

Stumbling Charleston

by Thomas A. Rhodes

The best part of Harlan Greene's novel, *Why We Never Danced the Charleston*, (\$12.95, St. Martins/Marek Press) is the title. As titles should, it entices the prospective reader to pick up and quite possibly purchase an otherwise mediocre novel. In this case, it is a plus; becoming the proverbial carrot on the stick, leading the reader into a world which leaves many questions unanswered.

The world Greene creates is a small homosexual community in the outskirts of Charleston, South Carolina during the early 1920s. Greene sees Charleston as an island in the stream of social progress. While the rest of the country is searching for new lifestyles, the residents of Charleston seem happy to maintain a social structure that disappeared from the rest of the nation after the Civil War, nearly two generations prior to the era of the novel.

Greene particularly enjoys juxtaposing the orderly world of Charleston with the Charleston, which is chaotic and unorganized, and frowned upon by the local residents. But many of the residents do want to try a new dance, but have to do it behind closed and locked doors.

Written in first person, Greene tells his tale as a reminiscence. As a young boy in a city that seems to be dominated by women (not many girls, either), the young hero needs companionship from a peer. He eventually is introduced to a boy named Ned Grimke, who seems to be quite strange at first. The description of Grimke's entrance seems to warrant concern and intrigue of the narrator. "Because of the angle of the sun, he was half in and half out of the shadows; like a magi-

cian's saw, white light sliced him diagonally." Depending on one's viewpoint, that's either rich in symbolism or merely portentous.

It leans towards the latter. Either way, Greene is desperate to let the reader know how important Grimke is to the development of the story.

For the two boys, the intrigue leads to a quick friendship. After a while, the two develop a more intimate relationship which gives the narrator "a shiver as though transported to winter." The explicit sexual encounters between the two boys (Greene never gives them ages, which makes the characters more confusing than mysterious), leads to a brief separation. They seem destined to meet again. With a line like, "... slim and lovely and blessed, his body looked like a crude medieval crucifix in the moonlight," there seems to be no question.

Green picks up the narrative as the characters become old enough to explore the local homosexual speakeasy. In fact, Greene nicely details the experience of realizing one's sexual preference as being different from just about everyone else's. Those are the better moments of the novel.

But because the story takes place in a southern town, and Greene seems to have read the same Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams plays that the rest of us have, so his story must have jealousies, betrayals and even murder.

Greene tries to hold the balance of these with his commentaries. They are aplenty, and they aren't half as interesting as the narrator's awareness of being a member of a subculture, or his confusion as to the ramifications of his sexual preference. A love triangle which formed between the narrator, Ned Grimke and a powerful man named Hirsch Hess seems to bog the novel down, and the problem is that it takes up half the book.

Late in the novel, a possible murder is very well handled by Greene, but he quickly drops the event as just another step in the life of the narrator.

Only one major (or even minor) female character can be found in Charleston. Mrs. Wragg is sort of the "Big Daddy" of a halfway home for the homosexual community. It's too bad Greene couldn't have developed more female characters. His only comment on women is rather condescending. "The ladies of the confederate home — still clung to them like bridal bouquets, eternal Miss Havershams, they were vestal virgins."

Greene's prose is similar to that of William Styron. Thankfully, Greene controls his language better. As a first novel, *Why We Never Danced the Charleston*, is not a bad effort. Greene shows a great deal of promise.

Women Who Loved Women

by Kristan Aspen

Women Who Loved Women, by Tee Corinne, is an incredible collection of images from the Lesbian Family tree. Leafing through the pages I met yet another cousin, an aunt, or grandmother I have not seen before, and some I have never even heard of. Where have these women been all my life? Natalie Clifford Barney, Lorraine Hansberry, Florence Wyle, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sylvia Beach, Qui Jin, Mercedes de Acosta, Frida Kahlo, Mary Edmonia Lewis. Here they are assembled under one cover, the famous and the not so famous, from many countries, cultures, and races, my own herstory, my

sisters, *The Women Who Loved Women*.

Surely I have known there were lesbians before me, before publication of "The Ladder." At least I assumed there were. But how close can I feel to women like Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, who is rumored to have been a lesbian? What proof do I have? Last year when I was in New York City I visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives and saw pictures of ER that have been banned from public circulation by the Roosevelt Library. They show Eleanor with her lover, Lorena, and their friends, at the beach, in the woods, camping, obviously enjoying each other as only lesbians do. These pictures made Eleanor Roosevelt real to me — to my herstory. And these pictures are not allowed out of the archive and cannot be reprinted.

Gradually, I am beginning to see how much has been denied me, even if I am "out" and accepted by my parents, and friends. As lesbians we have had no access to our past. How can we know who we are without knowledge of who we were?

An important visual link to 19th century lesbians has recently been published here in Oregon, by Tee Corinne, pioneering multimedia artist and untiring art historian. Securing copyright permission to reproduce actual photographs of all the women in this book under such an explicit title, *Women Who Loved Women*, would have been prohibitively expensive, time consuming, and absolutely impossible. So how did Tee do it? First she researched to find paintings or photos of the women who belonged in the book. Then using photocopy enlargements she altered the originals with conte, crayola, oil pastels, nail polish remover, and liquid paper, to create graphics reminiscent of wood block prints or lithographs — Tee's impressions of our dyke foremothers in an original way.

In addition to the book, 11 x 17 size poster reproductions of many of the images are available in brown tones, distributed by Pell's Womancrafts West in San Francisco.

Women Who Loved Women by Tee Corinne is available from Giovanni's Room, 345 S. 12th St., Philadelphia, PA 19107, and also, in Portland, at A Woman's Place Bookstore, 2349 S.E. Ankeny.

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