

"Drifting on an unfriendly sea"

Lesbian pulp novels and the creation of community

Linnea A. Stenson

The 1940s and 1950s brought considerable changes to the lives of women in the United States. World War II brought an influx of single women into major metropolitan areas. Their newfound independence and economic strength gave them freedoms they had not had since World War I. As well, they tended to live in highly sex-segregated communities, both in the armed services and in civilian housing, which allowed lesbians to find one another in a manner that had been nearly impossible before. The growth of the number of bars that catered exclusively to homosexuals began to foster a



semblance of group identity. The publication of the Kinsey reports startled the American consciousness with scientific evidence that the frequency of homosexual activity, for both women and men, was significantly higher than previously thought. Finally, the publication of Donald Webster Cory's *The homosexual in America* in 1951 (and *The lesbian in America* later in 1964) presented a new view of the homosexual: that of a persecuted minority. All these factors played into the "bloom" of lesbian novels that occurred during the 1950s and early 1960s.

The paperback revolution begun by Pocket Books in 1939 made books affordable and sex (of any sort) made them saleable. While the 1940s saw little in the

way of lesbian fiction published due to “military requisition of cellulose for explosives, which resulted in an unprecedented shortage of paper and stringent selectivity in published fiction” (Foster 1956 p. 241), the 1950s saw an upsurge in the number of works having a lesbian theme. While most “pulp” paperbacks (which were named for the inexpensive paper on which they were printed) had little redeeming value, nonetheless, “more lesbian novels were published in the 1950s and early 1960s than at any other time in history” (Zimmerman 1990 p. 9). For lesbians, the pulps offered evidence that they existed. The emancipatory potential of pulp novels lie not simply in their storylines or covers, but rather in the cultural practice of consuming them, which allowed lesbians an opportunity (within an otherwise rigidly heteronormative system of representation) to re-imagine themselves and the world around them.

Given the political climate, it is not terribly surprising that so many novels with a lesbian theme were published during the 1950s and early 1960s, considering that for the most part they functioned as Radclyffe Hall claimed *The well of loneliness* should function: as stories that warned of the dangers of a lesbian life. Nonetheless, lesbians voraciously devoured these novels, despite the moralizing, the prejudices, and the frequently awful writing. These novels were inexpensive, generally 35 to 40 cents during the mid-1950s, and their length seldom ran more than 200 pages. The characters in them are almost without exception white and young. The colorful and luridly designed covers, often featuring two women embracing or in various stages of undress, signaled “lesbian” to even the casual browser, and were widely available at drugstore book racks and newspaper stands. No distinction on the cover could signal which of these novels might be somewhat sympathetic. Despite their cautionary intent, these latter-day “penny dreadfuls” often served to inform women, who might otherwise not be in contact with other lesbians, that there were others like themselves out in the world. Indeed, Suzanna Danuta Walters has argued that:

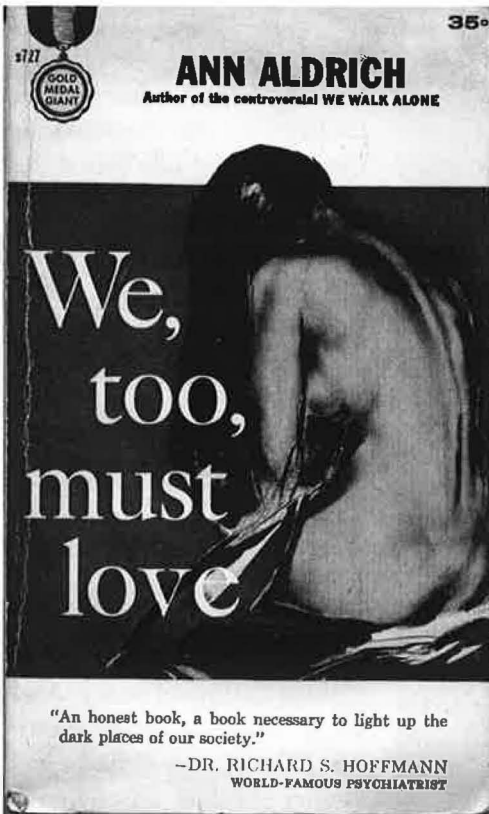
one could even see these books as a sort of “how-to” of lesbian lust. . . . These books are travel guides to the seamy side of Village life, inviting the reader to venture into the bars and coffeeshops and test her skills with the ladies. From these books, one could learn the terminology, dress codes, and etiquette necessary to negotiate the lesbian subculture. And one could even pick up a good line or two in the process (p. 90).

