

Musings from my Hermitage

By Larry F. Ginsberg

Esther Rome: Feminist! Educator! Author!



Our Bodies Ourselves Founders

Looking back at *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (published in 1973): “It was a book we stole from our moms, or thumbed through in private, when we had questions. Friends of mine, from different chapters of my life, all did. Says Gaia, ‘I remember flipping through it at all different ages and actually using it as a resource as a teen.’ Jennie says, ‘I read, from cover to cover, the 1970s-era copy I found in the house I babysat in during my junior high and high school days.’ Megan says, ‘I took it from [my mom] at some point because I liked the way it looked.’ And for Lisa, ‘Girl, it meant everything to me.’ It meant everything to me, too. In high school, it was the guide I turned to when I had questions I knew my friends couldn’t answer and the adults in my life

wouldn’t answer. In college, it came with me.” - Laura Lambert, “The Legacy of Our Bodies, Ourselves – And How One Book Can Change Your Entire Life,” www.readbrightly.com

The late 1960’s and early 1970’s was a period of upheaval, of revolution. The “old order” was again being challenged. Vietnam, civil rights and racial equality, woman’s liberation and sexual equality were the issues of the day. Protest for a more just society.

Though women had the suffrage through the Nineteenth Amendment since 1920; they were still a subservient sex. Men made the rules! Men were still in control. Few “glass ceilings” in the professions or industry had been smashed.

Knowledge was power and women sought control of their bodies, their sexuality, their very lives and health. Was my vulva normal-looking? What options and methods of birth control were available? What about masturbation, lesbianism, abortion, postpartum depression? As Laura Lambert reflected, upon discovering the book years after its original publication: “My private angst about my female body, or the quietly sinister gender norms that robbed me of so much of my autonomy weren’t just problems with me.”

Esther Rachel Rome was one of a group of 12 intrepid women who formed the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (now called Our Bodies, Ourselves) and co-wrote *Women and Their Bodies* in 1970 and three years later published the first edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, a collection of groundbreaking essays on women’s health and sexuality issues. Rome and Paula Doress wrote on postpartum depression.

Rome was born Esther Seidman on September 8, 1945, in Norwich, CT. Raised in Plainfield, she attended Norwich Free Academy, Brandeis University (BA in Art, cum laude 1966) and Harvard Graduate School of Education (MA in teaching, 1968).

With the women’s movement was in full swing, in 1969, Rome became a women’s health advocate to aid, change and challenge the organization and healthcare available to women. Her focus was on women’s body image, cosmetic surgery issues, dietary needs and nutrition. That’s when she became involved with a small

gathering of women in a workshop entitled “Women and their Bodies” to discuss information on doctors and women’s health issues. This led to the formation of the Boston Women’s Health Book Cooperative.

Rome’s efforts were influential in the enactment of legislation to help to change women’s perception of their bodies, attitudes and behavior. She campaigned assiduously and successfully to get standardized absorption ratings for tampons and was influential as a consumer representative for the FDA in bringing about, in 1992, a partial moratorium on silicone-gel breast implants. She publicly challenged the prevailing definition of premenstrual syndrome as a disease and not as a normal physical condition. At the time of her death, she was co-authoring a book entitled *Sacrificing Our Selves for Love* that analyzed health issues arising from domestic violence, starvation diets and cosmetic surgery, in relation to women’s wishes to accommodate their partner’s views and desires.



She continued to focus on these issues for the rest of her all-too-short life; she was also committed to the practice of Judaism and Shabbat celebrations at home with her husband, Nathan Rome, and their two sons, and as a member of Temple B’nai B’rith in Somerville, MA. She died in Somerville at age 49 of breast cancer on June 24, 1995, and was eulogized as “intelligent, compassionate and fun person to work with.” In 1998 the

Women’s Community Cancer Project of the Women’s Center of Cambridge, MA. honored Esther Rome and her 11 cohorts with a mural.

There will be no further editions published of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. So let us close end with Laura Lambert’s words of praise for the book, and for the 12 magnificent women, including Esther Rome, who fought for women’s rights, healthcare and education:

“I think about what my own daughter might read and trust the way I did *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Where is her real-world guide? Where is her private, go-to resource? Where is her early political education? What will be her life-changing book? Because women’s bodies, women’s health, and sexuality—even feminism—are (comparatively) less taboo, there are a lot of options for young, impressionable women... Still, in a couple years, when she’s of age, I plan to give her my old copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, just in case.”

