

BOOKS

Home is where her heart is

Passion, love and hard work—25 years in the life of a country dyke

BY NATALIE SHAPIRO

As lesbians, we have passion for each other, but we also have passion for place.

Author Hawk Madrone knows this well. "We walked a little of the 40 acres that day, drinking her in, seeing her more obvious charms, even looking for possible flaws," she reflects in her book.

This yearning could be for a newly found lover, but it is the piece of land named Fly Away Home that has stolen her heart. The story of this intense, 25-year relationship is told eloquently in *Weeding at Dawn: A Lesbian Country Life*.

It all began in 1975, when Madrone and her lover, Bethroot, bought land together in remote southern Oregon. They were part of the dyke back-to-the-land movement of the time.

"We wanted to join the tribe, the wide network of lesbians who were rooting their spirituality in the soil, the cycles of the earth, intent upon separating ourselves as much as possible from the world the men have made." And so they did. Although no longer lovers, they both still live on the land.

Becoming a country dyke was a dramatic change from Madrone's former life. She was a philosophy professor for 10 years in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

A self-described radical, she always was fighting to keep her job. "I was successful as a teacher," she laughs, "and at alienating the administration."

Her next career move was auto mechanics. "I had been in academia all my life," she explains. "I needed a balance of mental worker with physical worker. So I became an auto mechanic for a while, then ended upon the land." It was a natural evolution, as her roots lie in a small working-class country town.

Madrone was inspired to write her book by the Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, the Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus. This group, which has been meeting for 20 years, gave her the encouragement necessary to undertake the arduous task of writing about her life.

She previously had published stories of her experiences in anthologies and magazines such as *Maize*, a *Lesbian Country Magazine* and *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*. She hopes women, through reading her book, vicariously will share her experiences.

And her stark, detailed stories of everyday country life should accomplish that goal. There's the dilemma of the skunk in the hen house, the joy and anticipation of her cat giving birth, the wracking pain over a dead wren and the bone-weary satisfaction from building a cellar or chopping wood. Country dykes will relate to and appreciate these experiences; urban dykes might yearn for them.

The uniqueness of these stories lies in her

detailed, passionate observations of nature. She begins to understand that her own life mirrors the quirks of nature. She learns this especially from the trees on her land.

One spring day, Madrone visits a locust tree near her barn; weakened from wood rot, it has been toppled by a large snowstorm. She notes in her book that it originally had two separate trunks growing from one base:

"As I studied the locust, I thought about the falling apart that happened to my mate and me 11 years ago.... Now I stroked the wet rough bark and my hands easily remembered the loving my mate and I made together, the mostly good and vibrant life we shared for over five years. But just as those two trunks could stand for only so long on what gave them their beginning, my love and I could stay together only so long as what we were creating was good for both of us, and that had come to an end."

She also relates to the resilience and adaptive abilities of nature. Studying a madrone tree, a survivor of a chain-sawed girdle intended to kill it, she writes: "This survivor has been an inspiring companion for me these many years.... This living tree whose name I share makes mockery of my despair, and I too find a passageway to my roots, and keep on growing."

The resiliency and versatility of the madrone trees on her land also inspired her to take their name as her own. "Madrone became my second name, as it was my second nature."

Of course, dyke readers will want to know about love, and Madrone gives a different perspective from what they might expect. One spring, she decides to camp alone, although she has reservations: "Some yearning lingered for just simply another woman to be with me, someone to love the scenery with me, someone to love me."

A few days later, nestled by a white cliff graced with the pink of blooming rhododen-

drons, she is content. "I lacked no lover in this scene: She was present everywhere. I was complete, and content."

Although Madrone possesses the rare ability to be content alone with nature and her animal friends, still, what about the people in her life? Who is her community in this beautiful yet isolated area? It depends, she muses.

"There's the land dyke community, the different women's lands. I have known these for almost 25 years; we have been doing all this land stuff together for all these years, sharing the country culture. Community is not just social. Women are there for you when there's a need; we help each other with projects."

However, her community is broader than that, including lesbians in the Roseburg area. Even if she doesn't personally know these lesbians, her life is richer simply because they are there. "They may never set foot on Fly Away Home and I may never visit them, but there's a sense of community because we are lesbians."

So what are the risks being a dyke living in a rural, conservative setting? Has she experienced anti-gay sentiments?

Madrone thinks about it briefly, then recalls only two incidents in the past 25 years. The first was when they just had moved there.

Two men walked up the road with beer cans, looking for someone who lived there previously. "I got mad, told them to leave—I knew they were gawking at us."


And they left. Another time, someone wrote on the mailbox, "Lezzies get out."

The locals know about Madrone and Bethroot, she says. Some friends once stopped at the gas station in the nearest town for help in finding the land.

The attendant gave them directions. "I don't know how I feel about that," Madrone laughs, "a complete stranger." But overall, people leave them alone, perhaps because of the live-and-let-live values of country living.

