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**Exploring the tribe**

California author Linnea Due finds that queer teens often see the larger community not as a help but as a hindrance

by Richard Shumate

As she started out on her exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teens, author Linnea Due expected to find drastic improvement from the days of her own youth, when she learned what she knew about gay life by secreting lesbian pulp fiction from the store shelves and was unceremoniously tossed from Sarah Lawrence because of her sexual identity.

After all, that was more than 25 years and a

work on queer teens was named as one of the top six underreported stories of the year by the watchdog group Media Alliance/Project Censored.

Primarily a novelist, Due admits she was at first somewhat ambivalent about this nonfiction project. She pursued it because so little has been written about gay and lesbian teens, and most of what is available is dry and academic. But after hearing the teens' stories and traveling around the country promoting the book, she has become committed to being an advocate for them. "They convinced me they need advocates," she says.

Due's chronicle contains a wide variety of life experiences: two lesbians at an elite prep school near the lesbian mecca of Northampton, Mass., the son of the founders of a homophobic religious sect in Georgia, a gay man in rural New Mexico whose contact with other gays consists mostly of the Internet, an African American lesbian suffering

**Books**

Stonewall ago. A visible gay and lesbian community exists now that didn't exist then. Melissa Etheridge is all over the radio. But, after in-depth interviews with two dozen teens for her new book, *Joining the Tribe: Growing Up Gay and Lesbian in the '90s*, Due found those expectations "completely shattered."

Gay liberation, she found, has left behind many teens, who still remain isolated and afraid, confused and abused—people who find that "Melissa Etheridge doesn't come and talk to you as an authentic human being."

"What is different is that [gay and lesbian teens today] don't grow up thinking that they are the only one. They know that somewhere out there is a community. They have some optimism, and that is positive," says Due. "But what they told me they wanted was some acknowledgment from the [adult] community that they exist. They convinced me that what they need are advocates—and that they can be their own advocates if we will just let them speak."

One of the main impediments Due found to meaningful interaction between younger and older queers was fear over the old chestnut that gay men and lesbians recruit and prey on children. Vic Edminster, a lesbian teen from Missouri featured in Due's book, found that, at 16, her attempts to reach out to women in the larger community were rebuffed.

"Nobody meant to do it. It wasn't like, 'We hate young queers,'" Edminster said.

"It was more, 'You can take care of yourself.' Now I can take care of myself, but back then I wanted to know I existed." Even at 18, Edminster, who looked much older, found that women she met would get angry when they found out how young she really was.

"The point is that the kids want help now, and they don't really care if adults want to be safe," says Due. "If we keep behaving as if we were child molesters, it's as if we're saying that argument is true, when we know that it's false."

Due also found that young people are coming out to themselves as gay or lesbian at a much younger age than people of her generation, at 11 and 12 instead of 16 or 17.

"In a sense, this makes it more difficult because it means that [kids are] stuck longer in this completely homophobic limbo, listening to [anti-gay] comments from their family and from their peers," Due said.

The genesis of *Joining the Tribe* was a series of articles Due wrote on gay and lesbian teens for *The Express*, an alternative newspaper in Berkeley, Calif., where she is an associate editor. In 1992, her



PHOTO BY PHYLIS CHRISTOPHER

extreme ostracism at a Catholic college in New Orleans. While many of the subjects she interviewed were at first reluctant to be candid, they eventually opened up and described how they are dealing with their sexual identities in sometimes painful, often humorous, detail.

"They were hungry. They really wanted to talk. They really wanted to tell their stories," says Due. "Everybody I met was sort of looking for their own family—their chosen family."

And what is it that lesbian and gay teens say they need most?

"Primarily, what they need to do is to socialize with each other. What they want from adults is whatever we can do to make that happen," says Due, who points as examples to the City Nightclub in Portland, Ore., and a theater group for teens in Seattle, Wash., funded by adult gays.

"The problems that are affecting gay and lesbian youth are solvable problems," says Due. "And that ultimately makes me optimistic."

*Joining the Tribe* by Linnea Due. Anchor Books, 1995; \$12.95 paper.