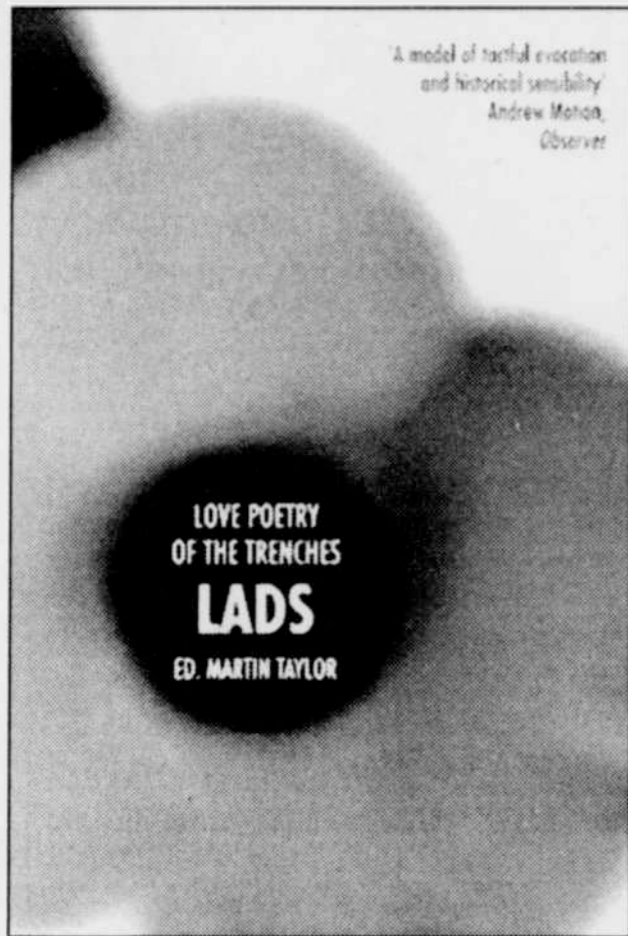


BOOKS

Poetic justice

Extraordinary queer love poetry from Sappho through the first World War



LADS: LOVE POETRY OF THE TRENCHES edited by Martin Taylor; Duckworth, 2002 reprint; \$9.95 softcover

The big question raised by this fine anthology is: What is the nature of man-to-man love?

Is there a love between men that lies somewhere between our notions of "straight" and "gay"? Is it possible for a man to love another man in every way that a man can love a mate, but without sex, and still be straight?

Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches is an extraordinary collection of poetry that explores this "somewhere between." One can argue for decades, as modern culture has, whether there is a form of man-to-man love that is not inherently homosexual (at least on the old sliding scale, Dr. Kinsey). This collection, taken as a whole, seems to argue that love comes in all kinds of radical packages and that each couple's bonds are as unique and unclassifiable as snowflakes.

Lads was first collected in 1989 by that indomitable force of literature, the late Martin Taylor. In it are poems by little-known and well-established poets alike—all of them writers who have experienced the trenches, mustard gas and death of World War I. You'll be surprised at how blatant these poems get.

*Yes, I've known the love uv a woman, lad,
And maybe I shall again,
But I knows a stronger love than theirs,
And that is the love of men.*

No matter how the debate turns, one thing

becomes eloquently clear in these poems: There is no place for homophobia in the manly heart.

But beside questions on the nature of love comes commentary on the horror of war. At this time in our country's life, it would do us well to spend some time in these voices:

*Pour out your light, O stars, and do not hold
Your loveliest shining from earth's outworn shell
Pure and cold your radiance, pure and cold
My dead friend's face as well.*

Lads is a great place to visit to remember what war is really like.

—Glenn Williams

IF NOT, WINTER: FRAGMENTS OF SAPPHO edited by Anne Carson; Knopf, 2002; \$14 softcover

Anne Carson has done it again. All the music of the language, the mystery of the legend and the poetic musings of the most celebrated lesbian folk singer of all time, Sappho, are masterfully collected into a work of epic proportions.

Drawing on her vast knowledge of both myth and history, the McGill University classics professor explains in her introduction that many of Sappho's poems have been recovered piece by piece (and often remain in pieces) when gathered for printing. She offers what she pens as "Sappho's reflections on love, desire, marriage, exile, cushions, bees, old age, shame, time, chickpeas and many other aspects of the human situation."

