

'Herstory' of women's liberation seen through rebel's life

By David Wood

Burning Questions, by Alix Kates Shulman, Knopf, \$8.95.

Strangely, there are two title-pages in this new, second novel by the authoress of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, Alix Kates Shulman. The first has the same title on the cover, *Burning Questions*. The second is by a fictional authoress, Zane IndiAnna, who calls the story *My Life as a Rebel*.

book review

Both titles are borrowed from books listed in the novel's bibliography — which is also strange, since novels don't normally name their sources. Lenin once wrote a book titled *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. And *My Life as a Rebel* has been written before by a contemporary of Lenin's, Angelica Balabanoff, a feminist revolutionary.

Shulman isn't using the earlier books as parallels, though. She uses them as just two more evocations to the long history of social struggle against oppression.

Shulman writes of the modern "herstory" of the women's liberation movement, as heard through the voice of Zane and seen through her life as a rebel. The experience of the individual in relation to historic events, Angelica Balabanoff wrote, "doesn't belong to oneself alone. It should be put at the disposal of those who can make use of it."

And this story at our disposal, Shulman intends to be made use of, not for our conversion to the cause, but to help us understand it.

Zane IndiAnna, from the start, felt in herself the rebel, however without a cause. This was mostly through the awareness that she just didn't naturally fit into the con-

formity of small-town midwestern permanence. She craved distinction, as intelligent adolescents do, and could find it only through deviancy.

But she knew, from certain books, written by New Yorkers, and from her Aunt Louise, the widow of a 30s communist, that outside there was more to living. Her spirit had been born into the wrong place, Zane felt. She was meant to live in New York City.

She soon moved there alone, but for a quotation from Louise by Oliver Wendell Holmes; "It is required of a man that he share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived." Zane had figured that was required of a woman too and that passion was most current in the voluntary impoverishment of the Greenwich Village of the beatniks.

Her nature to be flippant in the midwest was, in the East, changed into shyness and a readiness to cling. The change was understandable, as was everything in her life as a rebel, she thought, according to Hegelian dialectics. That is, when a conflict fuses, from its resolution evolves the next opposite.

Next, Zane fused into the Village, of which Jack Kerouac, Beat Generation spokesman, wrote, "We didn't have a whole lot of heavy abstract thoughts. We were just a bunch of guys who were out trying to get laid." Living with a poet, who later in the 70s, like Kerouac, was far enough removed to claim fame as nostalgia, Zane was uneasy acting under the only value of the 50s Beats, that of the moment. She didn't like their defensiveness about personal freedom.

So she went to the dialectic opposite, marrying, and becoming mother of three. There was naturally mixed pleasure in the rewards of love and children. But she anguished at being so tied down that years flew and she could only watch "the action and passion" of the 60's from the window of her home overlooking the changing daily parade through Washington Square.

Her rebel, her "Zanity", frustrated, and her kids old enough for sitters now, Zane went out protesting, sharing in the times, against the war and for civil rights. But not until she heard of the Third Circle, began attending their meetings, then participating in the activism for the rights of women, did she finally find her cause.

The comradeship she calls "sisterhood" was the thing she finally found that could relax the guilt she'd always felt with herself in former relationships. She took to the movement rabidly at first, bitterly accusing society, even reality, of being a product entirely of male minds. She gave all her energies for the cause, and gave up her husband, her adulterer, and much of her care of the kids, "those starlings on her runway."

And she fell in love with a co-libber, who told her, "Every man knows we're only women, so at the bottom they can despise us. Unless she somehow impress them as exceptions. It would be ridiculous for us to pretend to be exceptions. Anyway, we can do much better than impress each other. We can know each other."

Now women's liberation, like the 50s and 60s, has passed its hey-day, and Zane, like her first real lover, the beat poet, is at last, in the 70s, independently middle-class and lecturing at New School in N.Y.C. like a remnant from history. She's optimistic about the future of the women's statement, though the times are no longer ripe for activism — obviously, if there's no longer so much for a rebel to do that she's had time to write her story.

Zane admits things are better for women now, though much remains to be improved. She even concedes that some men have shaped up, that they're humbler, though still alien. But largely the novel is free of too much over-all reactionary bias. Besides having an efficient, feminine style, the book offers a wider scope which is more historical, and analytical and Marxist literature.



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