

## Gay Press Row

by Lee Lynch

I'm at the Portland, Oregon stop on the Amazon Trail, penning this column about my visit May 23 and 24 to the ABA. Wondering why everything always happens at once, as I'm at the airport, waiting for my flight to the National Women's Music Festival in Indiana. But that's another column.

Moscone Center. Picture an enclosed football stadium, minus bleachers, filled with books. Filled with booth after booth of publishers large and small, filled with bookstore owners, authors, salespeople, posters, gimmicks. A veritable carnival of the intellect. The only thing one couldn't do was aim rifles at a gallery full of right wing publishers.

Then picture a row about a quarter of a mile away from the start of your walk (and it's not even the last row). Notice the people milling about look — *different*. More casual, perhaps? Friendlier? More sincere? Is that a woman giving you THE LOOK? You've wandered into Gay Press Row! There's Alyson Publications at the end, with owner Sasha Alyson, tall, well-built, boyishly handsome in light pants, shirtsleeves, with his weathered, floppy-eared stuffed dog in his arms. Two assistants help him take orders for



*The Hustler, Iris*, all their titles.

Next door, Firebrand, with Nancy K. Berreano at the helm, her lineless face always so lovely under that shock of grey hair. *Moll Cutpurse*, a lesbian picaresque novel, caught my eye, as did Pat Parker's *Jonestown and Other Madness*.

Beside her, Naiad Press, queen of them all, Donna McBride and Barbara Grier proudly selling, shooing away their famous authors to avoid a blockage of the aisles. Nancy Manahan and Rosemary Curb, looking fresh and fulfilled, but sounding, acting a little bleary

and shook-up in the midst of their promotional tour. Tee Corinne, *Yantras of Woman-love*; Katherine Forrest, just finishing up *The Emergence of Green*; myself, with *The Swashbuckler* handsomely displayed beside *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, Jeanette Foster's classic study of lesbian writing.

Everywhere I turn I'm tripping over another author. Peg Cruikshank, *New Lesbian Writing*, (Grayfox Press), Joyce Bright, reviewer and author, Jeff Black, an Alyson author, Janis Kelly, former *Off Our Backs* collective member.

Then came Knight, a gay male press rumored to pay advances and in other ways actually treat writers as if writing is our profession, not a hobby. Then Seal Press, where author Barbara Wilson is selling her latest, *Murder in the Collective*. She and other Press members Rachael, Faith and Sally are working with translations from Scandinavian countries and Japan. One of the upcoming books is a comic novel about a place where women are dominant and men wear skirts.

After passing Feminist Bookstore Newsletter, Spinsters Ink, Cleis Press, Crossing Press, the Women in Print booth, Down There Press, Kitchen Table Press, Frog in the Well Press — how gratifying to swagger past Farrar Straus & Giroux, Harper and Row, Bantam, Penguin — and have a place in it all even if I am "only" a gay writer!

To back up, on the night of our arrival we went directly to Raggs, a downtown San Francisco gay bar. This part of the festivities was sponsored by some of the lesbian and gay presses. There, I met such luminaries as Del Martin, full of the energy that's accomplished so much for lesbians. Phyllis Lyon was with her, lionesque, another early visionary. A new Naiad author and her lover, a Jungian therapist; Vivian and Pam from Pandora Books in Englewood, New Jersey; Joan Densmore and Dana Farmer from Rubyfruit Books in Tallahassee, Florida. Joan told me about the "straight" women who work for the Florida legislature. They stock up on lesbian books at her store while in town for each session!

Another story came from Donna McBride of Naiad. A lesbian ex-nun visited her local Waldenbooks and took *Lesbian Nuns* up to the counter. The salesperson said, "You don't want to buy that book. It's disgusting!" The lesbian turned to the line of customers, waved the blatant gold-lettered title before them, and asked, "Does anyone else mind me buying this book?" One can hope the salesperson felt properly foolish.

