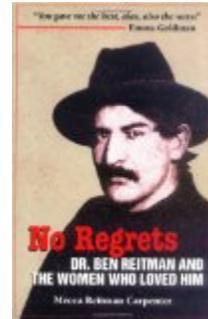


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Mecca Reitman Carpenter. *No Regrets: Dr. Benjamin Reitman and the Remarkable Women Who Loved Him. A Biographical Memoir.* Lexington, Mass.: Southside Press, 1996. xx + 212 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9650584-0-7.

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Mecca Reitman Carpenter's book, *No Regrets: Dr. Ben Reitman and the Women Who Loved Him*, is a careful and loving biographical memoir of her father, the colorful and controversial subject of two other recent studies (Roger Bruns, *The Damndest Radical* [1987] and Suzanne Poirier *Chicago's War on Syphilis, 1937-1940* [1995]).

The abandonment of his father and the poverty of his mother made Ben Reitman's childhood difficult. From his youth he experienced life in poor neighborhoods of Chicago, making acquaintance with prostitutes and criminals in the vice districts south of Van Buren Street and learning to "ride the rails" as part of the "hobo" culture with which he became identified. He spent much of his life in and with that culture, both serving its population as a medical doctor and gathering material from it for his sociological studies, *The Second-Oldest Profession* (1932) and *Sister of the Road (Box Car Bertha)* (1937). He also spent considerable time in anarchist circles through his connection with Emma Goldman. Through his adult life he pursued women.

A scientist at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona and a health writer and teacher, Carpenter has produced a book that gets at the life of Ben Reitman from a more personal connection than a standard biography. She uses his voluminous correspondence in an effort, as she says, to separate "Ben Reitman, the man, from my father, the family legend" (p. 3). Readers interested in sociology, in urban history, and in public health will benefit from this work, but because the work is centered on Ben's relationships with women, those interested in psychology, gender studies, and women's studies will find more substance. Carpenter chronicles seven of those relationships, some of which overlapped others. The first and

fifth were legal marriages, the former ended by divorce; the latter, after a decade of separation, by his death.

Benjamin Lewis Reitman was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1879 to Jewish parents. His father deserted the family when Ben was a year old, and Ben later asserted that his father's behavior was a precedent for his own. Ben, his older brother, and their mother eventually settled in the red-light district on Chicago's near south side. "Street education" for Ben consisted of running errands for neighbors, becoming acquainted with the poor, transients, criminals, prostitutes, pimps, con men, and drunks. His first arrest occurred at an early age, for stealing coal from train cars.

Though he had quit school very early, Ben's intelligence recommended him to a medical school professor, who encouraged him to take up medical studies. Graduating in 1904 after a bumpy ride through medical school, he practiced medicine only irregularly until about 1918, spending some of the intervening time on hobo "tramps" around the country. In 1901, he met, married, then almost immediately abandoned his first wife and child. A divorce ended this marriage in 1905, but his wife, who had difficulty with mental illness, kept in touch with him, sometimes coming to his medical office to ask for money. Years later, his grown daughter by this marriage learned to know him and corresponded with him.

While organizing social programs for homeless men in 1908, Reitman met "Red Emma" Goldman, the internationally-known labor agitator and proponent of anarchy, free love, birth control, and women's rights. To Emma, ten years his senior, Ben was a "handsome brute" (p. 27). From him, Emma received a full complement of unfettered sexuality. This behavior fit well with a phi-

losophy of free love, and perhaps not coincidentally with the distribution of birth control information. Sadly, when Emma discovered the “other women” in Ben’s life, her free love philosophy proved no shield to feelings of anguish at betrayal. Yet she returned to their bed repeatedly over a period of almost a decade.

By 1917, Reitman turned away from Emma and had taken up with a younger anarchist worker, Anna Martindale, with whom he had a son. According to Carpenter, “Not only was Anna a freeloader by choice, she was a woman ready to have Ben’s child” (p. 47). When she realized the extent of Ben’s womanizing, Anna became unhappy in the relationship but did not protest. Her own espousal of free love proved, as it did to Emma Goldman, a barrier to expectations of fidelity.

