



The Lesbian Edition

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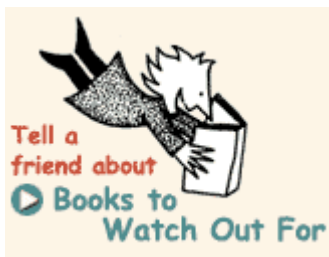
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About BTWOF

Books to Watch Out For publishes monthly e-letters celebrating books on various topics. Each issue includes new book announcements, brief reviews, commentary, news and, yes, good

– this issue sponsored by –

Alyson Publications

the proud publishers of
Lucky Stiff: A Lillian Byrd Crime Story
 by Elizabeth Sims

When the past is a lie, the present can be deadly as Lillian Byrd discovers when a chance encounter with a childhood friend reveals a shocking secret about her parents' death.

August slipped past Labor Day 2004

Volume 1 Number 8

Welcome to BTWOF #8. We have several new features this issue, but first let me extend my thanks to Alyson Publications for their commitment to lesbian publishing and for taking the lead by sponsoring this issue of *Books To Watch Out For*. Alyson will also sponsor several more issues over the next year. Publisher sponsors help to support BTWOF and keep us going. Actually, *anyone* can sponsor an issue of BTWOF. Email Mozelle@BTWOF.com for details.

This issue also features BTWOF's first author interview – Stacey D'Erasmus talks about writing *The Seahorse Year* and about the state of lesbian and gay writing/publishing today.

We'll be celebrating our first anniversary of publishing on September 19th. What a year! If this were a reality TV show, it would be called "Extreme Beta-Testing" – we worked kinks out of our own systems and even helped Bank of America find a few kinks in theirs – not something we'd put in the schedule, but there you are.

And we got to do what we're really about – publishing a good many issues of **BTWOF: The Lesbian Edition** and spreading the word about good lesbian literature. We published eight issues during this first year, amid everything else, and look forward to being increasingly on track in the months to come. (Note: Subscribers get 12 issues per subscription "year" no matter how long it takes us to get them all out. If your subscription was set to expire between July and November, it has already been extended.)

Printing out a booklist: Email subscribers can print out a list of books in this issue by clicking on the "Books Reviewed in This Issue" link at the top of the table of contents. This feature is designed to save you from having to copy down titles to make a shopping list. It includes the author, price, and publisher. If you want a list with only a few of the titles on it, you can, of course, copy the titles into a text file and print that.

Printing the issue: Email subscribers can also print out the entire issue by

book gossip.

The Lesbian Edition

covers both lesbian books and the whole range of books lesbians like to read. It covers news of both the women in print movement and mainstream publishing. Written and compiled by Carol Seajay.

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The Gay Men's Edition

announces and reviews new books by and about gay men as well as other books of interest and gay publishing news. Written and compiled by Richard Labonte.

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More Books for Women

will launch in 2005.

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Q. How does BTWOF define "a lesbian book?"

A. We think that any book that belongs to a lesbian is a lesbian book, just as any bike that belongs to a girl is "a girl's bike."

BTWOF: The Lesbian Edition

covers a wide range of books likely to be of interest to our readers as well as books with lesbian content and books by lesbian writers.



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And we also want to thank the *Lambda Book Report* for the great article about **Books To Watch Out For** they published this summer. You can read it at [Lambda Book Report](#) or in Vol. 12 #10.

Thanks for your patience during our beta year and for all your support as we launch BTWOF. I hope you enjoy this issue.

Yours in spreading the words,
Carol Seajay

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Find(s) of the Month

A Seahorse Year

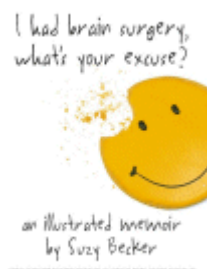
Stacey D'Erasmus's **A Seahorse Year** is an elegant and achingly wise novel about love, family, and parental dreams gone awry: Sixteen-year-old Christopher is sliding off the deep end and his parents – the ever-competent bookseller Nan, her partner of ten years, Marina, a painter, and musician-turned-accountant Hal, a hesitant sperm-donor who grew into being an equal parent – do all the wise and disastrous things people do out of love. In this richly complex novel, D'Erasmus explores family – birth, chosen, and the relationships that accumulate along the way, as well as the consequences of crisis and the unexpected risks of intimacy, in a tale that is both universal and uniquely lesbian. If you read just one novel this fall, make this the one. Then give it to all of your family members – birth, choice, and accumulated – for whatever holidays you celebrate. It's one of our best novels, ever, and is a worthy successor to D'Erasmus's well loved first novel, *Tea*. \$24, Houghton Mifflin.



"Nan doesn't ask Marina what she might have to be sorry about. The unsaid words are what they have, in a way – a slender sequence of them, their value lying precisely in their not being spoken. Marina's mother and father stayed together the same way, wrapped round and round each other with invisible thread. Everyone was just too tired to keep fighting. Sitting in the garden, Nan resting so docilely with her on the grass, Marina sees a kind of grace there, where before she had seen only deceit. What is love but a series of small decisions made under impossible circumstances? One by one, they add up to years."

BTWOF interviews Stacey D'Erasmus at the end of this issue - see [below](#).

