

Prolific Canadian writer and editor Karen X Tulchinsky talks to JOY PARKS about writing her reality



BUTCH ON THE STREETS AND IN THE SHEETS

For Karen X Tulchinsky, writing about butch and femme characters in her fiction is about opening a dialogue in unlikely places. "My mother wanted to know all about butches and femmes after reading my first book. That was an interesting conversation."

With *Love Among the Ruins*, the sequel to her first novel *Love Ruins Everything*, now out, a Lambda Book Award nomination for *Hot & Bothered 3* in her pocket and a solid reputation as a writer and editor whose short fiction tends to turn up regularly in popular lesbian fiction anthologies, Tulchinsky recently added to her already considerable repertoire a stint as writer resident at Norman Jewison's prestigious Canadian Film Centre. She's having the kind of career few lesbian writers can imagine.

For starters, she writes full-time, a rare situation for any writer, but particularly for one outside the mainstream. She attributes her successes to date to discipline and tenacity. "I used to write when I was a little kid. In school, if I were bored, I'd write little stories about the teacher or my classmates. I sent my first short story out in 1990, and it was accepted into an anthology called *Getting Wet* (Women's Press, 1991). It was very encouraging to have a story accepted on my first try, so I kept sending short stories out to anthologies and magazines. They weren't always accepted, but enough were to keep me going."

Tulchinsky's fiction is notable for its honest and decisive portrayal of butch and femme experience; identities often still viewed with suspicion and misunderstanding in the greater lesbian community. "The thing is... butches and femmes exist in the lesbian community. Not all lesbians identify with the butch-femme experience, but many do. Sometimes it's like being in a subculture within a subculture. I've had many interesting conversations about the so-called butch-femme scale, and fun watching women rank themselves on the scale."

Does she feel she has a responsibility to set the record straight on the butch and femme dynamic? "I think all writers have the responsibility to tell the truth as they see it. I am a butch who loves femmes, so Nomi (the butch protagonist of both *Love Ruins Everything* and *Love Among the Ruins*) is loosely based on myself, and facets of some of my friends. Julie, the femme heroine, is loosely based on my girlfriend. I have always had other butches and femmes in my life and my community, so it's natural for me to invent characters based on what I know."

Despite this revelation, Karen is reticent to talk more about her personal life "it's all there in the subtext of my books. You just have to look for it."

In addition to writing fiction, Tulchinsky has quickly become one of the most important anthologists of the gay and lesbian press, particular in the erotica genre. When asked about the phenomenal success of the *Hot & Bothered* series (published by Arsenal Pulp Press in Vancouver), Karen explains that

the larger theme of the series is desire between women. "That's what defines us as lesbians."

All three *Hot & Bothered* collections include the work of both established and emerging writers, and stories that deal with a range of desires. "As an editor, I've tried to include stories that reflect all aspects of woman-to-woman desire and love. I've also made a concerted effort to include work by women from as many different cultural backgrounds and ages as possible. I think the series is popular because so many different women can find their reality reflected somewhere within the book." Along with emerging writers and new voices, the series has included work by such well-known writers as Jewel Gomez, Sarah Schulman, Lesléa Newman, Joan Nestle, Carol Queen, Kitty Tsui, Cecilia Tan, Elana Dykewomon and Jess Wells.

Tulchinsky comments that the current proliferation of lesbian erotica, including collections like *Hot & Bothered*, fills an absence in lesbian culture. "We need to see reflections of our lives. Heterosexuals see images of their sexuality and their love lives on TV, in movies, magazines, bus shelters, and billboards every single second of every day. Lesbians rarely see any images of our sexuality in those places." Due to the print-bias of lesbian culture, these images are delivered to us within fiction, which means the availability of lesbian images is directly affected by the viability of the lesbian press.

"Historically, lesbian publishing didn't take off until the formation of feminist presses and bookstores by women in the early 70s. Unfortunately, a lot of these presses and bookstores have closed in recent years, mostly due to being squeezed out of business by the large chain bookstores." Tulchinsky says that this is why it is more important than ever before to support local independent gay and women's bookshops.

Tulchinsky admits her next novel is a departure from her earlier work. To be published in the spring of 2003, it's a historical novel, set in Toronto, Canada between 1933 and 1954, that follows the lives of a Russian-Jewish immigrant

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family through the depression and the war years. During her residence at the Canadian Film Centre, Karen has been working on developing two new feature-length screenplays and a television series. She also wrote a short film that is currently being produced in the Universal Studios Short Film Program. Scheduled for completion this June, the film will be screened in gay and lesbian film festivals worldwide.

Tulchinsky states up front that the one thing she wants to leave with her readers is hope. And she relies much on the old standard – write what you know – to achieve credibility. "I once had a couple of self-identified feminists yell at me for objectifying women through my portrayal of femmes. But I've also had the experience several times after reading from my work all over North America, of a self-identified butch or femme approaching me after the reading and thanking me for writing about her reality. It's like a friend of mine once so eloquently said – 'it takes all kinds of cars to fill the highway'."