

## 'Brokeback Mountain': A Woman's View Of The Life Of Gay Men

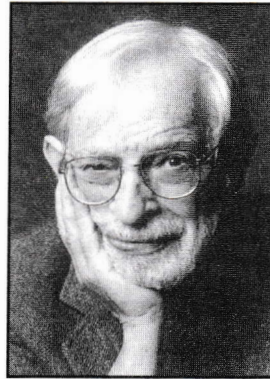
By Louis A. Berman, Professor of Psychology (retired), University of Illinois at Chicago

Given the lavish praise it won from the film critics across the country, "Brokeback Mountain" was a sure bet to be named Best Picture of the Year at this year's Academy Award ceremony. One particularly lavish endorsement appeared in *Rolling Stone*, and included the words: "Unmissable and unforgettable! . . . A classic in the making! . . . A landmark film . . . an acting miracle. . . The unerring script . . . a model of literary adaptation." The publication *Entertainment* lauded "Brokeback Mountain" as "a film in which love feels almost as if it were being invented. Revolutionary."

The Human Rights Campaign, the largest national gay rights group, prepared to make the most of the virtual certainty that this romantic story of faithful gay love, based on a short story by Annie Proulx, would be named "The Best Picture of the Year" by the Motion Picture Academy. A month before Oscar night, the Human Rights Campaign held a gala in New York City at which a pair of jackets worn in the movie by the gay lovers, was auctioned off for \$42,000. The *Chicago Tribune* quoted Human Rights Campaign spokesperson Susanne Salkind as saying that recognition of "Brokeback" will be an opportunity to raise gay issues "to another level of American culture. . . . We want to transform this . . . occasion into something much more important."

An Associated Press article (published in the Feb. 15, 2006 *Chicago Tribune*) quotes gay men who agree that the film "tells the story of [their] own gay life and struggles in a strikingly personal way," and that such movies "have given millions of Americans a greater understanding of who we are." Speaking on Hong Kong television, according to Chicago's *Windy City Times* of March 15, "Brokeback Mountain" director Ang Lee said, "This is the way gays are. It's just that they have been distorted. When two people are in love and are scared, that's the way they are."

Nobody asks that fictional characters be typical of persons of his group. Was Zorba a typical Greek? Was Capote a typical gay writer? But when it is claimed of



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"Brokeback Mountain" that "this is the way gays are," that calls for a closer look at the film, at the story on which the film is based, and how the events of the story compare with what is actually known about the lives of gay men. There is, after all, a considerable literature about the lives of gay men, including autobiographical writings, clinical studies, surveys, research studies and field observations of all sorts.

### Romanticized Or Reality?

Suppose we compare what we know about the lives of gay men, with what the story tells us. Is the story an educational (as well as an artistic) experience? Does the film sharpen our image of the gay man, or does it actually becloud it, romanticize it, elevating political correctness to a dazzling new level. How much does the story tell us about the social and inner life of gay men? For our answer, I will be guided mainly by Proulx's short story, rather than try to recall every detail of the movie adaptation. What contrasts so boldly between this pair's behavior and what is known to be so much more typical of gay men, is the secret lovers' uncompromised faithfulness, through 20 frustrating years. Jack is depicted as the faithful lover who pines away for his absent love. (A feminine conception of gay sensibility?) This makes a believable story for straight folks to behold, and gives the movie a very romantic touch, but this does not recognize the importance of cruising in the life of a typical young gay man.

The survey findings of the University of Chicago's Prof. Edward Laumann contrasts the average number of sexual partnerships claimed by typical straight and gay men. In a study reported in 2004, 80% of gay men claimed to have had 16 or more sex partners. In a 1992 study of heterosexual married adults, by contrast,

Laumann reported that a majority of 1,660 respondents claimed to have had only one sexual partner after the age of 18, and only 15 per cent more than ten.

“Cruising” is the word gay men use to describe this activity. Researchers use the term “multiple partnerships” and avoid the word “promiscuity,” which is old-fashioned and pejorative. Multiple partnerships are far, far more common in gay populations than is the uncompromised faithfulness depicted in “Brokeback Mountain.”

A gay man has always had to be careful where he worked or lived. Life in the rural West could be rather dangerous, as the following quote from Proulx’s story (Ennis speaking) indicates: “. . . *There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich. . . . They was a joke even though they was pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They’s took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp. . . . Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. . . . Dad laughed about it.*

*Hell, for all I know he done the job.”*

### **The Earmarks Of A Woman’s Imagination**

Jack and Ennis are portrayed as faithful lovers who pine away for each other in-between their infrequent reunions. Both men claim a powerful craving for each other, and indicate no sexual attraction to other men. However, this powerfully-drawn theme of endlessly patient and faithful love, has the earmarks of a feminine imagination. In the real life of most gay men, the world is too big and abundant, and one’s physical cravings are much too urgent to spend months pining away for an absent partner. If “Brokeback Mountain” were written by a gay man, it would tell a rather different story, and it might not be so readily adopted by Hollywood.

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Professor Berman is the author of *The Puzzle: Exploring the Evolutionary Puzzle of Male Homosexuality* (Godot Press, 2003).