

## ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

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Traditionally, friendship has often been portrayed as something primarily for men. From the time of intellectual giants like Aristotle and Montaigne, it has been suggested that women, with their supposedly undeveloped brains, are incapable of such a noble relationship. The Swedish language, like German and French, has different words for male and female friendships: vän – väninna, Freund – Freundin, un ami – une amie.

Eva Gothlin, who became one of my dearest friends during the five years we spent translating *Le Deuxième Sexe* into Swedish, remarked that there was a real dearth of academic literature about female friendship until the 1970s. An essay about friendship between women and men, which she refers to as a philosophical rarity, was the beginning of a larger study that Eva did not finish before she died of cancer in December 2006. However, a version of her analysis focusing on the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre was recently published in an anthology about gender-transcending friendships between intellectual women and men in which Eva's colleagues honored her memory.

As a journalist, writer, and translator, I am self-taught, an "autodidacte" with no university background. While we were working on the translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Eva was not content with a literal translation of the text. She insisted that I also understand the philosophical base of Beauvoir's writing. Thus I was privileged to have a private course in philosophy with Eva Gothlin as my teacher.

Eva was interested in analyzing the "best friend" relationship between Beauvoir and Sartre, one which tends to be fairly unusual between a woman and a man. We also had a brief discussion about Beauvoir's relationships with women, in which I personally saw a lack of close female friendships. Did Beauvoir have no need for female friendships, since she had longstanding close relationships with both Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lanzmann? Or did she not see herself as a woman and therefore part of an oppressed collective, but rather as an integral part of a male intellectual tradition?

I have been asked many questions about the subject of friendship since I wrote about Beauvoir and myself in my 1996 essay *Simone och jag, Simone and I - Thinking about Simone de Beauvoir*. The literal English title of my 2011 book *Vännorna och Jag* would be *My Friends and I*, which sadly fails to indicate the difference between female and male friendships. In it, I use myself and eight of my female friends, women I met when I was between the ages of 15 and 53, as examples of what constitutes female friendship. Topics include how the friendship starts, how it sometimes ends, and a consideration of whether or not compromised relationships can be repaired, the answer to which is that they can.

My eight friends related their personal stories to me in interviews I had with them. Topics about which I asked them included the identity of their first real female friend, what had seemed important to them in lasting relationships, and how they have handled envy. I myself recalled having lost contact with two teenage friends because, as I remembered it, they preferred each other. As it turned out, my memories were very clear, but wrong.

I then interviewed one of my colleagues, several women writers, a friend sometimes described as Sweden's Oprah Winfrey, a publisher, and a priest and writer who came to Sweden from the former Yugoslavia at the age of 15 to work in a rubber factory. Her story is a full-length Hollywood movie in itself.

I was inspired to write a book on this topic by a 34-year-old woman who is like a daughter to me. She is a psychologist who spent many of her childhood holidays on my tiny island of Lekholmen, which is located on a small lake 240 kilometers northeast of Oslo. She was searching for books giving advice about how to maintain female friendships and was particularly interested in my analysis of the aggressiveness and envy which can destroy them.

We hear generalizations about female friendship, suggesting that women tend to compete rather than cooperate, although it is really the men who are the competitive animals, in my estimation. Some complain that women talk too much, but I would suggest that it is rather the men who do most of the talking most of the time. Others proclaim that women are always quarreling, yet it seems to me that it is more likely the men who relish disagreeing with one another, sometimes to the point of becoming violent.

I have wondered why there seem to be so few books about female friendships. As I am pondering the answer to that question, I am inspired to return to Simone de Beauvoir's writings to see exactly what she had to say as she contemplated the role of friendship in her memoirs.



**ÅSA MOBERG** is a free lance writer, journalist, and translator. She translated Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* into Swedish in 1992 and worked with Adam Incèdy Gombos and Eva Lundgren Gothlin on the first complete Swedish translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which was published in 2002. The Swedish subtitle of her 2007 book on Florence Nightingale translates as "The Person Behind the Myth." She has authored four novels and a dozen other books, one of which has a title which translates into English as *Simone and I. Thinking about Simone de Beauvoir*. After reading that 1996 book, film director Ingmar Bergman commented: "There was only one thing wrong with that book: it should have been twice as long."