



(UN)MARRIED WOMEN

After a lifetime of heterosexuality, many women are finding a new dimension to their sexual identities. A BOUND report.

Having come out in December 2009, real-life lesbian mother, Meredith Baxter, who played popular TV mum Elyse Keaton on '80s sitcom *Family Ties* has secured a book deal and will now write her memoir. Crown Publishing Group announced that the memoir will “present a fully realised portrait of her life as an actress, mother of five children and grandmother, and will candidly discuss her fight with breast cancer, her 19 years of sobriety, entrepreneurship and her decision to come out.” The book will hopefully shed light on what is becoming a phenomenon: women with no prior lesbian tendencies who identify in middle age as lesbian. Baxter, 62, who started dating women seven years ago said the thought of being gay “had never crossed my mind.” The actress and skin-care entrepreneur has gone public about her four-year relationship with building contractor Nancy Locke after the pair were spotted onboard the Sweet lesbian cruise to the Western Caribbean in November 2009. Surely when Baxter took the cruise with 1,100 women there was the possibility of being outed and soon after a tabloid noted her presence on the cruise she went on the Today show to explain her position. She told host Matt Lauer of the difficulty of coming out as a private person; she said she once asked partner Nancy Locke to park her truck several

doors down from her actual address and Locke refused. Baxter has publicly come to terms with a long process. She told Lauer coming out did not discredit her earlier life. “Some people would say, well, you’re living a lie and, you know, the truth is — not at all. This has only been for the past seven years.” She told *People* magazine that before coming out, “I was never comfortable with myself,” although she was never “questioning.”

Carren Strock, author of *Married Women Who Love Women* is very aware of how this feels. After 25 years of happy marriage to a man, she fell in love with a woman. That bombshell led her to interview over 100 women who had found themselves in a similar situation. “I’d put fliers in a few locations to find women to interview. Women were taking my fliers, copying them and sending them off to friends and family. I began receiving notes and phone calls from women all over the country who were desperate for someone to talk to. Some of these women had been in therapy for years and never told their therapists but they were comfortable talking to me because I too was a MWLW.”

“One woman approached me at an early reading. She said she would have come through any weather and any distance to thank me personally. She thought she was the only married woman ever to have fallen in love with another woman. She didn’t know where she could turn or who she could talk to and thought the only thing she could do for her husband



Meredith Baxter, who came out after three marriages and five children, will write her memoir.

and children was kill herself. She actually planned her suicide for a night when she knew her family was going to be home late. She was coming home from work for what she thought would be the last time when she passed a bookstore. They were just putting my book in the window. When she saw the title she realised she wasn’t alone and decided to live.”

Sixty percent of Strock’s interviewees were between 35 and 65, which suggests midlife crisis. But it’s more complex than that. “If you were shown red, yellow and blue and asked what your favourite colour was but you’d never seen purple or orange or chartreuse, you’d be choosing from a limited selection,” explains Strock. “The same thing happened to many women. As little girls, they were told they would marry someone like their father. They had no idea they might fall in love with someone like their mother.”

The women Strock interviewed fell into four categories: “Those who sensed a difference between themselves and their peers but had no words to describe it; women who knew early in life that they had lesbian tendencies but denied them; women who had been involved with women but thought they were different, not lesbian; women who believed they were heterosexual until they fell in love with another woman.” This last category Strock and Meredith Baxter share, and Baxter’s coming out without prior experience does not surprise Strock. “I had no idea I was a lesbian until I was 43. I would have said ‘I know exactly who and what I am. I am not a lesbian nor could I ever be one.’ One year later I fell in love with another woman and my world turned upside down. All of my belief systems failed me. I experienced more passion, pain, isolation, and turmoil than I ever thought possible. But through it all my life became clearer and brighter.”

Coming out is hard on husbands, children, and older parents. “What I try to make the men understand is that their wives have simply discovered another dimension to themselves. Pointing fingers does no good. Many women leave their marriages because their husbands are abusive. Often women say ‘if only he were a drunkard, or a bastard. Then I’d have no trouble leaving. But he’s such a nice guy.’ In some situations, it was

the husband’s desire to see his wife with another woman that made the woman realise she preferred women.”

For children of married women who love women, “divorce is more frightening than their mother’s coming out.” It’s important that they “know how their worlds will be affected. Will they have to move? Will they have to change schools, give up their friends? Some women chose not to tell their children until they were older. Those children told me they resented having been kept in the dark. One teenager said, ‘I didn’t want to know what my parents did behind the bedroom door before and I don’t want to know what my mother is doing behind the bedroom door now.’”

Generally, older parents were more concerned about social opinion or a loss of grandchildren but now that same-sex couples are having children some of their fears are alleviated. There is also the domino effect: Strock spoke with several women who told her that their mothers came out after they did.

Coming out does not necessarily mean the instant destruction of the

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household. Some women have been able to redefine their marriages and remain with their spouses. “Different things work for different people,” says Strock. “I am not bisexual. I am a lesbian who has been blessed with a family who loves me unconditionally — that includes my husband, children and extended family and that is why I have chosen to remain. Many people are re-examining feelings and attitudes instilled in them since childhood and reconstructing their marriages in a more realistic light.” Baxter’s coming out can only help dispel the taboo and confusion around the situation. While Strock does not condone outing she believes that “if everyone came out the gay population would be seen in a different, more positive light as there would be so many of us. I applaud Meredith’s courage.”

Married Women Who Love Women is available at carrenstrock.com

WHEN STRAIGHT WOMEN TURN GAY

- Actress **Kelly McGillis** came out at 52 in 2009 after two marriages and two children
- At 37, pin-up **Samantha Fox** declared her love for manager Myra Stratton in 2003
- Comedian **Carol Leifer** became attracted to women after turning 40 and told the world on *Oprah*, sparking a nationwide discussion on the topic
- *WorkOut*’s **Jackie Warner** (right) received adoring fan mail and sexual overtures from mostly straight, often married women

