

**Through the Jalousie Window: A Conversation with Catherine Millet  
by Heather Hartley**

Appeared in *Tin House*, Issue # 39

“I no longer dreamt about my sexual life, I dreamt of Jacques’,” Catherine Millet declares in *Jour de Souffrance*. Seven years after the publication of her autobiography, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*—which Edmund White described as one of the most explicit books about sex ever written by a woman—Millet’s most recent book (the title is literally translated as *Day of Suffering*) explores the question of jealousy, that gargantuan, irrational, all-consuming green-eyed beast. Finding letters from other women addressed to her husband of over fifteen years (and partner for over thirty), Jacques Henric, she discovers that he’s been sleeping with other women. Though still a libertine partaking in orgies, Millet is devastated, angry, and entirely obsessed. Now her life revolves around her husband’s lovers...real, or imagined. Whichever they may be, these phantom women control Millet, and her imagination takes over where the last sentence of her husband’s lover’s letter ends. But in some ways, the phantom women have nothing to do with her obsession—certainly Jacques doesn’t. Millet is like a bulimic or anorexic who either overeats or starves: she both devours and is devoured. Jealousy becomes a constant companion and confidante for her; it is also her malady, both cultivated and chaotic. *Jour de Souffrance* chronicles this three-year crisis. “The idée fixe stayed firmly in place for several days and prevented me from accepting an invitation...from using [certain] objects (because she had touched them),” Millet writes, “I lived like a sick person whose slow movements had no more range than the width of my bed.”

In 2001, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* turned up quite unexpectedly on the literary scene, rocking and shocking. Translated into over thirty-five languages, it has now sold more than 1.2 million copies worldwide. In concise, graphic detail, Millet describes her innumerable sexual partners (she can recall forty-nine but there are many more), her involvement in orgies and encounters in the Bois de Boulogne. Part of the reason for the uproar was that Millet was no anonymous author. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Art Press*, one of the most well-respected and well-known contemporary art reviews in France and Europe for over the past thirty years. She’s a specialist in the art of Yves Klein and Salvador Dali and, among many other art books and monographs, has recently published the historical and autobiographical *Dali et Moi* in 2005. She is also a distinguished curator of exhibits in France and abroad.

Much of *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* reads with succinct, minimal, and carefully crafted language that distances the reader from the countless sexual encounters and faceless partners. “I sucked him steadily without tiring, resting squarely on my knees, which were perpendicular to his hips—one of the most comfortable positions.” Then, later in the same

passage, she'll throw in a monkey wrench—for example the very slangy, familiar word for “orgy,” *partouze*, used repeatedly throughout the book.

Between these scenes, she outlines a libertine philosophy. Libertinism often gets a bad rap, reduced to the rather myopic definition of one who engages in sex with multiple partners, possibly at the same time. There is often a hint of perversion and a pinch of sadomasochism thrown into the recipe. This particular definition was probably solidified during the Enlightenment, in the late eighteenth century, with the publication of Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the works of de Sade, and Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, among others; the literary genre of *le roman libertin* dates from this period. But the term “libertinism” dates back to the 1550s and originally had much more to do with religion than with sex. The Libertins, led by Ami Perrin, opposed John Calvin's restrictive religious policies that applied to all citizens of Geneva; they fought for freedom from these rules and the right to practice religion as they saw fit. *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* can be read as an eloquent—albeit laconic—apology for libertinism: Millet argues for free love, and, by extension, for tolerance. Beyond the myriad sex scenes, written and rooted in between the lines is a deeper, more philosophical implication and argument. “The reader will have realised that, as I have explained, I exercised complete free will in my chosen sexual life. Mine was not the kind of freedom played out on the whims of circumstance; it was a freedom expressed once and for all, accepting the unreserved abandonment of the self to a way of life (like a nun saying her vows!).”

*Jour de Souffrance* continues the story that *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* began. In a recent interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Millet explained that “*Jour de Souffrance* is a response to all of the readers of *The Sexual Life* who believed—in spite of the neutral tone of the book—that my life was a joyous and perpetual debauchery and that I had written an apology of hedonism... To those readers I say that assuming a free sexuality does not stop you from falling into the horrible trap of jealousy and the pain that accompanies it.” Her latest book describes this trap and its unexpected trap doors.

I met with Catherine Millet at the offices of *Art Press*, on the Left Bank, on a chilly Parisian afternoon, to talk about appetites.

*Nota bene:* Catherine Millet speaks a beautiful and cultivated French, complete with its subjunctive mood, litotes, double entendres, and other wonderfully exhilarating and linguistically challenging expressions for non-native speakers. To this end, some French words and phrases have been included in the interview to further illustrate the meaning and depth of her expression.

**Heather Hartley:** Your appetite for writing came very early on in your life. You explained in *Jour de Souffrance* that you were destined to read and write. At eighteen, you already had this very deep desire; at twenty-two you started publishing articles; and at twenty-four, you founded your own magazine, *Art Press*. Could you say that the axiom “L’appétit vient en mangeant” [“Your appetite grows as you eat”] applies to your appetite for writing?

**Catherine Millet:** I think that the desire to write inevitably comes from an appetite for reading. You start by being a voracious reader and that was definitely my case. I was a little girl who devoured books, to stay in the metaphor.

**HH:** What kind?

**CM:** I devoured all kinds. I’m reminded of this because, a few years ago, I wrote a book about what I read during my childhood. They asked me to re-write a sort of fairy tale. [The book is *Riquet à la houppe, Millet à la loupe*, Librairie Générale Française, 2003.] I had to remember what I’d read and what’s incredible is that as you start remembering all of this, you discover that you were reading fairy tales and adult books at the same time—the latter perhaps behind your parents’ backs. And all of these books blend together, get mixed up, and you don’t make any difference between them.

**HH:** Any authors in particular?

**CM:** My mother read a lot of Balzac and Zola and for me, it was all the same thing—the children’s stories, these writers...

I think that we don’t really want to leave the incredible world that reading lets us enter. It allows us to penetrate into such different realms than the one in which we live, and we really have the desire to preserve this imaginary universe, to protect it. So we’re going to work on building it.

**HH:** What is “appetite,” for you, and how would you define it?

**CM:** [laughs] You have appetite when you’re turned toward the outside world, when you’re open and ready to receive and accept things from the outside—to be penetrated by it.

**HH:** For everything?

**CM:** Yes—it’s a general opening [*ouverture*] toward the external world and others.