

## The Social Sex

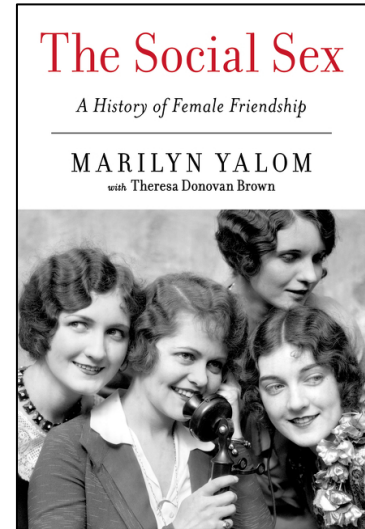
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### Introduction

In today's culture, the bonds of female friendship are taken as a given. But only a few centuries ago, the idea of female friendship was completely unacknowledged, even pooh-poohed. Dating back to the Greeks and the Romans, women were long considered "weaker" than men and constitutionally unsuited for friendship at the highest level. Only men, the reasoning went, had the emotional and intellectual depth to develop and sustain these meaningful relationships.



Surveying history, literature, philosophy, religion, and pop culture, acclaimed author Marilyn Yalom and coauthor Theresa Donovan Brown demonstrate how women were able to co-opt the public face of friendship throughout the years. Chronicling shifting attitudes toward friendship—both female and male—from the Bible and the Romans to the Enlightenment, to the women's rights movements of the 1960s up to *Sex and the City* and *Broad City*, they reveal how the concept of female friendship has been inextricably linked to the larger social and cultural movements that have defined human history.

With Yalom and Brown as our guides, we delve into the fascinating historical episodes and trends that illuminate the story of friendship between women: the literary salon as the original book club, the emergence of female professions and the working girl, the phenomenon of gossip, the advent of women's sports, and more.

Lively, informative, and richly detailed, *The Social Sex* is a revelatory cultural history.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The authors of *The Social Sex* hew to the historical record in their depiction of women's friendships through the ages. What was the ancient, male-centric view of friendship? What aspects of these views remain consistent with modern ideas of friendship? What is different? Who were among the first women to leave documents about their relationships?
2. Medieval nuns were often walled off from the rest of the world with a small group of other women. Throughout the Middle Ages, most monasteries and convents were regulated according to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* (sixth century), which emphasized the importance of

the community as a whole and discouraged "particular friendships." Does it seem realistic that women would be able to be equally friendly with all the nuns in a cloister, or do you think "particular friendships" would inevitably form? How do you think a single-sex environment affects the personal growth of women?

3. "Gossip" meant something different in early modern villages (c. 1500-1750) than it does today. What use did gossip have in the social structure of ancient villages? Why was gossip considered to be the role of women in the villages and towns of yesteryear? What is the role of gossip today? Does it ever serve a useful function in society?
4. Among the first assertions of female friendship outside nunneries were those made by highly educated, intellectual women, including the poet Katherine Phillips, the Precious Ladies of Paris in the seventeenth century, and the Blue Stockings of London in the eighteenth century. Why are these women's views on friendship prominent in the historical record? Do you see any similarities between your reading group or circle of friends to the Blue Stockings and Precious Ladies?
5. Have you ever felt the dismay expressed by Katherine Phillips that "We may generally conclude the Marriage of a Friend to be the Funeral of a Friendship"?
6. Until the mid-nineteenth century, women's participation in political movements was largely behind-the-scenes. How were women involved with the American Revolutionary cause? What were the challenges faced by women revolutionaries in eighteenth-century America? What difference have women's efforts made to the outcomes of World War I and II and subsequent conflicts?
7. "Romantic Friendships" between women were characterized by fervent declarations of love between soul mates. Does such language characterize or reflect your experience of friendship?
8. The authors state, "In this book we have used the word *lesbian* regarding women's friendships in the past if there was concrete evidence of sexual activity....Women's intense attachments to each other cannot be rendered into a word or a formula...." Is it important to our understanding of female friendship to distinguish between sexual and nonsexual relationships?
9. How do you think social media has changed the nature of friendship for women? Is this change different for women than it is for men?

10. How does your socio-economic status influence your circles of friends? Has a change in your economic situation ever caused you to lose a friend?
11. Do you have friends among your workplace colleagues? How do these compare to long-time friendships formed under different life circumstances? Do you separate your friends into different "circles," e.g. "work friends," "childhood friends," "parents of my kids' friends"?
12. In the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, the character Harry believes that women and man can't be just friends because "the sex thing gets in the way." Do you agree? Why or why not?
13. Do you think perceptions of cross-gender friendships are different today that they were in the 1990s? What about in the 1970s or 1950s? How do you think perceptions of cross-gender friendships affect the prospects of women in the workplace?
14. The authors cite four enduring qualities that are basic to women's friendships: affection, self-revelation, physical contact, and interdependence. Do these qualities characterize your friendships with women? Do you think they differ from male friendships? Why are these qualities important to you?