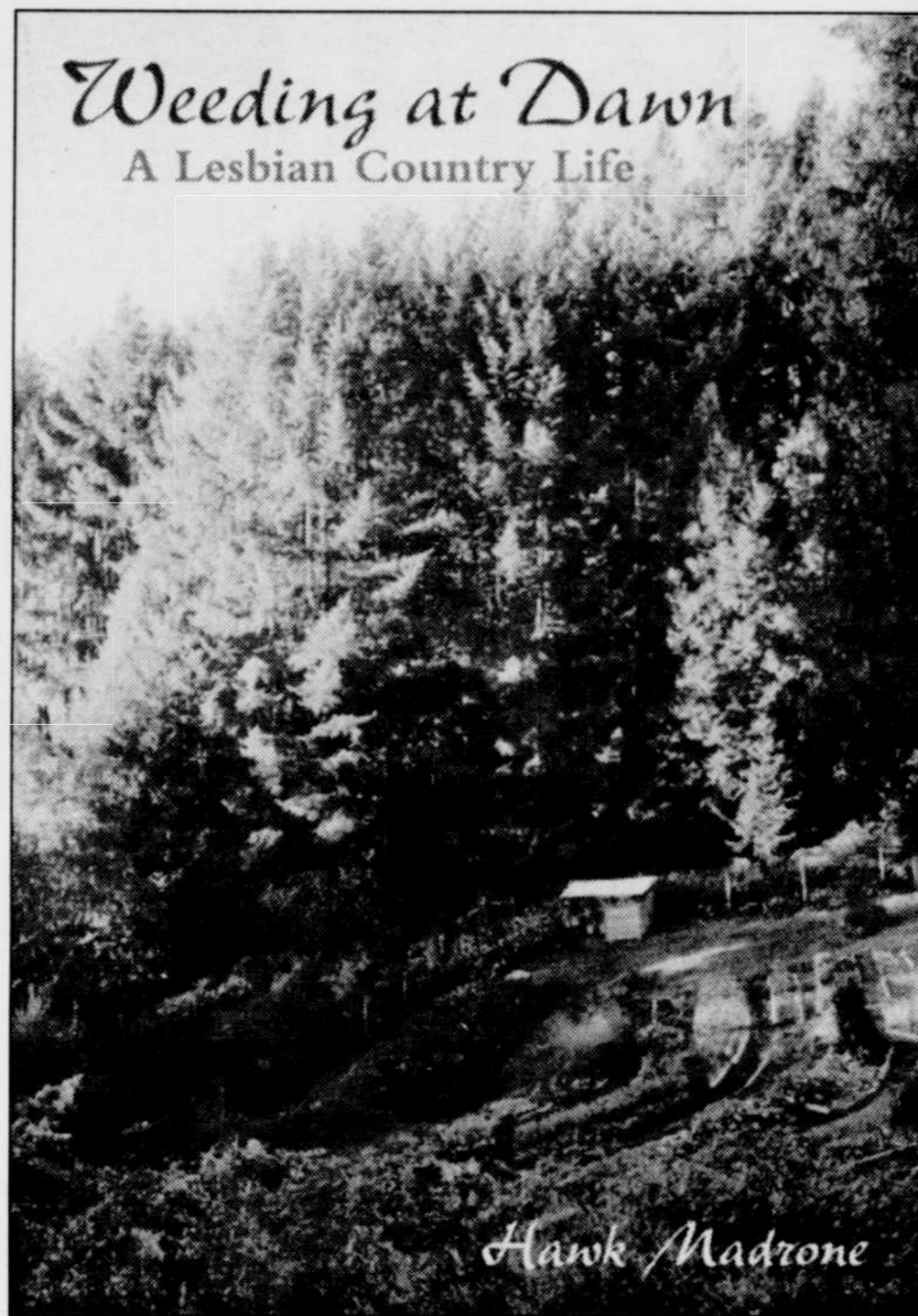
And sticking it out for 25 years certainly earns them respect from others. When she and Bethroot moved there, one neighbor gave them two months. "We outlasted him!" she smirks.

Certainly, thriving on the challenges of country living is one reason she has lasted for 25 years. Her work list includes keeping ditches cleared, keeping landslides out of her water

tank, keeping a steady supply of wood for heat and building a home. She writes, "The challenges, and the work they require, keep me busy, keep me learning, keep me accomplishing." 

WEEDING AT DAWN: A LESBIAN COUNTRY LIFE is published by Harrington Park Press; soft-cover is \$14.95, hardcover is \$39.95. Madrone will read 7 p.m. Dec. 2 at Grassroots in Corvallis and will give a reading for women only Dec. 17 in Ashland. Call 541-512-0369 for details.

NATALIE SHAPIRO is a former country dyke who now is trying to adjust to her new identity as an urban dyke.



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