

## Help is on the way

*Just Out* introduces readers to the woman behind our new advice column, "Ms. Behavior"

BY ORIANA GREEN

Suppose two dyke pals asked your advice on this conundrum: Seems they had joked about a sexual fantasy involving letting a man watch them have sex. It also seems that one of the women was more eager than her partner and went ahead and sent out the invitation. Her more reticent partner sought help, wondering how to keep the man under control and if they should hire a lesbian bouncer to officiate. What would you advise?

This bizarre scenario was in fact a real question sent to Ms. Behavior, and one she says she "had the most fun answering." Her reply? "Yes, hire the bouncer, then hire a dog to watch the bouncer, then invite Ms. Behavior to come and watch the dog."

Though this was one of the more outrageous questions she has received, Ms. Behavior does not recoil from a challenge. More typical are questions about relationships, family interactions and other sticky issues of etiquette.

With this edition, *Just Out* begins running in each issue "Ms. Behavior," an advice column for lesbians and gay men that aims to answer your toughest questions and solve most of your dilemmas. As Ms. Behavior says in her book, *Do What I Say*, "She would like to be the salve for your pain and the balm you spread on your wounds." (Ms. Behavior also likes to speak about herself in the third person.)

Thankfully, the woman behind the column does not. Meryl Cohn is a native New Yorker, though you'd never know it speaking to her by phone.

As a former New Yorker myself, I have a keen ear for any whiff of the Apple, and Cohn is pleased that her efforts have paid off.

"Losing an accent is sort of like an exorcism," she says, ironically from New York, where she is spending a few days away from her home in Provincetown, Mass.

Actually, she spends several months a year in New York, because, she admits, "I find Provincetown in winter really desolate, and I'd get sad if I stayed there.... I need more stimulation."

A full-time writer whose work has appeared in *The Village Voice* and the *Boston Phoenix*, she started the column about nine years ago when she was writing for Boston's gay paper, *Bay Windows*. With a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in playwriting and screenwriting, she claims "both are just as useful in writing this column."

She thought about becoming a psychologist but confesses "what I really wanted was to tell people what to do and be done with it!"

Did she always want to grow up to be Dear Abby, only queer? "No, I always wanted to write an advice column, but I wanted to give more useful advice—while also being funny," she answers.

Indeed, as the column has evolved over the years, Cohn has focused more on truly helpful advice, though she's never stopped leavening her pointers with humor.

Early on she did some comedy performances in her Ms. Behavior drag getup,

but she no longer feels comfortable dressing like that, even for fun.

"People were often surprised Ms. Behavior was a real woman—some people always thought she was a gay man in drag," Cohn says. Why? "Because lesbians aren't funny."

Well, this one is. Since the only photos I've seen are of her as her alter ego, I ask what she looks like in real life.

"Well, let's see, I'm wearing a black shirt and jeans.... Hey, this is beginning to sound like phone sex," she quips.

When pressed for more details, she confesses to being about 68 percent a lipstick lesbian, "which means I have a lipstick in my pocket at all times, but I don't carry a purse."

I decide to get even more personal.... So, does an advice columnist have a fabulous, healthy, well-adjusted personal life? "No, I have as much angst as the next person," she confides, "but I do try to take my own advice."

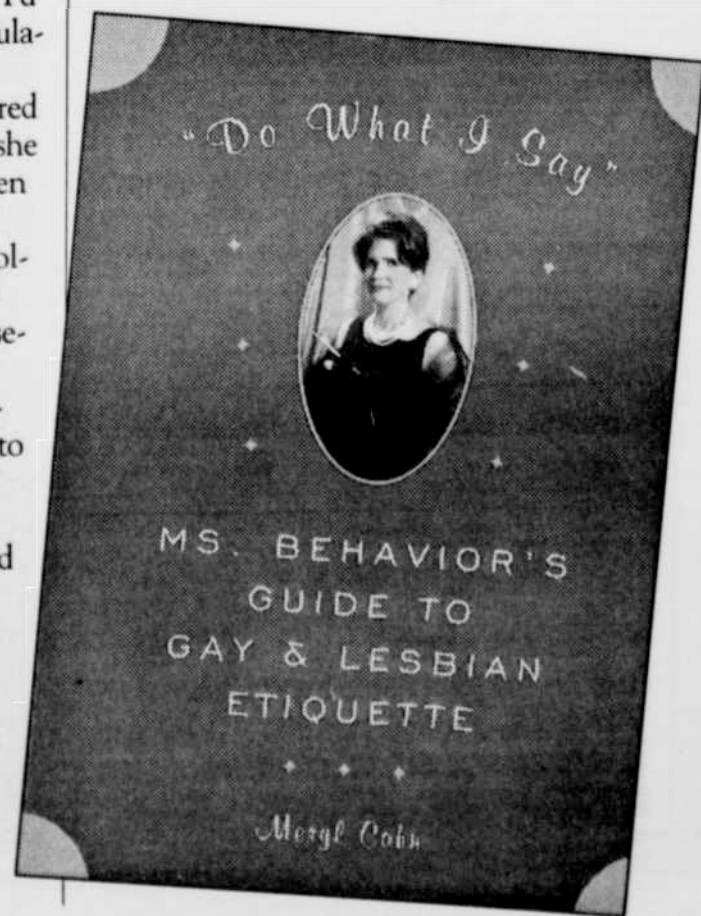
When I ask her age, she retorts: "Should I turn the clock back or tell the truth? Dan Savage and I used to be the same age, but lately I've noticed he's gotten younger." Finally, she states her age as 38, which seems way too young to start fudging.

Other projects on Cohn's desk include a collection of more serious essays she hopes to publish under her own name, a play, and a compilation of her best columns. She says she intends to continue writing her column "as long as I still have fun and I keep getting new questions."

That's where you come in. Yes, all her questions really do come from actual readers of the dozen newspapers in which her column appears. And she does read all her own mail—curiously, though, she admits to having "an imaginary assistant named Harriet who is exactly my size and tries on clothes for me."

That aside, Ms. Behavior eagerly awaits your quandaries. I promised her that we'll send some authentically peculiar, only-in-the-Northwest questions for her perusal. Don't disappoint her!

■ Send your dilemmas and desperate cries for help to [MsBehavior@aol.com](mailto:MsBehavior@aol.com).



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