



Lesbian Erotica, Minus Lesbians

One critic worries aloud about the masculinization of dyke porn.

by Joy Parks

Most lesbian erotica today reminds me of the life of Catalina de Erauso, a Basque ex-nun who passed for decades during the 1600s as a man. De Erauso was an early version of lesbian chic. If she lived today, we'd put her with Cindy Crawford on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

Some scholars believe that de Erauso became a national legend because medieval Spaniards found the tales of her enormous womanizing to be titillating. Some believe that as perhaps the first public female-to-male transgender, her lifestyle demonstrated a noble ambition: to raise herself from womanhood to the "higher" form of manhood.

So what does that have to do with our erotica? To me, much of it seems to be written to titillate straight readers who just want to know what we do in bed. Which explains the tedious descriptions of one sexual act after another, sexual catalogs that read like emotionless instructions to some surreal game of naked Twister. Many of the characters come dressed up in male clothing and accessories, too, as if it were true after all that lesbians really want to be men.

If the straight media isn't co-opting us for our titillation value, then our own press is portraying us as garishly made-up sex kittens or strap-on wearing wannabes who haven't quite attained the ideal. And if you don't identify as butch or femme, then forget it. You're portrayed as a victim of fusion or lesbian bed death, or you simply don't exist at all.

Lesbian culture is still a pauper's culture. If not, you'd be watching this on television. What we write defines who we are. Since a pivotal aspect of our shared experience is our sexual desire, lesbian erotica is a crucial and valid genre. There are some—Joan Nestle, Karen Tulchinsky, Jess Wells—whose work I need. But I'm disturbed over what the rest says about us. It bothers me that I can enjoy only the early half of *On Our Backs'* recent collection of short fiction, the stories that were published more than a decade ago, when writing lesbian erotica was still a revolutionary act, not motivated by money, acceptance, or the desire to shock. It upsets me that so much of our erotica is about pain and degradation, not acts of love. And it exasperates me that our best-of collections are edited by writers who don't even identify as lesbians. Ironic perhaps, but I just can't take this lying down.

It's no secret that straight men are aroused by lesbianism. But why are we now so willing to play along? Are we that desperate for acceptance? Or money? Who really benefits from an erotic literature in which women are conventionally gorgeous and totally uninhibited? Who needs an erotica in which pleasure isn't possible without a phallus? Sounds like some man's fantasy to me.

Am I calling for a vanilla lesbian erotica? I loathe that term. I abhor the suggestion that since I have no wish to cause my lover discomfort or humiliation, my sexuality is bland and

dispassionate. Could it be that because so-called vanilla acts can't be quantified, objectified, or classified, they have no currency with readers who lack a real understanding of lesbian desire? I guess straight readers won't enjoy us half as much if they think we're having sex with women because we want to—and not just for their amusement.

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There are lesbian writers who write erotica for lesbian readers. They see butch, for example, as a proud lesbian gender of its own, one that has nothing to do with being a man. They understand that being femme doesn't mean being straight or bi. They write about lesbian sexuality in all its diversity with respect, pride, and even love. There just aren't enough of them.

What I want is a better, richer, more authentic erotica. One that fuses both emotional depth and physical pleasure. An erotic literature that celebrates our dignity and our defiance. Without it, we run the risk of sharing Catalina de Erauso's fate—of having our desire made acceptable to everyone but ourselves.

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