I had brain surgery, what's your excuse? an illustrated memoir



There you are – having a reasonably wonderful 11-month anniversary with your new sweetie and zap! you're in the middle of a grand mal seizure with no reasonable explanation. And so begins this tale from Suzy Becker, the *NY Times* bestselling author of *All I Need to Know I Learned from My Cat*.

Girlfriend doesn't accept "stress" as an explanation, and there begins a round of doctor appointments, tests and examinations that culminate in brain surgery that has unanticipated consequences on the humorist's speech, drawing, memory and ability to conceptualize.

Clearly not aimed at a lesbian market – the author's lesbianism, her lesbian and gay friends, her commitment to the AIDS Bike-A-Thon are all, well, just the stuff of anyone's life. You could search the jacket for lesbian



clues, be put off by the smiley face on the cover (albeit a disintegrating one) and not find a single reason to open the book unless you happened to be looking for humorous books on brain surgery recovery. But don't let that stop you: this is lesbian memoir writ large. Go with Anne Lamott's summary ("A wonderful book, funny and touching, harrowing and sweet.") and open up a rich, humorous (she *did* heal her funny bone, after all), tale of life's unexpected twists, the long, not-so-long-in-hindsight road to recovery, and the daily courage it takes to travel that road. And it's also the story of an evolving new relationship, family dealing with new lover, and all the stresses brain surgery can have on any relationship. I'm generally a curmudgeon about "illustrated" stories, but Becker's drawings won me over. There are times when a picture *is* worth a thousand words. Here's hoping it becomes a bestseller, too. \$19.95, Workman.

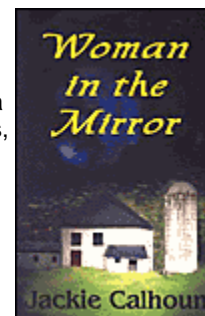


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Friday Night Reads*

Jackie Calhoun's **Woman in the Mirror** is a perfect Friday Night Read.

An irresistible urge to paint and equally urgent need to make a living, finding passion after mastectomy, giving a hand up to a troubled niece, complicated family relations, and solid friendships – they're all the stuff of lesbian life, and make satisfying themes in this reasonably complex tale of lesbian life in small town Wisconsin. No chiseled cheekbones or simplistic lust here – both life and *Woman in the Mirror* are much richer than that. \$12.95, [Bella](#).



The Honor Series



Over the course of the 10-day San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival I watched a reader work her way through Radclyffe's Honor series, a 700-page romantic thriller (in three volumes) featuring secret agents, a President's daughter who needs protection but doesn't want it, haunted pasts and high-drama presents. Lots of compelling beauty, passionate attractions, conflicts with duty, and clever demented bad guys. Expect this series to last you through a number of Friday nights: I read the revised edition of the first book, **Above All, Honor**, \$17.50, BookEnds Press;

Honor Bound, \$16.95, [Yellow Rose Books](#); and **Love & Honor**, \$17.99, [BookEnds Press](#).

If historical romance/adventure is your gig, look to Helen Shacklady's **The Vinland Sheep**, a Welsh tale of resistance set in the 15th century wherein Welsh country folk do their best to cope with the ever-intruding English gentry, second sons turn to horse thievery to make a living, and women sometimes find each other more interesting than men.... Throw in a few enterprising pirates, the odd explorer from Vinland, and a bit of Italian nobility and you have a good, dense, read for a cold, foggy night. \$14.99, published by London's [Onlywomen Press](#). Distributed to booksellers in the U.S. by Alamo Square. It may take a good bit of persistence to find it.



Finest Kind of Love

Molly Bean made her way through a difficult childhood with the help of her crusty Aunt Em and now makes her living as a Maine lobsterman. Neither she nor her brother have made it into adulthood unscathed but, with Aunt Em still on her crew, Molly makes progress even when everything around her (including new-gal-around-the-harbor Carolyn Stanley) makes waves. Everyone should have an Aunt Em – however unrealistic the details might seem. By Diane Tremain Braund. \$12.95, [Bella](#).

* The Friday Night Reads section is in honor of Sue Butterworth, a consummate bookseller and publisher who, with Jane Cholmeley, founded London's Silver Moon Bookshop and the companion publishing company, Silver Moon Books. Sue also wrote *The Silvermoon Quarterly*, which went to 10,000 women, worldwide. She believed fiercely in the right of lesbians to "a good Friday night read" – books that succeed at being entertainment, distraction, comfort, or even affirmation, rather than necessarily aiming for the highest literary esteem. Sue placed many a Friday Night Read in women's hands over the years and published a good number of them as well. She died in July. Feminist booksellers are rather more famous in the U.K. than they are in The States – the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, and *Bookseller*, as well as, unexpectedly, the Tory newspaper *Daily Telegraph*, all ran obituaries.



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Memoir

Marcia Hill isn't a lesbian – but many of her clients are – and **Diary of a Country Therapist** offers insight into the therapeutic process that will be useful to people on both sides of the couch. She's adamantly feminist, a strong proponent of feminist therapy, insightful about both homophobia and the therapeutic process, articulate about staying (or becoming) emotionally healthy – and she gives us a wise, jargon-free page-turner. What more could we ask? Well, maybe a support group for when it's time to put it down and turn to other tasks. Even at 270 pages it's over too soon. \$19.95, Haworth Press.

