

BOOKS

TAMMY FAYE MESSNER

REVIEWS

I WILL SURVIVE...AND YOU CAN, TOO!
by Tammy Faye Messner; Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2003; \$19.95 hardcover

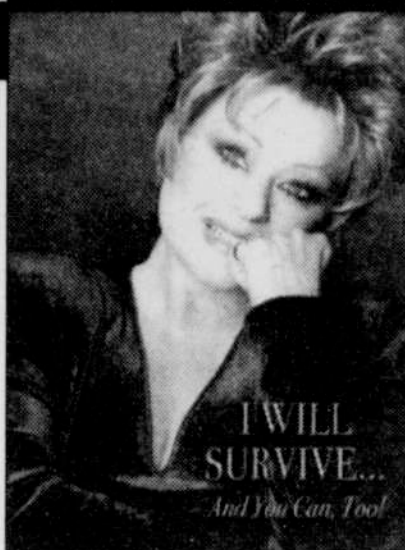
Tammy Faye Messner has had more lives than Felix the Cat. She is the ex-wife of scandalized preacher Jim Bakker, co-founder of the three largest Christian television networks in the world, subject of the touching documentary *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* and co-star with übergay boy JM J. Bullock of the syndicated talk show *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show*.

She also is the first televangelist to embrace AIDS patients, has recorded more than 25 solo albums and toured in a one-woman show. She has been described by John Waters as "a militant Christian fag hag drama queen."

Yes, Tammy Faye has led a very interesting life, indeed. What she hasn't done is write an interesting book.

I Will Survive...and You Can, Too! is a collection of essays on subjects dear to Tammy Faye's heart. She covers both the heavy (illness, death, divorce) and lightweight (makeup, shopping, weight loss). She includes homespun recipes, Bible quotations and pithy aphorisms for coping with life's rocky slopes: "Believe in yourself and don't let anyone or anything take that away from you." Then, in the next breath, she tosses in silliness like: "I think almost every woman should own a wig. It makes every day a good hair day."

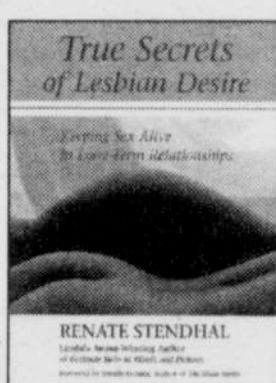
The beauty (to some the mystery) of Tammy Faye is that she sincerely believes everything she writes, and she believes others can benefit from her advice.



Tammy Faye is certainly a survivor, and I'm not embarrassed to admit I greatly admire her. But, while *I Will Survive* is meant to appeal to her legion of fans (including gays), it seems to me that the target demographic is only up-tight, middle-aged women clinging desperately to a world that is changing rapidly.

—Floyd Sklaver

TRUE SECRETS OF LESBIAN DESIRE: KEEPING SEX ALIVE IN LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS
by Renate Stendhal;
North Atlantic Books, 2003; \$14.95 softcover



Writer and counselor Renate Stendhal (*Sex and Other Sacred Games*) was born in a postwar German family that effectively cosseted her sexuality. Driven to the brink of suicide, she escaped and spent two decades among the legendary French feminists in Paris, liberating her sexuality through promiscuous journeys: "I walked through the streets dressed as a boy, lining up with the men...to peek into a courtyard filled with women."

To Stendhal, monogamy equaled the epitome

of sexual demise until an American woman proved her wrong. Eighteen passionate years later, the two are still lovers in California, and Stendhal has published *True Secrets of Lesbian Desire*.

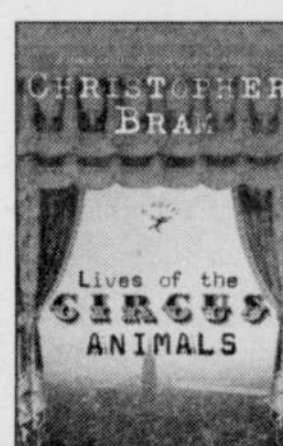
The book refuses to generalize, following three long-term lesbian couples, each with its own complex struggles around sex. Lou and Annie are abstinent, Mariushka and Sybil are junkies, and Petra and Selena just don't do it enough.

The author's approach and the discourse by each of the couples reads very '70s without variation, which makes for a mostly alienating and uncomfortable read: "Selena's armpit was the gateway, her 'Open Sesame!'...Petra invented a game she called 'truffle hunt.' She got a kick out of playing 'Captain Pig.'"

Stendhal's cracking of relentless myths on lesbian sexuality, though, is vastly insightful. She sets the record straight on bed death and discredits belligerent patriarchal truths like "there is no magic if I have to explain" and "sex is an instinct, therefore it comes just naturally."

—Els Debbaut

LIVES OF THE CIRCUS ANIMALS
by Christopher Bram;
William Morrow, 2003;
\$24.95 hardcover



While many would argue that Christopher Bram is one of our best contemporary gay authors, his latest book offers no proof of this.

Lives of the Circus Animals is a three-ring circus, all right, with a trapeze of a plot swinging from one New Yorker on the edge to another, as their lives intersect in the surprisingly but nonetheless realistically small world of New York theater.

Playwright Caleb Doyle is a hot ticket with a second show bomb. His sister is a personal assistant for the aging Henry Lewse, a once-prominent Shakespearean actor relegated to appearing in musicals and preoccupied with young men. Together, they mix it up with a couple of wannabe actors, including Caleb's ex-but-still-pining boyfriend. And as ringmaster is Kenneth Prager, the killjoy *Times* reviewer who panned Caleb's play.

In true circus (and Broadway) form, all gravitate toward a final spectacle to complete their tedious circle of want and need. As in real life, some get what they want, some don't. So it is with *Circus Animals*: half-and-half, so-so, más-o-menos.

Bram once fascinated us with erudite pieces such as *The Notorious Dr. August: His Real Life and Crimes* and *Father of Frankenstein* (subsequently made into the Academy Award-winning film *Gods and Monsters*). These were inventive themes that played out in rewarding stories.

But the "serious comedy" that is drawn out in *Circus Animals* is more a monotonous biography in which Bram's attention to nuance actually waylays his attention to drama. And that is ironic, given that this is a comedy of manners, after all, set against the Great White Way itself.

—Timothy Krause

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