



The Possibilities are Staggering

The text of a speech delivered before the 2nd Annual
Lesbian Writers Conference Chicago, September 19, 1975

by Barbara Grier

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"A great wave of sisterly love." All I can really hear or feel is my heart beating, because I am very frightened to be up here. Part of the price paid for being "Gene Damon" was living away from people for twenty years of my life. Collecting and reading books was about all I did while writing for *The Ladder*. This makes speaking to even a happy, good audience very difficult for me.

I have always been arrogant about *The Ladder* and our past. And because I spend all my time reading about what happened to all of us or all those lesbians who came before us, I've always assumed that everybody else knew all those things too. But, obviously, that's not so.

The Ladder was begun in 1956, ran until 1972 and stopped publishing. We hope someday that if it doesn't begin again some magazine will come along to do the things it began. There were other writers beyond those that Valerie Taylor mentioned. One early contributor of two lengthy letter-essays was Lorraine Hansberry. We published her in 1956, about a year before she became the first--let's see, I want to get this right--the first Black writer to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. I am especially proud that she was among the very first contributors. Every fifth issue in those days we had to write a disclaimer telling our readers, "Your name is safe, we won't tell that you subscribe to *The Ladder*." Our mail was almost evenly divided between women who were overjoyed that we existed and those who were so terrified that they wanted their names off the mailing list after seeing an issue or two.

That's very sad, and I'm glad that that's gone and over. There could have been no meeting like this one tonight then. Which brings me back to "Gene Damon" which has now become my albatross. By the time it was "all right" not to use a pseudonym, I was too well-known as "Gene Damon" to become "Barbara Grier". At a speech Robin Morgan gave in Los Angeles a few years ago she said, "Among the women who founded the DOB and began *The Ladder*, were Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and Barbara Grier." Two different friends wrote me to say they heard women in the audience say, "Who the hell is Barbara Grier?"

Hopefully, next year Diana Press will be bringing out a three-volume compilation of biography, fiction and essays from back issues of *The Ladder*. The information on the jacket of these books is going to say "Gene Damon" though I have insisted that "Barbara Grier" appear in parentheses after it everywhere that the name comes up. I guess after twenty years I'm stuck with it.

On the subject of being an "up-front" lesbian, the pseudonym was not to keep people from finding out that Barbara Grier was and is a lesbian. I began telling people I was a lesbian when I was about twelve--which is when I discovered it. The very first person I told, I have since learned, is the last person most people tell. I went home and told my mother. I was very lucky she took it so well; it might have given her ideas, because my next youngest sister is also a lesbian.

There seems to be a real demand for the women of our past. And that's really what I want to talk about tonight. I'm always expected to talk about literature and writers, but I don't have to do that by myself anymore because, as Marie pointed out, there's a marvelous book out which does a good job of talking about the more famous and open lesbian writers of our past, *Lesbian Images*, by Jane Rule. There are other books bearing on the subject; many women are interested in talking about lesbian writers--Marie's own bibliography is an excellent example. I said about all I needed to say in *The Lesbian in Literature*, which is a guide to help you find the books if you want to read on the subject.

We have a glorious past and much emphasis in the lesbian press in recent years has been placed on how lost our women have been, buried, more or less in male history. Buried they may well have been, but we are here to dig them up, figuratively, to bring them to life for today. We need less commentary on our losses and more on our gains . . . and much more research and reportage for the women who will come after us, women hungry to know their heritage.

You out there in the audience are their hope. A year ago at one of the myriad conferences on the west coast dealing with lesbians, a packet of information distributed contained a series of interesting quotations from one of the developers of the meeting. She said in effect, that she was ignorant of her history as a lesbian and "not into a scholarly trip", that she hoped to learn from sisters willing to do the "hard research."

Hard is not a valid word for the work needed; most of it is exciting and the sources exist. Willingness to spend time reading and compiling is half the battle. The possibilities are staggering. I have card files overflowing with unworked information, notes on women I've personally not had time to research fully or even at all beyond the basics. And even the fifty or so women I've written about at length through the years need much more said about them.