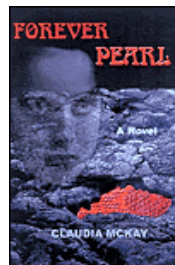


Fay Jacob's **As I Lay Frying: A Rehoboth Beach Memoir** has a much milder agenda: pure entertainment. Jacobs has been writing a column about her adventures in Rehoboth Beach – a Delaware resort community that's almost as gay as Provincetown – for a decade. She and her partner sailed (literally) into town ten years ago, fell in love with the gay-positive spirit of the place, became summer weekend residents, bought property, eventually sold the boat, and became year-round fixtures. Jacobs chronicled it all in her entertaining monthly columns for the local gay paper. They're collected here, in **Frying**, published by Rehoboth Beach-based publisher A&M Books. A&M publishes the Sarah Aldrich novels, the most recent of which is *O, Mistress Mine*. I'd recommend **Frying** as good beach reading, but Jacobs spills the big secret about beach reading: nobody actually reads the books they hold in their laps, they're just props. \$15.



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Science Fiction



In **Forever Pearl**, Claudia McKay takes on drug addiction, addiction to inappropriately long life, a resulting abuse of power in high government, and life on the dusty little planet where the new drug, Pearl, is mined. Pearl is totally safe.... or is it? Then, inexplicably, Pearl starts disappearing. Intergalactic agent Sonya Shankar is sent in to investigate, but nothing is as it seems, and no one, even the trusted leader who sent her there, wants to hear what she finds. A good Friday Night Read for the science fiction set. \$12.95, [New Victoria](#).

My Irish grandmother once asked me if I was a changeling. She'd grown up reading faery tales with changelings in them, but wasn't sure what they were....I hoped **The Changeling of Finnistauth** would offer insight. More Celtic fantasy than post-modern transgendered tale (and with a lot more

passion between men than among women), it offers a tale of a girl raised as a boy and pledged as a monk, her adventures in love, and her fierce warrior's life as a mother. It's a book that would have been earthshaking a couple of decades ago, but might still be for some people – and an entertaining read for others. Kate Horsley's previous book is *Confessions of a Pagan Nun*. \$22.95, 350 pages, Shambhala.



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Our Lives & Our History

Stay up all night reading **All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930**. It's the most fun I've had sorting through our literary past since *Women of the Left Bank*.

In *All-Night Party* Andrea Barnet celebrates New York's bad, bold Bohemian girls, their gutsy role- and expectation-smashing feminisms, and their often intense interrelationships. Interlocking biographies of Mina Loy, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Mabel Dodge and A'Leia Walker also look at the lives of Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, Alberta Hunter, and other women of the time. Many – most?– were lesbian or at least, in keeping with the spirit of the times, had a few affairs with women, regardless of the marriages they may have entered into. The photos and drawings alone would be worth the price of admission.



“What they all had in common was that none lived conventional ‘feminine’ lives. Some were lesbian, some bisexual; some promiscuous, some seemingly asexual.... What connected these women, [including] the black blues divas from Harlem, like Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Alberta Hunter, who faced down different taboos...was...[h]ow they contrived to ensure the necessary space for creative work; how they negotiated [broke] the bonds of monogamy, marriage, childbearing, and economic dependence; how they expressed their feminism in their lives and their work – these were the common threads of their collective insurgency.”

“These women – bold, provocative, irreverent, and compulsively creative – gave everything they had in the effort to make their lives new. For all their uncertainties, they blasted the door open to the rest of the century, leaving it to us to imagine future lives as stunningly original as theirs.”

Barnet's epilogue, “The End of the Party” is a cautionary tale we might all need to heed, as the Presidential election approaches. \$16.95, Algonquin/Workman.

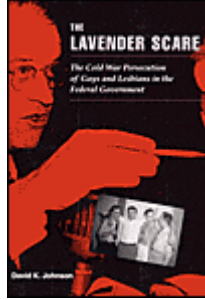


Lovers of more academic biographies will want to check out **Colette**, the third book in Julia Kristeva's trilogy on female genius. Published on the fiftieth anniversary of Colette's death, Kristeva's biography considers Colette's life – including her several marriages, her lovers both male and female, and her careers as a mime and a dancer. But her real focus is on Colette's writing, on Colette's celebration of women's sexual pleasure, and the language she invented to describe it. The first two books in the trilogy are *Hannah Arendt* and *Melanie Klein*. 448 pages, \$35, Columbia University Press.

I started reading **The Lavender Scare: the Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government**, I told myself, to better understand the generation of women who welcomed my teenaged-self into lesbian life during the mid-sixties. Most of them had come out in the 1950s, during the height of the McCarthy Era and the gay purges both in the Federal government and the military.

I kept reading because author/historian David Johnson was revealing the

basis of my parents' generation's deep-seated homophobia, and, even more intensely, the history of homo-panic that informs and permeates the Bush administration and the American Right today... and because it's a fascinating piece of our history. (Suddenly DOMA looks like a rerun.)



Ironically even the most well-intended chronicles of the McCarthy Era rarely address the transference of communist witch-hunt mania to homosexual men and women. Hundreds (if not thousands) more men and women were told, in secret, in small windowless rooms, "Information has come to the attention of the Civil Service Commission that you are a homosexual. What comment do you wish to make?" – and subsequently lost their jobs, careers, and oftentimes much more – than were asked "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?"

