

San Francisco Chronicle CONFIDENCES

Laughter, rage and the bonds of love

Women's anthologies pay tribute to friendship and survival skills

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Teddy Roosevelt's probably grimacing from the grave, but Autumn Stephens couldn't resist tweaking his famous motto, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," into a title for her new book.



"Roar Softly and Carry a Great Lipstick" (Inner Ocean Publishing), which she co-wrote and edited, fits this anthology with 'tude -- penned by 28 women set on showing the world how they take on life, sex and survival.

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"This is a book about women's ways of handling things," says Stephens, the Berkeley writer of "Wild Women" series fame. "Or at least, this brand of women."

A book about women's struggles and triumphs may sound potentially deadly, but "Roar" is, by turn, laugh-out-loud funny, reflective and poignant as it recounts womanly encounters of every kind. Twelve of the writers are local, including novelist Anne Lamott and Mary Roach, author of the recent best-seller "Stiff." (Chronicle columnist Jane Ganahl is among the contributors.)

"Roar" isn't the only recent anthology of works by female writers. The more sedate but equally thoughtful "Secrets and Confidences -- The Complicated Truth About Women's Friendships" (Seal Press, \$14.95), has 24 contributors, five from the Bay Area, including Chronicle staff writer Joshunda Sanders. Former Berkeleyan Karen Eng, a veteran of mainstream publications and zines (she founded PekoPeko, a food zine), co-wrote and edited the book.

Eng, who now lives in England, says the book evolved from a life-changing event years ago, when she cut off an impassioned friendship with a woman she'd known since college. Tormented by ending the problematic friendship, she sought self-help but couldn't find a single book that wasn't "chicken-soupy kind of celebratory" about friendships.

"Women's friendships are not taken seriously," she writes. "Accordingly, when things go wrong, that too is not taken seriously, and the consequences can be devastating."

Eng hopes the book begins the process of breaking down the "shoe shopping, martini lunches, wedding-dress envy" public image of female friendships, and in the process, portrays the complicated tapestry of women's relationships with each other.

Breaking through false images is something 47-year-old Stephens, too, knows about. In her "Wild Women" series in the '90s, she reminded the world that bold feminine figures were doing their thing, even in the Victorian era.

A decade later, the germ of "Roars" was born after a brainstorming session with an agent about women's issues. "We were talking about a big sociological book, with bar graphs and charts," says Stephens on the phone, her sons, 5, and 8, slightly underfoot on a recent Saturday. "Then I realized that's not the book I wanted to do."

Instead, she solicited personal essays from women, mostly in their 40s and 50s.

"You have to live for a certain amount of time to see the pattern of your life," says Stephens. "I hoped people would write about things not normally spoken of, because silence creates suffering."

Stephens herself writes a chapter about fighting breast cancer three years ago. Her diagnosis of ductal carcinoma in situ, she writes, came on a sunny July morning, "while my husband was at work, and my children were in day care, and big, blowsy summer roses were blooming like crazy all over my backyard."

"But," Stephens adds, "while this particular book addresses the ways in which women feel pain, it obviously is not just that."

Roach made sure of that.

Calling middle age "a heinous and insidious conglomeration of small physical failings," she writes: "Unpigmented white spots on forearms. Compared with those little red, raised blebs on your chest and upper arms, these white spots are hardly noticeable. By the way, I'm guessing they're not only on your arms. Have you examined the fronts of your shins lately?"

"Receding gums. What you are failing to realize is that the enamel underneath your gums have been protected from unsightly coffee and cigarette stains for the past thirty years and is as white and perfect as your toilet bowl above the waterline. Also, many of you have the problem of unflattering gummy smiles, and this will be alleviated by the gradual disappearance of your gums."

San Francisco author Bonnie Wach's hellish account of postpartum depression after the birth of her son is shot through with pathos and hilarity.

One day, she writes, she's swimming upstream "with the other salmon," the next, she's "dumped into a goldfish bowl" with a wailing baby in the other room.

She tries to cope. One afternoon, during "a forced march through the neighborhood with the baby," she accosts a mother pushing a stroller, demanding, "How do you take a shower and have a baby at the same time?"

She gets no answers, except that it gets better. But it doesn't. Blissed-out breastfeeding moms make her flesh crawl. She comes to loathe the park with "all those zombie mommies with their snack packs and sun cream."

Her search for a group hug ends hilariously.

"Nothing can reinforce the notion that you're Joan Crawford in stained sweatpants quicker than arriving, as I did, at the first meeting of a postpartum depression support group, after weeks of working up the nerve, only to discover that I was the only one who had shown up."

"Even as I was crying, I was laughing," recalls Wach. Somehow she got through it; her son, now 3 1/2, charms her just by laughing. "I love him to tears," she says.

Wach describes that period of her life as "throwing up pick-up sticks. Mine landed in Siberia, I believe. It was very hard to write about it. I feel like a different person and it feels like a different lifetime. But a lot more people go through it than we think."

To Eng, the same could apply to the complicated subject of women's friendships.

"Female friendships must be the most oversimplified, trivialized, underappreciated and misunderstood of relationships. In direct conflict with women's own expectation of a lifelong, consistently intense bond with their girlfriend, society dictates that girlfriends come after children, spouses, parents and siblings, roughly in that order."

"Secrets" is full of images that resonate for women. Basement cabals of Barbie doll devotees. Shared peanut butter and marshmallow puff on Wonder bread. Cooking, studying, face masks and gossip into the night. But as life and circumstances pull girls and women in many directions, those bonds shift, thin, maybe even break.

Seattle writer Jennifer D. Munro's poignant piece describes her alienation among a group of friends who are now mothers. One shared the same due date as Munro. Now, the friend's child is 8. Munro remains childless; she had seven miscarriages in 10 years.

"We used to walk around the lake together frequently before she got pregnant, but then she and her husband began walking weekly with another set of expectant parents. I passed them once, strolling the other way. Soon-to-be- dads walked up front, while the expectant moms waddled along behind. We made polite but awkward small talk, then said goodbye."

Other friendships, strangely, become stronger, even with death. In Brooklyn writer Ayun Halliday's essay, a casual acquaintance with Viola, a woman from Bali, is transformed when Viola collapses -- the cops treat it as a drug overdose -- and dies in an East Village playground where their kids are playing. In the harrowing hours that follow, Halliday cares for Viola's toddler, Jessye, telling the authorities who show up that "we were playground friends."

"Who do you consider your friend?" Eng asks of Halliday's story. "Sometimes, friendship is a question of behavior, rather than how much you knew that person day to day."

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