

Feeling Like a 2,000-Year-Old Lesbian

WRB editor Amy Hoffman talks about the alternative press, *Women's Review of Books*, and her new memoir, *An Army of Ex-Lovers: My Life at the Gay Community News (2007)*.



Dear Readers,

I've been at a loss about how to cover my own book in *Women's Review of Books*. Nothing I could think of seemed to adhere to our standards. We generally try to avoid assigning books to the author's friends or colleagues—but everyone who writes for WRB is, for me, one or the other or both. Yet I didn't want to ignore it. So, instead of pretending to be fair in any way, I asked Donna Tambascio, the deputy director for communication and external relations at Wellesley Centers for Women, WRB's host organization, to help me interview myself. Here's what we came up with...

—Amy Hoffman

DT: Why, in 2007, are you publishing a memoir about *Gay Community News* and the gay and lesbian movement of the late 1970s?

ABH: Because I'm slow?

Gay Community News was a weekly newspaper that was published by a loose collective of volunteers and paid staff from 1973 through 1989 (and then quarterly through 1999). Based in Boston, it had subscribers in all fifty states and several foreign countries. At a time when gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people were invisible in mainstream media and culture—when many of us discovered what “homosexual” meant only by furtively looking it up in the dictionary—GCN was an invaluable, unique source of news and information.

The world GCN covered was very different from today's. The AIDS epidemic was still in the future. GLBT artists and public figures worked hard to keep their sexuality secret. “Homosexuality” appeared in the headlines only in association with scandal and crime. Coming out could mean losing your job, your home, and your family—with no legal recourse. The international movement sparked by the Stonewall riots of 1969, when the patrons of a New York bar rebelled against yet another humiliating raid instead of running away or filing quietly into the police wagons, was only beginning to have an impact.

I wrote the book to examine those times, which were so important in shaping the world we live in today, yet which are often misunderstood or forgotten. But I also wanted to write about what it all meant to me, in my life. When I walked into the GCN office at age 26, in the fall of 1978, my life changed forever. The men and women I encountered there were serious, committed political activists of various ages, social classes, levels of education, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. They were smart, funny, sexy, creative, open-minded, and, occasionally, ridiculous. We worked hard together to try to put our ideals into action. We fought with each other and with the outside world. Some people from that time I will probably never speak to again. More of them, though, became and remain my dearest friends.

I also wanted to write about what it meant to me to get to know gay men. I came to GCN from the women's movement, and as a lesbian. I would never have described my politics as separatist, but I had created a personal life that was pretty much woman-centered. I went to GCN thinking I would teach the men a thing or two about feminism; but I learned more from them than they ever did from me. They introduced me to new ways of thinking about gender, about sex roles, and about sex. The book particularly focuses on my developing friendship with Richard Burns, who was managing editor of GCN, and who became a lifelong member of my “gay family.” (He is now the executive director of New York's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center.)

DT: What was the most unexpected challenge you faced in writing the book?

ABH: One of the most difficult things about writing *An Army of Ex-Lovers* was trying to convey the utter invisibility at the time of gay politics, events, and culture, and of lesbians and gay men themselves, in mainstream society. When GCN's news editor called a straight source, the person would say, “You're from where? The *Bay Community News*? The *Day Community News*?” They literally could not hear the word “gay.” The contrast with the presence of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people in today's popular culture and media is mind-boggling. Of course, the fact that we are visible in a way we never were before doesn't mean that

our portrayals are any more accurate, respectful, or sophisticated than those of any other subculture.

Our marginality was belittling, and even dangerous, and our goal was to turn it inside-out. Our slogans were “Come Out!” and “We Are Everywhere.” To get to the point where we could say those things, we had had to question our most basic assumptions about ethics and social structures and human nature: Were our desires “wrong”? Who is the “man of the family”—and does a family need a “man”? Why is the first question anyone asks about a newborn is “Is it a girl or a boy?” Although our invisibility was oppressive, it also liberated us to be able to envision a different world.

