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Lori Landay. *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. 272 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1651-6; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3435-0.

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Women are naturally deceptive, right? Landay exposes this fallacy in *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con Women*, a look at nineteenth and twentieth century tricky females in popular culture. She lays out how women use trickery to negotiate the societal limits placed on them, including advertising's influence. She spotlights white heterosexual performers and characters, among them: Mae West, Lorelei Lee of Gentleman Prefer Blondes, Lucy Ricardo of I Love Lucy, and Catwoman in Batman Returns. A few performers and characters outside this range, African American Whoopi Goldberg and lesbian Ellen DeGeneres, get coverage. Film stills and frame enlargements, and magazine advertisements illustrate Landay's points.

An amusing story about a pair of wily women opens the book. But neither are performers or popular genre characters so why are they included? Landay says one of the women probably, emphasis on probably, modeled her tricky performance on a Mae West character. This upstart beginning foreshadows the strength and weakness of the rest of the book. Landay chooses interesting examples, explains clearly why they are significant but fails to offer evidence for her views.

In searching for ways to codify female behavior that, in relation to mainstream mores, is transgressive, Landay settled on "trickster." Her use relies heavily on how the term is defined by Native American and African American traditions. In this light, the concept is more of an overlay than an idea fully integrated.

One reason Landay chose "trickster" is that trickster figures illustrate duality – life and death, good and bad. But when Landay cites John Berger's idea of the "split of female consciousness" women are saddled with by hav-

ing to be both the viewer and the view, she shows she has confused the term duality with dichotomy. Duality is two complimentary parts while dichotomy is a split into two opposing divisions. And many of the "trickster" characters that Landay discusses are one-dimensional – their selfish trickster plots don't ever backfire – as they do in Native stories. Nor does she does mention the spiritual aspect of tricksters, which is important for Native Americans.

Another of Landay reasons for choosing "trickster" is that the trickster reminds us how constructed societal roles and institutions are. Landay is more successful in integrating this aspect of the Native American concept into her study. While not all, most of the female figures covered in the book do hold a mirror to society. Landay also probably chose "trickster" because it is not pejorative.

Still, I challenge Euro-American scholars such as Landay to look into their own cultures, or that of their subject, to support their arguments. Unfortunately Landay neglected Euro-American "tricksters" like the Jack stories protagonist, or the country man/farmer who gets the better of the city slicker. Using the trickster concepts from Native America would work if Landay understood the concept completely, acknowledged what she left out, and included more people of color in her study. Also Landay does not use her title categories: madcap, screwball or con woman, throughout the book. These, as she defines and illustrates them with popular culture characters in Chapter one, make more sense than imposing a multicultural trickster concept, even if, as she states, "the term trickster is a scholarly conceit."

The crafty women in Landay's study use various

types of 'passing.' These include passing as a member of a more privileged or valued ethnic group, and acting as a more moneyed or privileged class member. But the most common is gender role-playing, which Judith Butler has explained so well. Here females act the role of socially constructed femaleness. If a boyfriend desires a demure, sweet voiced girlfriend, the woman, knowing she will gain material goods, acts like a 'lady.' Landay sees passing as analogous to the shape shifting of Native American and African American trickster figures, but I find this a stretch.

Chapter One examines nineteenth century literature featuring female characters acting outside socially sanctioned roles for women—the madcap, the screwball and the con woman. Landay includes the novel *Passing*, which recounts how a young mulatto woman passes as 'white.'

In Chapter two Landay moves into the beginning of the century with a study of the consummate con woman Lorelei Lee of Anita Loos' novel, *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, and of actress Clara Bow as the girl with 'It.' sex appeal.

Mae West and screwball comedy films make up Chapter Three. Landay notes in the early 1930s the trickery in films is loosey-goosey, trickery is done as much for and with men as to them. By the late thirties, the woman uses covert trickery to dupe the man into marriage.

Chapter four looks at the film version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as well as the television series "I Love Lucy." Marilyn Monroe's innocent portrayal of Lorelei is

contrasted with Loos' original character. Landay shows how Lorelei's sidekick Dorothy, as played by Jane Russell, is the real trickster onscreen. Up to the mid-1950s, in Landay's examples, the female 'trickster' is a single woman whose trickery is used to capture a husband. Lucy Ricardo illustrates what happens to the crafty woman once she marries.

Chapter five moves us into the last thirty years. Landay looks at characters from television sit-coms "Bewitched," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Roseanne," "Ellen" and "Cybill." The movie "tricksters" include characters from "Desperately Seeking Susan," "The Last Seduction," "Thelma and Louise," "Sister Act" and "Batman Returns." Landay sees Catwoman/Selina as the quintessential female trickster at the millenium. She has not used her trickery to carve out a place within mainstream society, as characters such as Lorelei Lee and Lucy Ricardo have done, but remains a threatening outsider.

If Landay had created a neutral term for women who use trickery to negotiate societal roles and/or had drawn on Euro-American "trickster" figures and relied less on her wit to carry theory her book would be stronger. So it's best to ignore any overt Native American aspect to the trickster title and concentrate on the almost thoroughly Euro-American madcaps, screwballs and con women in Landay's engaging book.

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