

The Amazon trail yields sweet rewards

"Meeting readers completes the lonely task of writing — warms, as my grandmother would have said, the cockles of my heart." Lee Lynch takes us along as she travels the trail on the west coast.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

The Amazon Trail brings me as many gifts as it leads me to. I hadn't expected to be spending December 25 under the potted pine in our rural cranny with San Francisco guest Susie Bright, editor of *On Our Backs*, and with Honey Lee Cottrell, long-time photographer and filmmaker of lesbian erotica. But there I

THE AMAZON TRAIL

was, watching the video-present Susie had made of Honey Lee's film on masturbation, *Sweet Dreams*.

Nor had I expected to while away the day watching *Fun With a Sausage*, a playful and wonderfully androgynous spoof; or watching lesbian striptease from San Francisco's Baybrick Inn. But, as I say, there I was, and two stimulating autumn months were thus aptly ended.

The gifting began at a party for my new book *Home In Your Hands*, and for *Erotic Interludes*, a short story collection in which Tee Corinne's "The Woman In Love" appears. The party was quiet, attended by local dykes lured from their own mountain lairs to share an evening of culture by the woodstove. One couple, a hairdresser and a medical professional, had managed in their isolation, to find only Rita Mae Brown's books. Till the party — where they heard names like Jane Rule for the first time and left with pockets full of lists and arms full of books. How gratifying, to hand someone a lifeline like lesbian literature.

The next weekend I traveled to another rural hub of the dykedom. I'd never seen *Musica Femina* in concert, but a grant from the Oregon Committee for the Humanities allowed Janna MacAuslan, guitarist, and Kristan Aspen, flutist, to travel locally. They've done extensive research on women composers in order to reclaim and perform works lost to silent history.

At this performance, the audience was as packed with lesbian separatists and radical fairies — both of whom abound in the area — as with members of the cultural elite of Roseburg, Oregon. In their innovative costumes, long lacy gowns for the first set, courtly and colorful suits for the last, *Musica Femina* waged its gentle revolution. Slides shown by Dr. Jane Bowers, author of *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, brought cheers of recognition from those who know who really makes women's music.

Also on tour in November was Sarah Schulman, author of *Girls, Visions and Everything* and *The Sophie Horowitz Story*. She stayed with us between appearances in Eugene and Sacramento. I'd expected her to be bright and ambitious, but not so sweetly shy. She talked of her upcoming books, one of which depicts a married lesbian. Schulman is young, but accomplished, and knows her way about the world. Forced out on her own at sixteen when she was caught with another girl, she's managed since then to earn a college degree, to travel to Europe and to hitchhike in Africa. She supports herself primarily as a waitress in a sleazy New York dive where, because employees are hard to come by, she is always assured of work between adventures.

Had she stayed another week, Sarah would probably have visited Womanshare, one of the longest-lived of the Oregon women's land settlements. Its residents wrote the classic *Country Lesbians* and have been featured in *I Know You Know*. I'd just finished a new book and wanted to celebrate, so when the invitation to a birthday party at Womanshare came, off I went. It was my first visit and I was a little concerned about being out of my league politically, but it was a party, not a forum. The guests included a pump jockey turned

management, a lot of artists, an elementary school teacher, a nurse, factory workers — in other words, a representative slice of country lesbians.

The party was held in the main building, a rough-hewn, low-beamed structure with kitchen, living room and darkroom — only the essentials. Individuals lived in smaller spaces on the land. I got comfortable when I noticed the bookcase was no more political in spots than mine — I curled up on the couch with a gay male romance by Gordon Merrick. But I was up tapping my feet with the rest of them when the elementary school teacher and her artist lover showed MTV videos. I couldn't resist "Nasty Boys," that vigorous, if tongue-in-cheek, put-down of heterosexual males.

I reached Portland the next weekend excited to see that the new *A Woman's Place Bookstore* on Broadway reflects the professionalism and savvy of a maturing women's movement. Spacious, attractively organized, well-stocked, it appears to be a magnet for the Portland community, a great portion of which tracked its muddy running shoes through that afternoon. I was signing books along with Tee Corinne and kept noticing one young woman who, unsmiling, pored ceaselessly over books near our table.

