

Sisters of the Road: one of our own

by P.M. Scott

A young black prostitute is killed in Seattle; another may have seen the killer and fears for her life. Into the sticky threads of the public and private lives of these girls stumbles Pam Nilsen, with her own sexuality, intents and prejudices to sort out.

So goes the new Barbara Wilson novel, *Sisters of the Road*, a sequel to the popular *Murder in the Collective*. Wilson has summoned a rewarding array of characters and arranged a complex interplay of ideas and issues under cover of a murder mystery.

"It doesn't seem like people are talking seriously about issues now," Wilson remarks, "but they do want to be entertained. So, if you can find a way to keep people interested yet get some ideas in there . . . that's pretty important."

And Wilson has chosen the modest vehicle of a mystery, with gripping plot and characters and fast-paced action, to explore weighty issues: the nature of prostitution, women's sexuality; guilt and responsibility; the nature of trust, of compromise; lesbian sexual behavior; and relative realities.

The story began brewing because of the Green River murders. It's been noted that if the victims of those murders were white, middle class, "good" women there would be more of a hue and cry about finding the killer, and Wilson recognized that same complacency and judgmental attitude in herself. Thinking about *why* she felt that way led to her writing *Sisters of the Road*.

The book called for "a huge amount of research," the author remembers. Since important characters are teenage prostitutes, street kids, Wilson visited drop-in centers, met with social workers, activists, and prostitutes themselves. She also hung out on the streets and "a lot of really foreign places," immersing herself in her subject.

"I try to look at an issue from a lot of different sides and let real people talk about it," Wilson said during a recent phone interview. "I think about it a lot and emotionally try to come to terms with it. So when I start out I don't really know how I'm going to feel about it. I really admire feminist theorists and the women who write passionate letters to the editors proclaiming one point of view or another. And I'm always convinced by each one I read," she laughed. "But that's not my purpose."

Wilson's writings are read by mainstream audiences, but she considers herself primarily a lesbian feminist writer and her work mirrors that experience. The issues she ad-



Barbara Wilson

ses are those that interest her as a feminist; and the love interests are lesbian.

Writers of romance and love scenes these days must work hard to avoid cliches, after all, romance is one of the most over-discussed areas in any medium. Yet until recently, lesbian loving has been veiled — discreet and careful not to offend heterosexual sensibilities. It is an integral part of much of Wilson's writing, however. The honest depiction of a lesbian feminist lifestyle or belief system is a responsibility about which she is very conscious.

"It's difficult because we don't have any models," Wilson maintains. "We have to look at ourselves and try to describe what we're feeling. I think some of the writing has suffered in terms of style; it's still too new and we're still too angry. But this is a really fertile period for all of us trying to grapple with our own sexuality and with living as lesbians in the world we do."

One thing that has helped Wilson is being co-founder of the Seal Press in Seattle. Among the earliest things published by the press was one of Wilson's own books. She sees that now as having been very important: being able to validate herself, not waiting around for someone else to do it. And being self-published has allowed her a sense of safety about writing personally and about intimate issues. Seal Press is intended to allow other women an outlet for their work and that same feeling of safety.

"June Arnold was a fiction writer who started Daughters Publishing Co. She had really strong ideas about women publishing themselves and learning how to publish. She was afraid that the trend of publishing women writers would die down — and I think we're actually seeing that now — that women

would once again be left with their books out of print and no control. She was interested in the whole idea of women controlling the process. That was really inspiring to me," Wilson recalls.

Another major publishing interest of Wilson's is making the writings of women of other countries available in English. Mainstream America presses aren't interested in taking the chance of publishing those works, she says. They're interested in exporting American books. But Wilson is convinced we need the cross-ventilation of ideas, and Seal Press has embarked on a "translation series." They hope to publish four translations a year although given the obstacles, the effort involved and their other projects, that may be a little ambitious, Wilson admits.

"But it's just been going two years and [besides *Egalia's Daughters* by Norway's Gerd Brantenberg] we've published a Danish woman and an Egyptian novel. Next year we're coming out with an anthology of Japanese writers and also a murder mystery from Spain, a feminist thriller."

Wilson herself is read perhaps as much in Europe as she is in the states. For *Murder in the Collective*, approximately 9,000 copies were sold here versus 8,000 in England. In England, however, she may be better known.

"I was taken real seriously in the kinds of reviews I got for *Murder in the Collective*," Wilson remembers. "The *London Times* reviewed it and it was number two on the alternative best seller list they publish every week. So it was *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco; *Murder in the Collective* by Barbara Wilson; *In Love and Trouble* by Alice Walker."

Barbara Wilson and her book were in excellent company.

Here at home Wilson is known as an author, editor, co-founder of Seal Press, teacher. Like most of us she runs out of time — to write, to work on the press, to promote the books. There's not as much time for friends, or "delicious little Italian meals; I just kind of work a lot." Seattle has come to mean just plain work.

In Europe, however, Wilson is seen as something more. As part of her business, and one of the special pleasures in her life, she travels: Germany, England, Norway. . . . She's visited publishers from many countries. And as one of the few, the very few publishers in the U.S. interested in works by authors from other countries, Wilson is sought after and catered to. This kind of attitude is still surprising to her. One of the first of Seal Press's translations was a book from Norway, and the head editor of a Norwegian publishing house took her to lunch; Norwegian papers print articles about her.

"There's still a part of me that thinks, 'If he only knew. . . .' But they're interested in selling books and no one wants to publish Norwegian books," Wilson reports. "So when I come on the scene they're totally enthusiastic. It's real funny. I'm like the savior of Norwegian literature in Norway. And I guess that's kind of a kick. That's pretty far away from my life here in Seattle."

Wilson figures that although 9,000 copies of *Collective* were sold, it was read by at least five times that many people. As an author, it's wonderful to have that many readers. As a feminist it bothers her since loaning instead of owning may be another indicator that women are still grasping the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. And as a publisher it worries her because it represents a loss of revenue.

It's expensive to buy a book from a feminist press, Wilson admits. They don't have the mass market capabilities of, say, Doubleday. "But I don't think people know how many women they're supporting when they buy a book," she says sadly. "They're supporting women's bookstores, alternative bookstores, the presses, the people who work there, and the writer — all by plunking down the 8 or 9 dollars."

It's a problem for which there seems no solution. So Wilson will keep writing and publishing, reveling in her role as international feminist, continuing to deal with the problems and issues that confront many of us and bringing to the U.S., through the medium of the written word, the experiences of other feminists. It would seem that Wilson, too, is a sister of the road.

Barbara Wilson will be in Portland to promote her new book this month. Friday, Nov. 21, she will be at Catbird Seat for an autograph party from 3:50-5:30 pm and at A Woman's Place for another signing from 7:30-9:00. Saturday, Nov. 23, she will be at Murder by the Book (on Hawthorne) from 4-6 p.m. with a reading beginning at 5:00.

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