I'd like to talk about a particular woman who is virtually unknown. The fascinating, almost movie script life of Marion Barbara Carstairs deserves a full-length book at the very least. And one of these days, possibly someone in this room will write it. "Jo" Carstairs was born in 1900 into a socially

prominent family. As have so many women in such surroundings, she rebelled early. She ran away from Lowe-Heywood School in Connecticut when she was sixteen. She went to England, drove an ambulance in the First World War as did the heroine of *The Well of Loneliness* as well as its author, Radclyffe Hall. She raced boats, raced motorcycles and drove fast cars; she ran a gypsy caravan in Brighton. None of this would make her candidate for extensive biography, possibly, but her later life surely would. In 1933, the year I was born, Jo liquidated her personal fortune (by that time, despite having been disinherited by her family, she was wealthy) and bought an island in the Bahamas called Whale Cay. She moved there at once, finding she'd become owner of 3000 acres of land, 8 miles long and 16 miles wide, covered with scrub and virtually uninhabitable except for a lighthouse cared for by a lonely elderly couple. In the next eight years, she built that island into a paradise and a fortress. She put fifteen miles of paved road on it. She built forty-odd buildings, including a house that would make this church look small. She brought an almost-army of workers to it and gave them all jobs and training. Then she turned it into a vegetable-growing paradise. Which perhaps doesn't sound remarkable in Chicago this year, but it was remarkable on the soil available there. And that's just the bare bones of the things in her life. She really was a fabulous sister. She belongs to our past; somebody should dig her up and write about her.

There are many, many others like her. I have probably three thousand cards, just single cards at home in files. Each one of them has just one or sometimes two--pairs of women are much nicer really--and every one of them should be looked into. Not all of them, probably, would be worthy of a book; but certainly all would be a chapter or at least a few lines, and they all need to be talked about because all the women out there are really waiting to hear about their past.

It's very, very difficult to feel that you were born when you came out and women are still doing that today. When you are close to a movement, as presumably all of you are, it's hard to realize that most of the women who come out come out alone. That's something I do know about, because through the years, the vast majority of women who were most interested in receiving *The Ladder* were isolated people who lived in small towns. They still exist; we still get mail constantly, from young women primarily, although not exclusively, between fifteen and twenty-five. They write saying: "I have just discovered myself; no one else in the world, no one else in my area is like me." They all love some kind of identity.

(Comment from audience: Do you try to put them in contact with one another?) No, I really don't have the facilities to do that; however, we do answer all the mail we get. Which brings me to another thing: the problem of responsibility in publishing, and it's something I have to mention tonight

because it seems an important part of keeping everything going and everyone together. Probably most of you are familiar with Ambitious Amazons' *Lesbian Connection*--the lesbian newsletter that is coming out with lesbian information and going to people free. They are trying to keep a sort of tie with every group so that all lesbians can keep in touch with what is going on in their world wherever their world may be at the time. We need a great deal more of that; but also, those of us who work with publications in any sense need to be responsible to people who write in to us or approach us in any way. It's still as difficult today as it was fifteen or eighteen years ago to get responses to mail inquiries. We are not even active in the sense that *The Ladder* has not been published since 1972, but we do still answer inquiries. Many, many publications are not answering their mail. Many of them do not have or do not think they have the time to do so. But we have to have the time to do so. We have to, even if it means less public activity or private time, because it's extremely important. The only way our ranks will swell the way they have to swell, the only way all the women will come out is if we help everybody who is in the process of coming out. Not just the people we know and greet happily as we did downstairs tonight--all fairly self-confident, all very happy to be here, all very unnerved about being here.

Most lesbians are still nervous. Yesterday afternoon in downtown Chicago, while going around a corner of a building, Donna and I passed a sister who isn't here tonight. She should be; she tried to crawl through the stone wall of the building just because she had seen us walking together down the street. There are still, for every one in this room, thousands out there who would react the way she did. I wish she were here tonight; I wish they all were. I'm sure you know what I mean, and the writers--lesbian writers--are the people who can do this. We can with what we write, what we publish, what we put together and send out. For the isolated ones, the frightened ones, we're their only hope. The only place they have to go, for the most part.