In a world where "security risk" was code for "pervert-homosexual-unmarried," scapegoating gay women and men was so acceptable that it garnered little public or social outrage, although a small group of people *did* begin to protest. And therein lie the roots of the gay rights movement.

While fewer lesbians than gay men were persecuted and fired, the impact on the lesbian community was incredibly far-reaching, if my experiences in Michigan, a decade later, are any indication. And, given women's very limited options at the time, I think the Lavender Scare, may have affected the following generations of lesbians even more intensely than it affected gay men. It's a vital – and compelling – part of lesbian history. \$30, University of Chicago Press.



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Bit Parts

In **Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna**, Peter Singer explores the life and times of the grandfather he never met, David Oppenheim, a colleague (and critic) of Freud, who perished in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. His grandmother, Amalie Pollak, was eventually able to reunite with Singer's family after the war. Somehow the letters from their premarital friendship survived – and indicate that in addition to their commitment to equality in their relationship, both were at least bisexual, if not primarily inclined toward same-sex relationships. His grandmother, who was "a brilliant student of mathematics and physics" as well as, apparently, psychology, was one of the first women to graduate from the University of Vienna. She pursued a career as an administrator rather than as a scientist. \$13.95, Ecco/HarperCollins.

One of BTWOF's favorite readers recommends **Learning from Dogs Without Collars** by Lauralee Summers. Summers grew up homeless and then went to Harvard, and it's a memoir of her life up through graduation from college. She doesn't come out in so many words but there are several hints: she was on the board of the student BGLTSA group and describes her dorm room as having a BGLTSA poster. Later, having just met her father for the first time, she wrote to him about a transgendered friend.... \$13, Simon & Schuster.

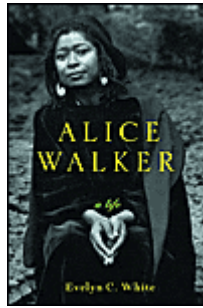


Rosalind Franklin: The Dark Lady Of DNA, is a great read, BTWOF was told, and it turns out Rosalind's aunt lived with a female companion. There is speculation at one point in the book about Rosalind's sexual orientation, but it's clear to the author (and to our reader) that she was straight. Still, an excellent read and an amazing woman. \$15.95, HarperPerennial.



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Books To Watch Out For



Alice Walker: A Life – ten years in the writing and coming in September. Written by Evelyn C. White. \$29.95, Norton.



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What They're Reading in Provincetown

BTWOF asked Karen Hokanson, the book buyer at *Womencrafts*, what women are reading on the Provincetown beaches this year.

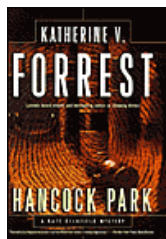
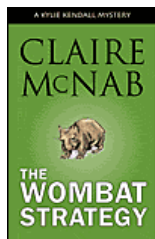


Stacey D'Erasmus's **Tea** (\$13.95, Washington Square Press) and Rita Mae Brown's **Alma Mater** (\$13.95, Ballantine) are vying with one another for being the bestselling book in the store. Which is on top varies week by week, but it's almost always one or the other. D'Erasmus's just-published **The Seahorse Year** (\$24, Houghton Mifflin) is garnering a good bit of interest, too.

The three Sarah Waters have been the next-most-popular lesbian beach reads for the past couple of years with **Tipping the Velvet** and **Affinity** running slightly ahead of **Fingersmith**. All \$13.95-\$15, from Riverhead.

Cameron Abbott's **Inexpressible State of Grace** and her earlier book, **To The Edge** would be the next most popular novels. Both \$17.95, Haworth.

Lisa Stocker's **P-Town Summer**, thanks in part to being all about Provincetown, leads the Light Reading/Romance category (\$14, Kensington). The summer's other two leading romance titles are Jackie Calhoun's **Woman in the Mirror** and Diana Tremain Braund's **The Finest Kind of Love**, both \$12.95, both from Bella.



Katherine V. Forrest's **Hancock Park** and Claire McNab's **The Wombat Strategy** lead the mystery pack. \$25.95, Penguin and \$13.95, Alyson, respectively. [So much for the old saw that lesbians don't buy hardcovers....]

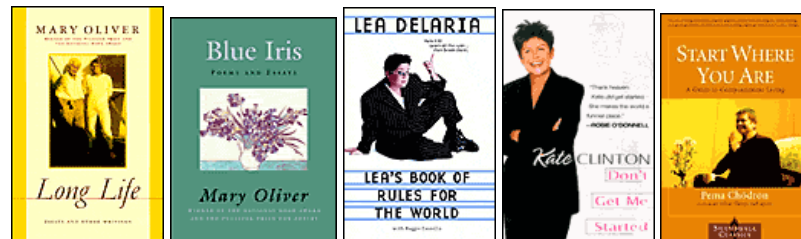
Vacation trips to Provincetown aren't all about reading, of course. The top-seller in the erotic inspiration section is Tristan Taormino's collection **Best Lesbian Erotica 2004**. The new Cleis collection has been the top seller every year for the last five years or so. Alyson Press' **Best Lesbian Love Stories 2004**, edited by Angela Brown, is right behind it. Both are \$14.95.



