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Susan Morrison (Editor): Thirty Ways of Looking at Hillary: Reflections by Women Writers

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Susan Morrison (Editor): *Thirty Ways of Looking at Hillary: Reflections by Women Writers*
New York, NY : HarperCollins Publishers, c2008, 254 p. ISBN 9780061455933 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Barbara Sylvia, MSW, PhD, Professor: Social Work, Salve Regina University

In a somewhat desperate attempt to bring a much sought after definition to Hillary Clinton, Morrison offers up a chorus of 30 voices that may do more, in the final analysis to broaden and deepen the complexities of “Hillary” than to answer lingering questions. The almost schizoid response to Hillary that Morrison herself so aptly describes in her introduction perhaps says more about the ill-defined expectation of American women than of Hillary’s ability to meet those standards.

Through these 30 voices which are all female American writers and journalists, we hear that women, without ever being quite able to fully identify with Hillary, still wonder what it would be like to be her. We are said to wonder about her character in ways reserved only for her and not for other candidates. We applaud her for pursuing her professional life, while rebuking any notion that full-time motherhood is any less admirable. And we sympathize with her need to adapt her style in response to public image demands while blaming, to some degree, her less well-defined character resulting in having to adapt so often. The duplicity that Elizabeth Kolbert voices in the text as expected in male politicians apparently is not as easily tolerated in female candidates. For example, while the general public is quick to comment on any perceived stiffness in Hillary’s demeanor, she is equally mimicked for her spontaneous bouts of laughter.

An underlying theme appears to be somehow related to power and the comfort level of the American woman in seeing another woman garner that much control. If the women’s movement did anything for us it ought to have paved the way for women to be not only tolerant of powerful women but cheerleaders squarely positioned in their corner, at least on the issue of access to power. But, somehow in the wake of the women’s movement, women apparently find themselves yet unable to reconcile work and motherhood, ambition and grace, power and gender. This theme is well explored through the voices that Morrison has assembled in her choir. While one voice questions whether the ambitious spirit that so much a part of every presidential candidate is any different in Hillary, another seems to be still stuck on analyzing her marriage to Bill and its implications. Even worse, another of the assembled choristers chimes in that Hillary, if elected, would be seen as succeeding only on the coattails of a man, her husband, which would undermine any sense of real victory for women. And for that reason, the writer would not support her success! Yet another asserts that any show of strength and power on her part only serves to emasculate her husband. The reader is left wondering whether American women will ever be capable, or willing, to move beyond the sex-role stereotypes that have haunted us for so long in order to provide the space needed to elect a strong and capable woman into a position as powerful as that of President of the United States.

Throughout the text, there are numerous examples of women’s struggles with media-crafted images of a candidate they respect but in whom they are ultimately afraid to fully believe. Why? Perhaps the vestiges of the women’s movement are too difficult for us women to accept. The truth may well be that the struggles leading to that movement are no more eradicated than the struggles that led to the civil rights movement. That is, gender discrimination is alive and well in

America, just as racism lives on in the hearts, the minds, and the voting booths of America. Morrison's book serves as a sober reminder to us that women may be more ready to applaud the effort than they are the final victory of a strong, capable and powerful woman candidate for President. Perhaps that is why Hillary is no longer in the running – not because she was up against a more formidable candidate, but because to women gender and power are more complex, in the final analysis, than are race and power.

While the text never fully answers the challenge of providing great definition and clarity to all things Hillary, Morrison has done much to draw together, into one text, many of the strings that still tie women to the past. And that makes this a “must read” for those pursuing gender studies. Although Morrison might well have assembled a more diverse choir, rather than only well-known writers and journalists, the clarity of their written expression is needed and appreciated as one wades through the complex perspectives they offer. Morrison has succeeded, through this text, in documenting many of the self-imposed barriers that women must all work to eliminate if we are ever to reach equality. As a female, the message seems clear to this reader – time for another phase of the movement to begin – one which begins in our own consciousness.