



For My Granddaughters...

The text of a speech delivered before the 1st Annual
Lesbian Writers Conference Chicago, September 13, 1974

Valerie Taylor

FOR MY GRANDDAUGHTERS...

by Valerie Taylor

The text of a speech delivered before
the 1st Annual Lesbian Writers Conference
Chicago, September 13, 1974

Copyright © 1975 by Marie J. Kuda
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Womanpress
Box 59330
Chicago IL 60645

Valerie Taylor is a witty, well-read, literate conversationalist as well as a poet and novelist with over eight published books to her credit. Her talk on lesbian literature overlooked her own significant contribution to the field of paperback originals. Gene Damon, principal compiler of The Lesbian in Literature and for several years editor of the lesbian-feminist magazine The Ladder has ranked some of Ms. Taylor's work with that of Gale Wilhelm and notes that her's was a significant contribution to the field of lesbian literature. Ms. Taylor's lesbian novels include:

*Whisper Their Love, 1957
The Girls in 3-B, 1959
Stranger on Lesbos, 1960
Unlike Others, 1963
Return to Lesbos, 1963
A World Without Men, 1963
Journey to Fulfillment, 1964*

All of the above appeared as paperbacks in their American editions and are out of print. In response to the many requests we have had for copies of her talk, we are reprinting from her original notes--her speech varied slightly--mostly humorous asides. As she retires this year from her 9 to 5, we expect to be reading new stories from her pen in the near future.

*--Marie Jayne Kuda
Womanpress*

September, 1975

When *Lavender Woman* began to publish, it was a pleasant surprise to find in one of its early issues a page of letters from young women to their mothers --attempts to explain their viewpoint and lifestyle and find some way of bridging the age gap. It was also good to learn that a feminist press was called *Daughters*. To learn our origins is a first step in establishing identity; as Dan Berrigan says, "If you don't know where you come from, how do you know where you're going?" For women who are becoming liberated it's valuable to know who our mothers and grandmothers are.

Notice that I say "becoming" liberated. Liberation is an organic process and is always progressive and always incomplete. Nor are we the first women to work at it. In thinking about lesbian literature we must first take a look at our grandmothers--not our biological grandmothers necessarily, but our social and cultural ones. They began what today's writers and readers are carrying forward.

And what a crazy mixed-up bunch they were! One was a wealthy Englishwoman who probably had the worst literary style ever developed, but who had so much to say and said it with such passionate intensity that she became a one-woman revolution. One was an ex-medical student who claimed to be a genius and proved that she was by inventing an extremely new literary style. One was a sensitive woman who after several periods of insanity committed suicide because she felt unable to face another bout of madness in a world gone crazy with war. One was a clergyman's daughter who emigrated to Paris and devoted her life to discovering and publishing great books. One was the first woman to be admitted to the French Academy. In her need to earn a living she interspersed the writing of books with acting in vaudeville and running a cosmetics firm.

Two were gentle and timorous creatures who ran away from home together and lived to an old age on a secluded farm in Wales. One gave up her native language, English, to write distinctive poetry in French. And of course, if we go back far enough we find the great-great-grandmother of us all, the sweet singer of Lesbos whose name has come to be a synonym for lesbians even though only fragments of her work remain. Ours is a proud inheritance.

Let's begin with Sappho, the woman who wrote, "Love, like the mountain wind upon the oak, falling upon me, shakes me leaf and bough." Peter Green's book, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, is a fictional, but imaginative and sympathetic reconstruction of her life and loves. For the poems themselves we have Mary Barnard's translation of and commentary on the bits and pieces attributed to Sappho. This book was published by the University of California Press in 1958 and is still a definitive work.

I know this is a forum on fiction, not poetry, but how do you tell where one ends and the other begins? Read Colette and you find that some of her best passages are really poems in prose form--their quality comes across even in translation--and God knows much of the so-called poetry read by any editor is extremely prosey.

Read Aphra Behn, the first woman to earn an independent living in the theatre in the male-dominated seventeenth century, and you'll understand the Family of Woman. We're all inheritors. Only the idiom changes.

Let's come up to our own day--that is, to the twentieth century. Let's begin with Radclyffe Hall. I suppose everyone here had read *The Well of Loneliness*. It's one of those great trailbreakers which open the way for thousands of others to follow.

A terrible book in many ways--the literary style is almost incredibly bad, the sentimentality is spread on so thickly that some of the most emotional passages tempt a modern reader to burst out laughing, and the theories of causation and homosexual development have been rejected by everyone except a few Neanderthals like Socarides and Bieber. The heroine, Stephen Gordon, thinks of herself as a man in a woman's body. That's a concept no self-respecting lesbian would accept today. In an Edwardian, upper middle class English context Hall's errors are understandable, perhaps inevitable. Still in the light of later work *The Well of Lonliness* is a bad book.

