

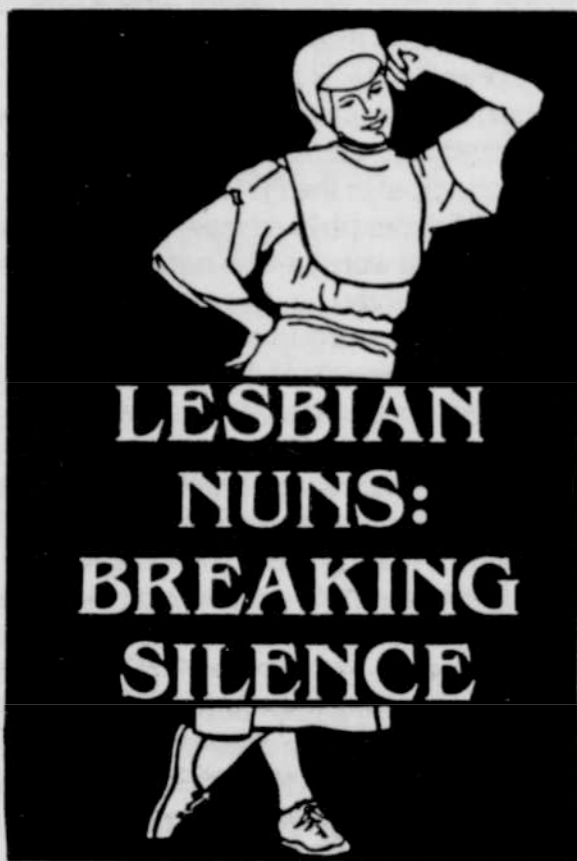
Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence

by Lynne DeMont

Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, Tallahassee, Florida, The Naiad Press, 1985, 383 pp. \$9.95.

The forty-nine stories in *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* illustrate a little-known aspect of religious life. For three years, co-editors Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan interviewed hundreds of present nuns and ex-nuns who identified themselves as open or closeted, active or celibate homosexuals.

Both editors are particularly qualified to explore the topic. Curb spent seven years as a Dominican nun before leaving the convent in 1965. Manahan joined the Maryknoll novitiate in 1966 and stayed one year. Both are professors of English.



Manahan explained that the title of the book has a double meaning. "The first," she said, "is the breaking of the historic silence about erotic love between women in religious life." The second meaning concerns the rule of silence that governed the nuns' daily lives. "We worked, studied, and ate in silence," she said. "Speaking at other times was a grave infraction of the rule."

Yet the fifty-one contributors to the book have chosen to speak out on a subject only briefly mentioned in earlier literature about cloistered life. Manahan described the few historical references to convent love as mostly heterosexual in nature. "One book entitled *Medieval English Nunneries*," she wrote, "discusses the great problem of nuns' lapses from chastity, but never hints that from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, some British nuns might have lapsed with each other."

Common themes of guilt, isolation, pain and struggle underlie the convent experience. Many nuns struggled for years to resolve their need for and enjoyment of "particular friendships" with the Catholic Church's ban on homosexuality and the convent's ban on twosomes of any kind. The Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics, December 29, 1975, states: "... homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of."

One nun, who kept a diary during her first year, wrote, "Lord, you know what's in my heart. You know how I feel about (Sister) Claire. Please keep it a 'selfless' love on my part. I do go out to others and no one else knows what's going on inside me — I don't think."

Another wrote that one of the first rules of the convent was, "They shall not touch one

another, even in jest, except when going out or returning from a journey, and then only according to custom." But with this commandment, no mention was made of what such "touching" might entail or to what end it might lead. Lesbianism or homosexuality were terms few nuns heard in the convent.

"Sometimes," the editors wrote, "it started with a sisterly backrub between novices, a charitable visit to a bed-ridden sister, or a theology discussion late into the night." When erotic feelings became overt activities in defiance of convent vows and rules, the nuns were sternly warned or even expelled from their orders.

One wrote, "We were told that sexual temptations were to be stopped immediately, since they came from perverse, fallen nature."

Others chose to be sexually active. One Dominican nun of twenty years, remaining in the convent and using a pseudonym wrote, "The fear that I experience as a Lesbian woman who is a member of a religious community is sometimes paralyzing. I know that all the pain, struggle, death and rebirth I have experienced over the years could all be swept away in a moment if my community knew of my sexual identity."

