LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

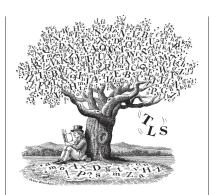
Stonewall and after

Sir, – Years ago, I reviewed Derek Jarman's final book of diaries for the *TLS* (August 18, 2000). In a fairly decent review of a good and moving book I noted that Jarman was happiest using the word "queer" about himself and his kind. It was precisely because the term was in-your-face and convention-defying that he found it preferable to other options. I found this view invigorating and inspiring. John Lauritsen (Letters,

July 19) clearly disagrees.

Lauritsen objects to the term, finding it unacceptable, viscerally offensive, and disrespectful. Equality is one thing – and my generation should be very grateful indeed to Lauritsen's for fighting that battle, one that clearly hasn't ended yet. But he is nevertheless in no position to dictate terms. Some of us prefer to be gay, others are happy to be queer. One size fits all is very unlikely to be helpful when it comes to identity.

I don't know which dictionary Lauritsen is using, but when he claims that the core meanings of queer are "odd, spurious, worthless, deviant" he seems to me to be slipping "worthless" (a secondary meaning, the first of many others) in among the other three terms. Personally, I have no issue with the idea of banding together with the odd, the spurious and the deviant. They appeal to me far more than the purely conventional. And if the idea of "worth" is coming with puritan overtones, then I am all for the



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worthless, too. Again, it is a matter of personal judgement.

What I find offensive in Lauritsen's letter is his presumption that he speaks for "most gay men" and refers to gay people as one big "us". "Sexual preference does not make us a community," Jarman noted in his diary, "it's the assimilationists who are the enemy." Lauritsen has every right to be appalled by the word "queer" and by the sight of it in the *TLS*. I have every right to think differently. Speak out, of course – but speak for yourself.

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Sir, – I'm sorry if my word choice hurt John Lauritsen. I am happy, should we ever have a personal conversation, never to use the "Q" word. No one word matters more to me than having an honest conversation, where both people can participate fully, without being re-traumatized by semantics. I'll avoid repeating that word here, in the interest of this discussion. But all of us LGBT+folks carry wounds: from words, from actions, from things said or left unsaid. Growing up, the insult I was most likely to hear was "gay" – as in "that's so gay". Does that mean "gay" should now be banned as well? Where does this language policing end?

Furthermore, why should "gay" a word most commonly associated with men - get to be the universal term for our community? The Gay Liberation Front was an incredible organization, and we are all indebted to Lauritsen and his comrades. My life is immeasurably better thanks to the work of the GLF. But this kind of not so subtle sexism was one of the areas in which GLF stumbled, and it rears up again in his letter. I'm not just writing for, to, or about "gay males". Lauritsen should make the language choices that work for him, but to impose those choices on others seems

to me the opposite of liberation.

Personally, I find intent more important than word choice. Language moves quickly, particularly the language of slights and slang and subcultures – the nooks and crannies where LGBT+ culture has for so long survived and thrived. Trying to nail it down to one particular moment in the 1970s is like standing in a river, yelling at it to stop.

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