One woman, interviewed for the Canadian documentary *Forbidden love: The unashamed stories of lesbian lives*, recounts how she and her girlfriend, dressed in their butch and fem finest, left their home in Toronto and travelled to Greenwich Village because they had learned from the pulps that was where lesbians were. Audre Lorde describes pulp novels as “the gay-girl books we read [...] avidly” (p. 213). Dorothy Allison documents her own relationship to pulp novels

in an essay, writing "what the books did contribute was a word – the word *Lesbian*... She wasn't true ... but she was true enough, and the lust echoed" (p. 187). The books provided a confirmation for Allison: "I wasn't the only one even if none had turned up in the neighbourhood yet. Details aside, the desire matched up. She wanted women; I wanted my girlfriends. The word was Lesbian. After that, I started looking for it" (p. 187). Barbara Gittings declares that "the fiction, despite stereotypes, despite unhappiness, despite bad characters, was much more positive [than non-fiction].... Then I was so glad to find that my people existed, that there was literature about them.... There was definitely a sense of community, and of history" (quoted in Katz 1976 p. 423). If no other anecdotal evidence existed, the presence of these books today in lesbian archival collections presumes their importance to lesbian identity and community during the period of their publication.

Ann Aldrich documents some of her contacts with her readers. While Aldrich did not write novels, her "journalistic" books sold along side the pulps, targeted at the same readership.¹ In *We, too, must love* (1958), *Carol in a thousand cities*

(an anthology of writings by and about "twilight women" published in 1960), and *We two won't last* (1963) Aldrich include chapters that contain excerpts from a number of letters she received. In the last of these books, Aldrich writes:



I my book *We, too, must love*, I included a sample of my mail, to point up the dire loneliness and emotional frustration of people involved in homosexuality who have no one to turn to but someone whose name they copy from a book cover. The most stunning thing about the mail I receive is the aura of bewilderment permeating it: bewildered parents, youngsters, wives, and women who are homosexual, but not part of a homosexual group.

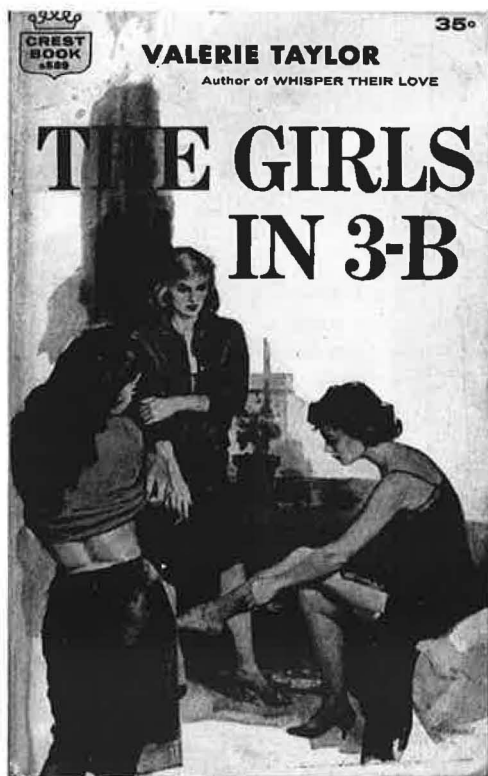
I included the sampling, too, to show the contrast between homosexuals who have made an adjustment (happy or not) within a homosexual coterie, and those who live in small towns scattered

across the United States, and are more or less adrift in a hostile and intolerant environment (*We two* p. 145-146).

