

Power of language

Words are used to draw lines between crazy and sane, men and women, doctor and patient

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

"At 5:59 in the morning, all the lights are off except for the little white vents above the floor which line the hallways. In winter...it's dark except for that glow above the floor. But at six-oh-oh all the lights explode in your face — and the Muzak, loud — you come awake in a sweat with your heart on drive. That's the most effective thing in their treatment program."

It is 1964 and 16-year-old Latisha, lesbian, prostitute, street kid, heroin addict, is tossed into Eastern Central State Hospital with the catch-all label of "incurable." *Bird-Eyes* takes place entirely in this grim setting — not just a mental ward, but the back ward, among the most hopeless patients, the most disenfranchised, the ones no one wants to save.

The hospital Madelyn Arnold describes in this, her first novel, is the hospital of strait-jackets and electro-convulsive therapy, of locked siderooms and institutionalized homophobia. Homosexuality is still classified as a mental disorder (and remained so for another decade), and male patients earn privileges faster than female ones.

The place is Illinois, the land stretches flat in all directions, and inside Eastern Central there is no season, little sense of time. Confined and regimented, Latisha's explorations are limited to the terrain of her own mind and memory. In a voice alternately acerbic and wistful, she weaves her oppressive childhood and risk-filled life on the street with the world of the hospital ward and its characters.

Particularly one character, another patient named Anna Robeson. Anna arrives on a December day. "They brought her into the middle of our ward by the hand, like a child, and left her standing in the hallway, staring around like somebody's little smart dog," Latisha recalls.

Anna is about 40, depressed because of her husband's death. She is also deaf. But her doctor refuses to let her use sign language; he believes it is primitive and damaging to her mental growth. Latisha, true to her "incurable" label, learns enough sign to communicate with Anna and, eventually, to become her friend.

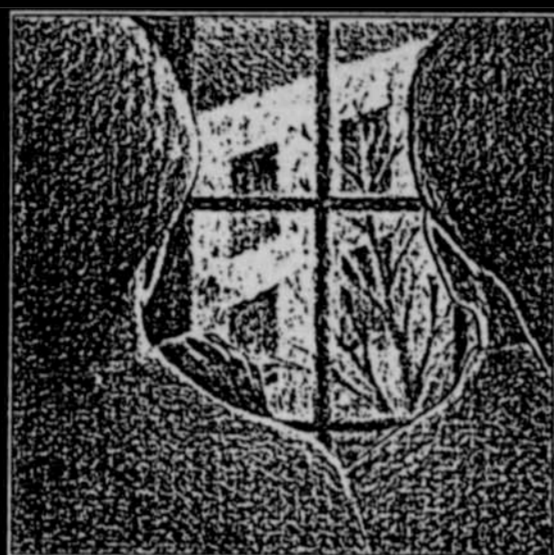
Bird-Eyes is a densely packed book, filled with arresting scenes from a mental ward that seems medieval in its concept of human survival and pain. Latisha recalls the hours before she was confined to the ward, standing handcuffed to a wire grill by a white clouded-glass window in the Juvenile Court.

"Public buildings echo and they have this funny smell, or at least, the old ones do: cleaning wax, human pee, duplicator fluid, burning coffee...I strip my denim sleeves above the elbow and I watch the cold invade me, the fish-white skin turn blue and shrink and bead with blue-and-cream until I almost cannot feel it anymore. Is that my arm?"

Some of this book's power lies in such descriptions. But equally provocative are Arnold's thoughts about the impact of language, the way words are used to draw lines between crazy and sane, men and women, doctor and patient. In the back ward, attendants, nurses and doctors reign over patients with their power to name and describe — or in Anna's case, to forbid the use of her language entirely.

Latisha, wise beyond her 16 years, thinks often about the ability of words to tell a false story as well as a true one. "Words prettify ideas, screen events for you, help you stand

BIRD-EYES



Madelyn Arnold

your life," she says. "When you have a lot of words in your head, you can pick among them to describe to yourself what you see; this helps you to protect yourself."

Perhaps because of this sensitivity about language, Arnold has chosen a stream-of-consciousness style for the book — a form that sometimes seems a faithful model of Latisha's mind and sometimes grows monotonous.

Even when engaged in painful memory, Latisha's narrative tends to be ironic, detached, and clipped. Some events are recounted in such distilled fashion, almost a sort of shorthand, that it is difficult to tell exactly what's happening. This is particularly true in the flashback scenes that are intended to flesh out Latisha's past; the style is so terse that some important information becomes almost impenetrable.

