

A winner from discontent

Corinne's imagery — of ocean, earthquake, explosion — lifts the reader from those specifics, bridging intimate and outer worlds.

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex:
A Collection, by Tee Corinne (Banned Books, 1987, \$7.95).

Trying to review a book of erotica is like reading a lavish and detailed restaurant menu straight through from martinis to mousse — both too much and too little. A menu, after

Books

all, isn't meant to be devoured at one sitting, yet to do so leaves one a little hungry for the real thing.

That whetting of the appetite is one plain purpose of erotica, and Tee Corinne does so successfully in *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*. Corinne writes in the introduction that she created the stories she wanted to read: "sexy stories that encouraged me to feel good about myself." The sexuality depicted in *Dreams* is richly explicit, frank, thorough, unafraid. Is it a turn-on? Certainly. But the book achieves more in occasional passages that try to do less.

Dreams is actually a three-course meal: a narrative first section that chronicles three-and-a-half years of a highly sexual relationship; a series of 31 short poems, called "Cream"; and a final portion bearing the book's own title, a stream-of-consciousness blend of fantasy,

dreams, and an allegorical relationship between a character called Woman in Love and her lover, Desire.

Corinne explains in the introduction that her urge to depict women's sexuality grew out of discontent with existing material. The erotica she read while growing up — from *Lady Chatterly's Lover* to *Delta of Venus* — included nothing with a lesbian focus, and the lesbian erotica she discovered later existed only "in fragments and flashes."

Art was Corinne's first medium to fill the need for positive images of women loving women. A coloring book of her drawings, *Labiflowers*, was published by Naiad Press in 1981. One well-known Corinne photograph of two women making love, which became a Sinister Wisdom cover and later a poster, demonstrates her vision and insight. In the solarized photograph, the faces of the two women are not visible, but the shadow-forms of their bodies, rimmed in light, suggest a world of passion. It is an explicit photograph, remarkable for what it leaves out as well as for what it depicts.

The first section of *Dreams* could benefit from the same artful technique. Much of the thrill of erotic writing is its come-on, the delicious suspense between detailed "good parts." This section, titled "Passion is a Forest Fire Between Us," is a long, sustained "good part," and its abundance finally weighs it down.

A strength of Corinne's prose, perhaps derived from years of art and photography, is its

ability to see and describe with clarity and detail. At one point, the narrator examines her lover and notes that "her labia are shell pink, wild rose pink, small and delicate, fluted at the edges. . . . I marvel at the minute ruffles, passion's lace." While present tense and first-person narration give the prose a here-and-now urgency, Corinne's imagery — of ocean, earthquake, explosion — lifts the reader from those specifics, bridging intimate and outer worlds. And the narrative's form, broken into chapters by month, aptly parallels seasonal changes in sexual feelings and the relationship's progress. This technique doesn't feel forced; rather it captures well the state of pitched, peaceful awareness sexuality can bring — the feeling that all of nature is thrumming in rhythm to one's own.

The prose carries an unmistakable sense of daring — an awareness that Corinne is bursting decades of silence by speaking so plainly of lesbian sexuality. But such literal language, in generous doses, sometimes assaults instead of exciting, making long passages seem like a thesaurus of terms to describe female genitals. The strongest parts of "Passion" remain lines such as ". . . she seeks me with her tongue, presses me, damp to damp" — words that, like Corinne's photograph, suggest rather than specify.

If words are inadequate to convey the heat and power of sexuality, Corinne attempts to vault the limits of language by experimenting with form in the second and third sections of *Dreams*.

"Cream," subtitled "A Suite of 31 Erotic Poems," doesn't quite make the transcendent leap. As specific as the book's first section, "Cream" lacks the spare elegance, the subtle attention to rhythm, that makes poetry something more than short lines arranged on a page. Like the book's first part, these poems express

the most when they say the least. "Springtime returns daily / when you touch me / there and there" engages the reader's fantasy more than the other almost clinical phrases that leave nothing to the imagination.

If the final portion of *Dreams* is the dessert, it is a velvety and textured one, well worth the wait. Here, lyrical language, rhythm and story mesh, plunging the reader into a world of heightened sensation. The richness, beauty and depth of sexuality are suggested here in language that shimmers and rings. Corinne describes how

Desire, with her almost boy's body, claimed her with hips and loving hands, knelt between her legs, breathing in all her secret places, touching her in the twilight, in the half-light, late into the mornings, quietly in corners, on half-deserted streets.

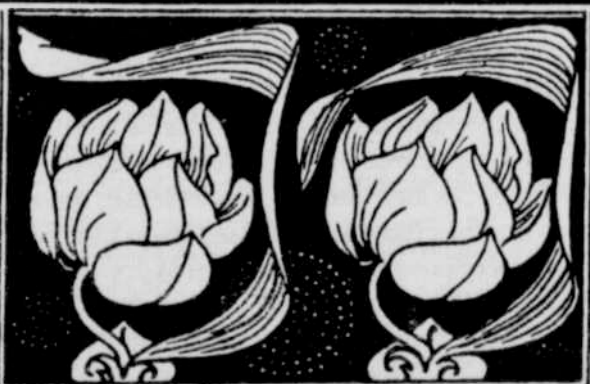
Her prose engages all the senses:

The Woman in Love walked toward the river feeling the evening full along the close-walled streets. She smelled the red bean and rice smells, the gumbo and crab, crawdaddy and shrimp. Jasmine bloomed. Somewhere a tenor sax slipped along the hot, damp, slow-moving air. . . .

In sharp contrast to the book's previous sections, Corinne here achieves meaning through simplicity and understatement. The passage closes with this spare, enigmatic description:

In Barcelona they lived in a small, cool, white room; wandered among the flower vendors until, aroused beyond propriety, they returned to their room and drank each other's bodies, breathed each other's smells. . . . When their work drew them back to America they returned, alone, together.

It is an apt ending for a book that proves, whether it wants to or not, that sexuality is larger than language — it is, finally, a bit strange, a bit elusive, a bit beyond our best powers to describe.



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