

Banned Books

A firm in Austin, Texas has joined the ranks of gay/lesbian book publishers. Edward-William's first offering is Fairy Tales Your Mother Never Told You.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

The appearance of a new star on the lesbian and gay publishing horizon is an event to celebrate. Since Naiad's inception in the mid-seventies, there have been many: Alyson, Firebrand,

T H E



**AMAZON
TRAIL**

Everywoman, Knight, Seal, New Victoria, Metis — these are a few that come to mind. There are also, of course, the brave small presses like Kitchen Table and Crossing that are not exclusively gay, and the farsighted mainstreamers who are willing to touch pariahs without the popular appeal of a Rita Mae Brown.

Now, out of Austin, Texas, of all places, comes the audaciously named line of Banned Books from the Edward-William Publishing Company.* This house has a history unique among gay publishers. Benjamin Edward Eakin is the son of a thirty-year veteran reporter-turned publisher. Ben has worked in the production end of Eakin Press for several years and his father is "very supportive" of this variant chip off the old block. In the near future Edward-William (William being the middle name of Ben's five year partner-lover, Tom) will assume its own life independent of the literally parent company. To date Ben, 34, and Tom, 30, have birthed five fiction titles and are eager to do more.

The first of these titles, published in 1985, was a delightful addition to the gay literary scene. *Fairy Tales Mother Never Told You* is just that — tales of faeries like the "Wish Queen" described below.

"Just as he was ready to give up, Dan

saw a figure standing on the ridge just above him. The figure appeared to be wearing a sixties-style prom dress, spiked heels, and a tiara.

"Yoo-hoo," the figure called out."

Ben Eakins wrote the book for Tom. The two decided to use it to kick off their publishing venture because, explains Ben, "I was already nervous. Why make someone else nervous as our first author?" Their choice was successful. I'm hoping for a sequel with a touch as innocent and charming. I hope, too, that the author and the press will become familiar enough with gay and women's culture to reflect the special place witches have in our history and to locate some illustrations of women with more consciousness. The book is light, but important in every other way. What could be more natural than a gay fairy tale? What more validating for gay people as a whole than this very basic positive mythmaking?

I read *Death Strip* expecting it to reflect similar themes, ready to welcome an addition to the dearth of lesbian mystery novels. Author Benita Kirkland, a former stripper from Southern California, had a different agenda. This novel is a strange mix of psychological study, *a la* Patricia Highsmith, and lesbian history, *a la* Ann Aldrich. It creates a sordid world of women and men wrestling with and for the most part losing to evil. Flannery O'Connor, if she'd come out, might, with more skill, have written a similar story.

Kirkland writes of lesbian life as I remember it twenty-five years ago. I knew butches like the heroine Sintura, who could only feel powerful when teasing men, dropping them and treating them as if they were less than human. I recognized the quickies in the bathroom of a lesbian bar — the reason the big New York City bars had a one-at-a-time policy. I knew the drunken compulsion to be unfaithful without whitewashing theories like non-monogamy and anti-romance. I remember femmes like Gina, wanting a lasting marriage so badly they'd deny their butch's transgressions until they couldn't any more, and try to "fix" the relationship until fixing became impossible.

And I remember horrible ends to self-destructive women like Sintura. My reac-



tion to the violence in the book and to the detailed description of the villain's sexual dysfunction, to the progress of his resultant pathology, was at first a rejection of this as lesbian literature. Was Banned Books really a gay press, I asked myself? Was this a plot to plunge us back into self-hatred?

No, I decided. The writing is not skilled. This is a chunk from a woman's life and imagination. A passionate recording of her vision and experience akin to Sharon Isabel's in *Yesterday's Lessons*, without the tempering of feminism or gay liberation. To condemn the book would be to reject a reality still being lived by lesbians. To protest it would be censorship.

Much the same can be said about *A Cry In the Desert* by Jed A. Bryan, the poet-turned novelist who has written this dire AIDS novel. I have read it only in galley form and am not sure what editorial changes will be made before the publication date in late May. As it stands, the novel is a skillfully written and structured piece of fiction with the power to make those of us who haven't, look into the mouth of the AIDS beast and cry out in terror.

Not because of the disease. AIDS itself is almost secondary. The most positive side of the book is the ease with which a serum is developed. Its sinister side is the withholding of that serum from gay men.

There is a mad-scientist villain who is perhaps a little thin, a little too invincible. (One of my problems with Banned Books is its reliance, in three of the five works, on traumatic sexual experience at an early age as a motive for later behavior.) But the villain is only, as Bryan makes clear, the device by which homophobic society is able to wreak its revenge on the "liberated" gay community. The villain would be powerless without the hysterical masses, and he employs this power to create a chain of high security "hospitals"

which are, of course, concentration camps. Into these camps, and to other dire ends, go a series of well-drawn, true-to-life characters. Their fates wring the reader's heart. *A Cry In The Desert* should be mandatory reading for anyone who thinks we are liberated, gay or straight.

Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* came to mind when I read Drew Kent's *Days In The Sun*. It's another novel of good and evil, set on the West Coast, "shot" in a grainy monochromatic tone. The hero is small, weak in spirit, gentle, kind, and constantly toiling for his subsistence living. The villain is tall, handsome, amoral, cruel and lives off others. I would have expected the hero to be transformed in the course of the novel, the villain to weaken. But this is a Banned Book, full of twists and warps. Its original, if dismal, vision, is devoid of human warmth and hope, written in staccato sentences which draw the reader along with a sense of doom. Obviously, the publishers are shooting to create a fully-realized gay literature, not clone-books.

They've found a gem in Gerard Curry, a Key West writer whose work has been published in various gay magazines. His collection of short stories is called *Tangled Sheets*, and may appeal to lesbians as well as gay men. Curry is a soft-spoken caring writer who speaks of everyday life. The process of recovering from a breakup is drawn beautifully in "Sunday Music"; physical disability is treated sensitively, even tenderly, in "Glance Your Heart Away."

Ben Eakin summed up the presses' goal like this, "I'd like to think we can publish books for a gay audience that are good literature." I remember my own unpolished start, the risk Naiad took with me, with so many of us, and the way the fledgling publishers have helped the fledgling writers grow. From talking with Ben, I believe Banned Books offers the same nurturing quality to its authors, a quality essential to our young out culture.

Even in the heavens, some stars shine more brightly than others. Banned Books continues to seek out more stars of its own and is soliciting quality lesbian and gay manuscripts to that end. The press seems to publish work with a popular appeal which makes palatable documentation of external and internalized oppression as an every day experience. A noble achievement.

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