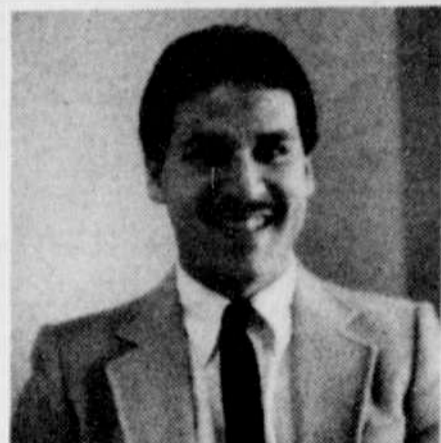


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## Norway's Gerd Brantenberg

by Pat Scott

Faded blue jeans; loose-fitting, comfortable blue sweater; slender. She looks away as she speaks, then swings piercingly your way as though to catch you napping. Not exactly cool, not warm; pragmatic. Some things are private, some personal, and this interview, if not a chore, is something to be tolerated. Oftentimes, though, she forgets this is "work" and it becomes a real dialogue — animated and amusing.

In Norway, she is recognized and respected as a political activist, a rabble-rouser, and an author. Here recently on a U.S.-Canada tour to promote publication in English of her book, *Egalia's Daughters*, Brantenberg came and went almost unnoticed by the majority of Portlanders. In the little time allotted, she shared her time, thoughts, wit and candor.

Feminism is at the heart of Gerd Brantenberg. Her eyes send you sparks when she talks of patriarchal society. "Men have the power because they have the jobs because they have the brotherhood. . . ." And women wait on them to sip some of that power. They wait, because to be without a man can be to-be-powerless. This feeding on and feeding off obviously goes against the grain of this woman.

Brantenberg is an outspoken lesbian and feminist. She was early on an organizer of the lesbian movement in Oslo, Norway, and Copenhagen, Denmark, and is the only established writer in Norway who is openly lesbian. Of her six books, the first (translated into English and soon to be published in London as *What Comes Naturally*) dealt with the "coming out" of a lesbian and the second, *Egalia's Daughters*, is a sex role satire.

Her first book was originally published in 1973, the same year as Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Both dealt with the trials and tribulations of a young lesbian. "There have been times when I didn't like my book," Brantenberg recalls, "because I thought it was too humorous and too superficial. I took the main problems of lesbian lovelife too lightly. I couldn't resist the temptation to change it a bit in the English version," she admits, "to make it a little less superficial, give more of a background story."

But Brantenberg still views her world with an amused eye; and she still feels related to Rita Mae Brown. Both had their first books come out the same year and both have been considered leading feminist lesbians in their respective countries. More importantly, Brantenberg liked Rita Mae's attitude. "The attitude she had in the book to being a lesbian, her humorous attitude, I found akin to mine," she says.



If I don't say that I am a lesbian, they infer that I'm a heterosexual. I just can't live that kind of life.

Brantenberg's second book, *Egalia's Daughters*, is very much a product of the women's movement, "particularly in Denmark where I was living at the time I wrote the book," she says. The fact of women's oppression had become more real to her, and less tolerable, so she created a "dys-Utopia" of great detail, presenting a mirror image of our society where sex role stereotypes are reversed. The "wim," (women) wear the pants in the family while the "menwim" (men) stay at home, curl their beards, and take care of the children because "after all, it's menwim that beget children."

Brantenberg's extensive knowledge of the injustices, inadequacies and rationalizations of a patriarchal system is brilliantly reflected in *Egalia's Daughters*. Some readers find the mirror-world terrible, to others it's terribly funny. "In Sweden it created a sort of laugh in a very short time," the author remembers, "a huge, spontaneous laugh throughout the country." The reality satirized in the book is still valid, sad to say; humor makes it palatable.

Brantenberg herself finds today's society anything but funny. Her eyes shoot sparks when she discusses it.

"Reality in patriarchy, especially the private reality, is so horrible. All the private domestic violence that takes place, and all the murders; all the things that can be done privately. . . ." She shakes her head and sits up a little straighter.

"I think it's that men have the power because they have the money because they have the jobs, and because they have the brotherhood. And so they go into the world, and they pick and choose cars, jobs and women. And 'cakes.' . . . Whatever they want.

And I don't think women should be included in an attitude that life is a circus where they (women) are possessions!"

Brantenberg's outspoken rejection of patriarchy has led to accusations. "I think I have an image of being a kind of monstrous man hater in some mens' ideas," she says, hastening to deny the label. "And it's *Egalia*, too, that has gained this reputation for me, for being the kind of woman who's absolutely uncompromising. And it's a very ugly image, actually, of a person. It's a kind of dehumanization of me," she feels.

Norway and Denmark are two of the most progressive countries in Europe. Perhaps because Norway's population is only four million, women often vote in a bloc, across party lines, to promote change. As of 1983, 25.8% of the Storting (parliament) and 4 of the 17 ministers were female, due in large part to a major push by women to make mandatory a 50% female representation in Parliament. (As with an arrow, you aim high, expecting to fall low.)

Perhaps it's this veneer of egalitarianism in Norway that has eased the way for Gerd Brantenberg. The fact that she is lesbian has not stood in her way. "I get a lot of support, as a matter of fact," she reports. "I get very much admiration in my home country, both from lesbians and from heterosexual writers alike. I think they respect me for what they see as my courage. For me it's just a matter of being honest," she demurs. "If I weren't to say that I was a lesbian I'd have to go about my life lying, because all the time something is implied. Heterosexuality is just implied. So if I don't say that I'm a lesbian, they infer that I'm a heterosexual. I just can't live that kind of life."

Brantenberg is an outspoken feminist and lesbian. Most especially, however, she is a writer — promoting her books as need be now, "performing" for her audiences, learning what she can about "the most talked-about nation in the world" and its people — anxious to get back to what she does best and loves most.

"The whole situation of being a writer published abroad is very contradictory," she says, "because as a writer what you really want to do is to stay at home and write. And that's the only thing you want to do! And then you're dragged out (on tour). And you learn from that, but it's not what you want to learn. And you know, this idea some people have: 'Oh, it's wonderful that you're going to America.' It's very inspiring for you as a writer to go to America. . . ." Well, it's not true. It's just something I have to do — though I know I'm going to learn from it. . . ."

The experience of coming to this country, finding out what the people are like, what feminism is like here; getting to know new people, seeing new places; this is what Brantenberg expects. "I'm not here to teach, I'm here to learn," she says.

One suspects, however, that those of us in the U.S. making the acquaintances of Gerd Brantenberg will learn a lot as well.

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