Poetry isn't usually our bestselling category. But we sell a lot of local poet Mary Oliver's work. She – and her work – break all the myths that people can't – or don't – read poetry. She writes more about her relationship in the essays in **Long Life** (\$22, Da Capo/Perseus), which adds to its popularity among our customers. **Blue Iris: Poems and Essays** (\$22, Beacon) was just released and is selling right along with her earlier poetry collection, **Why I Wake Early** (\$22, Beacon). I order them in batches of ten. That's amazing for hardcover poetry.

People are looking for a beach read, vacation book, so we don't sell a lot of non-fiction, except for books from comedians Lea Delaria and Kate Clinton who both spend a lot of time here and do a lot of shows during the season. **Lea's Book of Rules for the World** and Kate's **Don't Get Me Started** both do very well here. \$14, Random House and \$15, Dell, respectively.

And, you might be surprised, all of the Pema Chodron books – **Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living**, and **Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times**, for example, sell steadily. It's the West Coast influence arriving on the East Coast.... Both \$12.95, from Shambhala.



Many thanks to Karen and the entire crew at *Womencrafts*. You can find them at 376 Commercial St., Provincetown, MA 02657. 508-487-2501. You can find them online at <http://www.womencrafts.com>. There's a current list of women's bookstores at www.litwomen.org/WIP/stores.html.



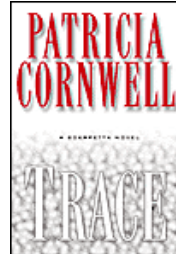
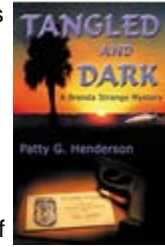
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The Crime Scene

By Nan Cinnater

People who read mysteries know what they like, and it's usually a fairly refined taste. Those who like CSI-style forensics wouldn't be caught dead reading a medieval mystery, for instance. Mysteries have spawned many strong sub-genres, and most readers don't like all of them. I believe it was Dorothy Parker who wrote in a review, "This is the sort of thing you will like very much if you like this sort of thing." Well, this month's "Crime Scene" is full of this sort of thing: sub-genre mysteries that some people will like very much indeed.

Some people are wowed by woo-woo mysteries (with ghosts or other supernatural elements), but I am not. Those who feel at home among the living dead will love two new mysteries featuring Brenda Strange, a lesbian psychic detective in Tampa, Florida: **The Burning of Her Sin** and **Tangled and Dark** by Patty G. Henderson (both \$12.95, Bella Books). The wonderful Ellen Hart pretty much says it all in her cover blurb: "Think The X-Files meets a lesbian Jackie Collins for a weekend of fun and frolic at the House of Usher."



Those of you who appreciate all the grisly details of forensic science have been eagerly awaiting **Trace**, the new Kay Scarpetta novel by Patricia Cornwell (\$26.95, Putnam). Even though Cornwell was outed in 1996, her lesbian character Lucy is fated always to play second fiddle to the super-competent, heterosexual Scarpetta. (For information on the real-life courtroom drama involving Cornwell's relationship with a female FBI agent, see the May 1997 *Vanity Fair* or check out this fansite: <http://www.246.dk/cornwell.html>)

So far, all of Scarpetta's rivals in the forensics field have also turned out to be heterosexual. Nevertheless, you may want to give the following strong, feminist crimefighters a try:

In **Monday Mourning** by Kathy Reichs (\$25, Scribner), forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan digs up the remains of three young women, all victims of the same serial killer in Montreal. This is the seventh in an excellent series by real-life forensic anthropologist Reichs that began with **Deja Dead**. Reichs' latest paperback is **Bare Bones** (both Pocket, \$7.99).

Indelible by the aptly named Karin Slaughter (\$24.95, William Morrow) – yes, it's her real name – is a flashback story featuring Georgia medical examiner Sara Linton and her ex-husband, police chief Jeffrey Tolliver, back when their relationship first began. If you've never met these characters, start with Slaughter's kickass debut, **Blindsighted** (\$7.50, Harper), which was followed by **Kisscut** (\$7.99, Harper) and **A Faint Cold Fear** (\$7.99, Harper).

Mary Logue's **Bone Harvest** (\$23.95, Ballantine) is a strongly atmospheric police procedural involving a gruesome past crime. Wisconsin Deputy Sheriff Claire Watkins thinks she's dealing with small-time vandalism when pesticides are stolen from the local farmers' coop; but pesticides are lethal, and gradually the terror mounts.



If, on the other hand, you prefer a more genteel murder, along with a Devon cream high tea, you will rejoice at the publication of a new Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey novel. Jill Paton Walsh, who co-authored **Thrones, Dominations** (\$6.50, St. Martin's Press), a mystery left unfinished by Golden Age writer Dorothy L. Sayers, has now brought out **A Presumption of Death** (\$6.99, St. Martin's) using Sayers' "The Wimsey Papers" as the basis for a mystery set in WWII Britain at the start of the Blitz. In the late 1920's and early 1930's, Sayers invented the feminist mystery. If you've never read it, there is no substitute for Sayers' **Gaudy Night** (\$6.99, Harper).

