

Literature

Sleaze, Trash and Miracles

How Ann Bannon changed lesbian fiction by writing about the butch of her dreams.

"The pulp world was the forerunner of today's romantic paperbacks for lesbians. The true pulps were the province of males and so many of them were quasi pornography that it is miraculous that so many of them managed to sneak into the world of lesbian literature."

The Beebo Brinker Chronicles by Ann Bannon is one of those miracles. This five-part serial which includes *Beebo Brinker*, *Journey to a Woman*, *I am a Woman*, *Odd Girl Out* and *Woman in the Shadows* has been reissued many times since they first appeared as Gold Medal paperbacks between 1957 and 1962. Read by generations of lesbians, they were once labeled "sleaze" and "trash," but are now part of what literary historians call "The Golden Age of Lesbian Pulps." And their survival has allowed readers who didn't experience this era firsthand a chance to glean some insight into the degree of courage it required to live as a lesbian in the pre-Stonewall days and better understand our lesbian past.

Ann Bannon has been called the "Queen of Lesbian Pulp." While her books are still widely read and admired, what often goes unnoted are the great strides she achieved in making images of lesbians in pulp fiction much more credible and positive. During these dark and difficult post-war years when being different in any way was suspect, Bannon and a handful of other pulp-writing lesbians, such as Marijane Meaker (better known as Vin Packer or Ann Aldrich), Valerie Taylor and Paula Christian, began to slowly and courageously wear away at the overly sexualized and exploitative images of lesbians prevalent in pulps by male writers. In hindsight, this approach appears brave, possibly an unconscious attempt to reclaim lesbianism for their lesbian readers. These pulps, with their relatively happy endings (meaning that the characters didn't opt for heterosexual relationships, lose their jobs or commit suicide), stronger plots and more realistic, sympathetic characters, brought hope to countless readers who needed some sign that they weren't sick or alone in their desires.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of Bannon's contribution is that while writing books that would change the perception of lesbians in pulp fiction, she was also creating a fantasy world that helped her cope with her own situation as a wife and a mother.

"I was one of those women with my nose pressed to the window, wishing to get inside – 'in the life,'" Bannon remembers. "I thought of the community of lesbians as a magic island of lucky women I wanted so much to join. But there seemed to be no way to get out to that island and get safely on shore. But while I was trapped for many years in a conventional lifestyle, I managed to spend a lot of time exploring Greenwich Village, parts of Philadelphia and later, Chicago and Los Angeles, where the GLBT community lived or gathered. In those brief segments of my life, I probably lived more intensely than the people who lived there and had long since

come out. Those emotional and intellectual ties I longed for were present in my imaginative life, and for brief but wonderful brushes with real people. I realize now that I was in a sort of 'holding pattern,' a way of keeping my sanity intact while waiting for my children to grow up and the freedom door to open."

For Bannon, writing the *Beebo Brinker* chronicles allowed her to step into a fantasy world that helped her to survive her wait for freedom. But even the fantasy wasn't completely safe and Bannon was often concerned about the consequences of writing what was becoming a successful series of novels.

"I started writing to escape into a world of possibilities I wanted to explore in my real life, but could not," says Bannon. "I was a newlywed, just coming to grips with the blunder of my marriage. So I wrote a college novel, because at twenty-two, that was all I knew. Eventually, it became *Odd Girl Out*."

At the suggestion of her editor at Gold Medal Books, Bannon – whose apprehension about writing lesbian fiction in an era when any association with the genre could implicate the writer – followed Laura Landon of *Odd Girl Out* to the next stage of her life, giving birth to the series.

In continuing to write the series, Bannon began to gradually wear away at the conventions, to reinvent the pulp form. There was more emphasis on emotional connections between women and the need for social tolerance. At times, they demonstrated the first faint glimmerings of self-acceptance and pride that would be at the heart of the coming revolution. Bannon wasn't consciously aware of the impact her approach had on readers, but it's obviously one of the reasons for the popularity and staying power of her books.

"Someone has estimated that there were about 2000 lesbian pulps published during this so-called 'Golden Era,'" says Bannon. "But most of them were pure titillation – a wild ride from one sexual set-up to another, a way to lure male readers into buying the books and enjoying that most perdurable of male fantasies: two attractive women making love, usually ending with a male stepping in to show them how it's 'really' done. These books tarred the whole genre with the sleaze brush."

But it was clear that the few women who were writing lesbian pulp were taking a new approach. And readers could spot the differences almost immediately.

