

INTERVIEW

THE FRUIT OF FRANK BROWNING'S LABOR

The author of *The Culture of Desire on his new book, the sensuality of Naples, and apples*

by Daniel Vaillancourt

The first line of the informal bio that arrives with the bound galley of Frank Browning's new book, *A Queer Geography* (out from Crown in April), states that the author "writes books in Brooklyn and grows apples in Kentucky."

Browning's double life may very well come as a surprise to the readers who made 1993's *The Culture of Desire* a bestseller. But for the author, these two alter egos—so seemingly at odds—in-

Books

habit his one body rather amicably. Farmer Frank. Bookish Browning. Quite simply, the man is both.

As for *A Queer Geography*, Browning says the book is his attempt to understand contemporary gay experience in the context of a larger American story.

"What it means to find an identity which gets called 'gay' for males in the United States is usually taken simply to be understood in terms of sexuality and sexual personalities," he says. "And what trying to understand the gay experience in those terms misses is that we are also a part of the history of this continent. This continent of people who are largely displaced people.... I think North Americans in general are very different from same-sex people elsewhere in the world. What I wanted to do was to try to find a set of stories—interior stories of my own as well as stories of other people—to try to broaden this whole conversation around gayness, to make it a little richer than the sort of easy categories, slogans and cheer-leading songs that it all too often has become."

Written in six short chapters, *A Queer Geography* explores the gay psyche, as Browning travels from the streets of Brooklyn to rural Kentucky—from France and Italy to New Guinea, Brazil and beyond.

Below, Browning speaks further about writing, apple farming, seeing the world...and how he makes it all come together.

Vaillancourt: Tell me about writing books in Brooklyn and growing apples on your family's farm in Kentucky.

Browning: Well, I've been called a geographic schizophrenic.... Writing is a way of figuring out how to integrate very disparate parts of my own life. [Kentucky] is a very beautiful place—strikingly beautiful—to me. That's pretty important in my life. And there's not a lot of Brooklyn that's very pretty. I've lived for the last 25 years in cities, and on some level I still don't think of myself as a city person. Obviously that's kind of a silly comment to make, because I've lived very effectively in cities. But they always seem a little strange to me. The thing about the farm—the thing about growing fruit—is it's tangible. You know it has value. We know that we grow an unusually good product, or set of products, that give people nourishment and give them pleasure. Apples are, in life and in myth, thoroughly about pleasure.... And the fermented things you can do with apples are also about pleasure. So is the

sense of climbing and swinging your way through apple trees. I mean, there's so many of these myths and so many of these experiences that an awful lot of people have had, or wish they had had. And I find a certain kind of connection there.

Here's a risk to take: To a degree, working in the orchard, making cider, being surrounded by the fragrance of apples, is like going to a sex club. It's not abstract. It's about a direct experience of delight, of physical pleasure, of the tactile.... How do I integrate [writing and apple farming]? I really do think that I was blessed in a certain sense with being surrounded by an agricultural enterprise that had direct, immediate tactile sensual pleasure. And I'm trying to work through both of those in ways that people who are engaged in each can understand about the other.

How and why did you choose *A Queer Geography* as the follow-up to *The Culture of Desire*?

I was actually ready to go on to a book on the origin of apples. In fact, I have a contract to do that. But [following the publication of *Culture*, Crown editor] David Groff said, "I don't think you've finished what you have to say here, and I'd like you to keep thinking about it. We'd like to have another book on it.... Then go on and do your apples book." Which is what I'm doing next.

From its title, I expected *A Queer Geography* to be similar to Neil Miller's *Out in the World*, yet it's quite different. How did you structure the book prior to writing it?

I did not have a distinct outline before I started. I knew there were some things I wanted to look at. I knew that there was some internal psychological terrain for which the metaphor of geography made

a lot of sense; ways in which I wanted to examine how I have placed my sense of sexuality inside my life, and how that shifts and continues almost to unroll as though flying over terrain and seeing the landscape unroll. And to that degree, I found myself doing what people who write short stories or novels do a lot. I said, "I don't know what I'm doing today, let's see where my mind's going to go." And it usually was a kind of journey into my own imagination, but also trying to follow that and hear it and see where intellectually it was going. That's a part of it.

I knew from conversations I'd had that I wanted to find a place in the world, a physical location, in which the terms and structures and morality, behaviors—all these things of sexuality—were performed in a radically different way than they are in the United States.

One of the most captivating chapters in the book is the one that deals with Naples, Italy. In your bio you state that in your next life you plan to live in a small villa overlooking the Bay of Naples. Why the fascination with this geography?

My father was always fascinated with the Mediterranean, and I would hear stories of when he, as a young man, had been in that part of the world. They always seemed intriguing. There was a very influential childhood book I'd read called *Red Sails to Capri*, in which I began to get a portrait of this place, which is about as remote from Kentucky as you can imagine. From that very early age, I was really just—I can't tell you why—but I was always taken by it. Perhaps because there's the sense of myth; because it's the sun; because it seemed to me, from everything I could hear, that at the most subcutaneous levels it was a place where the body was not something to be ashamed of. People seemed to relate to

the sun and the feel of the sun on the flesh, the fragrance of the soil and the fields and the vegetation, the sea, all of these things. The richness of sensuality had always had that sense.... I don't know. There are certain parts of the world that strike each of us as magical, depending on who we are and where we go. And that's one of them. I needed to try to understand that. I want to go back. There are a lot more things I want to do that don't overtly have anything to do with sexuality.