One letter notes that "I learned from reading your book that I'm not the only lesbian who wears a skirt. At first I thought all the others looked like men, and I was glad to know there are some like me, feminine women" (*Carol* p. 250). Another writes, "I might have been helped if I had read one of your books, instead of the one my mother chose for me [*The well of loneliness*]" (*Carol* p. 253). One woman from Ohio, who is "at the point of suicide" and who does "not look like a woman at all" (*We, too* p. 178) writes:

No, I don't want your sympathy. I don't know exactly what I do want, but I found a copy of your book in the drug store, and it was the first time I read anything that said there were people like me. Yes, I read THE WELL OF LONELINESS [sic], but the woman in that was rich and attractive and had a family who cared about her. That would make a difference.

I suppose I just want to say thanks for writing that book. It doesn't help me but maybe it'll keep some kid from being like me if she reads it in time, or her folks do (*We, too* p. 179).



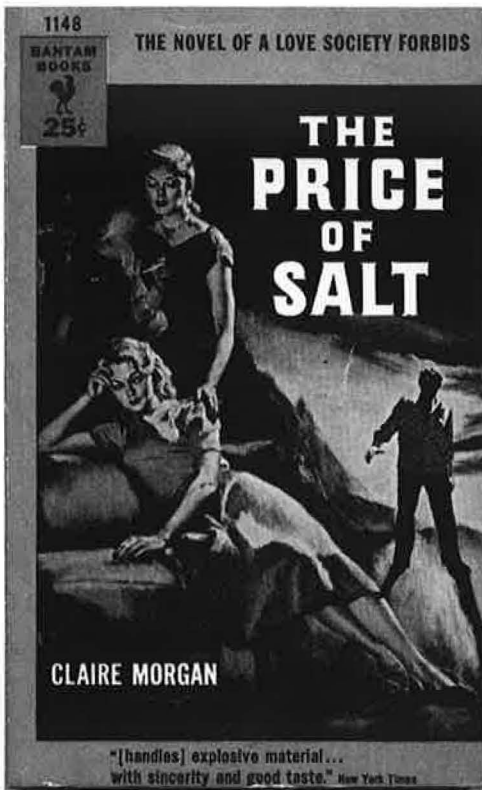
Clearly, Aldrich's books played an important enough role in many readers' lives that they took the time to write to her, even if they felt disheartened by their "condition" in life.

Some novels themselves make explicit reference to their own importance in the formation of identity and community. In Valerie Taylor's *The girls in 3-B* (1959), Barby is in search of her own identity. Ilene Gordon (shades of Stephen Gordon!), an older woman interested in Barby, leaves her a book to read. She finds "the story of a young woman who, growing up, rejected the love of men and was lost in loneliness for the years of her girlhood, only to find a kind of love she had never known

existed – the passionate unselfish love of another woman" (p. 105). Barby continues to read the book throughout the day, "like an explorer who, long drifting on an unfriendly sea, finally sights land and dares to hope he will make it to shore, after all" (p. 106). The book reveals to Barby "a new world, a world where secret hidden emotions ruled people's lives. Was it possible that she belonged in that world, too?" (p. 106). Here in a single passage, Taylor outlines the manner in which so many of these novels must have functioned for countless numbers of readers.

Ann Bannon also suggests how important these pulp novels were. In *Journey to a woman* (1960), Beth Cullison is caught in an unhappy marriage and yearning for Laura, her lover from college. Beth finds herself reading pulp novels. "On her shopping trips she picked up books – every book she could find on the subject of homosexuality and Lesbianism.... Most of them were novels with tragic endings" (p. 74). Beth writes one of the authors of these novels, a woman named Nina Spicer. Nina "knew New York; you could tell that from the books she wrote. She knew the Village, and she knew gay life both in and out of the Village" (p. 100). Nina's novels have been metaphoric guides to "gay life" for Beth; when Beth travels to New York in search of Laura, Nina becomes Beth's actual guide to gay life. " 'I want to learn my way around down here,' Beth said. 'I want to get to know the Village.' Just being in it gave her a tingle of hope, of excitement. The Village. The end of the rainbow. How she had wondered about this place" (p. 105). Beth and Nina go "around to some Lesbian bars. It was the first time in her life that Beth had ever been in such places. They recalled scenes from Nina's novels to her" (p. 106). While I don't want to confuse life with art, I must point out here how culture produces culture, and this is perhaps the most important feature of these novels. As Bannon suggests here, these novels are guides to "gay life." To the extent that printed material reflects how a culture perceives itself, lesbian pulp fiction may be said to describe the landscape in which the lesbian reads about herself and participates, vicariously, in her community.