Which brings me to publishing. More of it is needed; new presses, more newsletters and newspapers, all magazines that exist, and we're right now mourning the death of *Amazon Quarterly*; it has issued its last. I understand--and I won't name them (that sometimes is almost a death sign)--there are at least two other publications, one of which is exclusively lesbian and one of which is lesbian/feminist, that are definitely dying and dying almost immediately. Reasons given are usually time and money . . . but there is, I suspect, a far more dangerous reason, the malaise of overwork and the exhaustion of those willing to work. We need to support them and I don't necessarily mean support them with money, although that helps a great deal. We need to send them material. They still, all of them, suffer for material. All they get (and I've had this information from several) is coming-out stories or political analysis, and they cannot build whole issues on this material.

Because eventually when the readers cannot stand to read any more political analysis, and don't care who came out, they'll stop reading.

About once every month, I am asked to write a biographical or historical article; right now I am not--I may be again--but there have to be a lot of women right here in this room who can do the necessary bare-bones research and write a biographical article for whatever local newsletter, newspaper--or one of the national ones; they all need material badly.

Most of the lesbian writers I know are interested in *individual publications*, which is understandable; to be a writer means to have an ego, it means to think that you have something to say that is important enough that at least one or two other people in the world will read what you have to say. So I can understand wanting to do individual publications. They're very, very important, but there's no money for that either. In a lot of cases, so many more cooperative enterprises need to happen. We need to put things together with the help of other people, pool the resources to get things out; once again, if we don't, they won't get out. Everything that gets out, brings out more people; the more resources, the more money. All of it is very important. All of it needs to be done.

So far almost none of our publishing ventures have been self-sustaining . . . and there is going to be a long period of time probably before that will happen. There are encouraging signs in the book creating publishing ventures. Daughters, Inc. of Vermont is flourishing; if I understand correctly--they have a great deal of money. They deal now entirely in fiction. Diana Press is functioning well, though they struggle a good bit. They are doing non-fiction though and that is encouraging. Their next release is Jeannette Howard Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, due out on or about Thanksgiving Day this year. Next year, they are to begin publishing a series of three anthologies gathered from the sixteen years of *The Ladder*, the late lamented lesbian journal to which I owe my life's allegiance. The first of these is to be biographical in nature, the second a collection of fiction and the last a collection of essays from *The Ladder's* pages. Many other presses are dealing in poetry, which is a loving and needed, but very limited field. The Naiad Press which just began in 1973, has so far published only fiction, two novels now out and two scheduled for release in 1976. Chicago's own Lavender Press has published poetry and Womanpress *Women Loving Women* an annotated bibliography. *The Ladder* has issued its own index and the new edition of *The Lesbian in Literature* (which title was supposed to be my talk tonight, but I fooled you!)

What to do next? Well, one thing is certain, those of us who fancy ourselves as writers for the lesbian movement have got to begin contributing well-worked out material to the existing

newspapers. Most of them are in need of material and welcome it. Most of them will privately admit to getting a good many coming-out tales and a good deal of political analysis and little else. They can also use, where you are situated physically near enough to help, your presence as a laborer, and the writers of this movement have got to be laborers, too.

There are many women to find, many lesbians to write about and for. We are the women to do this. We are leaders, whether we like that term or not. Not elitists, and maybe not even doers . . . we are the orators. We watch and record . . . that is our place and it is a good one. We have to go out on hills and listen for the fine wild sweet singing of our past and record it for our future.

If anyone has anything they want to ask, I'll try to answer it.

Q: I'm really unfamiliar with the reasons for *The Ladder* ceasing publication. Could you fill me in?

A: Yes. I know that so well I figured it was common knowledge. *The Ladder* published for sixteen years and stopped publishing with the August/September 1972 issue. It reached what is called a "circulation plateau"--this happens in publications where they don't have enough money to get to the next highest plateau in circulation to maintain enough money to keep on publishing. I see Valerie Taylor laughing. I know she is very familiar with this, having been in the publishing world most of her life.

The only excuse that I can give beyond that--and I always feel very apologetic because it's like my life, a great part of it, died at that point--the only excuse that I can give is that magazines support themselves in only three ways. One way is by advertising; and there simply was never enough money in that that could be fairly charged, and we wouldn't accept the kinds of ads that quite possibly would have made it possible to keep *The Ladder* publishing because, if we had, the women who read *The Ladder* wouldn't have read it. So there was no way to do it with advertising.