No stranger to translation, Carson has an impressive list of texts under her linguistic belt: Her *Eros the Bittersweet* explored Sappho's term "glukupikron," or "sweetbitter," among other Greek concepts, while the poems in *Autobiography of Red* reinvented the literary remains of the Greek poet Stesichorus.

In her four-page preface Carson addresses how very little is known for



certain about Sappho apart from the fact that she lived in the "city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos from about 630 B.C." and "appears to have devoted her life to composing songs." The majority of these had a common theme: the fine art of loving women.

These translations, beautifully presented here with the Greek en face, is based on a 1971 transcript by scholar Eva-Maria Voigt published in Amsterdam. Carson used "the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did." The text is centered on the page in rich font, while empty brackets are used to denote what's missing:

*But to go there
] much
talks [
Not easy for us to equal goddesses in lovely
form
] desire
and [] Aphrodite
] nectar poured from gold
] with hands Persuasion...
] into desire I shall come...*

A must for any collector of Sapphic translation, *If Not, Winter* will be a treasure for lovers of women for years to come.

—Marie Fleischmann

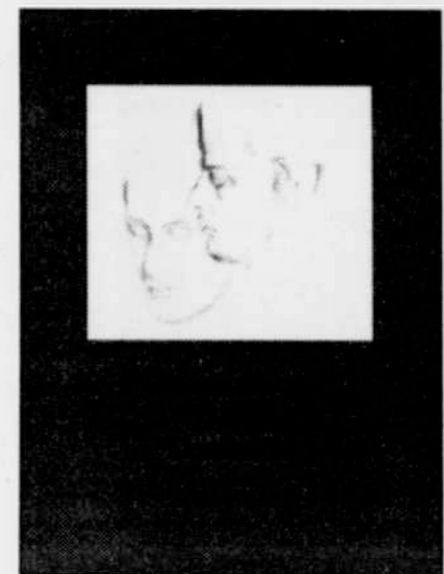
CONFUSION: THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF PRIVY COUNCILLOR R. VON D by Stefan Zweig; Pushkin Press, 2003; \$14 softcover

Available for the first time in an English translation (its original European publication was in 1927), the late Austrian-born novelist Stefan Zweig's *Confusion: The Private Papers of Privy Councillor R. von D* is an admirably economical novel that should intrigue anyone interested in the sociological aspects of queer lit, detailing as it does the prevailing attitudes of a certain place (Berlin) and time (not too far into the 20th century) toward homosexuality.

The heterosexual Zweig is remarkably enlightened, considering his milieu; more importantly, the book is a fine example of structure, craft and how to do ambiguity—sexual and otherwise—right.

Comprising the fictional "private papers" of

a highly regarded professor as he looks back upon his life, *Confusion* immerses the reader in the first-person recollection of a single-minded obsession—that of the professor's younger self



toward his own professor, a man capable of inflaming a passion that, the young man thinks, comes solely from the older man's compelling, contagious love of literature.

As the student becomes dependent upon his professor's approbation, the professor's own ambivalent behavior exacerbates the already opaque fixation of our narrator. Aware of his own feelings and the potential ethical—not to mention social—pitfalls involved in falling for a male student, the professor plays a confusing, tormented/tormenting, push/pull game with the young man's emotions.

For his part, the protégé, who talks the professor into resuming long-abandoned work and becomes his assistant, is extremely disturbed by his beloved mentor's hot and cold running moods and the strange timbre of his household and marriage. The understandably jaded wife even warns him about a vague something on the professor's end of which he may prefer to remain ignorant. These mysterious circumstances stir up and oddly mirror the student's own tangled (if wholly sublimated) feelings.

A bittersweet—emphasis on the bitter—closing confession marks the climax of a relatively short, rhythmically building narrative that's unmistakably sexual in structure, from the initial stirrings to the accumulation of tension to the spilling over of confessional release at the end.

The prose is occasionally too purple, which could be more a problem with the translation than authorial misdirection, but it's an insignificant flaw amid the effortlessly woven, deceptively simple narrative pleasures *Confusion* has to offer.

—Christopher McQuain

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