DT: How do you think younger readers will react to the book?

ABH: When I was in my twenties, none of the lesbians I knew were any older than I was—for obvious reasons: much (although of course not all) of the older generation was in the closet, and feared the real damage that associating with the new liberation movement could do to their lives. So for me, coming out felt like standing on a cliff—I couldn't see beyond the edge of the present. I would have welcomed a mentor to tell me that a lesbian life could be full of love, security, self-actualization.

As I got older I would occasionally try to talk to younger women about my experiences. But I began to feel like the 2,000-year-old lesbian, gently disbelieved when I talked about the day my consciousness-raising group examined our vaginas with speculums and mirrors.

Then a friend who is about 25 years younger than I am invited me to lunch and spent the afternoon asking me about my days at GCN. We had a great time, and he kept saying, “You should write a book.” I had to confess that I *had* written a book—a novel, when I was in graduate school. He encouraged me to revisit it, and although I was skeptical, I began writing a memoir.

DT: What do your family, friends, and colleagues think of it?

ABH: My friends want to make sure I spell their names right—they're the kinds of people who say, “How come there's not more about me in here?” They've been incredibly supportive and generous in pushing me to dig deep and to be honest.

I'm sure some people will not like what I've written about them or others, or will not agree with my interpretations. But if I've learned anything from my years as a writer and editor, it's that you never know what will set people off. I'm trying to look forward to finding out.

I've been especially moved by my mother's reaction to the book. She loves it. She thinks it should be a tv show, like *Friends*. Of course she does. She's my mother. But I write in the book about the difficulty both she and my father had in accepting me when I came out to them. Now my mother says, “I was obsessed with such trivial things. I can't even imagine why.”

DT: You've worked for much of your career for progressive publications, including in your current job as editor in chief of *Women's Review of Books*. How have things changed?

ABH: I never thought of what I was doing as a “career.” It was more like the opposite of a career: my parents, at least, were convinced that with GCN on my resume, I'd never get another job. But I really do love editing and working with writers. So even though I didn't set out with any sort of plan, and I've bounced around a lot, emerging from everything else I can see a clear trajectory—from volunteering at a feminist journal called *Sister Courage*, to GCN, to South End Press, to writing for *Sojourner*, to *Women's Review of Books*.

Of course there have been huge changes since the 1970s in both the alternative and mainstream publishing worlds. The political, cultural, and technological landscapes are nearly unrecognizable. When I worked at GCN, we covered just about every book, film, play, and musician with any lesbian or gay interest in a few features pages each week. And, it was inconceivable that any of this would be discussed in your local newspaper, favorite glossy magazine, academic journal, or trade publication. It was completely beyond the pale.

Similarly, when *Women's Review of Books* started, in 1983, it was comprehensive, and people subscribed because it was one of the only ways to find out about the new books and ideas. Things are utterly different today. Women's studies books in every discipline stream off the presses each week, from publishers large and small, mainstream and alternative, scholarly and new age. Fiction, poetry, and memoir by women are abundant. Some days my office is so crammed with books I can barely get in the door; and deciding which minuscule proportion of this outpouring *WRB* will review is the main challenge of my job. Unfortunately, you wouldn't know this from reading major book review publications such as the *New York Times Book Review*, which generally covers about two books by men to every one by a women.

At *GCN* we did layout each week by hand, with rolls of typeset copy, which we pasted to ruled sheets of oaktag with rubber cement or sticky wax. My layout and phototypesetting skills are now completely obsolete; it's as though I learned to shoe horses.

DT: What do you think is the role of progressive publications today?

ABH: That women's, GLBT, and gender studies are respectable academic disciplines, and that you can read about GLBT issues and even organizing in the newspaper, and watch tv shows with gay characters are the results, sometimes unintended, of the convergence of many social changes, including years of hard work by brave, prescient activists and the AIDS epidemic. One ironic aspect of these changes is that much of the alternative gay, lesbian, and feminist media, as well as gay and feminist cultural institutions such as bookstores and concert series, collapsed, starting in the late 1980s. Subscribers and patrons had other sources for the information and enrichment these media and institutions had provided; they no longer had to be members of the club.