I met one of our foremost gay researchers, Eric Garber, that night. Though he's worked on many projects, his long-lived passion is for the Harlem Renaissance. The lists of gays and bisexuals he reeled off! To think, my favorite blues singer! So many others unfortunately unnameable in print because they're still living. He was the one, too, who Barbara Grier called when she needed the last link in her search for author Gale Wilhelm. Naiad reprinted Wilhelm's exquisite *We Too Are Drifting* last fall and is bringing out *Torchlight to Valhalla* this summer, but no one knew if Wilhelm was even alive. Thankfully, she's very much alive, though elderly and ill, and living with a lover on the west coast. How sad she hasn't known all these years how important she's been to so many. How grateful I am for Grier's diligence and resourcefulness.

I also spoke with Tede (pronounced Teddy) at the party. He is the drag queen in "Word Is Out," who was, as a passing friend commented, "in drag" for the party: tie and beard, narrow-lapelled jacket, white shirt, black pants. He was transformed, but still cute, twinkly-eyed. I told him how I'd patterned my first male character, Starr, after him. Starr is important to me because he is a feminist male who recognizes and expresses his female side and lives in the world in a very womanly way. I told Tede it wasn't until after I'd seen "Word Is Out" a second time, after

creating Starr, that I realized he'd been my model. Tede, who now works at Modern Times Bookstore in San Francisco and is a poet, seemed excited that he's had such an impact on the world.

Tede also told a story. This one's about his mother, who knew he was gay, but hadn't been told he was a "hooker" or drag queen. He was worried about her reaction to these revelations in "Word Is Out" until she saw it and complained instead, "But, Tede, you said I was a *strong woman*. I couldn't help it. I had to be strong to raise kids in those days!" "But, Mom," answered Tede, "that's not an insult! Some of my best friends are strong women!"

I moved on to Susie Bright, editor of *On Our Backs*, a magazine of lesbian erotica which seeks to publish a wide range of sexual tastes and experiences. Honey Lee Cottress was also there, a photographer often published in *On Our Backs* as well as other women's magazines, and the coverwoman for *The Swashbuckler*.

Kirio Spooner, founder of Womanfyre Books in Northampton, Massachusetts, has moved south to work at Womanbooks in New York City. And was at ABA with Karyn London, Womanbooks owner, who'd brought the painful news that Sonny Wainwright had died. Sonny wrote *Stage V — A Journal Through Illness*, just published last year, and had recently retired from a position as assistant principal in the NYC public school system. A former phys ed teacher, Sonny was small, tough, a woman who contributed richly to our community.

From Raggs, a group of us went over to the Sheraton for a snack. I left the group to find the women's bathroom, completely unprepared for what I'd find in there. Girls. Girls at a prom taking place at the hotel. Girls in strapless gowns, lifting their skirts, straightening their nylons, fluffing their hair, fixing their makeup, chattering — and staring at me, in my black jacket and dress pants. I fled to my table of queers.

The next night, after a day on the floor of ABA wallowing in variant books and people, the owners of lesbian and gay Century Book Club feted us at PS restaurant on Polk Street in San Francisco. Manny is tall and quiet, his partner Mark moustached and lively. I found them both highly principled, committed to positive images and optimism in gay literature. Over and over as they talked it was obvious they are, rather than a threat to gay and women's bookstores, a lifeline of gay culture. They serve more women customers than men, a fact I didn't expect since men traditionally have more money than women. But men also have greater access to gay books. Mark tells of the letter of thanks they received from a woman who lives on 73rd Street in NYC, near Womanbooks. She cannot afford, she wrote, to be seen going into a women's bookstore, much less buying lesbian books. It's *this* market and those women and men living far from our bookstores that CBC reaches. Commonly they receive checks printed Mr. and Mrs. at the top. It is Mrs. who has ordered the books.

My heart filled with hope at this story, as it did each time I looked down Gay Press Row and saw our literature, solid and undeniable, our culture wending its way into places where queers can buy it, absorb it, grow stronger for seeing our lives in print. Next year, who knows, perhaps some of those married ladies will be writing their own books, starting their own presses. Certainly, they may be finding the courage to walk into women's bookstores.

I'm closing in the air, somewhere over South Dakota, full of the excitement of thirty-six hours living and breathing gay publishing. I read this morning that the city of New York is going to paint a lavender line along the Christopher Street Parade route. It's hard to keep myself from peering out the window, searching the midwestern plains for just such a marking — from Gay Press Row back in San Francisco, all the way to New York City — along the Amazon Trail.

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