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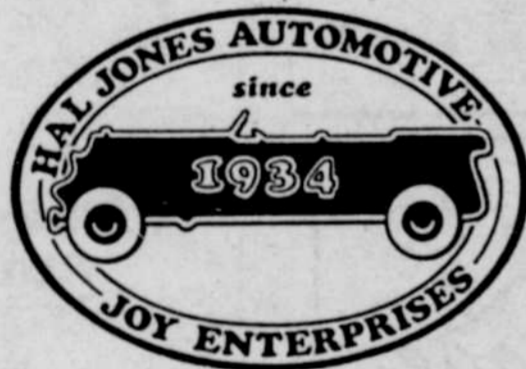


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## First OUTWRITE Conference highlights struggle and celebration of lesbian and gay writing

*The dangers of silence outweigh the risks of speech*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

For two days, they swarmed through the rooms and corridors of the Cathedral Hill Hotel in downtown San Francisco and did what writers do — talked, argued, shared notes, told stories. More than 1,000 poets, novelists, playwrights, readers, publishers and editors gathered at the first national gay and lesbian writers conference last month to examine the current boom in gay writing, its history and its prospects for the future.

That expansive topic led to a packed agenda of 29 panel discussions on subjects ranging from practical matters of contracts and agents to the political implications of revealing oneself in print.

Throughout all the sessions, some common themes surfaced: the urgency for gay and lesbian writers to tell and publish the truths of their lives, and the forces — both inside and outside the gay community — that threaten that honest speech.

In opening addresses, poets Judy Grahn and Alan Ginsberg talked about the political landscape in which gay and lesbian writers reside. While glasnost has broadened the boundaries of discourse in the Soviet Union, Ginsberg noted, censorship continues here in the United States, in actions such as Sen. Jesse Helms' attack on two federally-funded photo exhibits with homoerotic content.

When government acts to repress gay and lesbian voices, Ginsberg said, writers must respond with frankness about their lives as gay people and as human beings.

"If we base our art and writing on the accuracy of our perceptions... we will have a place to stand on earth," he said.

Some of the most moving addresses came from panelists who pointed to lines etched within the gay community — divisions of racism, class, culture and "political correctness" — that act to starve expression rather than nurture it.

Essex Hemphill, a Philadelphia poet who is black, brought the packed ballroom to a hush as he talked about the persistent racism he encounters among white gay men and lesbians.

"The gay community still operates from a one-eyed, one-color perception that recognizes blond before black and never the two together," Hemphill said, his voice cracking with tears.

The conference was sponsored by OUT/LOOK, the San Francisco-based gay and lesbian quarterly. Although its organizers aimed to recognize the community's diversity with workshops on "Revisioning Race," and "Chronic Illness, Disability and Writing," the audience was overwhelmingly white and the emphasis tended to rest on the "mainstream" world of publishing and book reviews.

Chrystos, a Native American poet, noted that a gay cab driver who brought her to the hotel had not heard of the conference and

suggested its agenda was colored with biases of race and class. Issues of writing are more than academic questions to her, she said; they are about survival. "Poetry is the weapon I use to fight for the lives of my people."

Numerous speakers stressed that, for gay and lesbian writers, complacency is both unwise and impossible. In a discussion on "AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer," novelist Sarah Schulman disputed a vision of the writer as a gifted recluse who need not traffick in the world of politics.

"Writing a book is not the same thing as taking action," she said, urging audience members to make their views known through demonstrations, letter-writing and other forms of activism.

Pat Califia, the author of *Macho Sluts*, stresses that the gay and lesbian community must not silence its own extreme voices, because any kind of censorship leaves "a gap in the discourse."

Nearly all of the panelists spoke of internal censorship, the struggle that happens in their minds and hearts as they try to tell truths about their families, their communities and themselves. Again and again, the same message came forth — that the dangers of silence outweigh the risks of speech.

Amid those risks, speakers also talked of reasons to celebrate. They cited the conference itself — the first-ever national gathering of gay and lesbian writers, which its organizers hope to make an annual event.

In addition, the current boom in gay and lesbian publishing — from small, independent presses and, increasingly, larger publishing houses — points to a broader sweep in American culture, said Michael Denny, an editor at St. Martin's Press.

The emergence of gay and lesbian writing marks "a literary manifestation of a huge social transformation," Denny told the audience. To maintain that change, he said, gay and lesbian writers must reach past their obvious audiences, "expand the literary culture to the boys in the bars and the lesbians next door."

Several panels aimed to look beyond the present flourish to both the history and the future of gay and lesbian writing. A discussion of writing before Stonewall included such pioneering authors as Ann Bannon, Samuel Steward and Del Martin; another panel looked at the prospects for the emerging field of gay and lesbian studies in colleges and universities.

The conference brought together writers from opposite coasts, old and young, in dresses and leather, and reassured them that, while they may suffer from a sense of isolation, they are not alone.

"There is no such thing as innocent gay and lesbian writing," said George Stambolian, editor of the *Men on Men* fiction anthologies. "What we write affects people's lives."

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