GLBT, feminist, and alternative media need to fulfill different roles now, and take new forms. People don't need the basic information and the dish; they get that elsewhere. What they don't get is in-depth discussion and lively, serious debate of our issues and experiences. I'm very proud when *WRB* can fill this gap. For example, you can order Nobel Prize-winner Doris Lessing's novels on Amazon (although you really should order them from Women and Children First or your local independent bookstore), but nowhere else would you find the kind of discussion of Lessing's work that Ann Snitow offered in *WRB* last spring—to give just one example. Publications like *WRB* still have a place.

Money is a huge problem. For example, *WRB* writers get paid, but barely: fourteen cents per word plus a one-year subscription and a bunch of author copies. They agree to write reviews for this pittance amount because they like and respect *WRB*, because there aren't a lot of other venues for the sorts of articles we publish, and because many of them are, on the one hand, academics who see reviewing as part of their jobs or on the other, new writers who want to gain experience. I appreciate their generosity every day. But it's the rare person indeed who can afford to write a piece for us that involves a lot of reading or research, or the creative exploration and synthesis of ideas—in other words, the kind of article our movement really needs.

I think those of us who work on alternative publications need to develop a new financial model—although I have to admit I have no idea what it is. We think we can make it with a combination of advertising, subscriptions, and the occasional grant. *WRB* itself is based on this model. But in fact, it almost never works. Developing a large, stable subscriber base requires investing in promotion, and alternative publications rarely have that kind of money. Selling ads gets easier the more subscribers you have. And liberal funders have simply never gotten the message that they should fund media, although this is discussed ad nauseam whenever progressive people get together—the right wing does it, why can't we, etc., etc.

The other thing we need to get creative about is media itself. I'm a writer, and I understand and love print. But sometimes I think those of us who are moaning about the demise of alternative publishing simply don't perceive all the other activity that's going on—on listservs and websites, for example. The Internet may not solve our financial problems—you still need a staff, writers, and equipment to publish online—but it offers amazing possibilities for connecting ideas and formats that I think we've barely begun to explore.

DT: Which came first, the title or the book?

ABH: Definitely the book! Writing a book is hard, but sticking a title on it is sometimes even harder. "An army of ex-lovers" is an old 1970s joke about the gay liberation slogan, "An army of lovers cannot fail," which was coined by Rita Mae Brown in her poem, "Sappho's Reply." I'm not the first to refer to it. In addition to being a rallying cry for LGBT people, S&M enthusiasts, people with AIDS, and advocates for gays in the military, "an army of lovers" has been the title of a film by the late gay German director Rosa von Prauhheim and the name of a rock band.

Actually, the "army of lovers" was not the followers of Sappho but rather the

Sacred Band of Thebes, a fighting force made up of 150 gay male couples. Ancient philosophers imagined that such an army would be invincible because of the strength of the lovers' loyalty and desire to prove their courage to one another. Plato wrote, "Even a few of them fighting side by side might well conquer the world"—the comment that Rita Mae may have had in mind when she composed her poem.

Like "the people united will never be defeated," and "ho, ho homosexual, the ruling class is ineffectual," the "army of lovers" slogan, although inspiring, is patently false; thus the joke, "But what about an army of ex-lovers?"

As a pacifist I have misgivings about using a military image in my book title, but: 1) It's funny; and 2) Maybe it will help subvert the whole concept of an army. ☹

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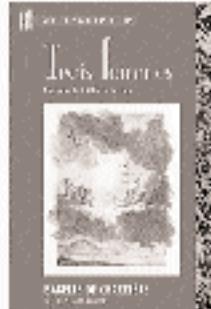
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