

National lesbian and gay writers conference a first

Proceedings were part political rally and part support group

BY ED SCHIFFER

When I told friends I was going to "OUTWRITE '90," the "First National Lesbian and Gay Writers Conference," many were surprised that it was the first. And indeed, it seemed unlikely that people so used to meeting on the sly had never before gotten together to exchange notes. But something unprecedented did happen last month in San Francisco. Gay and lesbian writing had found a way of coming of age without betraying the spirit of its formative years.

The whole notion of such a conference assumes that being gay or lesbian makes a distinct difference in our angle of vision, but it was hard to tell whether this was an idea to be discussed or an article of faith gay writers need in order to write. At the opening plenary session, each speaker was greeted with wild standing ovations that seemed suited to a pep rally on the eve of a big game.

But perhaps that was the proper spirit for proceedings that were part political rally and part support group. Keynote speakers Judy Grahn and Allen Ginsberg both sounded alarms about the enemies of gay and lesbian self-expression. Grahn seemed more than a little surprised to find herself addressing a crowd of a thousand women *and men*, and she recalled the days of lesbian separatism while acknowledging a changed political climate in which the fruits of joint action were palpable and sweet.

While the very fact of the conference suggested that gay and lesbian writing had arrived, several of the panels hinted that it was at a crossroads. As the conference progressed, the need to present a united front gave way to frank exchange. Most illuminating, perhaps, was a section on "Working in the Mainstream." While the moderator posed questions that seemed designed to provoke declarations of bad faith and concern over "selling out," the panelists resisted feeling guilty over the newfound commercial viability of gay writing. Novelist Jane DeLynn pointedly described how her experiences in the mainstream had actually been more positive than her encounters with gay and lesbian editors who had sought to censor her for unflattering portraits of the gay community.

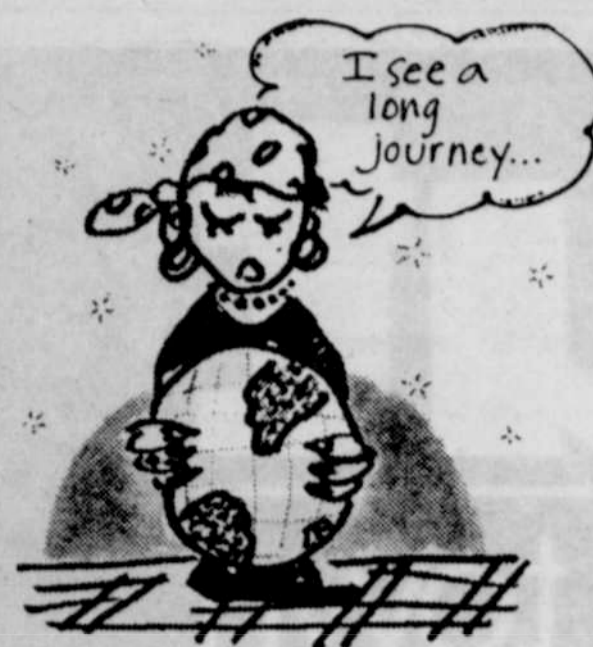
DeLynn was not the only one to show that gay and lesbian writing had evolved to a point where it could tolerate some healthy self-

criticism. During a panel on AIDS, poet Essex Hemphill broke down as he detailed the dirty secret of racism among gays. While the National Endowment for the Arts' homophobic response to the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe was a rallying point for many speakers, Hemphill dared to decry those photos as documents of the way gay white men fetishize black sexuality.

While such moments of controversy flashed throughout the conference, the dominant mood was celebratory. For two days we wandered about a vast clearinghouse of information. Several panels highlighted the work of pioneering authors and publishers, while others catered to newcomers wanting to know where and how to get their work into print. As more than one participant noted, the problem was not finding authors so much as readers. One editor joked that a third of the national readership for gay and lesbian fiction was probably right here at the conference.

The mystery of a gay and lesbian community of readers supposedly "out" there somewhere still remained at the end of "OUTWRITE '90," but the commitment to servicing it had been renewed. For two years, this has been the special project of the conference's organizer, the "national gay and lesbian quarterly" OUT/LOOK. In a panel on lesbian and gay magazines, OUT/LOOK's executive editor, Debra Chasnoff, described the delicate balancing act required to produce a journal that appeals across the incredibly wide spectrum of gay and lesbian identities in its attempt to provide "an intelligent alternative for our community." Sitting beside her on the panel were the publishers of BLK, a newspaper for black gays, On Our Backs, the lesbian erotica magazine, and Tribe, a new (but very old-fashioned) gay literary journal. If that seemed like strange bedfellows to me, perhaps I was thinking too much like those who do indeed find our choice of bedfellows strange.

Perhaps we *are* joined by more than the hatred of people like Jesse Helms. If "OUTWRITE '90" left me wondering what that something more might be, it also left me convinced that a lot of folks are out there thinking and writing about it. That does little good, of course, if people don't read what's being written. Editor David Groff left the conferees with a difficult but relevant challenge: don't sleep with anyone who owns more albums than books. ▼



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