The other way is by having a benefactress, which we did have for many years, and which we lost in 1970 as a direct result of *The Ladder's* becoming less preoccupied with "homosexuality"--that is, in the sense of male homosexuals--and more preoccupied with where I think it's all coming from--the Women's Movement. That is not to say the Women's Movement sans the Lesbian Movement, but the Women's Movement and the Lesbian Movement. And as herstory has shown, I was right about that. I'm sorry we lost the benefactress. I wouldn't want *The Ladder* again at the price of the changes that were made in it. There's the editorial responsibility there. And that part I accept. I don't know if I answered your question.

Q: What was the third way a magazine could be supported?

A: As I said before--subscriptions. You could do it now on subscriptions even though everything is much higher than it was

then, and everything then was outrageous. You could do it today on subscriptions. I can tell just from the way *The Ladder* mailing list has grown. For example, tonight we had some cards down there and we've asked people, just casually, you know, give us your name and address and we'll put you on *The Ladder* mailing list. Assuming you could find a room full of lesbians ten years ago--you might at a party or a bar--then, after you'd found them, if you really wanted to watch them scatter, just ask them to please put their name and address down on a piece of paper. There wouldn't have been very many lesbians left in the room. And now, of course, there *are* actually enough lesbians to support a publication once it gets off the ground. I believe that Gina and Laurel of *Amazon Quarterly* really are saying, and I have no reason to believe that it isn't so, that when *AQ* reached its third year, it began to make enough money at least to drag along with. They were surviving, in other words, so that it could be done. Ironically, *AQ* died about the time it really went somewhere. The circulation doubled for the first two years in a row, and by the time it reached its all-time high, that was when it shut down. I'm being cautious, because the minute you say anything in publishing is a fact, it's not true anymore.

Q: What was the circulation of *The Ladder* when it stopped publishing?

A: The mailing list was 3,850, right at. Incidentally, nobody else has ever been that big.

Q: Why did you have over-twenty-one-year-olds only on the list?

A: Are you kidding? Have you ever heard of contributing to the delinquency of a minor? I have had letters from irate parents along this line. (Also, that was the age for membership in DOB.)

Q: How were you able to get so much national news and timely information?

A: That was easy to do. *Ladder* women were extremely loyal women. We asked that everyone everywhere in the country send clippings. We had an unbelievably active staff; we had about--I always exaggerate everything so I have to stop--we had about twenty-five very active women. Ten of them really worked hard; they were spread all over the country. I hadn't, at that point, ever met any of them. Nobody except the people who were in couple relationships met; which was wonderful--we didn't have to spend any time talking at all. All we did was work and write letters. It really cuts down on all kinds of hassle.

What we did was send out requests for all this clipping information. It all came eventually to me. I went through it, sort of lightly, and pulled out everything that I didn't think would help; and then I marked up everything and put them all together in stacks. I sent them to a woman in Kansas City whom I know quite well now but not in those days. She put it together and then typed it up. She would send it back, and I

would look through it and send it back, and she typed it up again. We kept demand up. For one thing, I wrote three hundred letters a week for four years while I edited the magazine. I found that since we couldn't pay anyone to function, the only way we could get people to work was to convince them that it was important that they do so. The best way to convince people that they are important to you is to pay attention to them, and that's how it worked. Everything in *The Ladder* was put together pretty much in that way.

Q: I was going to ask, you say *The Ladder* stopped in 1972, you've still got a mailing list going . . .

A: Oh, it's much bigger now.

Q: What have you been doing for these three years, now, trying to bring *The Ladder* out?

A: What are we doing? Well . . .

Q: Why are you keeping the mailing list alive?

A: Well, *would you* give up a mailing list of over five thousand?

Q: No. What I'd like to do is find a way to reach everyone on it.

A: Quite seriously, we are keeping the mailing list alive because it is probably the largest, and it certainly has got some of the oldest people on it, I mean really, chronologically, women who have been in the movement forever. We keep the mailing list because everything is still happening, many things are still going on. We put *The Index to The Ladder* out. It's an index to the whole sixteen years, and it just has fabulous things in it. Because we did not have a computer--all we had was nine hard-working women, some of them right here tonight--we put it together so that it's running year by year instead of interfiled which is the way you are supposed to do an index. We couldn't do it the right way because it would have taken five years or a computer to do it. As it was, it took almost three years to get it out; but it does have a lot of rare information in it because *The Ladder* had some really fabulous writers, some of the early writers. Admittedly, a lot of the early women wrote under pseudonyms, because in the early days, a lot of people did not want to be shot on the street.

