The Stranger Next Door, by Arlene Stein

reviewed by Tex Sample in the October 17, 2001 issue

Every liberal ought to read this sociological study of a successful Christian-right, local initiative in a small Oregon town. In Timbertown (a pseudonym), this initiative, later overturned by the courts, aimed "to prevent antidiscrimination protection for gays and lesbians and to prohibit government spending to promote homosexuality." Arlene Stein provides an important depiction of life in a town which became a vortex of national and local issues.

The Timbertown initiative was largely symbolic, Stein argues. There were "few visible signs of queer life" in the town, and yet homosexuality became a primary issue for the community's self-definition. Why was this so? Stein's response to this question examines how sexuality, especially homosexuality, can become a loaded symbol for people's anxieties about a changing world. She examines the deep divisions which result, the way the community consequently defines itself, and what such things tell us about how we live together in a contested moral order.

Stein ignores neither the economic nor the cultural issues before this community. But on the homosexual initiative, she focuses on an inclusion/exclusion dynamic: "Social groups know who they are in large measure by knowing who they are not. Timbertown's conservative Protestants defined themselves in opposition to nonbelievers, homosexuals, radical feminists, and, in subtle ways, people of color."

Stein is a Jew and a lesbian, though--for good reason--she kept her homosexual identity hidden from this community of 8,000. Her sympathies are clearly opposed to the initiative and the views of her Christian-right subjects. Yet she is able to nuance her descriptions so that such folk come through as living, breathing people rather than as cardboard stereotypes. For those unfamiliar with Christian-right ideology, its local strategies and its turn from "moral majority" rhetoric to "victimization" language, Stein's book is a good introduction.

But she may be at her best when she depicts the flaws of liberal ideological arguments against the Christian right in a community undergoing significant change in family structure as well as in the relationship between women and men and sexuality, and experiencing the influx of large numbers of hippies, émigrés from California, people of various racial and ethnic identities and other strangers.

Add to this a severe economic downturn. In Timbertown the well-paying jobs with benefits that could support a family quickly disappeared. In Oregon as a whole 80 percent of families lost income during the time immediately preceding the initiative, a decline well represented in Timbertown. Yet the liberal battle against the homosexual initiative did not take these factors into account. In fact, the liberals seemed to regard members of the working class as unsophisticated "rednecks"--the only racial slur allowed by such progressive enclaves.

Stein graphically delineates liberal elitism, with its abstract talk of inclusivity, pluralism and diversity and its often callous disregard for the concerns of local, more traditional people. Her book is an education for liberals who care about race and gender but who would not know a class issue if it walked up and belted them on their new-class-and-status backsides.

A frustrating aspect of *The Stranger Next Door* is the absence of an analysis of the voting results on the antigay initiative. Stein reports that the initiative "won 57 percent of the vote despite the fact that its sponsors were outspent by their liberal opponents" and that "only one third of eligible voters turned out to the polls." The number of registered voters is not reported. If roughly 20 percent, or 1,600, of the population of 8,000 are children and youth, then those over 21 make up, again roughly, about 6,400. Surely this figure significantly exceeds the number of registered voters.

Nevertheless, if only a third of this number voted (around 2,100) and if 57 percent of these voted for the antigay measure, this amounts to about 1,200 antigay voters in my highly inflated guesstimates. If Christian conservatives make up around 20 percent of the population and liberals make up 15 to 20 percent, is it possible that this was an electoral battle largely between the liberals and conservative Christians in town--a battle that, though it received a great deal of media attention, did not really engage most of the people?

This question becomes important in at least two instances. While Stein is quite sensitive to the economic reversals of people in the working class--a sensitivity I applaud and appreciate--the impression the book gives is that these working-class people are primarily responsible for the scapegoating of homosexuals, liberals, radical feminists and, more subtly, people of color. The election data do not support such a view. They suggest that this community dogfight was a battle between middle-class liberals and conservative Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals and Pentecostals, though certainly not all such Christian conservatives became politically involved.

The book gives the subtle impression that more traditional people are the carriers of racism, heterosexism and authoritarianism. But racism, heterosexism and authoritarianism are found throughout this culture. Working people and traditionalists certainly bear the responsibility for their own complicity in these culturally pervasive evils. At the same time, traditional life in the U.S. is complex and ought not be stereotyped as the primary location of such views.

While Stein is too deeply humanitarian to make such claims flatly, she nevertheless implies them. For example, she sees the traditional family as male-dominated, but such families are enormously complex. Many are headed by women. Moreover, the research of Judith Stacey, whom Stein knows, finds that racial-ethnic and white working-class families are in fact the innovators of postmodern family forms.

But let the final word be one of genuine appreciation for the book. Stein's sophisticated critique of essentialist views of homosexuality, especially those held by liberals, is a needed corrective. Many progressive views have not adequately engaged the socially constructed character of sexuality in general and homosexuality and heterosexuality in particular. Moreover, her critique of the media, her careful treatment of symbolic boundaries, her capacity for nuancing the lives and the views of the people of Timbertown and her appreciation for the other all make this book required reading for those at the center of a host of issues now challenging us.