It is also a tremendously valuable book. Gertrude Stein, who was also an innovator, said something to the effect that when an artist creates something new it's never beautiful because it's still taking shape. Later it becomes beautiful--but then it's no longer new. She was talking about painting, but it's equally true of writers and social activists and we think of Hall as both. Being a pioneer is a lonely business. It's easy to move ahead with a thousand others supporting you. In 1924 Radclyff Hall stood alone and appealed for the right of the lesbian to be accepted for what she was. We have to respect her.

In the 1950's when Jeannette Foster wrote her book, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, no commercial publisher would accept it. Dr. Foster was an excellent writer; she had also been one of Kinsey's librarians, with access to a huge body of material, much of it still unpublished. But she ended by having her book published at her own expense, after which it went out of print.¹ This year (1974) her book has been honored by the Gay Task Force of the American Library Association and the book will be republished by a good press. Pioneers don't always live to see their experiments accepted--when they do it's a great thing.

¹ Dr. Foster's book is being reprinted by Diana Press, in paperback, for 1975 release.

From 1924 to about 1950 authors who were lesbians hid the fact from all but their closest friends and wrote what the public wanted and would pay for. Typical of this period is Rose O'Neill, who might have written like Gale Wilhelm, but instead invented the Kewpie doll and wrote saccharine stories for the women's magazines. However, around 1950 the sexual revolution got into high gear. There really had been a sexual revolution under way for a long time--it wasn't invented by *Playboy*, that old-fashioned magazine dedicated to male chauvinism and the exploitation of women as sex objects. A hundred years ago Victoria Woodhull & Tennessee Claflin were arguing for free love and woman's right to vote--the struggle for equality has been carried on by a dedicated few. The First World War gave it new impetus and changing customs in the twenties and thirties carried the struggle ahead and brought homosexuals in it to a new degree. In the forties women locked themselves into the kitchen and threw away the key; at that time women were exploiters of their sisters equally with men. But the idea persisted and when in the fifties homosexuals began to come out of the closet and get into the struggle for human dignity, lesbians had double support--as women and homosexuals.

Literature reflects life, and one result of the new openness was that the market was flooded with lesbian books, both republished and new. *The Well of Lonliness*, now in the public domain, came out in several paperback editions. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* was reprinted, as were two delicate and sensitive books by Gale Wilhelm, *We Too Are Drifting* and *Torchlight to Valhalla*. Elizabeth Craigin's *Either is Love* foreshadowed today's general acceptance of bisexuality. Three important books were translated from the German: *The Scorpion* and *The Outcast* by Elizabeth-Anne Weirauch and *The Child Manuela* by Christa Winsloe, which was the basis for the film, *Maedchen in Uniform*.

In addition to reprints of primarily lesbian interest a number of books which dealt with lesbianism as a minor theme came to the attention of women readers in the fifties. Colette's work had been thought of as heterosexual, she was known in this country as the author of *Gigi* and *Cheri*. Now the Claudine series was translated, to be followed by *Earthly Paradise* and *The Pure and the Impure*. Mary Renault's two lesbian novels--*Promise of Love* and *The Middle Mist*--appeared in paperback and took their place on the shelves of many private libraries alongside her Greek stories. May Sarton's early work had included overtones of lesbianism, for example, *The Single Hound*, *A Shower of Summer Days* and later, *The Small Room*. In the fifties she began to publish poetry that was overtly lesbian in tone, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* and her two recent autobiographical books, *Plants Dreaming Deep* and *Journal of a Solitude* were yet to come. The increasing frankness of this gifted writer has won her a small but devoted following; the progress of lesbian writing over the last three decades can be followed in her work.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was reread for its lesbian implications, as were Katherine Mansfield's writings. When *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (sometimes called *Fanny Hill*) appeared in 1963 after 200 years of obscurity, readers enjoyed Fanny's initiation into prostitution by another girl in the house where she was to work and the implications of homosexuality that were scattered throughout the book. Tereska Torres' novel of the Free French women's army in London, *Woman's Barracks*, appeared in 1950 and included several lesbian and bisexual characters. In each of these books, and many others, lesbianism was not the main issue, but it does appear as a part of everyday life, more or less taken for granted by the author and without moral implications. The same is true of Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* and *To Love and Be Wise*. In the mid-sixties Sarah Kilpatrick's *Ladies Close* described the breakdown of a middle-aged teacher after an affair with a young

pupil, her pursuit by another pupil whose advances she resisted and a handful of assorted love affairs on the part of her neighbors, most of them hetero. The cast includes a delightful homosexual actor who reminds one of Noel Coward. It's refreshing to discover so many books that take lesbianism for granted.