Anthologies, of course, can have something for everyone. One of the best, **A Moment on the Edge** edited by Elizabeth George (\$24.95, Harper Collins), celebrates 100 years of crime writing in English by women. George selects Golden Age authors (Sayers, Christie) and the new women private eye writers (Muller, Paretsky), as well as literary authors not known for their crime writing (Oates, Gordimer). **Shades of Black** (\$23.95, Berkley Prime Crime), edited by Eleanor Taylor Bland, collects mystery stories by African Americans, including stories by herself, Grace Edwards, Frankie Y. Bailey,

and other women as well as classic male writers like Hugh Holton and Walter Mosley. In **Wild Crimes** (\$6.99, Signet), Alaskan author Dana Stabenow features wilderness mysteries by our favorites S.J. Rozan and Laurie R. King (but significantly missing Nevada Barr), in a mixed gender collection.

Note that Dana Stabenow's new Kate Shugak mystery is out: **A Taint in the Blood** (\$24.95, St. Martin's). Her latest paperback in that series is **A Grave Denied** (\$6.99, St. Martin's). For more on Stabenow, see [BTWOF Lesbian Edition #4](#).



In **Lucky Stiff** by Elizabeth Sims (third in a series following **Holy Hell** and **Damn Straight**, all \$13.95, Alyson), lesbian freelance writer Lillian Byrd encounters Duane, a childhood friend she hasn't seen since she was twelve. The night Duane left, Lillian's parents died in a fire. Naturally, Duane's



reappearance raises questions about what really happened. **Lucky Stiff** works beautifully on many levels – a good mystery with an engaging, witty narrator; a wonderfully layered unraveling of childhood memories and secrets; a noir trailer-park tale of lust, greed, and retribution. Sims pokes fun at the lesbian mystery/romance genre by describing Lillian's reading matter: imaginary thrillers about the "gorgeous and accomplished private sleuth, Calico Jones." Thus it's surprising when Sims

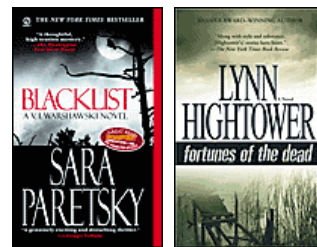
introduces Lillian's love interest, Minerva Banks. A famous true-crime writer who is beautiful, fabulously wealthy, and a Vegas high roller to boot, Minerva seems like a character out of a Calico Jones story. Lillian and Minerva may be an odd couple, but it doesn't ruin this otherwise believable, smart novel.

It must be terribly difficult to write about the phenomenon we call the Sixties (peace, love, hippies, revolution), because I can't think of a truly great Sixties novel. **The Patron Saint of Red Chevys** by Kay Sloan (\$21.95, Permanent Press) is a good but not great coming-of-age story about the South in the Sixties, masquerading as a mystery. Jubilee Starling, a white teenager growing up in Biloxi, Mississippi, begins her tale with the murder of her mother, stabbed by an unknown assailant in the front seat of her pickup truck. The first half (Biloxi, 1963) is immediate and compelling, with Jubilee as a fresh and funny narrator, but the second half (Berkeley, 1968) bogs down a little in peace, love, hippies, etc. As far as I can tell neither Jubilee nor her sister grows up to be a lesbian, but you never know what the Seventies might bring.

Now in Paperback

Blacklist by Sara Paretsky (\$7.99, Signet) – See [BTWOF Lesbian Edition #3](#).

Fortunes of the Dead by Lynn Hightower (\$6.99, Pocket) – See [BTWOF Lesbian Edition #4](#).



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Hothead Paisan—The Musical

BTWOF had a great time at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival – and it was great to talk to so many BTWOF subscribers there.

The highlight of the Festival, in our humble opinion (next to talking to BTWOF subscribers, of course) was Friday night's debut of "Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Musical," conceived and written by Animal (of

“Bitch and Animal”) Prufrock. Animal has dreamed of turning Diane DiMassa’s brilliant comic series *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* into an opera and has spent much of the last year doing so. She gathered a star-studded cast:

Ani Difranco was one wild and wonderful Chicken
 Rhiannon was brilliant as Roz
 Edie Klecka played Lampy
 Suhir Blackeagle did Sharquee
 Kate Wolf was a perfect Daphne
 Susan Powter did a wild Personality #2
 And Animal was beyond brilliant as Hothead



The “Whorchestra” members – Alyson Palmer, Toshi Reagon, Jami Sieber, Julie Wolf, Debi Buzil– were equally brilliant and courageous. And Diane DiMassa’s sets were perfect.

Animal, cast & musicians rehearsed for four pre-Michigan days and then presented an absolutely brilliant show.

The gals want to take it to Broadway. I admit I was skeptical at first – but having seen the job Animal and her team did with this first act, I really think it could work. Hothead is just outrageous enough, the interpretation is excellent, and the music was good enough that I can see a Bush-weary New York embracing Hothead as their own. Check out the work-in-progress at <http://animalsfarm.net/hotheadmusical.html>. And if you have money to spend on launching a lesbian musical, write to Animal Prufrock at mistress@animalsfarm.net or c/o Animals Farm, PO Box 537, Haydenville, MA 01039 or, better yet, just send a check (with “Hothead” on the memo line) to The Fund for Women Artists, PO Box 60637, Florence, MA 01062.