Arnold has a knack for the raw phrase, the unexpected image, and she avoids cliché in her ideas as well. The book's ending will not satisfy readers who like their conclusions ribbon-tied. But it fits this novel, which insists on using words not to mask but rather to reveal the unpretty picture, the grim struggle of a young woman to keep her mind alive in one of society's most numbing settings.

Lesbian works of Gertrude Stein

In her life, Gertrude Stein rarely hid her lesbianism. Although Alice B. Toklas sometimes traveled as her secretary, she and Alice considered themselves married and that was it.

Much of Stein's writing reflects this honesty, even though her use of wordplay and repetition mirrors the Cubist art movement of the day. Throughout her career, she based novels and short stories on her own life as well as the friends and artists she knew.

Early works such as *Q.E.D.* — meaning "to demonstrate" — detail her first relationship with a woman. *Q.E.D.* tells the story of an emotionally-charged triangle that seems impossible to unravel. Critic Edmund Wilson states that the central character of Adele is based on Stein herself.

The title was changed to *Things are They Are* when *Q.E.D.* was first published in 1950.

Stein's next novel, *Fernhurst*, is based on the well-known relationship of Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr College's president and an ardent suffragette who campaigned for women's right to an education, and her lover, English professor Mary Gwinn.

The short story "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene" is about a lesbian couple who often frequented Stein's salons at the rue de Fleurus. It is also one of the first times the word "gay" (to mean "homosexual") was used in print.

The novella *A Long Gay Book* takes the word one step further by arguing that each person has a fundamental nature that determines everything about the person, including his or her way of thinking and loving.

Many Many Women, another short novel, has a gay theme as does the short story "Mable Neathe."

Portraits and Prayers also includes Stein's poetic impressions of some gay contemporaries such as Edith Sitwell, Mabel Dodge, Virgil Thomson and Carl Van Vechten.

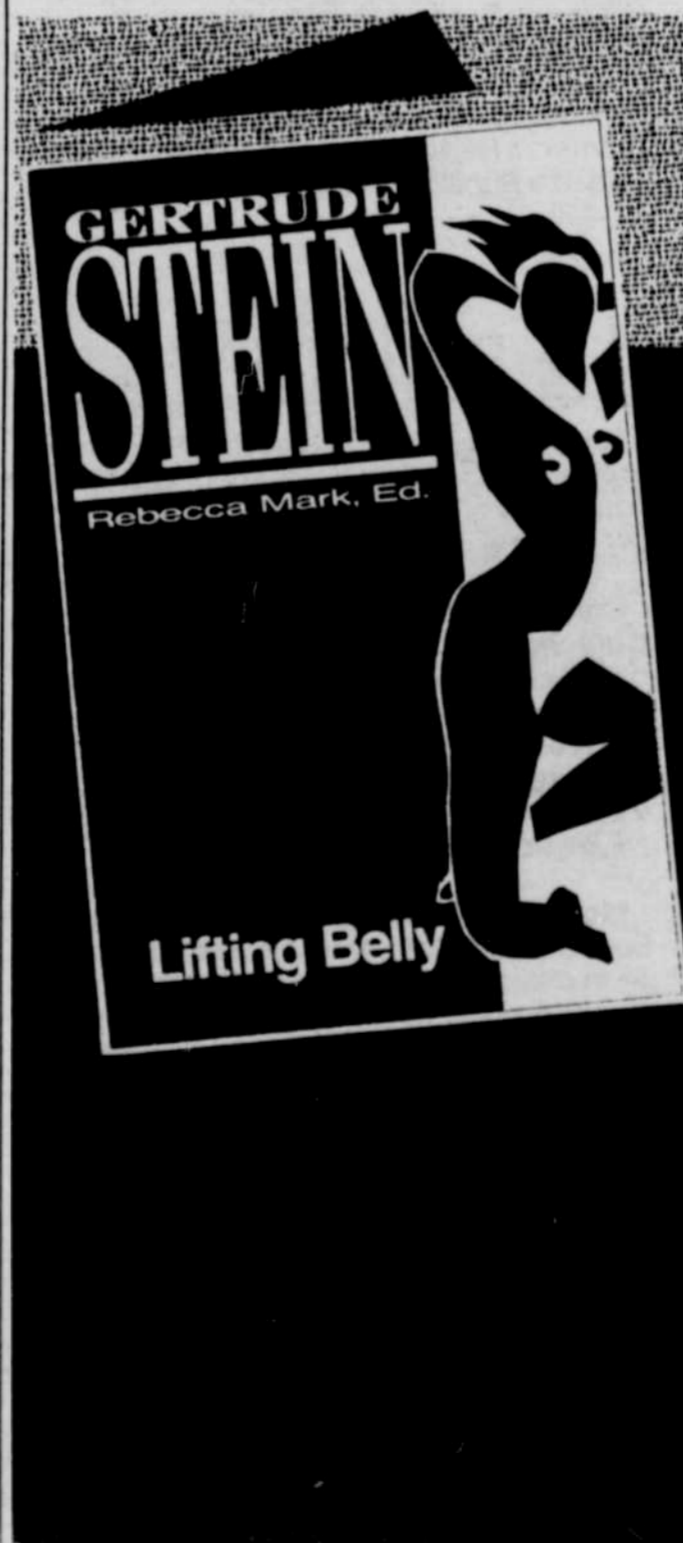
Stein's most famous work, ironically entitled *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* even though Stein wrote it, gives a fascinating portrait of Toklas' and Stein's life together in their adopted homeland of France.