"This one!" I heard a while later, and looking up to see the same young woman holding *Toothpick House* out for my signature. She'd been shy, but now turned into a warm bubbling soul, eyes shining, eager to talk about her own career. When she left she backed out all the way, grinning, *Toothpick House* against her chest like a prize. Meeting readers completes the lonely task of writing — warms, as my grandmother would have said, the cockles of my heart.

From the damp of Portland to the palm trees and contrasting holiday lights of San Rafael. I made the marathon ten hour drive alone, after having learned that there are no cheap motels in Marin County and that I, therefore, couldn't afford to fly. But I got the best deal in town at a raffish establishment run by two men: the Panama Hotel. It consists of at least two older buildings attached by walkways and extensive latticework. The restaurant is a meandering indoor/outdoor affair. The hotel upstairs is more of the same, with rooms decorated in helter-skelter thrift store camp and always topped off by a ceiling fan.

It was a perfect refuge from the high-power, straight-world workshop I'd driven down for, taught by Sarah Lippincott, non-fiction editor of the *New Yorker Magazine*, and by Orville Schell, a staff writer. For the 600th time in my life, I found myself the only lesbian, and the only out gay, in the world. On this occasion I was trapped

in a roomful of writers who publish in such places as *Esquire*, *Mother Jones*, *Focus*, *San Francisco* and the like. I'd been accepted on the basis of two pieces, a review I'd done for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and an Amazon Trail column about The American Booksellers' Association — subtitled Gay Press Row. There was no turning back. I took a deep breath and read a piece that spoke of lesbian culture, of our isolation and our erotica. I knew nobody but the Goddess could get me through this one. In the course of the profile I mentioned that its lesbian subject had also once been married. After the instructor praised my writing, the students honed in on what was apparently the crux of the piece for them — was the subject really a lesbian? Surely she was bisexual. Or didn't she know what she was?

"Take what you can and leave the rest," whispered the Goddess with a tap on my shoulder. I did, learning in the course of the workshop that these were my peers, and that I can compete with them for space in high-paying straight publications, even, perhaps, bringing lesbian and gay culture further into the light of day. My poverty, as well as a messianic streak, tempt me. But, oh, it's the shy young woman in the bookstore, grinning backwards all the way out the door, who I want for an audience.

That shy young woman and the rural couple with their armload of books, the pioneers at Womanshare and the separatists and radical fairies, the real Sophies and Frenchies — and the clerk I happened on in a San Rafael bookshop. I was paying for something by Rilke and hadn't even considered looking for gay literature there. The young, bright-cheeked clerk somewhat timidly blurted, "You look just like the author of a book I'm reading."

I raised an eyebrow.

"As a matter of fact," she said, glancing at my check, "you even have the same last name!"

I raised the other eyebrow and asked quietly, "What's the name of the book?" I'd fallen right into the old gay habit of coy back and forth that allows us to guardedly identify one another.

"Home In Your Hands."

When I admitted to being that very author in the flesh, you would have thought the clerk had been a rocket poised for take-off. "This is great!" she shouted repeatedly, flying toward the rear to get her copy. She seemed to career off bookshelves as she went, explaining to all the other clerks who I was, whizzing back to me. "This is great!" Afterwards, she showed me the tiny gay book section she's nurturing like a garden of promises.

What can I say? The Goddess had tapped me on the shoulder once again and said, "Keep up the good work, kid. And wherever you go, don't forget it's the Amazon trail you're traveling."

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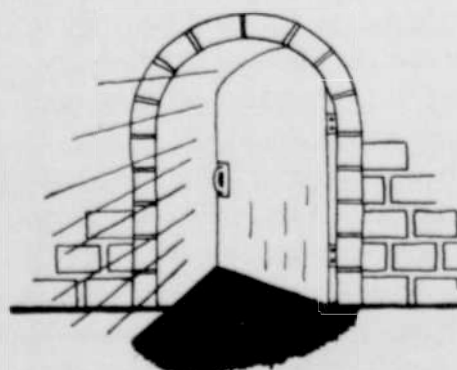
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