"We were groping our way toward an affectionate portrait of real human beings. We were vulnerable to the prejudices of the period, just like our readers," recalls Bannon. "I reread my own work and shudder at some of the unexamined assumptions. But, we cared about these young women whose lives we were trying to capture; we loved them; we were them. I was too naive, too young and dumb, to give much thought to the effect I

Film

By Hook or By Crook

A refreshing film that takes the buddy plot of movies such as *Midnight Cowboy* to an entirely new level, *By Hook or By Crook* is the narrative of three weeks in the lives of stone butch grifters Valentine and Shy. Shy, a handsome, small-town boy with a dire need for redemption, receives inspiration in the form of a bank robbery on the evening news and leaves flatline Kansas on the heels of her father's death. She hitchhikes to gay old San Francisco, and meets the charismatic, mentally unstable Valentine, a rootless adoptee on a quest to find her birth-mother. Throw in Billie, a lithe and lovely femme played by co-writer Stanya Kahn, and you've got a perfect recipe for a three-person, counterculture crime wave. However, what it really adds up to is a story of finding inner heroism and maintaining a sense of humor along the way.

Scripted and directed by Silas Howard and Harry Dodge (who masterfully play the two leads as well as sharing production chores), the 95-minute film reclaims the original spirit of DIY independent filmmaking. Shot on handheld digital video and edited in a cold, crumbling barn reeking of cow urine and mold spores, the film's overall texture reflects the grittiness and desperation of the characters themselves. Despite the film's humble beginnings, it swept indie and lesbian and gay film festivals and garnered critical acclaim nationwide.

Howard says, "We initially started out writing a bad-cop action movie. The script was fun, but the ending lacked soul. So we started all over again and gave ourselves permission to come at the story from a more personal angle and write about things that really mattered to us." Those things being, clearly, transgendered life in a bilateral world, and discovering one's place in all the craziness of Planet Earth.

"This is definitely not a crime flick," says co-director Harry Dodge. "This is an emotional thriller that's about all different kinds of love, friendship and finding connection in an alienated world."

"Ironically, our characters are full of humor, pride and bravado," Howard adds. "They take these little, humble steps which, in the end, feel heroic, and in fact, are."

To fully appreciate the subtleties and humanity of Shy and Valentine, order *By Hook or By Crook* on DVD or VHS through Wolfe Video (www.wolfeyvideo.com), a forerunner in the distribution of lesbian and gay films.

- JT ECKHOFF

was having on my women readers — at least not until I began to get hundreds of letters from them, begging for reassurance and information. On the whole, the portraits were positive, because I never let go of hope for salvaging my own life."

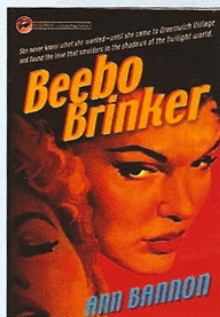
Beebo Brinker, the irascible, tall and handsome butch who lends her name to the series is one of the best known and loved characters in lesbian literature. She is the archetype of the bar butch, the most prevailing image of lesbianism in post-war urban America; tough, daring, an imposing but oh-so-sexy figure with her men's clothes and butch gestures. She is mysterious, alluring, and able to capture the attention of any femme with a single glance across a smoky bar.

"There were a lot of handsome, vibrant young women around me when I was in a college sorority house during my undergraduate years," says Bannon. "Several of them served as pre-Beebo models," says Bannon. "Wandering about Greenwich Village a few years later, I saw many beautiful women, a few of whom helped to round out the physical picture. But in all honesty I put Beebo together just as I wanted her, in my heart and mind. And it was only after the name came to me that she began to seem entirely real. She was just, quite literally, the butch of my dreams."

And even after all these years, the dream isn't over yet. Bannon confides that she never felt that Beebo's story has been fully told. Currently, she has a rough draft of a novel that would bring her story up to date, a project she wants to get back to as soon as she can.

"I think it would be fascinating," says Bannon. "To pursue Beebo into the present and see what she has done with her life."

For thousands of lesbian readers who have come to know and love Beebo, the promise of one more book, a chance to catch up with pulp fiction's best-loved lesbian and learn how she's navigated decades of change, would be, much like the author's eventual freedom to live openly as a lesbian, well worth the wait.



- JOY PARKS

NOTE: All of the editions mentioned in this article are recent reprints by Cleis Press. (\$12.95 each.) Most contain additional new material by the author and feature wonderfully colorful and lurid "retro" cover art and sensationalistic jacket copy that that pays homage to the "Golden Age of Pulp."