"A Brilliant Story of Lesbian Love": Lesbian Paperback Originals and Lesbian Identity in 1950s and 1960s America

Tamara de Szegheo Lang

Abstract
The 1950s and 1960s were terribly oppressive for lesbians. Not only was homosexuality considered an illness but it was illegal, which meant that many women had to live in secrecy. Pulp fiction novels were one place where lesbians could find out about other women like them, offering them a sense of community. These novels are valuable for more than just this however. They can also provide an indication as to the social and political climate at the time as well as the events that may have subconsciously affected the authors’ development of these stories. The novel Bebo Brinker by Ann Bannon is one example of these novels that reflects on the time period.

Introduction: The Importance of Pulp

Lesbians who lived through the 1950s often remark on the support that lesbian paperback novels offered in a very oppressive age for lesbians in America. As Yvonne Keller writes in her study of the genre; "when it was conceptualized at all in the 1950s, homosexuality was a crime, sin, or illness; many individuals thought of themselves as 'flawed individuals' or people with a 'homosexual problem.'" Since lesbians were trained to be ashamed of their sexuality, they could not often be open about it. This, in turn, made it seem as though lesbianism was rare. This led to feelings of deep isolation and fear for many lesbian women. It was thus very important for women to know that they were not alone, that other lesbians existed and that it was possible to find a community that was supportive. Lesbian-themed paperbacks did just this.

Though the novels were laced with garish covers, tragic endings and the 'exoticism' of lesbian sexual situations, lesbians learned to read between the lines and find love to which they could relate. In fact, aspects of these books such as their covers, acted as a clue to lesbians, revealing which books they were searching for. As Ann Bannon explains; when lesbians saw the covers of the paperbacks they could “decode them. They knew that when it said ‘shocking’ or ‘twilight’ or ‘secret’ or ‘shameful,’ and there was a pair of pretty women on the cover, you had found the lesbian gold at the end of the rainbow.” In between the sexualized covers and heartbreaking endings, women who were excluded from and abused by the society around them could find a little piece of their lives, or what they hoped their lives would someday be.

Ann Bannon sums up the effects of the books nicely when she says that through lesbian pulp novels “the most important things [lesbians] learned were that 1) they were not unique and doomed to lifelong isolation, 2) lurid cover art to the contrary notwithstanding, they weren’t “abnormal,” and 3) there was a hope for a happy life.” With the knowledge that others were out there, the women sought to find community and with that community strength they were able to question and challenge the situations that victimized them.

When reading lesbian pulp fiction, it is important to be aware of influences of the time period on the plot lines and character descriptions. Many scholars and activists are quick to judge pulp novels. They are often portrayed as either simple entertainment or as an important part in the development of lesbian visibility but not useful as a valid representation of the social condition of the time. Though this is true in some ways, the novels can be very complex if read a little more deeply. The storylines are littered with implicit and explicit reflections of the society at the time. The novels are also often accused of being highly offensive in their portrayals of lesbians and the queer community which is often true, though this is also a function of the highly homophobic society in which the authors were writing. Due to pressures of publishers, government and the public, even if the writers had wanted to write a positive portrayal of lesbian life, it was challenging to do so.

This paper will outline the rise and resurgence in popularity of the lesbian pulp novel between the years 1950-1965. It will then use one novel, *Beebo Brinker* by Ann Bannon, as an example of the importance of this medium.
as a historical social and political indicator. In this case, the novel reflects lesbian history and the importance of large cities and the bar scene in the creation of lesbian communities.

**The Lesbian Paperback Genre**

The lesbian pulp fiction craze began in 1950 with Tereska Torres’ *Women’s Barracks.* After the immense success of this novel, Fawcett, the book’s publisher, solicited a young, aspiring writer, Vin Packer, to write *Spring Fire.* The popularity of these two books demonstrated the potential of the market and before long many publishers and authors were reaping the benefits. In a span of 15 years more than 2000 paperback novels were published with lesbian relationships as their main theme. Most of these novels were written by men who were drawn to the genre by the high income they could receive. Male authors, in fact, outnumbered female authors 5 to 1. Most of these men knew nothing about the real lives of lesbians and were thus particularly sensitive to influence by the popular and untrue portrayals of homosexuality that were prevalent in the society at the time. This did not matter to most readers, however, because the novels were officially written for the sexual pleasure of men or as warnings to women of the dangers of ‘deviant’ sexuality.