Getting back to your apples book, many authors working in gay and lesbian publishing would not follow books about queer culture and geography with one about apples.

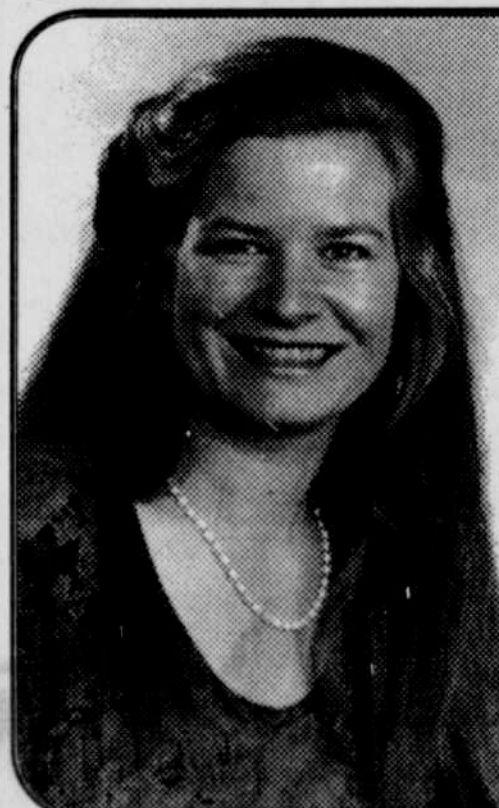
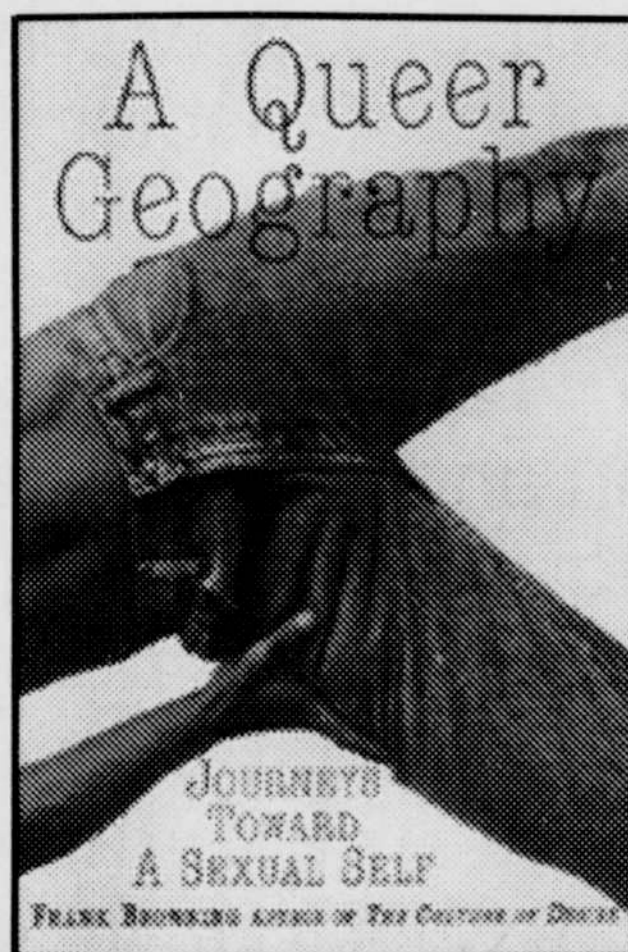
I resist mightily any of my own subconscious efforts to self-categorize me, or to let anyone else categorize me. When I first went to San Francisco, my attraction was because I thought it was an extraordinarily beautiful place that had a remarkable degree of civility. It was unlike anything I'd ever found in any other major American city. And secondly, I realized, "Oh, there are a lot of gay people here." I mean, this sounds awfully naive, but when I first moved there in 1970, I did not think of it as Homo Mecca.... I know there are all kinds of things in the world that fascinate me and upset me and drive me in contradictory directions. And I don't want to sacrifice my ability or my voice in speaking about those things, in writing about them, in exploring them. I think that the drama of human accomplishment and tragedy and exuberance is so rich that I can't imagine letting myself be constrained by it.

Also, I do live in 1996. I am a white, middle-aged, North American homo. I can't pretend I don't live in this era. I can't pretend I don't live in this class. This book about apples will be informed by my sensibilities, and by this kind of homo life that I have built. I can't pretend that this is not going to have some effect.

But obviously, the apples book will not be marketed in the same way as your two previous ones? It's not going to be a book about queer apples—it's about apples, period.

But it's mostly going to be a story about human beings. And I don't know whether there will be any queer people in it. I may be a little naive, but I hope that gay publications—at least some of them—will have an interest in that book and in why their readers might want to read it. Because my sense is that gay people are as interested in food stories as any other set of people are. The real challenge that faces gay media to me—I mean, I'm probably a big minority here—is how to take this life experience that we've found, and open it up and see its surprising dimensions. [Gay publications] don't have to simply be homo boy versions of *Martha Stewart Living*. Although *Martha Stewart Living* might very well be interested in the apple book....

A Queer Geography: Journeys Toward a Sexual Self by Frank Browning. Crown, 1996; \$24 cloth.



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