The 49 stories represent a wide cross-section of the convent community, including sisters of many different orders, ethnic groups, races, social classes and cultures. For non-Catholic readers, the glossary is very helpful. A complete bibliography adds authenticity.

Unfortunately, the editors chose not to summarize their work in a concluding chapter. The reader seems to fall off the edge of the last chapter looking for something more. A better format might have been for one editor to write an introduction and the other a conclusion, or at least some acknowledgment that this book, unusual and controversial, will become part of the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence is a book of many voices: voices of pain and guilt, voices of love and laughter, voices of struggle and survival.

One nun wrote, "Lesbian nuns I know are going to dance! In convents this book will go around like hotcakes... Lesbian sisters who are not out in their communities (and I don't know anybody who is out) will have to listen to homophobic reactions. But it will be a catalyst. All hell's going to break loose. Religious communities are going to have to discuss the book. They're going to have to respond to the reality, and they've never had to do that."

All women will have to respond to the unpleasant reality of this book's appearance in *Forum*. What was originally a scholarly attempt to explore a controversial subject has become cheapened, even trivialized, by a publisher's misjudgment. Naiad Press and Barbara Grier are exploiting the lesbian community.

Does a lesbian-feminist publishing house have any moral obligation to its readers, writers and editors? Should it exploit women the way male pornographers exploit and demean women for sale and consumption to a leering heterosexual public? Is profit the only consideration?

Naiad Press might ask itself these questions in the wake of its decision to sell limited serial rights of its controversial book *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* to the *Penthouse* publication, *Forum*.

Naiad's editor and owner Barbara Grier told Boston's *Gay Community News*, "We'll reach more women with this than ever could have been reached in a lifetime. Ten to fifteen thousand women will get on our mailing list because of this."

Grier added that *Penthouse, Ltd.* is a corporation which owns a range of publications including *OMNI*, a popular science magazine. Asked if the book's appearance in

Forum might result in sensationalism, Grier said, "I don't think so. You can't preach only to the converted. As an older lesbian-feminist, I hope somebody 18 years old is coming up behind me. I'm overjoyed with the breadth it reaches."

Less than overjoyed is co-editor of the book, Rosemary Curb. Curb told *Gay Community News* she "felt awful" about the *Forum* publication. "I wasn't consulted," she said. "I was out of the country when the decision was made. I intended the book for an audience of women. The only audience I ever imagined was a feminist audience. The idea of pieces of the book being read by men bothers me."

One of the book's contributors also expressed concern. "I thought it would be distributed within the women's community," Helen Horgan said. "I didn't expect it to go out into the world... I feel upset that (*Forum*) is owned by *Penthouse*."

Grier said that Naiad has "absolutely no contractual arrangements with the contributors."

SRO crowd hears Curb and Manahan

by Lynne H. DeMont

A standing room only crowd of approximately 400 people filled PSU's Lincoln Hall Friday, June 14, to hear ex-nuns Nancy Manahan and Rosemary Curb discuss their controversial book, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. The event opened Portland's Lesbian-Gay Pride Week activities.

Of primary concern to speakers and audience was the on-going controversy over the sale by publisher, Naiad Press, of serialized material from the book to a *Penthouse* Publication, *Forum*.

Manahan said Naiad's publisher, Barbara Grier, sold stories from the book to *Forum* for \$2,000. Excerpts from the material appeared in the June, 1985, issue of *Forum*.

Manahan described her feelings about the sale as a "horrifying, devastating experience." She added that both editors felt "we were robbed of our pride. The book was a sensitive, vulnerable look at a painful subject. The stories in it were not meant to be taken out of context."

Curb acknowledged that she and Manahan felt personally responsible for losing control of their material. "I wish we could have known the book would go 'mainstream,'" she said. "We never expected it to become a best-seller or to be read by such a diverse audience. Also, we were inexperienced at negotiating book contracts."

She described feeling both "invaded and betrayed" by the material's appearance in *Forum*.

Both women said they thought publisher Grier exercised poor judgment by not understanding what Curb called "feminist ethics."

Curb said, "Grier has a fervor to reach lesbians who wouldn't go to a woman's bookstore. Maybe she thought that selling the stories to *Forum* would reach more women. I think she made a bad decision, an insensitive decision."

She added that Grier has apologized to both editors and contributors of *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. She also said that a new contract has been negotiated between publisher and editors that gives Manahan and Curb greater control over syndication and serialization of their material.

"Now," Curb said, "we're a lot wiser."

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