

BOOKS

# Currents in the woods

Oregon author takes the plunge, on and off the page

BY LISA BRADSHAW

East of Portland in the Eagle Creek wilderness is the 52-acre We'Moon Women's Land, where a handful of women known as Mother Tongue Ink annually produces *We'Moon: Gaia Rhythms for Womyn*, an anthology of women's art and writing and an astrological calendar.

One of those women is Amy Schutzer, who left a job, security and a house in familiar Northeast Portland to move to We'Moon and concentrate on her writing. Having just published her first novel, *Undertow*, it appears the daring leap is paying off.

Originally from New Jersey, Schutzer attended Antioch College during the '70s. The curriculum demanded some practical work-study, which she decided to fulfill on the West Coast.

Fortunately for poetry and prose lovers in Oregon, nothing was available in San Francisco—"where I wanted to go"—so Schutzer struck out for the wilds of "Orygone." (Her pronunciation since has improved.)

"I was pretty naive about the whole West Coast in general, and I just loved it," Schutzer explains. "I mean, from the very first moment I got here."

She moved out permanently after earning her communications degree in 1979. Her first Portland digs were in the Lair Hill neighborhood "in a hippie household," but she eventually moved to Northeast Portland, where she worked full-time in various jobs and eventually bought a house.

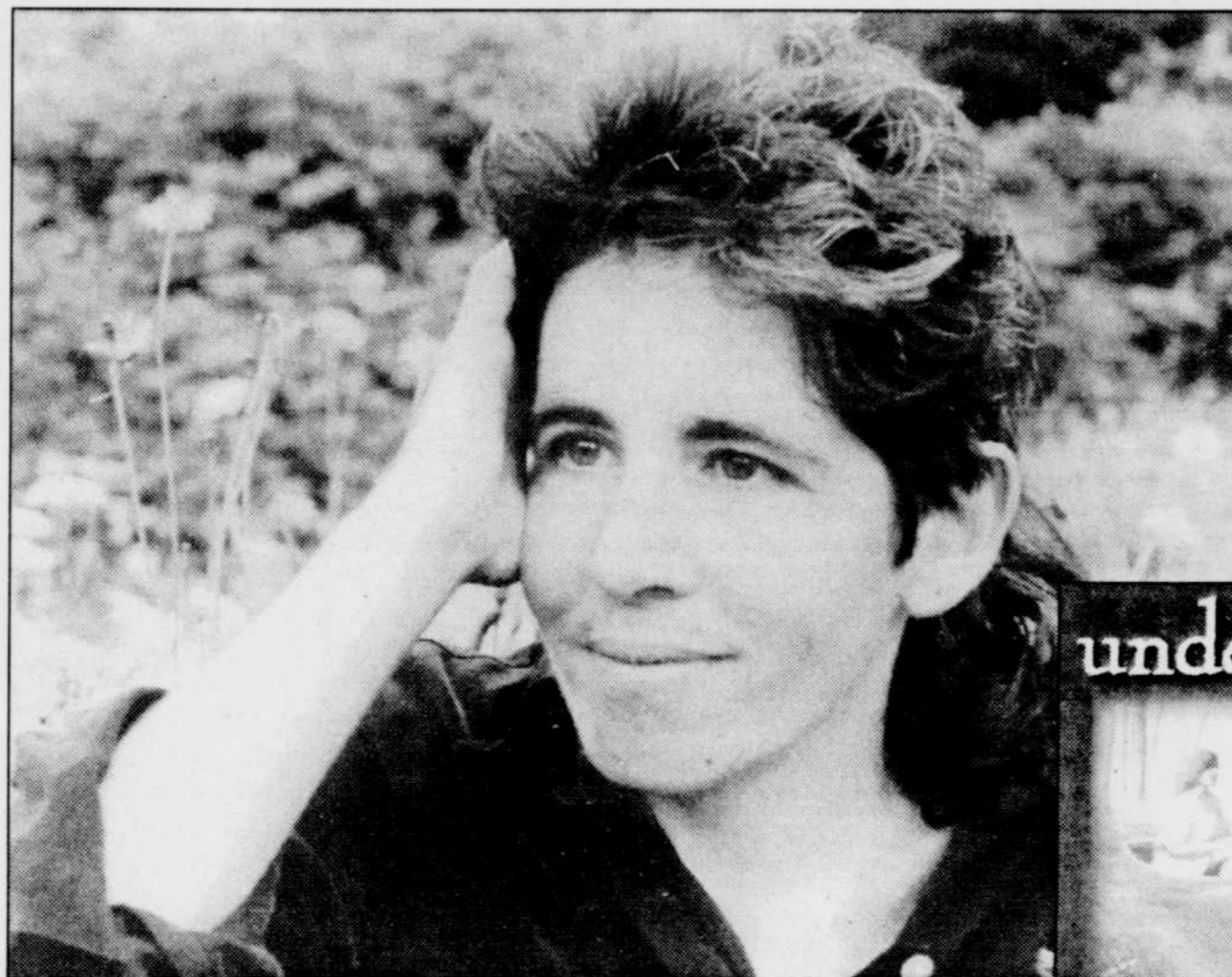
And once she moved to Oregon, her sexual orientation became clear. Because *Undertow* depicts young dykes discovering and eagerly experimenting with their desires during the early '70s, I assumed Schutzer had done the same. I looked forward to her stories about radical university women in the sexual and social revolution.