Despite the many "bad" lesbian novels that were available at this time, like Bannon a number of lesbian writers strove to present some sense of positive lesbian identity, regardless of the "unhappy" ending that many editors demanded be tacked on to the end in order to provide "redeeming social value" (Vin Packer quoted in Faderman *Odd girls* p. 147). The most radical of these novels, because it refused to participate in preconceived notions about lesbians is Claire Morgan's *The price of salt*. First published in 1952, this novel marks a dramatic shift in the consciousness of lesbian novels. What astonishes is that the conflict in the novel moves from being that of the protagonist's lesbianism, to being the prejudices the world holds against the lesbian. Along with this, Morgan forms



the lesbian identity of her protagonists against the grain that socially and culturally marks the lesbian as perverse, deviant, and abnormal. This shift in consciousness clearly had an impressive impact on the novel's readers.

The moment in the novel that most clearly defies the view that lesbians are immature or pathological comes in a letter from Carol to Therese. Shortly after they have made love for the first time, Carol tells Therese "in the eyes of the world it's an abomination," and Therese replies "you don't believe that" (Morgan p. 189). And indeed, Carol doesn't believe that, but comes up against it and her husband's lawyers in her fight to retain visiting rights to her daughter. Carol writes to Therese:

between the pleasure of a kiss and of what a man and woman do in bed seems to me only a gradation.... I wonder do these men grade their pleasure in terms of whether their actions produce a child or not.... It is a question of pleasure after all, and what's the use of debating the pleasure of an ice cream cone versus a football game.... But their attitude was that I must be somehow demented or blind (plus a kind of regret, I thought, at the fact a fairly attractive woman is presumably unavailable to men). Someone brought "aesthetics" into the argument, I mean against me of course. I said did they really want to debate that – it brought the only laugh in the whole show (Morgan p. 246).

For Carol (and for Morgan and her readers as well) we see the question has turned from one of pathology (or even at its most innocuous, teleology) to one of preference and pleasure. Carol wishes she had made "the most important point... [that] was not thought of by anyone – that the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect, as it can never be between man and woman, and perhaps some people want this, as others want that more shifting and uncertain thing that happens between men and women" (Morgan 50

246). Within this popular genre, with this explicitly feminist rephrasing of the question, Morgan makes lesbian literary history, turning the tables on all the assumptions and prejudices that have gone before.

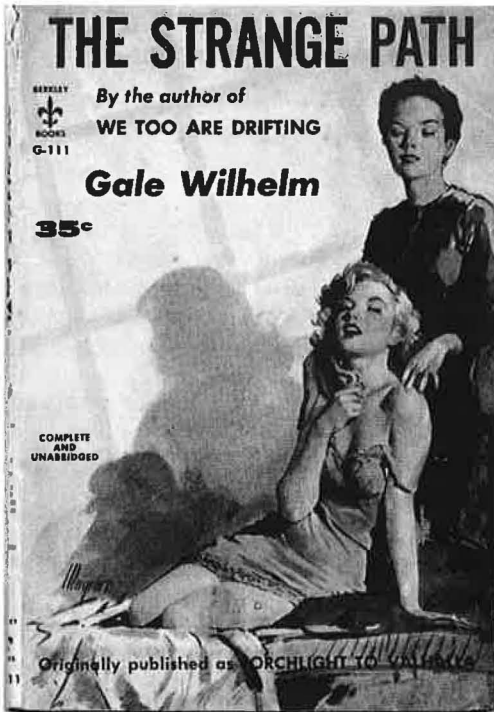
Clearly, Morgan touched a chord in her readers. She writes in the afterword to the 1983 edition:

The letters that poured in after the paperback edition in 1953 were amazing, in number and content, twelve a day sometimes and for weeks at a stretch. *Thank you* most of them said... They thanked me for writing about two people of the same sex in love who actually came out alive at the end and with a fair amount of hope for a happy future. "I live in a small town. There is nobody here like me. What do you think I should do?"
...Above all there was optimism, the smell of courage in these letters.... I answered as many as I could, put one isolated soul in touch with another similar, asked her to write the other to save my doing so, and to express my thanks for her letter (Morgan, "Afterword" p. 278).

