

Touring the Amazon Trail

*From feminist bookstores to Polk Street leather shops,
Lee Lynch savors Northern California hospitality.*

B Y L E E L Y N C H

My mini-tour began at San Francisco Airport when the Mission-Castro Super Shuttle bus arrived. It was propelled by a punky young dyke with yellow hair and emphatic dark eyebrows. She grinned and ushered me into the front seat beside her — just 'cause I was a dyke, too.

The editor of Feminist Bookstore News, Carol Seajay, a writer herself who most recently published in *A Faith of*

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One's Own (Crossing, 1986), greeted me at her Mission doorstep, along with her cat, Chia, and we got right down to business: Talking lesbian books till the wee small hours. Carol's apartment, decorated with a treasure trove of review copies of books, looks out on a warren of urban backyards, crisscrossing staircases and porches. One neighbor had dressed a tree in necklaces and such. Many of the other neighbors were feline, and the cat-caphony they raised echoed up the wall at odd hours, a city song.

The alleyway also houses a large and vocal first, second and third generation immigrant family. The second generation son was in prison for a while. On his return he rented a garage in Carol's building and began an auto repair business. Neighborhood teenage boys, who until then had amused themselves with vandalizing buildings, flocked to this unofficial training center and went to work on cars. The vandals became competent mechanics. The graffiti and other damage stopped.

When a new landlord bought the building, the mechanic couldn't afford the hiked rent. He sadly prepared to move away from his neighborhood and his

trainees. But unseen forces, in the guise of Miz Seajay, a dyke with a wise heart, whispered in the owner's ear: wouldn't it be smarter, safer, to keep the garage rent, and the vandalism repair bills, low, by letting the shop stay? The mechanic asked Carol a few days later, "Was it you who put in the good word for us?"

It wasn't long after this that a new lesbian was moving into the building, the vandal-trainees were hanging around the garage. One of them greeted the woman and her retinue of butchy moving-day helpers with groans of, "Not another damn dyke!" and the like. It didn't take long, though, for what went around, to come around.

The mechanic whispered into the trainees' ears. While the actual taunter hung behind, a couple of others, gruffly bashful, went up to the new woman. "Aw," they told her, "he was just in a bad mood. Don't listen to 'im.'" They thereupon grabbed the heaviest items and, macho, lugged them upstairs side by side with the dyke's butchy friends.

Stories. Everywhere stories. I went to read at Mama Bears in Oakland, a half-bookstore, half performance space-restaurant. Alice Malloy, intense and fascinating with her own stories of her Lower East Side New York old gay self, welcomed me and my escorts Carol and Cheryl. I had remembered Cheryl as painfully shy, but the woman I hung out with that night was charming and terribly sweet. She works with bag ladies and is said to be amazingly effective with them. Street people, so shy of the world. Cheryl, finding a way out of shyness.

Nor was she the only one. Two women in the audience that night had been at the West Coast Festival last summer. One of them, her lover had explained then, had been too shy to ask me to sign a book, so the lover had asked for her. Five months later, not only did they show up at Mama Bears to hear me read again, but the shy woman came up to me *herself* this time! I was thrilled.

Jennifer and Tiana welcomed me to Old Wives Tales the next night. The crowd was larger and just as warm. I kept having flashes of a June night in 1982, my first trip to the West Coast, when Barbara Grier spoke there. She introduced many women in the room including me, all a-twitter, the

about-to-become-a-published-author. The highlight of the evening was Barbara's introduction of a pretty middle-aged linguistics teacher in a pants suit who just happened to have written the Beebo Brinker books which I'd come out on twenty-two years earlier: Ann Bannon. How we all cheered! And here I was, four books behind me, a real live author at Old Wives Tales at last.

That same night in '82 at Artemis Cafe I'd learned that writers don't just get to think up stories in their safe, cozy lairs. Donna McBride of Naiad Press just kind of casually mentioned that real live authors did readings. I almost choked on my bagel. Read? Aloud? To rooms full of real live *people*? (Cats, maybe.) Talk about painfully shy. Talk about a sudden need to find a way out of shyness. I was physically ill for every one of my first dozen or so readings. But I love them (mostly) now.

Love them for the people I met at Clairelight Books in Santa Rosa: Enthusiastic, laughing, responsive. Claire herself is all a bookseller should be, a bright beaming beacon greeting authors and audience alike with the same fervor.

It was Ardy who whisked me away the next day, from the shopping center where Clairelight is flanked by a maternity shop and a beauty parlor, to Lioness Books in Sacramento. Ardy and I swapped old gay stories all the way there. And discovered with great excitement that she used to hang out at the same bars in LA as Benita Kirkland, author of *Death Strip* (Banned Books, 1986) — if Ms. Kirkland, who did work the LA burlesque houses, used the name Midnight.

There's one more story I want to tell from my mini-tour. One more time when I free-fell, alone in a strange city, into the arms of the gay community and found myself right at home.

While still in San Francisco I decided to replace my twenty-four year old flight jacket. I'd been to Ollie's bar in Oakland the night before to visit with Ollie and her lover, Nadine. I'd felt not a little shabby under the various battle-scars and shredding fabrics of my beloved coat. After all, how often do I get to a gay bar these days? Especially the bar which comes closest to my ideal, *Cafe Femmes*. I think it was Ollie who teased about my disintegrating jacket. I suppose until then I'd thought clothing so old and comfortable must be invisible, or have so much character it commanded admiration.

Jefferson, a character in my stories, wears a cracked and faded brown leather bomber jacket. Ever since I first imagined

the jacket, I'd wanted it. My royalty check was on its way and I always try to treat myself from royalties as a reward for working my ass off all year.

Carol Seajay took me over to the Haight where we raided the Aardvark, a used clothing store. There, displayed high on a wall, was a \$200 jacket that looked just like Jefferson's. But \$200 was too big a chunk of my anticipated check. A saleswoman, long-skirted-and-haired, high-booted and earringed (in other words, whom I'd assume was straight) sympathetically suggested I try two gay male leather stores on Polk Street. Carol had an appointment in the opposite direction, so I bumbled myself onto a couple of wrong buses and eventually got downtown to the Polk Street bus stop. There I had to face the task, without street numbers, of asking someone *where* on Polk the leather shops might be.

I sidled up to a man whom I strongly suspected would be familiar with such information. I cleared my throat, "Do you know where Wendell's Leather store is on Polk?" I asked.

His manner reassured me, but when he couldn't identify the cross street I needed I plunged on. Then I, always a lesbian, in the past a separatist, also still partly a nice-girl-from-Queens, cleared my throat again and asked, "How about, ah-hem, uh — 'Hard On Leathers'?" I *really* wanted this jacket.

Straight-faced, he promised to tell me where to disembark and we began to talk as we waited. I mentioned living near Grants Pass.

"Grants Pass!" Patrick exclaimed, fluttering with excitement. He named the small town where I live nearby.

"Who do you know *there*?" I asked, excited myself.

It turned out that his brother is our nearest gay neighbor and a good friend who'd been to dinner just a few weeks before. Patrick and I practically danced onto the bus, chattering and smiling all the way to You-Know-What Leathers. We arranged to get together again in Oregon, and parted full of the wonder of discovering once more that everyone in the gay community is related at least once to everyone else.

With a sign like my chance meeting with Patrick, of course I found Jefferson's Jacket, perfectly cracked, faded, and affordable, at Wendell's. Not only that, but to the collection of stories I'd bring back along the Amazon Trail I could add another: How I'd picked up a gay man in San Francisco!



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