But "I was just kind of clueless," she admits. "Even though there was so much going on with the women's movement, it didn't kind of trickle down to me. I was very out of the loop."

She caught up with the loop here, though, and incorporated her sense of lesbian identity into her writing.

"It broadened my view and opened up new avenues," Schutzer observes. "Politically, it opened my eyes a bit to not just always feeling like some sort of an outsider. It gave me voice. What is that feeling about—I could put some names to that: I'm a lesbian, I've always felt that way."

Schutzer's poetry has been published in a variety of local and national publications, including *Fireweed*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Northwest Magazine* and the *Portland Review*. Most recently, one of her poems appeared in the *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*.



Poetry is Schutzer's first love, but a few years ago she felt the need to expand into a longer genre. Finding the time and confidence in her work to commit to being a literary artist was daunting.

"Taking myself seriously as a writer is a long process," she says. "I'm sure there are some people who come to it really naturally, but that wasn't me."

Schutzer credits much of that forward journey to Portland writer Judith Barrington, who she calls "a phenomenal teacher and mentor." Schutzer continues to meet with the group Barrington organized 18 years ago, the 29th Street Writers. "I gained a lot of confidence as a writer being in the group she led."

In 1997, Schutzer received a \$10,000 writing grant from the ASTRAEA National Lesbian Action Foundation, which helped solidify her plans. She packed up, sold her house, ended her seven-year tenure at Nature's Northwest and moved to We'Moon.

Surrounded by woods and a garden, her two-room house looks like something out of a fairy tale. She and her visitors employ a built-in wooden ladder to reach the combination loft bedroom and workspace.

Now, Schutzer works for We'Moon, the calendar, and also on maintaining We'Moon, the land. More importantly, she's found the time to be a writer.

*Undertow* is the story of an emergency room nurse, Macy, who takes care of another 40-something woman, Doty, after a serious accident. Macy is obsessed with discovering how the body heals itself after being wrenched apart, as she explains early in the book:

"What I wanted to know was when we break or lose parts of ourselves, how do we get them back? Do we? And in what new arrangements? ...I wanted to get inside that place where the body doesn't remember what it had been and the mind can't tell anyone what it had become. Would that place be a whirlpool of loss and confusion or the calmest seat in the universe? I was sure Doty would tell me."

These words serve as a metaphor for the book's ultimate theme: questioning how people heal themselves internally from past abuse and trauma. Macy's preoccupation with the physical self frames the characters' struggles to

rebuild their lives from the emotional wreckage of their youth.

"We do lose parts of ourselves," Schutzer maintains. "Whatever our traumas were, whatever our challenges were as children, we have to deal with those—incorporate it into our lives—to become the adults that we are."

Schutzer is interested in both physical and emotional healing differences in individuals. "You would think that if you gave people the same set of stimuli, they would react the same way, but they don't...that's the mystery of each person."

She incorporates mystery into her main characters in the form of a shared past experience neither knows the other had. The author holds off revealing how this will affect the couple until the final page, which creates a rather successful tension. Schutzer also generally avoids a clichéd or completely predictable ending, instead concluding the revelation in a

hopeful, but believable, way.

Although *Undertow* suggests the pair are brought together by (dare I say it) fate, it avoids melodrama. And Schutzer makes no apologies in any case, remarking: "I hear all the time of strange coincidences. I think you can call that fate...it's just these currents that feed you into these situations."

*Undertow* is commendable for a first novel. Although the dialogue tends to feel forced or a bit stilted at times, there are moments of complete beauty: "When I woke again," Doty says at the beginning,

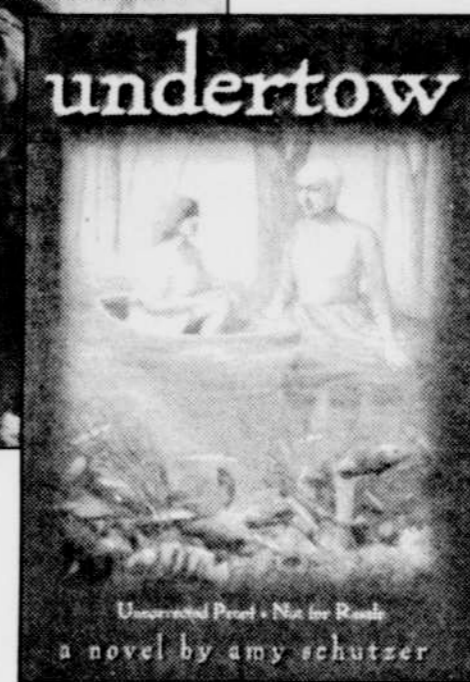
"I was peels and shards held together with steel and catgut. It might not get any clearer. It was not just sky I fell through, but sky with the taste of flesh."

Quintessential lesbian author Jeanette Winterson has said good writing isn't about brilliant words but about putting together simple words in a brilliant way. *Undertow* supports that idea.

Schutzer already is writing her second novel, *The Color of Weather*. With *Undertow* as an introduction, we can look forward to her future work. **JN**

*UNDERTOW* is published by Calyx Books; soft-cover is \$14.95, hardcover is \$29.95. Amy Schutzer will read 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20 at Annie Bloom's Books, 7834 S.W. Capitol Highway.

LISA BRADSHAW is a free-lance writer who also loved Portland as soon as she got here.



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