And so Morgan's novel performed a double duty for some readers, letting them know they were not alone, and giving them someone to contact.

Valerie Taylor, too, received letters from readers. "I wanted to do a book about people who had families and jobs and allergies – whatever real human beings have" (quoted in Gershick p. 166). And readers responded. Taylor remembers that there "were lonely lesbians who thought they were the only ones, and they used to write. Those letters were very appealing. They'd say, 'I'm 45 years old, and I know I'm a lesbian, but I've never had a lover. How do you find anybody?' ... Or young girls who'd ask, 'How do I know whether I'm a lesbian or not?'" (quoted in Gershick p. 168f). What's evident from these examples is that readers believed that pulp novel writers could and did provide a point of contact for lesbian readers in search of others like themselves.

Far and away most lesbian pulp novels (of which Morgan's was certainly one) of the 1950s and early 1960s have a different version of identity and narrative possibility. Typical of the genre, in these "sexploitive" novels, the "real" lesbians are portrayed as manipulative, perverse, and evil. Their victims are generally younger women who are innocent, unable to comprehend the destructive power of the lesbian on the prowl. Ultimately, these novels have some sort of "redeeming social value": the real lesbian is killed at the end, or a rival male gets the girl; the normal balance of life is restored. Lesbians of color are virtually non-existent in these works, and where they exist they are an exoticized, super sexualized other, the "dark" seductress who makes trouble for her blond, white (and innocent) victim. In looking at the huge number of pulps published, I wish to draw some distinctions. Most of these novels I consider purely exploitive, such as those mentioned above. In addition to these, some pulps were reissues of more



”literary” lesbian novels, such as Gale Wilhelm’s *Torchlight to Valhalla* republished in 1953 under the title *The strange path*, or reissues of Radclyffe Hall’s *The well of loneliness*. Along with all the others, there were a number of pulp novels published that were generally more positive in outlook.

Despite the incredible odds, these more positive pulps represented a small number of paperback original novels that were published (among the thousands) in which lesbian characters, much like Morgan’s, could be found who rebelled against the stereotypes of perversion and social prejudice. These were particularly popular

among lesbian readers, although given that one cover was as lurid as the next, it’s difficult to imagine attempting to discern on the drugstore racks which one might be relatively ”healthy” for the lesbian ego. Paula Christian, one writer of more positive lesbian pulp novels, communicated in the pages of *The Ladder* the difficulty of publishing these novels under the watchful eye of a publisher intent on acting as a sort of moral sanitation engineer:

Through my own experience at Fawcett, it should be understood that a publisher (with the moral character of a nation in mind) cannot allow this theme to be promoted as something to be admired and desired. Nor can a publisher in the paperback field expect the general public to accept a truly sophisticated treatment where there is no justification for this ”deviation” with a great deal of why’s, wherefore’s and ”we hate ourselves but what can we do” (p. 19).

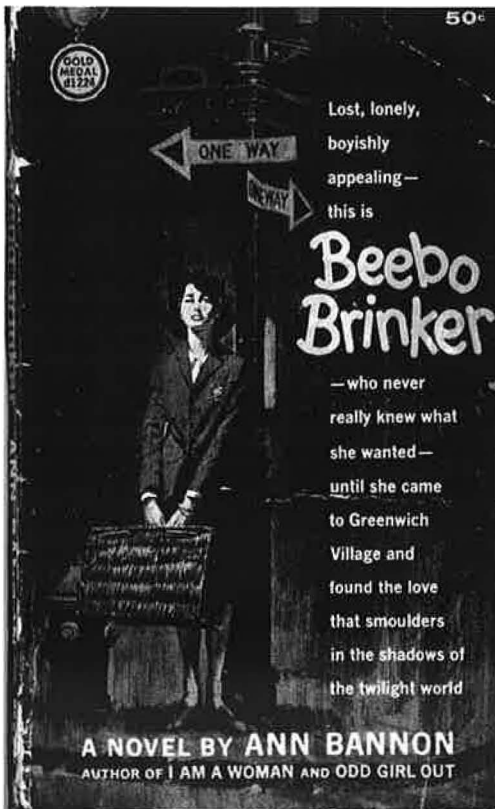
What does set the pro-lesbian novels apart is an empathetic narrative, coupled with characters who (for the most part) come to their lesbian identity through struggles that must have looked (and to some degree, still might look) familiar to many of their white and middle class readers. Perhaps most importantly, the romances that occur in these novels are often implicitly allowed to continue in the novels’ final scenes; if not, the ending is nevertheless hopeful for the prota-