Of less literary value, *Diana*, published in 1939, and Nora Lofts' *Jassy*, from 1945, were reprinted in paperback during this time.

Alongside the revival of many books which have become classics, the fifties saw the appearance of many new titles, most of them paperback originals. Ann Bannon wrote the Beebo Brinker series, among the first paperbacks with which gay readers could identify. Paula Christian, who wrote under several other names, wrote *This Side of Love*, *The Far Side of Desire* and other gay stories whose characters grappled with social ostracism and their own guilt feelings more or less successfully, making it clear that the problems were not inherent in lesbianism but were forced on the main characters by bad social attitudes and institutions. It was a shock to many readers when Christian later repudiated her lesbian works. She later went to work as an editor in a porno publishing house, which she seemed to feel was morally superior to writing honest and realistic gay books.

A sensational journalist named Marijane Meeker adopted the name Ann Aldrich and wrote *We Walk Alone*, *We Too Must Love*, and *Carol in a Thousand Cities*, the last a putdown of *The Ladder*, which at that time was the only lesbian magazine in the United States. Aldrich's gambit was to pretend a sympathetic interest and then show lesbian life as frantic, promiscuous and tragic. Jess Stearn was to use much the same technique in *The Grapevine*.

Far different was Claire Morgan's *The Price of Salt*,

published in 1951. Here two women in love eventually overcome all obstacles, including a resentful husband to make a lasting relationship.

Unfortunately, not all the paperbacks that appeared during this time were as good as Morgan's. Carol Hales wrote a sticky, drippy book called *Wind Woman*, in which a female psychiatrist draws out all the facts of her patient's frustrated lesbian life and ends by virtually seducing her. Edwina Marks' *My Sister, My Love* adds incest and violence to sex, as does Fletcher Flora's *Strange Sisters*.

These books were written more or less skillfully and some of the situations were believable. However, the market was soon flooded with hastily written and superficial titles that relied on sensationalism to make sales. Many were written by men writing under feminine pseudonyms. They follow the same pattern: a beautiful and insatiable lesbian goes through one affair after another, averaging one sex scene for every ten pages, and ends in the arms of a handsome and remarkably virile man. One Chicago hack named Paul Little claimed to have written five hundred of these, using the pen name of Sylvia Sharon. Around 1964 his publisher admitted to me that Little simply outlined his plots and turned them over to another hack on the publisher's staff who filled in the details. So the author's hardest job was signing his royalty checks. The women in the books were always voluptuous and bosomy, they all wore black lace underwear, they loved to seduce innocent straight women and they never did anything but have sex. Male readers got a double kick out of these books--first they satisfied the man's curiosity about lesbians and what they do together--never mind the information was all wrong--and their machismo was fed by the final triumph of the male. Readers must have got some strange ideas about women during this period. I remember one book in which a butch--size 44 bust and black underwear--snarls "I am the man!" and plunges her arm into her girl friend's vagina up to the elbow. Some of us are still looking for that femme.

Eventually the market for this sort of trash was saturated and as the market for hard-core porno became more open there was less and less of specifically lesbian interest. The sixties saw a few good books instead of a lot of bad ones--many of them in hard-cover. Outstanding was Maureen Duffy's *The Microcosm*, a stream-of-consciousness novel about four lesbians in widely different life styles and May Sarton's *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*. With the seventies we have had more non-fictional books on lesbianism and fewer novels. I think there's room for both and it is possible that some of you who are here tonight will fill a real need by writing some really good gay novels.

One book published here in paperback last year had an unusual and interesting history. *Patience and Sarah*, written by Isabel Miller (Alma Routson), found no publisher here and was issued in England under the title *A Place for Us*. Based on the lives of two young women who lived in New York state around 1820, one of them a primitive painter whose works are still found here and there in collections of early Americana, it's a love story with fresh charm, a great deal of tenderness and some humor. It deserves mention not only for its own merits but as a possible indication of a new trend in lesbian fiction. Also making the transition from today's mood into tomorrow's are a few non-fiction works which ought to be read by everyone interested in lesbian liberation. Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation* is worth reading although it's repetitive, self-centered and written in an imitation of e. e. cummings' style. More important are Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's *Lesbian/Woman* which won the ALA Gay Task Force award last year, and Kate Millet's *Flying*. If you want to know what intelligent lesbian activists are doing and thinking, these books are required reading.

