

Journal columnist speaks

# Lois Sweet: "fist-swinging libber" more human

Gateway reporter Teri Paulgaard in an interview with Lois Sweet, an Edmonton Journal columnist.

Her job as columnist for the Edmonton Journal has gained her a reputation as a fist-swinging women's libber. Her articles seem to strike out at the contradictory sex at an area just slightly below the belt.

But Lois Sweet has been misunderstood somewhere along the line. She is a mother, a graduate of Carleton University and, surprisingly enough, human.

Gateway: How did you come to receive the reputation you have?

Sweet: I don't know. I guess it's because I write about women's issues. I mean, I don't know why. I don't consider myself a castrater. I like men a lot, as a matter of fact. I don't have a lot of patience with much of this radical feminism, but I think part of the thing is what is reported in the press. It has created a stereotype in which all women who are feminists or who talk about women's issues are automatically thrown into. It makes it difficult, it really does. On the other hand, it's partly amusing. You have no idea of the amount of mail I get with such unbelievable fantasies about who I am. I read these things and think, "Where in the world did they get that?" I don't know. I don't want to get too pop-psych, but maybe it's a way of trying to write off the issues.

Gateway: How do they portray you?

Sweet: Oh, it's so contradictory! On the one hand, "You must be really frigid and not like sex." One the other hand, "You

Gateway: How do you feel about the traditional male courtesies; opening doors, holding chairs, etc?

Sweet: I, quite honestly, find it hard to understand why women object to someone opening the door for them. Life is too short to make a big issue out of opening the door. If I get there first, I open the door and if there is a man behind me, fine, go through. And if a man gets there first and opens the door I gladly go through, especially if I've got groceries in my hands.

And this business of names drives me up a wall! I've been at meetings where there are important things happening. People are talking about real issues and suddenly somebody pipes up and says, (raises her voice a few octaves and speaks through her nose for emphasis) "You just called us ladies! We're not ladies..." And I think, "Shut up...just shut up."

Gateway: But you've been typecast as a woman who doesn't like those kinds of things.

Sweet: I don't know how you deal with those kinds of stereotypes because I come up against them all the time. People have some sort of notion that if you even talk about these issues, you've got to be butch or ugly and fat. You can't possibly be married, you can't be feminine, you can't enjoy dancing...There are just a million things that go along with it. I don't know how to deal with the problem. Maybe people need stereotypes. Maybe it's a way not to deal with the issues, if you can write people off.

Gateway: How do you feel about the stereotype that all women's libbers are lesbians?

*And I think, "Shut up... just shut up."*

must be promiscuous and do it all the time with anybody anywhere." And, "You've obviously had a deprived childhood and been a victim of abuse," or, "You've obviously had a very comfortable childhood." It's really funny.

I get a lot of people objecting to me. They think I'm a radical or something. "Why do you talk about sex all the time?"; that's one of the problems. The funny thing is, we should talk about sex a lot. I don't think it's very healthy the way that sex is right now portrayed in our society. Right now sex is bought and sold, right? It's everywhere. But it's not very well understood. It's not possible to enter into conversations with people about their sexuality. It's either intercourse or nothing else, or a few variations thereof. And you don't talk about it, you just do it. It seems to me we'd be a lot less uptight about sex if we talked about it in the context of our feelings. I don't mean 'it' in terms of technique and methods, but in terms of how we feel about it.

Sweet: A lot of them are.

Gateway: That many of them? Enough to create a stereotype?

Sweet: Partly, I think there are a lot of them. Certainly the ones years ago who really made an impact in feminist literature and theory have come out and declared the fact that they are lesbians; Kate Millet, for example. That's part of it.

The other part gets back to what we were talking about before, which is: If you've got a stereotype you can write it off. You've got a certain number of categories and you can slot them. If you can slot them you can ignore them. It's not unlike "All Indians are drunk and lazy."

Gateway: How do you feel about women who prefer the traditional roles?

Sweet: More power to them! That's fine, if that is what they've chosen to do. My only concern is that women have to really think



photo Teri Paulgaard

Lois Sweet

carefully about what possibilities exist for them if that relationship ends. One marriage out of three ends in divorce. A woman who stays in the home is not paid. She has no pension plan. Good luck to her if she tries to collect maintenance. She'll have a very tough time. Being out of the job market means that she'll have a very difficult time getting back in at other than a Safeway clerk level. It's not going to be like *Kramer vs. Kramer* where the woman goes into a \$30,000 a year job.

So I think that if a woman makes that choice she should also make sure she has a damn good contract with her husband, or the man who is providing for her. Certainly I think there needs to be more social recognition for the role women play when they stay at home. The work they do is very important. No question about it; they are socializing the young, providing at no cost to the employer a lot of benefits the employee needs to do a good job; provide stability, wash the clothes so he can go to work looking nice. A lot of stress is taken off him. It is a very important job the woman does but it's not socially recognized. So I think any woman who makes that choice should be aware of the statistics.

There's a whole group of women now actually organized, because there's so many of them, called Displaced Homemakers. They are women who always assumed — oaky, they worked to put their husbands through university on the understanding that then they could stay home and he'd provide. After 15 years of marriage and

three children, they're out on their asses. The biggest problem of that group of women is the suicide rate; a tremendous amount of suicide and attempted suicide.

My point is that at an individual level it is fine for women to make the decision to stay home. I certainly don't mean to imply, and I've been charged with this, that I put these women down; that somehow you can't be liberated, you can't be realizing yourself or enjoying life unless you're in the work force.

More power to them, but I think it's a decision they have to make very carefully.

Gateway: Is there anything you'd like to say to any of the men who might be reading this?

Sweet: Yes, I don't think men should be so afraid of women. We need each other far too much to either mystify, distort, stereotype or abuse.

Gateway Conclusions: Columnists are truly different when wrenched away from their typewriters; for example, Lois Sweet on home turf she is far more human than given credit for. But on behalf of all those who prefer to cling to the radical image of this writer /feminist, I have one small measure of consolations: Lois Sweet was wearing hiking boots.

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