gonist. (Although given the number of suicides and deaths, just being alive at the close could be considered an uplifting ending.)

Ann Bannon's novels make for an interesting study of pulp paperbacks, given that the series as a whole gives us the full panoply of characters and events that occur in most other pulps: butch and fem characters, all-female institutions, an ill-chosen marriage gone bad, bitchy seductresses, smoke- and lesbian-filled bars in Greenwich Village, a passing woman, violence, excessive drinking, a suicide, murdered dogs, twisted minds in twisted bodies. The books that comprise this series are *Odd girl out* (1957, OGO), *I am a woman* (1959, IAW), *Women in the shadows* (1959, WS), *Journey to a woman* (1960, JW), and *Beebo Brinker* (1962, BB). In all of her novels, a central concern for the protagonist is often discovering how she "fits" into a lesbian identity, or dealing with those women who have a problematic fit because they deny their homoerotic feelings. The novels offer "object lessons" in which the protagonist must successfully negotiate some aspect of lesbian life in order to maintain her sense of self as a lesbian in the world. As well, and surprisingly so, the novels all essentially end

on a "high" note in which a lesbian identity is claimed (OGO, JW) and lesbian romances are allowed to flourish (IAW, WS, JW, BB). Considering that these pulp novels were often the only link that some lesbians had to others like themselves, their existence alone could be experienced as an affirmation of identity. So much the better that some of these narratives actually came to positive conclusion.

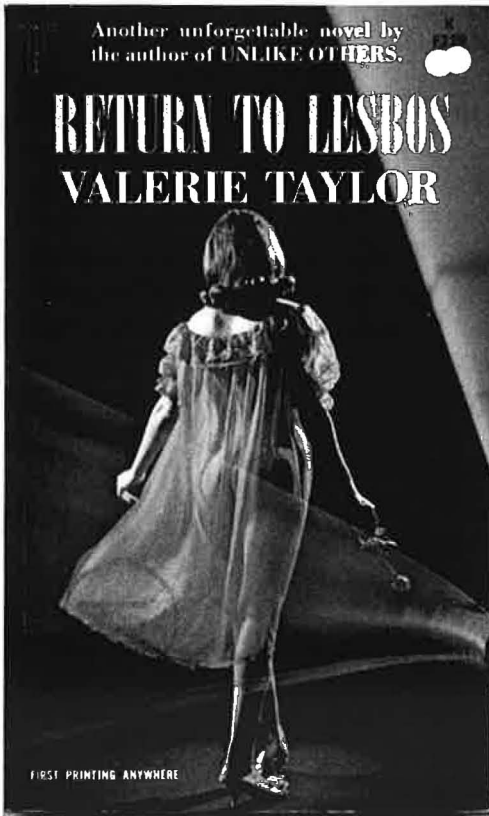
Despite what might seem to some an entirely retrograde portrayal of lesbian identity (especially in comparison to *The price of salt*), it is ironically in the portrayal and story of Beebo Brinker that the most overtly political messages can be found of all the novels in the series. The novel opens on gay Jack Mann