Let's not forget, either, that 1973 was marked by the reappearance after many years of Gertrude Stein's

Q.E.D., her only overtly lesbian work with the exception of certain poems.

What happens from now on? No one can say for sure, but we might guess at the future by looking at a few current trends. One possibility is that with the swing away from pornography, which seems to be killing itself with dullness and repetitiveness, there will be a return to Victorian prudery and hypocrisy. More hopefully, readers may demand more variety and a more realistic approach in the books they read. There's a practical argument against censorship as well as a moralistic one: if people are allowed to read anything they want to by the age of 15 or 16 they will be bored with the average dirty book, movie or what-not and ready for something more lifelike.

The young writers coming up will have something new to say and an informed readership to say it to. As gay liberation and feminist liberation proceed, as people try to find a meaningful way of life, a new freedom should open up for the lesbian author. She may even be able to treat lesbianism as one phase of a complex, fascinating and diverse world and not as an isolated phenomenon.

There will be less defensiveness as self-guilt and social pressures lessen. Think of a play like *The Children's Hour*, in which a sensitive and intelligent young woman kills herself when she realizes her own latent lesbian tendencies. Or a situation like that in *The Price of Salt*, in which a husband has his wife and her lover trailed by detectives so that he can get custody of their child. Today the wife would find a good feminist lawyer and win custody. In Lawrence's *The Fox* and *The Rainbow* the lesbian episodes are kept under cover as far as the women's families and friends were concerned. Both affairs are treated as not being very important--preludes to heterosexual marriage. I've always

thought that if Lawrence had written a sequel to *The Fox* the young wife would surely have been ready to leave her arrogant husband in a very short time and create a new life style with another woman. Incidentally, Lawrence might have understood his own latent homosexuality better if he had written such a sequel. Certainly if *The Fox* were written today the conflict between the two kinds of love would have to come out into the open. There would be a confrontation between the two rivals for the younger woman's love and she would understand her own feelings better. We've made some headway since the 1920's.

One way to see what has happened in the last forty years is to compare two books about Vita Sackville-West. In 1928 Virginia Woolf, a longtime friend and sometime lover of Sackville-West, wrote *Orlando*. It's a bisexual fantasy in which the protagonist, based on Vita, lives for 300 years and changes sex every century. Forty-five years later Sackville-West's son, who plainly loved and admired both of his parents, wrote *Portrait of a Marriage*, an explicit account of his mother's and father's life together with the homosexual tendencies and experiences of both parents described with names, dates and places.

Perhaps tomorrow's lesbian books will go even farther. If we become civilized enough to realize that there are many viable life styles we can stop being defensive. The young woman who becomes aware of her primarily lesbian nature won't have to struggle against self-blame or social rejection. Even if she's subject to social and personal pressures--inner and outer conflicts--she won't have to cope with them alone. There will be supportive organizations and accepting friends, as well as a tremendous body of lesbian and feminist literature to help her find her place in life.

With all this clutter of blame and guilt swept away, there will be room for tomorrow's writer's to develop interesting characters and situations. Today many young lesbians setting out to become writers feel that they have a moral obligation to write about nothing but lesbianism, just as many black writers over the last half century have felt that they must write only about black problems. That's a hang-up that won't trouble us when we become more free. Can you imagine a heterosexual author feeling that she must write only about heterosexuality and its problems, ignoring all the other aspects of human life? The world should be our subject matter--not just one small corner of it!

Colette and Sarton have already pointed the way to this universality of subject matter. Sarton writes about marriage, friendship, parent-child relationships, teachers and pupils, neighbors, rejected old people, the impact of love on art and many other things, as well as about women in love. Her books are full of complete human beings.

So all of us build on the lives of those who have gone before. Today we think in terms of sisterhood--and that's good, that's productive. But when a writer reaches sixty she also begins to look for daughters, for inheritors. We hope that our work too will help to make a foundation for those who come after us. We hope that young women coming up realize the challenge and the rich possibilities that are open to them. . .that they will go on where we leave off.

I'd like to attend a conference like this one in twenty years, when I'm eighty. Perhaps by that time we'll all be much farther along on the path to liberation. Perhaps the infinite variety of human life will be caught in our books--lesbianism just one important theme among many others. If that

happens, it will be because you who have come to this conference, and others like you all over the world, have made it happen. You have tremendous power.

Some of my daughters are here tonight. Some will be reading their own work on Sunday--I am eager to hear what they have to say. We're planting a seed here. Unless male politicians and militarists manage to blow up the human race, I believe that some of you will still be around in the year 2000 to harvest what grows out of this weekend. That's your future--and I wish you luck with it!

--Valerie Taylor
September 13, 1974