If you’re a Hothead or Animal freak – or if you totally regret not having seen the premiere, check out *Viral Chaos: The Making of an Animal Artist*, a DVD looking at Animal’s creation of *Hothead Paisan the Musical*. It takes place in Animal’s home during the last three months before the Michigan debut. 59 minutes, \$20, and all proceeds go to creating and producing the show.

When you see Hothead on Broadway – or the touring musical – remember that you saw it here, first!



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Caught Reading—Michigan

In the spirit of the American Association of Publishers’ Caught Reading program (designed to encourage children and others to - *gasp!* - read), BTWOF asked all the booksellers, publishers, and writers we could find at Michigan what they’re reading.

We caught feminist theorist Marilyn Frye on her security shift. She was reading **The Seduction of Water** by Carol Goodman. “No lesbian characters so far,” she said, “But there’s hope for one of them....” Each time we ran into each other she’d report, “Not yet...” but the end of the festival came before the end of the book. Goodman’s earlier book, **The Lake of Dead Languages** (what a title!), looks equally inviting. Other security-shift workers were reading science fiction – including a lot of Nicola Griffith – **Bending the Landscape: Original Gay and Lesbian Writing: Science Fiction** and **The Blue**



Whoopi Goldberg caught reading *Peter Pan*. No, not at Michigan, as part of AAP’s [Caught Reading](#) program. Check their site to see what Pat Schroeder, Rosie

Place. One woman was working her way through a biography of Mahler. We were impressed!

O'Donnell, Barbara Lee, and others are reading

Animal (Prufrock), who has been living, breathing, and getting Diane DiMassa's Hothead on the road to Broadway is also producing Susan Powter's one woman show, [The Politics of Stupid](#). Between the two of them they're reading Rosalind Miles' **Women's History of the World**, Mary Daly's **Gyn/Ecology**, the original plays of Aphra Brehn, and **The Scum Manifesto** "by the brilliant, Valerie Solanis." And, Susan added, "**The Bitter Queen Chaser Project** – poems by Animal Prufrock. I spent a whole lot of time reading these grand, grand poems....as should everyone." It's a zine-ish, 30-some collection of Animal's recent writings and drawings (compiled by Jane Bernstein) that was for sale at Michigan as a fundraiser for the Musical. \$10. Try Animal's web site: <http://www.animalsfarm.net>.

Hothead Paisan creator Diane DiMassa had just finished Mary Roach's **Stiff** and was reading rock star Kurt Cobain's biography, **Heavier than Heaven**.

Laura Love was signing her new book, **You Ain't Got No Easter Clothes**, at the Woman's Prerogative booth when BTWOF caught up with her. She'd been reading Barbara Ehrenreich's **Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America** and Michael Moore's **Dude, Where's My Country?**

I caught Amy Blake reading Katherine V. Forrest's **Hancock Park** one evening after the [Woman's Prerogative](#) booth had closed. Her able assistant-for-the-week and previous co-owner, Kelly Smith (now with [Bywater Books](#)), was caught reading Val McDermid's **Clean Break** (see [BTWOF Lesbian Issue #1](#)) and Cynn Chadwick's **Girls With Hammers** (see [BTWOF Lesbian Issue #5](#)).

Over at the People Called Women booth, Gina was reading singer-songwriter Laura Love's just-off-press **You Ain't Got No Easter Clothes**, Carolyn was reading the 20th anniversary edition of Starhawk's **Spiral Dance**, Diane was reading Ann Patchett's tale of friendship, **Truth and Beauty**, Amy was reading Laurie Notaro's **I Love Everybody (And Other Atrocious Lies)**, and Luann was reading Lauren Maddison's **Witchfire** (see [BTWOF Lesbian Issue #3](#)). And, during the quiet moments between customers, they were all browsing through copies of [Off Our Backs](#).

Kayla Rose ([Herland Bookstore](#)/Santa Cruz, CA) raved about Kathleen Ann Goonan's **Crescent City Rhapsody** and **Queen City Jazz**, two fantastic science fiction tales featuring smart, city-saving heroines (one of whom is a reincarnation of Marie Laveau), nanotechnology gone mad, living through techno/cultural revolutions, and fierce analysis of power – who has it and who doesn't. How often do you get black women heroines in sf?

We found writer Kate Allan managing traffic and all else at the night stage entrance. She was reading **The Secret Life of Bees** (see [BTWOF Lesbian Issue #1](#)).

Musician Jamie Anderson was also caught up in Laura Love's **You Ain't Got No Easter Clothes**.

And that's the news from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival – where the women are strong and the women are pretty, and the women are any- and everything else they want to be. Next year is the 30th anniversary. If you've been thinking about Michigan for a while but haven't made it, next year's festival is the one to attend! More info at www.michfest.com/ or write WWTMC, Box 22, Walhalla, MI 49458.



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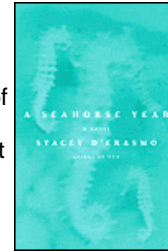
Where did the inspiration for *The Seahorse Year* come from?

I was living in California and finishing my first novel when two things happened that gave off that unpredictable buzz of interest around which novels form.

One was that a friend, a psychiatrist, told me a story about a young man coming into an emergency room where she was working years ago. He had all sorts of strange symptoms and his parents couldn't understand what was wrong with him, but she knew right away that he was having a psychotic break. She felt, she said, so terrible for this family because of what she knew lay ahead for them all.

