struction of the lesbian. She pays special attention to how this cultural legacy was mitigated by the influential British novel of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, a novel, she writes, that “substantially altered [the lesbian love murder] as the dominant interpretive frame for white elite women’s same-sex attachments,” even in the United States. She also offers an epilogue, documenting Mitchell’s life and death in prison and the constant retellings of the Mitchell-Ward case in various forms up to the late 20th century, and calling for “new narratives” that would help sexual minorities gain equal citizenship today.

Duggan’s treatment of the Mitchell-Ward case itself is solid, insightful, often gripping and well-written, and the ensuing discussion of the scientific and literary construction of lesbianism is similarly commendable. It is also refreshing to read a book about the cultural history of the United States that acknowledges and incorporates influences and legacies from beyond its own borders, something that is still all too rare, especially in studies that involve the media.

The book does have a disjointed feel about it, however. For example, it could have provided more cultural context about heterosexual female as well as lesbian transgressions and scapegoating in women’s history. Judith Knelman’s *Twisting in the Wind*, a study of 19th century press coverage of British women murderers, immediately springs to mind here. Instead, Duggan digresses throughout to discuss the issue of lynchings of Black men accused of rape as another example of how American

law, the press, and science experts contributed to the political, economic and social inequality of anyone perceived to be outside of white, heterosexual norms. In her introduction, Duggan explains that the Black man and the “masculine” lesbian were both presented as threats to the “normal” couple— that is, the white, middle class man and “his” woman— and that the male felt duty bound to defend their safe, privileged domesticity by punishing the alleged offenders. In both case, she points out, the agency or self-determination of the “normal” woman—the white, presumed heterosexual “victim” of both Black male and lesbian lust—was rarely raised in public discourse. These are very good points well taken, but the juxtaposition should have ended there, especially since Alice Mitchell really did murder Freda Ward. Duggan’s continuous references—including an account of the anti-lynching campaign of Black activist and journalist Ida B. Wells—smacks of comparing two many apples with two few oranges, despite her attempt to distance herself from drawing parallels.

Still, Duggan deserves a great deal of credit. The fact that the stories of lesbians have largely been erased from family papers and other historical documents, unless they are presented as deviant in court, prison or mental health records, is a particularly onerous challenge for anyone doing research on them. How the media, and by extension, society treats sexual minorities over time says a great deal about the cultural history of discrimination, social acceptance and nation building in any era. *Sapphic Slashers* is a noteworthy contribution to this line of inquiry.

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