You have to remember that Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon stood in the Mayor's office in San Francisco about two years after the DOB was founded and *The Ladder* was begun, and the then-mayor of San Francisco said, only partially in jest, to them: "Del, do you realize that someone could shoot you on the street tomorrow, and run for my job, and win it on that fact alone?" Several magazines wrote articles on the menace to society that was taking place in San Francisco; so understandably, even though women there were a comparatively speaking up-front brave lot, some of the outlying women, especially those who were trying to keep on earning livings--had to write under pseudonyms. So we

had a lot of women who have now become "quote unquote" famous writers writing under pseudonyms. Lorraine Hansberry is an example; there were many others. We also published, just recently, the new edition of *The Lesbian in Literature*; and it's very different from the old one which came out in 1967 and which was a best seller--which made me think that this one would be, but it hasn't been yet . . .

Q: It costs too much!

A: It does *not* cost too much! I *am now married* to a librarian, I *have been married* to a librarian for several years; previously I was married for twenty years to another librarian; and I will state categorically that a bibliography that costs \$10 and has 96 pages and 2,500 entries and twenty years of my life does not cost too much at ten dollars. There is another factor. The books cost a great deal of money; but that does not mean that I'm saying because I paid a lot of money that I'm ripping off my sisters to make up for it, but the bibliography at \$10 is really not expensive. It really, really is not. My saying it will not make any of you who think it is, think less so; I realize that, but I'm trying to be very forceful about it. Publishing is very expensive. Even if you are capable, physically, of doing all the work yourself, it's still expensive and very hard work. A relative of mine the other day stated, "Any idiot knows that you don't buy publishing stocks." Now, this relative of mine is an expert in the stock world, and it is considered a fact that publishing is bad business--and here I am recommending that everyone go into it more ardently than ever. But from the standpoint of money, no one is ever going to make any money doing it. And that's really not what any of us are doing it for, but Marie is asking why *The Ladder* must remain . . . I suppose it's because we must keep doing other things. We're promoting books for the Naiad Press--that's the new lesbian press I mentioned, and they're not going to put out anything except lesbian material period--of that I am certain.

Q: Would you say something about Naiad Press?

A: The Naiad Press began in 1973. There are only four people connected with it. I'm one of the four, but I'm not officially. I am the promotional director since *The Ladder* is doing all of its promotion. They do their own mailing of the individual books. I don't really know when you say tell you about them what to tell you about them. You give me some idea of what you want to know--all they've done is publish two books; they'll publish two more next year, and will probably publish two or more in the year following. They don't have enough money to publish many things very fast. It costs so very much in investment to start a book.

Q: Do they do their own printing?

A: No. They are elderly, not well, women. Literally. The idea is so ludicrous to think of them as printing their own

things; they have enough difficulty just living from day to day.

Q: Why did they decide to publish if they are so frail?

A: Because they love women, and because there aren't enough women around to publish, and not enough presses around to publish women's, lesbian, material.

Q: Are they doing it out of their own money?

A: Yes. Out of love.

Q: I just wondered if it were not more economical to have Diana Press or one of the presses do it. Instead of making one of your own, support the ones that are existing. Maybe contribute time . . .

A: Diana Press will not allow women to contribute time, and they don't want women to contribute money--and they have a very good reason, with which I partially agree. Diana Press feels that women eventually are going to be paid for their labor, and therefore, the women who work for Diana Press make some money. So far they are three women and they are scraping out; they're starving to death, but in theory, they're being paid--like ten cents an hour, which is well below minimum wage. And that's the reason. Your idea is fine, and many, virtually every press that falls in the area could be helped by what you're suggesting. But Diana Press has taken the stand that women--well, I say they won't allow contributions; that really is a contradiction, too, because they did ask for money when they had fire damage this last year at Christmas. They *did ask* for help then. But I think that was a little special. Mostly, I think the other presses, certainly the newspaper publications, need all the help they can get. If you've got some anywhere near that you can help, they'd be more than grateful.

