



... a lot of people share homophobia as a cultural attitude. "Gay people are just people you can be rude about."

Conversation with Jane Rule

by Julie M. Draper

Jane Rule and Donna Dietch met six years ago. Dietch approached Rule after reading *The Desert of the Heart*, showed Rule some of her films, and proposed making a movie of *The Desert of the Heart*. The two hit it off immediately, according to Rule. Several large studios had offered to buy the rights of the novel from Rule, but she had reservations. "I just wasn't willing to see them (the major studios) make the film," said Rule. After meeting Dietch, Rule trusted that Dietch would make a movie that would be in the spirit of and in sympathy with the novel. As Rule says of Dietch, "She has performed a miracle." *The Desert of the Heart*, her first novel, was

completed in 1961, three years after Rule began writing it. The novel was published in the U.S. four years later by World Publishing. This New York company was the twenty-first American publisher to consider *The Desert of the Heart*, although the novel had been published earlier in England.

Ms. Rule resides in Canada with her long-time companion, Helen Zonthoff. At the time she was gathering ideas for *The Desert of the Heart*, Rule's parents lived in Reno, and Rule visited them there while gathering material for the novel. To get a feel for her characters and the environment, Rule worked as a changer at Harold's Club, traversed the desert, and wandered in Nevada ghost towns. She is the author of *The Desert of the Heart*, *The Body Politic*, *A Hot-Eyed Moderate*, *Inland Passage*, and others.

Ms. Rule recently granted *Just Out* an exclusive interview. Here are the highlights

of it:

Just Out: How do your close family ties and relationships in general, affect your writing?

Jane Rule: My father is one of those people who thinks as a parent he should be able to teach anything to his children that they would want to know, so he tried to teach me to write a short story. He sent it off and it was rejected. I mean, he wrote the story to show me how it was done — and from then on he has left me alone in that department, for which I am grateful.

One of the things about relationships is it's not static and you have to know that relationship, like politics, is really housekeeping. If you don't clean the floor every day it gets dirty. If you don't work at being connected and understanding each other silences fall, misunderstandings build up, insecurities turn into lies. When relationships are working, whether they're between parents and children, lovers or friends, it's because people are working at them.

I knew a woman some years ago who said 'I don't work at friendship,' as if friendship was one of those voluntary things — she doesn't have any friends left.

JO: You teach writing at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B.C. You also work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a radio program evaluator. How does your writing fit in with the other work you do?

JR: I consider writing one of my jobs. For a long time I tried to work part time and write part time. To juggle six balls as so many of us try to do when we're getting started. What I did, in the middle period of my life, was try to take a full time teaching job for one or two years and not write, and then have time off when I could concentrate on writing. That, for novel writing, was a lot better.

I mostly teach. And I teach writing, so I mostly listen, and then I have long conversations with my students. And of course when people are writing — operating pretty close to what matters to them — I begin to hear patterns of concern. Teaching is a wonderful way to share insight with other people who are concerned with the same things I am.

I sell stories to the CBC. It's an important part of my information and attitude range that I listen to the CBC a lot. It's one of the ways I take the temperature of my country.

JO: The patterns of concern, could you elaborate? Is homophobia such a concern, and have you ever encountered judgmental opposition because you are a lesbian writer?

JR: Oh sure, but you know, I really don't think that there's much hostility that you experience once you are really out, because people then get polite. I listened to much more hostility when I was being circumspect when I was a young teacher. And I would have to be in rooms and listen to ugly jokes about homosexuals and not say anything about it. Once I was out, people stopped telling those

jokes.

I think a lot of people share homophobia as a cultural attitude, without really personally thinking about it very much. "Gay people are just people you can be rude about..."

People feel a great deal of pain and guilt and fear, and that can't help but internalize unless people have strong support, a real love — a strong personality structure. I think there isn't any one of us who hasn't gone through a homophobic period ourselves, fearing we have to face something people will be condemning about.

JO: You are very active, you swim daily and are a lifeguard on the island where you live. What are your feelings about gay health issues, particularly AIDS? How do we counter the attitude that disease is the wrath of God?

JR: Some insurance companies that have a deductible for accidents, if they designate it as an act of God, like an earthquake, something of that sort, then you don't have to pay the deductible, you get all your money. If that is what we mean by act of God, I think there should be not even *any* deductible for the help we give anybody who is sick.

I think this is something in our own particular minority that we need to understand better than we do, that is, that the more guilty and unself-accepting people are, the less well they seem to take care of themselves. Nobody up to this point has medical evidence that AIDS is the result of many sexual contacts. They just don't know that. All of us need to take a look at the ways we aren't good to ourselves and our bodies.

I don't have any moral problem with people who want to live hard and die young, but I hope that they are doing it with a sense of joy and intensity, not a sense of eroding a self they don't like very much.

JO: Drug abuse and unemployment are concerns in the U.S. and Canada. What do you think will remedy these problems?

JR: I don't think it's a drug problem we have. I think that we have a society that increasingly excludes its young. We set up an employment circumstance where our largest group of unemployed are young people. And that's crazy.

Canada is a much smaller country in population, and I think people here perceive problems as things that can be solved. I think a lot more people in Canada feel much more in touch with their government.

JO: You write both fiction and nonfiction. Naiad Press has published *Inland Passage*, a collection of essays you wrote. What has the response been to them so far?

JR: Normally people are reluctant to publish essays, because they don't sell. This essay book is outselling the short story collection two to one. That's in the States there. A great many of the essays are addressed to a gay audience.

JO: Have you been approached about writing another story for film or TV?

JR: Not lately, no.

Desert
Hearts
4