Stein either deliberately disguised some work, such as her love poems to Alice — or she just had a lot of fun with them. Richard Bridgman was the first critic to decipher the language Stein used such as "cows" and "caesars" for clitoris and "lifting belly" for making love. His *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* is handy to have when reading some of Stein's more obscure work.

Today, most of Stein's writing can be found in three books: *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein; Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings* and *Matisse, Picasso and Gertrude Stein*.

The letters of Stein and Toklas to another gay author, Samuel M. Steward, also can be read in *Dear Sammy: Letters from Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*.

—Dell Richards



A gay soldier's story

Matlovich: *The Good Soldier* by Mike Hippler. Alyson Publications, 1989. 176 pp. \$8.95

Leonard Matlovich burst into public consciousness in 1975. Resplendent in his Air Force sergeant's uniform, he was the first openly gay man to appear on the cover of Time magazine. To many in the gay movement, Matlovich was the ideal hero figure, an all-American boy who showed his courage and integrity by coming out of the closet at great personal risk.

Other gays had trouble accepting this atypical newcomer. To use current jargon, Matlovich was a type "R" gay man who wound up in a movement dominated by type "Q" men. Here was an openly conservative career soldier who had seen duty in Vietnam and professed to be proud of it — an anathema to gay activists and antiwar roots.

Throughout the mid-'70s, Matlovich was involved in a complex litigation battle against the Air Force. First he lost — he was discharged under less than honorable conditions. Then he won some of it back, with a discharge upgrade and a cash settlement from the Air Force to compensate for his loss of career. By then, the public's attention had wandered elsewhere.

San Francisco journalist Mike Hippler has put together *Matlovich: The Good Soldier*, a sympathetic but not overly worshipful biography that seeks to deal with the man as well as the myth. Matlovich's early life is sketched in hastily — he was a military brat who joined the service at age 19, in 1963, and except for one brief mustering-out stayed with it for the next 12 years. He was a model soldier who — despite his hawkish background — achieved his greatest career successes as an instructor in the field of race relations.

After his celebrated coming-out, Matlovich remained a national celebrity long enough to jinx any future military career — but not long enough to capitalize on his fame in any lasting way. He was no palooka — he tried hard and meant well — but his ventures into such fields as activism, politics, restaurant management and car sales ultimately failed. Though Matlovich was frequently criticized for accepting a cash award of \$160,000 from the Air Force, that figure today seems like a trivial payment for a wrecked career.

Nor was Matlovich's personal life a success. Though he often expressed a desire for a monogamous gay life with a lover in a "home with a yard, a picket fence, and a dog," his sexual preference remained grounded in "types" — the clone and the teddy bear. His sexual encounters rarely got beyond the first time or two with any one man. He was not wildly promiscuous, but he contracted AIDS and died in 1988.

In Hippler's biography, Matlovich's accomplishments may not be admirable, but the man's courage, optimism and common sense come through. Hippler lets Matlovich tell his own story, for the most part, through a series of interviews before his death. Acquaintances such as Randy Shilts and Bruce Voeller add corroborating testimony.

There are many reasons why one should read *Matlovich: The Good Soldier*. The multiple ironies surrounding Matlovich's life make for compelling reading, and Hippler's evenhanded treatment is by far the fairest portrait available of the man.

Perhaps the most compelling reason is that the issue posed by Matlovich — whether an openly gay person deserves the same rights as non-gay — is still open. In retrospect, the quality of Leonard Matlovich's sacrifice became very nearly a martyrdom. It would be a betrayal to allow his experience to slip from our memories.

—Allen Smalling