Q: Tell me if I can find this out by reading your bibliography, but could you name some women who used pseudonyms in *The Ladder* who now we'd know by their own names?

A: I was so afraid that someone would ask this--I could, I really could if I could think. Jeannette Foster had several names. Lorraine Hansberry just signed her initials to the marvelous essays she wrote. What she wrote were two great long essays on being Black and being a lesbian and being a feminist and trying to do them all at the same time. They were very exciting. Uhm, women, famous women? Tell you what--I will be here when I finish on stage; the minute I walk off the stage I become articulate and intelligent. (Laughter.)

Q: Would you say something about those three hundred letters you wrote?

A: What would you like me to say about that? It was hellish.

Q: What did you do?

A: What did I do in those days? How did I live? Literally?

Q: Well, I just sat here and figured it out--it comes to sixty

letters a day!

A: It's exactly sixty letters a day, which was my absolute capacity; yes, you're right. Well, first of all, I couldn't do it now, because I'm forty-two. I was much younger then, I think. It was very hard. Now look, when I say sixty letters a day--I'll go back and be fair now--some letters were answered like this: "Dear So-And-So, I'm really glad you wrote. I'm sorry I don't have time tonight but the answer to your question is" and arrows pointing and little words scrawled on the face of the letters themselves. Then whatever had to be sent to them was stuck on and back into an envelope and in a pile on the floor. I was highly organized, and as I said when I first started tonight, I lived more or less away from the world for twenty years. During the four years that I edited *The Ladder*, I held down a four or a six hour job every day. At least one of the two. And helped keep a house together and was married. But I didn't do anything else. By that, I mean I did not take walks, see a show--no, I did--I saw one show and two ball games; baseball games--it's a secret addiction. That's it. I mean I did not do any of the things we think of in terms of recreation. I got up, I went to work, I came home, I did my share of the house, and I spent the night at the typewriter or reading when I quit the typewriter because I couldn't sit up any longer. I read the mail that was incoming, and the manuscripts, and all the periodicals that I had to read in those days. I was reading every review written in the English language about books--especially fiction and biography--so that I could find all the lesbian books so that I could keep up my column, and those of you here who may have been reading *The Ladder* in those days know that during the years that I edited *The Ladder* the "Lesbiana" column went to hell because I couldn't keep it up.

Q: What kind of work did you do as "Barbara Grier"?

A: I was a non-professional librarian for five years, senior correspondent for a mutual fund; I've been a free lance writer (a bad hack writer--I had a lot of bad paperback books published back in the days when people could publish paperback books without writing porno. None were lesbian and there were none that I would want to claim here.) Clerical work. Anything to make money.

NOTES

- Page 1 -- Hansberry wrote two long letter-essays to *The Ladder*, portions of which were printed in 1956 issues. Hansberry was also one of the founding members of the New York DOB.
- Page 9 -- Naiad incorporated early in 1976 with Barbara Grier as stockholder. They currently have four titles in print and two more will be off press before the end of 1976. For more information, write to:
The Naiad Press, Inc.
% *The Ladder*
Box 5025, Washington Station
Reno, Nevada 89513
- Page 10 -- Some early contributors whose names would be readily recognized by today's readers are Jane Rule, Rita Mae Brown, Valerie Taylor, Jeannette Foster (under her own name and the pseudonym Abigail Sanford), Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, Alma Rontsong (under her pseudonym of Isabel Miller), Canadian poet Helene Roscnthal, Jane Kogan, and Kay Tobin to name a few.

Other titles available from Womanpress:

For My Granddaughters . . . the text of a speech delivered before the 1st Annual Lesbian Writers Conference Chicago, September 13, 1974 by Valerie Taylor

Women Loving Women: a select and annotated bibliography of women loving women in literature

Two Women; the poetry of Valerie Taylor and Jeannette Foster

Works in progress:

Women Loving, Women Writing: an anthology of poetry and prose from the 2nd Annual Lesbian Writers Conference, 1975

The Enclosed Garden, poetry by Penelope Pope

Also, the keynote address for the 3rd Annual Lesbian Writers Conference by Beth Hodges

Write for price and availability on the above.

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