

Southern route

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B Y L E E L Y N C H

My main impressions from a quick Southern tour are vociferous songbirds and consistently lovely women. One friend reminded me that Southern women have a reputation for physical beauty, but I'd never thought that conventional good looks might transfer to our own. Secondary impression: Stately buildings surrounded by blazing azaleas, long quiet blocks of porch-fronted homes in both black and white neighborhoods,

and rooms full of laughing, applauding, culture-hungry women.

Norfolk, Virginia, is a Navy town; flat and unpretty except for the waterfront. There, a festive shopping mall is backed by older shops and fronted by a view of the most enormous ships I have ever seen. Pretty scary.

But Dr. Ellen Lewin, Director of Women's Studies at a local school, wasn't scary at all. We went to high school together twenty-six years go. I admired her

enormously. She was a fifteen year-old radical before the age of radicals. Today (after reconnecting through my books last year) she thinks she's mellowed, but obviously forgets that the field of women's studies is a tenuous cutting edge through society's misconceptions, preconceptions and preoccupation with conception — and that the teachers are the vulnerable blades.

Ellen brought me together with a small and brave group of women who have formed the Tidewater Bookshelf, a bookstore without a home which travels to its customers with lesbian and feminist titles. They dared not advertise too blatantly — many of the women involved are Naval personnel. Others are simply Southerners

less curiosity about their ongoing lives.

A New Yorker drove me down to Greensboro, North Carolina. Her non-drawl was like a breath of home. But in Greensboro I was plunged once more into musical voices: Kim, assistant manager of White Rabbit Books, which is owned by John Neil, greeted me, along with Cathy, a filmmaker who, with backing and time, may well rival Donna Deitch's achievement with *Desert Hearts*. Jody was there, too, a jewelry-maker who wends her way down from the mountains of North Carolina to spend her weekends in the gay community. Greensboro, like the other cities I visited, may not boast of its gay people, but there are four bars in the small city. Two of them have drag shows — a well-entrenched Southern tradition enjoyed by lesbians right along with gay men.

I stayed with Kathy and Karen, who are members of Lesbians Up For New Adventures (LUNA), which co-sponsored, with White Rabbit, my trip. Both women are Virgos like myself. It has been my observation that Virgos have difficulty, to say the least, in making decisions together, in out-courtesying one another, and in penetrating one another's stubbornness. Our threesome proved me right. Once the initial, and riotous, negotiations were over, I rested until it was time to travel to a Unitarian church in the woods where women overflowed the seats to hear excerpts from *Dusty's Queen of Hearts Diner* (to be released in August).

Besides the Virgos, songbirds and lesbian beauty, the other commonality I found was a scarcity of gay writers visiting the South. The women were so glad to see me in person, and seemed so stimulated by what I read, that I wonder if alliances can be made between booksellers and grassroots groups in the various cities to establish a Southern Route on the Amazon Trail. Once formed, such a network could also supplement any in place to fight censorship and obscenity laws. In Durham I declined to read erotica because a gentleman in business attire, clean-shaven, bellied, stood nearby staring blank-faced into a single book throughout most of my reading. In Greensboro, after the reading, Karen mentioned that I could have been arrested for reading a story called "Dusty Eats Out" though she assured me there'd been no police in the audience. As I write this at Chicago's O'Hare International, I'm aware of breathing a little bit easier. From those big destroyers (literally) in Norfolk, to those little words in state statutes that restrict the freedom of speech and the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness embodied in Williamsburg, I was more aware than usual of the risks a lesbian takes to write about her life.

When it was over, when my last words hung naked and vulnerable in the balmy North Carolina air, Kathy and Karen whisked me off to a "pasture party" given by a couple who own a local stable. It was a comforting sight. At least two hundred lesbians, along with a handful of gay men, talked and danced around a huge bonfire which glowed orange and bright. I watched older femmes, baby butches, dancing boys; smelled horses, burning wood; heard rock music by the pond, and the shouts and laughter of a people set free, for a few hours, to love one another in the open, before the flickering bonfire light, under the dark and — unfortunately for the revelers — not always gracious Southern sky.

T H E AMAZON T R A I L

with a healthy respect for one tradition of their homeland: eradication of queers. Not that the South is any different from any place else. It just seems to be more so. But then, my audience was more so, too — one of the most appreciative I've ever had. The attorney who'd just started practice, the Naval officers who'd enlisted for training they never got, the writer who'd heard that publishing with a lesbian press was the kiss of death. I reminded her of Isabel Miller, Judy Grahn and Rita Mae Brown.

On the way to Richmond, Ellen took me strolling through Williamsburg, a reconstruction of a colonial town. Though real people live in the real houses, tourist groups ran amok and there were few signs of real history: pigs slopping in the mud, slaves struggling to survive, fragrant outdoor plumbing. And we complain that the Soviet Union rewrites history!

Lesbians, however, are similar everywhere. Representatives from the local softball team — "Soft Touch" — were on hand to cheer my softball story. They had a story of their own: of their one-armed teammate who can catch a ball and have it back in the air again in the blink of an eye.

Helen Whiting squired me around. She was one of several military daughters I met who opted to settle in the South. I stayed with Kristen, retail manager of Ladyslipper, a national woman's music distributor and mail order company. Her large breezy home is in an impressively integrated neighborhood.

Readings at The Regulator are very Southern. I felt as if I was presiding over an at-home tea as I sat on a wrap-around cushioned bench with my visitors. One woman had driven a great distance with her three young sons and their just-weaned kittens. While the boys stayed outside looking for kitten homes, mom listened to old-dyke-takes-by-request. I was gratified by Durham's yen for my characters. More than Western or Northeastern readers, the woman of the South seem to fall in love with fictional characters and have an end-



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This month, we join our *Just Out* clients in celebrating Lesbian and Gay Pride and remind them to celebrate safely.

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