



***Who Was That Woman, Anyway?*  
*Snapshots of a Lesbian Life* by Aorewa McLeod. Wellington: VUP (2013). RRP: \$35. Pb, 224pp. ISBN: 9780864738783. Reviewed by Katherine Sender.**

The question, “Who was that woman?” is the persistent itch that scratches this delicious,

semi-autobiographical story of a twentieth century lesbian life lived mostly in New Zealand. The title playfully references narrator Ngaio’s abundant series of erotic encounters with women whose names sometimes seem beside the point; the memoir structure invokes the author’s reflexive consideration of the identity of her younger self; and the playful ambiguity of autobiography cum novel demands the reader considers who – real or fictional – the protagonist might actually be. With gentle irony, empathetic characterization, juicy intimacies and a seductive pace, the book invokes such queer classics as Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* series. Even more than a story of the power of transformational lovemaking (and it is that), McLeod’s narrative is testimony to the tensile webs of foundational friendships: the community she draws around her bring her out as a lesbian, politicize her, tend her in sickness, make her drink and laugh while tending her ailing mother, and share the loss of a treasured member of their circle. McLeod has a skillful ear and creative memory for snatches of conversation and turns of phrase and recounts these in a register that ranges from warmly wry to out-loud funny. I took particular pleasure in recognizing – even in a different hemisphere and with a generational shift – distillations of many of the scenes and tools of my own lesbian feminist youth in the UK: Wiccan consciousness raising groups, the Motherpeace tarot deck, the strains of politically correct communal living (was that woman really me?). Only the last two chapters left me wanting: Ngaio’s sojourn to the US and encounters there with transgender politics, and facing her alcoholism and subsequent stint in rehab seemed to get the better of the author. Here the lightness of touch with which McLeod deals

with both political and personal struggle earlier in the book becomes tentative and burdened with recency, as though tender humour can only be reached through sedimented distance. That said, I hope Victoria University Press’s economically risky but culturally right decision to publish this book triumphs; *Who Was That Woman, Anyway?* joins an international body of queer literature that deserves a broad readership.