walking through Greenwich Village, where "a rash of raids was in progress on the homosexual bar hangouts at the moment, with cops rousting respectable beards-and-sandals off their favorite park benches; hustling old dykes, who were Village fixtures for eons, off the streets so they wouldn't offend the deodorized young middle-class wives" (BB p. 8). The Village may be a ghetto, but it is a gay ghetto, and the one place that Beebo can learn to claim her lesbian identity and live openly as a pants-wearing butch and sometimes passing woman. Despite the "sanitizing" efforts of the police, it is within a community of lesbians that lesbian identities, all kinds of them, become feasible and liveable. It is particularly Beebo's identity that needs the nourishment of the Village atmosphere to flourish. When Beebo's affair with a gorgeous movie star falls apart, it is due in part to this woman's inability to live any place other than the closet. Certainly, it is in part because as she puts it, Beebo "is one hundred per cent gay. You never doubt it ... I didn't have a body like yours that threw the truth at me whether I wanted to see it or not" (BB p. 193). Beebo must return to her place in the Village because ultimately she refuses to hide herself, and her movie star girlfriend

cannot have such an obvious lesbian around. A great part of what makes Beebo such a compelling character is that she explicitly rejects society's prejudices. No doubt Beebo Brinker, and other pulp novel characters, helped foster a nascent politicized "gay" identity.

There were, of course, pulp novels that did tend to reflect a less actively rebellious stance. Valerie Taylor's "Erika Frohmann" series is one such example. The last novel of her series presents an interesting picture of the early homophile movement. In *Return to Lesbos* (1963) frustrated housewife (and not-very-reformed lesbian) Frances Ollenfield manages to find herself in a quaint bookstore where she meets Erika. It's not



until Frances expresses interest in the store's more stimulating volumes that she starts to move her way into the world she wants.

Here were the Ann Bannon books side-by-side with Jeannette Foster's *Sex variant women in literature*, *North beach girl* and *Take me home* next to the Covici-Friede edition of *The well of loneliness*, dated 1928. Here, huddled together as though for warmth in an unfriendly world, were Gore Vidal and a tall thin volume of Baudelaire, translated by someone she had never heard of. Here were books in the field, for people with a special interest, a special orientation.... "It's not just curiosity, is it? You won't pass them around for your friends to laugh at?"

Frances said steadily, daring everything now, "If I had any friends here, They'd be interested for different reasons" (*Return* p. 45-46).

And so Frances gains entry into a new world for her, one of meetings and newsletters, " 'a group [called *Others*] for people like us. We have speakers and book reviews – like what are our legal rights? and how can we get better jobs? You don't need to be afraid, it has nothing to do with the communists' " Erika assures Frances (*Return* p. 63). And while the business of "passing resolutions and answering letters" is tedious, " 'it is nice to sit and drink coffee with people who know what you are, that's all' " (*Return* p. 63).

Organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis, Mattachine, and ONE Inc. were vital in beginning to address the very questions of jobs, insurance, joint home owning, and homosexual marriages, not to mention the overarching question of civil rights. The questions that these organizations began to ask during one of the greatest periods of repression the United States has ever seen became important foundations for the homosexual rights movement in the United States during the 1960s and beyond. But lesbians also needed to sit down and have a cup of coffee or a drink with others who knew and understood who and what they were. Clearly, this often happened over a book.

It is deeply ironic that at a time in the United States' history where social, economic, political, and cultural forces worked so strongly against homosexuals, they ended having a period of expression that has not been surpassed in its impact on life for these very people. Pulp novels themselves proved to be both agents and creators of lesbian cultures, and given their popularity, seem to have crossed class boundaries. Most importantly, they presented a picture of lesbian life. While they were often distorted, filled with information from "expert" psychoanalytic theories and medical pathologizing, they nonetheless introduced lesbians to one another, and sometimes, despite publishing pressures, allowed two women to remain together, or at least one woman to gain and hold onto pride in who she was. It is the pulp legacy of rebelliousness against the forces that move to assimilate that set the stage for the novels that came into existence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The novels of Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor,

and Claire Morgan reject a "deodorized" mainstream, bring their marginal lives to the center of their world, and create a kind of meta-community for their readers. Lesbian love, in all its passionate, sexual forms, wins over all the forces at work to suppress it: the existence of the pulps themselves offers literal evidence of this.

Notes

¹ The same author wrote some lesbian pulp novels under the name Vin Packer. Both are pseudonyms of Marijane Meaker, who also writes young adult fiction under the name M.E. Kerr.

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