Ben spent six months in jail, with a \$1,000 fine, for distributing birth-control literature, in 1918. He served as the prison’s unofficial doctor, while also, according to his own report, enjoying sexual union with female prisoners, guards, visitors, and a few of the male homosexuals. “Yes,” he writes, “I took my fun where I found it and denied myself nothing” (pp. 53, 54). One woman who contributed toward his fine was Rose Siegel, an occasional lover from Ben’s New York City days with Emma Goldman. Shortly after Anna died at age 45 of complications stemming from an abortion (Ben did not perform this particular procedure), Ben married 38-year-old Rose, but did not live with her long. He later commented, “I married Rose because she waited 20 years for me and my mother wanted me to do it. I never really loved Rose.” She returned to school-teaching in New York City, and he took up with other women.

One of these other women was Eileen O’Connor, a 45-year-old medical secretary in Buffalo, New York. Reading about Dr. Reitman’s projected book, “Living with Social Outcasts,” she began corresponding with him and eventually left Buffalo to work with him in Chicago. Filled with sincerity and hope, she conflated help on his book project with the promise of a relationship with a wonderful man. When they met she prayed silently, “Oh God, let me never fail him.” Eileen seems to have been a conquest-by-mail. She served as a secretary to Ben as well. The author comments, “Of all my father’s voluminous correspondence, his early letters to Eileen have the greatest power to make me angry at my father’s exploitive behavior” (pp. 89, 90).

Medina Oliver, the author’s mother, was a nursing student in her late 20s who had met Ben while studying briefly in Chicago. While on a trip to New York (to

see his wife Rose), he became intimate with Medina. She conceived the idea that Ben would be the ideal father for her children, despite the knowledge that she would most probably remain at most a “minor character” in his life. Further, writes Mecca, “There’s no question that my mother loved my father and thought he was her destiny for motherhood. Despite their many differences, the qualities she admired in him were ones she wanted for her children” (pp. 97-99).

Medina became pregnant by Ben and delivered her first child at Cook County Hospital. Later she moved into Reitman’s cottage. Eileen, who had miscarried the baby Ben had fathered, was jealous, but so devoted to Ben that she continued to serve him. Rose, kept informed of all these developments by Reitman himself, “thought that [Medina] had stolen Ben from her.” The situation is reminiscent of a soap opera plot. However, Ben remained married to Rose, and the author speculates by way of explanation, “As long as he was married to Rose, neither my mother nor Eileen could claim him” (p. 172). Medina eventually bore four daughters to Ben Reitman, the last shortly after his death.

The aspect of this book dealing with Dr. Reitman’s work in public health portrays him as an unselfish and dedicated reformer who worked at times for the Chicago Department of Health, and who also began a private organization, the Chicago Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease. In his lifetime the city had high local rates of sexually-transmitted diseases. Beginning about the time of World War I, government efforts against VD emphasized education, case reporting, morals court action against offenders, and the operation of free clinics. Reitman, whose practice and habits gave him first-hand knowledge of the people most at risk for sexually-transmitted diseases, took a different tack. He advised that the only way to solve the problem was to encourage sexually-active men and women to use prophylaxis. Asserting that the “sex urge cannot be controlled” (p. 64), he predicted with prescience that “a time will come when condoms will be on exhibit in high schools” (p. 154). He wrote in 1938, “We must make sex safe, foolproof” (p. 148). His candor and the substance of his advice proved too much for the public temper. In the 1930s, those in authority found this kind of talk too close to endorsing illicit sexual behavior.

Interesting on several levels, in sum this book is the story of Ben Reitman’s life with women. If the title, *No Regrets*, expresses his feeling on the subject, it clashes with what he wrote about at least one of his affairs,

“Someone once said, ‘Find them, F them, Feed them and Leave them.’ But that don’t work. People I work and play with have a habit of moving into my life. And they don’t move out so easy” (p. 96). Perhaps a key to Reitman’s thought is provided in the dedication to his *The Second Oldest Profession*, where he wrote of Emma Goldman, “She taught me that men and women will never be free until they learn not to exploit or be exploited.” Yet

looking more deeply, one is tempted to ask, In the life of Ben Reitman and his lovers, which of them was free, and what would this sought-after freedom mean? Were there really no regrets?

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