



Leora Tanenbaum

Catfight

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Q: Are you a competitive person?

A: Yes! In fact, in the interest of full disclosure, I will reveal some of my most embarrassing competitive moments:

- Once, a gorgeous woman made repeated attempts to reach out to me, to befriend me. Her beauty intimidated and threatened me, and I treated her coldly. After all, had I walked around next to her, who would ever have given a second glance to me?
- My college roommate was a columnist for both the college paper and the campus magazine. Was I proud of her? No, I was envious. For many years, our friendship faltered.
- Ten years later, pregnant with my first child, I was obsessed with how much weight I had gained compared with other pregnant women. I agonized over the purchase of each "Large"-sized maternity outfit—why on earth couldn't I fit into the "Medium" sizes? Obscenely, I compared myself not only with pregnant friends and acquaintances, but also with celebrities like Reese Witherspoon, Iman, Cindy Crawford, and Catherine Zeta-Jones who seemed to be made of rubber: their bodies appeared to just bounce right back into shape after giving birth.

Q: What prompted you to write this book?

A: I proudly call myself a feminist. I am committed to the idea that every woman should be given the opportunity to succeed in any endeavor she chooses. And yet, there is also a part of me that feels reassured if another woman stumbles. For a long time, I assumed that my competitiveness was mine alone. But when I looked around, I discovered that this problem affects nearly every American woman. I decided to explore this phenomenon to find out why so many of us feel compelled to measure ourselves against other women.

Q: Was it difficult to find women willing to share their personal stories?

A: I spoke with 100 women in all. Unlike researching *Slut!*, it was actually easy to find women willing to speak with me. Every woman has at least one catfight story—and most of us have several. I found that most women cast themselves as an innocent victim and another woman as a manipulative competitor—since few women like to admit to being competitive themselves—but, when pressed, many did admit to some sneaky manipulations of their own.

The first 20 or 25 women were similar to me—white, professional, heterosexual, from the East Coast or West Coast. I needed diversity. I asked everyone I'd interviewed to refer me to women from different backgrounds. I also placed classified ads in one alternative newspaper and one feminist magazine. This strategy paid off: By the end, I'd spoken with black, Asian, South-Asian, Latina, and multi-ethnic women; women working in a variety of careers; lesbians and bisexuals; women from the South and Midwest; women who grew up on welfare and women who lived off trust funds. Despite these differences, everyone had something to say about rivalries with women.

Q: Why did you choose for the title a derogatory word that insults women?

A: As with *Slut!*, I decided to use a word—ugly as it is—that's on everyone's lips because we can't have a conversation about a topic if we dodge the language commonly used in association with it. Like it or not, "catfight" as word and as a concept commands people's attention. It conjures images from the Bible, fairy tales, literature, cinema, television, and advertising campaigns. To discuss the phenomenon of "catfights"—how women are compelled to form rivalries with one another—I believe we need to use this word. Only then can we solve the problem.

Q: What in your research surprised you?

A: The rivalries among new mothers with post-partum depression in group therapy took me by surprise. I had assumed that when depressed mothers mingle, they feel a comforting bond—after all, they all are dealing with the same sleeplessness, the same sore nipples, the same conflict over when or whether to return to paid work. But it turns out that the contrary is actually true: these women judge themselves against each other and because they were unable to bond, they did not recover from their depression.

Q: How did writing this book change you?

A: I'm more forgiving of other women, and more willing to stretch out a hand.