

Lesbians: Superstars today and yesterday

BY DELL RICHARDS

Lesbians have always been the vanguard of feminist politics and crusades for social justice. But they also lead the field in many professions — from such disparate ones as tennis to poetry.

Consider contemporary superstars. Champ Martina Navratilova holds the distinction of being one of the top women tennis players today. In 1982, she set a record by winning over \$1 million in tennis that year. She has taken the Women's Single Championship at Wimbledon eight times; the US Open four times and the Australian Open three times. She also ranks as the leading doubles player.

Early in her career, world-reknown poet Adrienne Rich was chosen for the prestigious Yale Younger Poets series — one of the first women to receive this honor. She has since racked up many important awards including two Guggenheim Fellowships, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters — and an Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship, named for the famous early 20th century lesbian poet. And these are just two of the many lesbians who have broken records or new ground in their fields.

In researching my latest book, *Lesbian Lists*, I discovered that contemporary lesbians aren't the only superstars. Many lesbians — who have either been forgotten or had their lesbianism suppressed by historians — were on the cutting edge of their time. Come with me on a journey down this almost forgotten path and meet the lesbian superstars of yesteryear.

Science

Sonya Kovalevsky, b. 1850

Although she had to study privately because women were not allowed to attend college, Kovalevsky eventually became a professor at the University of Stockholm.

She is best known today for inventing the theorem of differential equations called the Cauchy-Kovalevsky theorem.

Medicine

James Miranda Barry (Miranda Stuart), c. 1795

Barry was not only the first woman to become a doctor in England but probably the first person to become a medical student in their teens. She also was one of the first Western doctors to advocate preventive medicine. Like many women of the day who wanted to practice "male" professions, Barry donned traditional male attire at an early age and passed as a man most of her life.

Exploration

Lady Hester Stanhope, b. 1776

Stanhope was the first European — man or woman — to visit many North African and Middle Eastern tribes in the early 19th century. For many years, she received a stipend from the British government for her study of unknown people and places.

Photography

Frances Benjamin Johnston, b. 1864

Johnston was one of the first — and still considered one of the finest — American photojournalists.

She photographed people at all levels of society — from coal miners and sailors to such notables as Susan B. Anthony and lesbian poet, Helen May Whitney.

Poetry

Louise Labe, c. 1524

Labe wrote more than 1,500 poems to another woman, Clemence de Bourges. Although Labe died in the mid-16th century, her sonnets still are considered the best love poems in French literature.

Education

M. Carey Thomas, b. 1857

Thomas is credited with creating the world-famous medical college at Johns Hopkins University — and insisting that women be admitted to the school. She also was first woman president of Bryn Mawr College as well as the first woman to attend the Universities of Leipzig and Zurich.

Political Activism

Susan B. Anthony, b. 1820

Most people know that Susan B. Anthony was one of the most influential women of turn-of-the-century US. Not so many know that Anthony refused to marry on principle and had romantic relationships with women most of her life. The founder of the National Women's Suffrage Association, Anthony is one of the few lesbians to have a coin minted in her honor.

Vocal Performance

Ma Rainey, b. 1886

Ma Rainey was one of the female founders of the blues as we know it today. She also is credited with originating the term "woman-loving woman" for her upfront lesbianism.

Art

Mary Edmonia Lewis, b. 1843

A lesbian of Afro-American-Indian heritage, Lewis was one of the first people of color to take the European art world by storm. Her radical lesbian politics came out in her art, which often used black and Native American women in her paintings to reflect women's struggle to be free.

Social Reform

Jane Addams, b. 1860

Along with other lesbians such as Lillian Wald, Addams helped start the settlement movement — an early form of social work which got medical and child care, shelter, education and even financial assistance to the working poor of 19th century urban ghettos. She, too, had strong "romantic friendships" with women and lived, worked and vacationed in an all-female social network.

Musical Composition

Dame Ethel Smyth, b. 1858

An ardent suffragist, Smyth was imprisoned for civil disobedience in 1911 — where she bolstered the morale of the other feminist political prisoners by composing "March of the Women." She was later made a Dame of the British Empire in recognition of her contribution to music.

Fiction

Marie Corelli, b. 1855

Called the "Queen of the Best Sellers," Corelli's wildly romantic novels outsold all other books in turn-of-the-century England. She wrote nearly 30 best sellers during her career, including her 1886 first, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, which was partly autobiographical and started her on the road to fame.

Journalism

Lorena Hickok, b. 1893

At Franklin D. Roosevelt's request, Hickok investigated the effects of the 1930s depression on family life. Her moving accounts detailed the specific effects of massive poverty not just in economic but also in emotional and psychological terms.

Many give credit to her reports — which conveyed the breadth as well as the depth of the Great Depression — for convincing FDR to implement the New Deal. The program instituted such measures as unemployment insurance, retirement, disability and death benefits. Along with the public works projects, these reforms helped bring the US out of its dire economic state.

Military Heroism

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, b. 1823

Passing as men, some 400 lesbians and non-gay women fought in the American Civil War.

Dr. Walker was one of the many lesbians who joined the Union Army to fight for her beliefs. She was eventually caught behind Confederate lines, administering to the wounded of both sides.

Although it is often stated that no women have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, Dr. Walker was accorded this recognition — one of the highest distinctions given for wartime bravery — by President Andrew Johnson in 1866.

Crime

Mary Frith, c. 16th century

Frith was a highwayman who became rich in 16th century England by leading a band of thieves who robbed aristocrats on the road. And in a remarkable show of audacity, Frith then set up a pawn shop to sell the stolen merchandise back to her prey.

The term "roaring girl," which was a euphemism for lesbian until the early 20th century, came from the tremendously successful play about Frith.

These women aren't the only lesbians whose intelligence, talent and courage contributed to modern knowledge and culture.

They are just a few of the many outstanding lesbians who were leading lights of their day.



Dame Ethyl Smith

Lesbian Lists is available at gay, lesbian and feminist bookstore nationwide and from Alyson Publications in Boston.