The other thing that happened was that I had an image of a man driving up the 101 and going through the tunnel just above the Golden Gate Bridge, the one that has a rainbow painted on it. The man, I knew, was in trouble, and he was going somewhere that troubled him.

So around these two things – an anecdote and a kind of daydream – the book got its start.



What was your writing process?

I began the book just as my first novel, *Tea*, was going to press. From the beginning, I had a very strong sense of each character, and, for a long time, the book was in alternating first-person perspectives. It was as if I were listening to each person tell me his or her story; I listened like that for a long time, just trying to understand what each one was really about and what he or she desired. I knew that the narrative would be about the psychic unraveling of this young boy, Christopher, and how the effects of that would radiate through all the people who are in his life — in other words, I knew that the development of his illness would provide me with plenty of plot.

But, on a deeper level, I began to understand that what I was tracing was not just Christopher's affect on people, as if he were a billiard ball knocking into other billiard balls, but also, or perhaps primarily, how all the characters in the novel are on their way to becoming who they've really been all along. Under the external pressure of this crisis with Christopher, the people around him are pushed to their limits, and I think that each one is somewhat surprised to discover what those limits are, and, really, who he or she has always been.

What sort of research did you do?

I always find my characters before I do any research; then, once I have a strong sense of them, I begin reading and traveling and figuring out what I need to know. I had lived in northern California, so I had some sense of the place. To bring Christopher into sharper focus, I read various memoirs, like Mark Vonnegut's *The Eden Express*, Lori Schiller's *The Quiet Room*, and a number of other first-person accounts of serious mental illness. To get a sense of what Marina's daily life might be like, I talked to several artists. It was important to me to understand the daily, physical, repetitive nature of her work: what her hands would feel like, what her studio would smell and look like, the sheer physical labor often involved in making art. Around the same time, my partner got a painting studio nearby, which was really helpful as well.

After I'd been working on the book for several years – it was four years in the making – it became clear to me that I needed to go to northern California and take the trip that Christopher, his mother, and his girlfriend take. That trip turned out to be a watershed moment because it gave me details and environments that were vital not only to the plot, but to the development of the characters. For instance, until I went to Humboldt and saw for myself the sheer mass of trees in those forests, I didn't truly understand how despairing Nan might be, looking for her son. She'd be frantic. She'd be sure she'd lost him forever. She would do absolutely anything to find him before he disappeared into this vast ocean of trees.

I went to the Monterey Aquarium, went to Emporio Armani (tough day) in San Francisco, went to saltwater aquarium stores, and asked lots of questions. Every layer of research would bring more dimensions to the characters [and] root them in their world.

Did you have an agenda for this novel? Any kind of social purpose? Or does that not drive your writing?

I wouldn't say that there was an agenda per se. It was more a feeling, the same feeling I had when I wrote *Tea*, which was that I wanted the reader to get as close to these characters as possible, so close that you'd feel as if

you could hear them breathe. It's probably given more urgency, certainly, by the fact that many of them are gay – it made me want to write them as deeply and richly as I could, so that they couldn't be ignored, or tossed into some category, or written off. I wanted an intimacy with them to be unavoidable, and for each of them to be as heroic and problematic as anyone, everyone, is in real life.

Do you have a (brief!) comment on the state of lesbian/gay literature or on the pleasures, problems, and opportunities derived from writing about lesbian and gay characters at this point in time?

I think it's an incredibly interesting time to be writing lesbian and gay characters because we're a group of people who are only quasi-assimilated: we're quasi-legal, quasi-married, quasi-empowered, some of us are still quasi-closeted, we're quasi-respectable. Politically, of course, we should be entitled to be fully everything with all good speed, but for a novelist, writing about people who don't fit smoothly into the social order—people whose seams are showing and who have to strive for everything they have—is very rich territory. We are, as a group, crosshatched with contradictions, both internally generated and externally imposed. Because of the homophobia in the world, it's easy to feel the pressure to make gay characters unimpeachable paragons, or to drain away their sexuality, their emotional complexity, their saltiness in all senses. But I think that would be a terrible mistake; it would be, in fact, to turn away from the kind of multiply layered material for which novelists pray.

What are you reading?

Right now I'm reading Shirley Hazzard's *The Great Fire*. It takes place in Japan just after World War II, and it happens to have all these interesting resonances to this peculiar political moment we're all living in right now. The characters are living their lives, falling in love, grieving - literally amid the ruins of war and on what feels like the brink of a strange new world. It's beautifully elliptical, melancholy, and emotionally dense.



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Awards

Arundhati Roy Wins 2004 Sydney Peace Prize

The Sydney Peace Prize, the only international peace prize awarded in Australia, celebrates inspiring people and their achievements. The jury's citation read, "Arundhati Roy has been recognized for her courage in campaigns for human rights and for her advocacy of non-violence, as expressed in her demands for justice for the poor, for the victims of communal violence, for the millions displaced by the Narmada dam projects and by her opposition to nuclear weapons."

Roy first received international acclaim for her novel *The God of Small Things*. Her nonfiction works include *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, *War Talk* (see [BTWOF Lesbian Edition #5](#)), *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile* and *Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy*.



Thanks again to Alyson Press for sponsoring this issue. See you next issue.

Yours in spreading the words,

Carol Seajay
for *Books To Watch Out For*



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