Though the books had to be written with a moral message, there were ways to get around this. As long as an author played by the rules of society, and made sure to include the necessary punishments for the lesbians in the end, they could load the novel with positive portrayals of lesbianism. This did sometimes occur and at least fifteen lesbian authors were able to publish over a hundred novels that portrayed lesbians quite favourably during the 1950s and 1960s. It is difficult to determine actual numbers of authors since most used pseudonyms so as not to tarnish their reputations by writing about this taboo subject. Men especially used pseudonyms and usually went by female names to seem more credible. Besides danger to reputation, it was also very important for lesbian women to maintain safety and anonymity in a time when they could be easily persecuted for their sexuality. This makes it hard to identify the lesbians that were writing at the time since their identities were often hidden for

---

8 Keller, 388.
9 According to 1975 statistics it was the 244th best-selling novel in the US and had sold, by that point, over 2.5 million copies.
10 Keller, 389.
11 Keller, 389.
13 Stryker, 61.
14 Forrest, xi.
15 Stryker, 57.
16 Stryker, 61.
17 Forrest, xi.
safety. Exceptions to this common practice included March Hastings and Valerie Taylor who were 'out' as lesbians and active in the struggle for gay rights. Since the 1960s others have also come into the public light to tell their stories and describe their experiences. These women include Ann Bannon and Vin Packer, who have served as important sources of information in analyzing the influences of the writing of lesbian pulp fiction at the time.

The Resurgence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction

The lesbian pulp fiction genre has recently regained a certain level of popularity, commencing with the re-release of a number of the classic tales dating from around the beginning of the twenty-first century by publishers such as Cleis Press, Feminist Press and Kensington Books. The problem that this causes, however, is to offer a false image of the situation of lesbian life in the mid-twentieth century. The novels chosen by these publishers are meant to exemplify the feats that lesbian writers, as a majority of the republished authors were, were able to accomplish amid a great deal of oppression due to both their sexual orientation as well as their gender. When reading these few works it is easy to assume that lesbians at the time were exposed to, and could easily access, fairly positive portrayals of lesbian relationships and could garner a lot of self-respect from these books. While there is nothing inherently wrong about this statement, as these novels were definitely accessible to the masses and were often the most popular books, this does not account for the full picture of lesbian fiction at the time.

Beebo Brinker: Coming Out in the Big City

“The music was rhythmic and popular. The floor was jammed with a mass of couples... a mass of girls, dancing, arms locked around each other, bodies pressed close and warm. Their cheeks were touching. Quick light kisses were exchanged. And they were all girls, every last one of them: young and lovely and infatuated with each other. They touched one another with gentle caresses, the kissed, they smiled and laughed and whispered while they turned and moved together. There was no shame, no shock, no self-consciousness about it at all. They were enjoying themselves. They were having fun in the most natural way imaginable.”

p. 41

Ann Bannon is probably the most well-known name in the lesbian pulp world. Her books, the five volume Beebo Brinker Chronicles, have gone

18 Forrest, xi.
though many reprints over the past six years. She has been named the 'queen of pulp' and her books are now valued for their realistic reflection of the times.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Beebo Brinker} is the story of a small town girl who knows she is different and, because of the intolerance of her town, decides to move to New York City. Once there she meets a gay man, Jack, who decides to show her the gay bars, to introduce her to the community and to help her find her lesbian identity. The city was a very important setting for the development of lesbian identity in the Cold War era. The migration of lesbian women from rural areas into city centres was based on a number of factors. As urban centres developed and grew people from all types of towns flocked to the cities to find work. Because women were a part of the working community at the time, albeit a small one, they were also a part of this emigration to the cities to seek out work. The job search was an especially common shared experience among gay women since they knew they would need to support themselves financially, as opposed to heterosexual women who might marry and be provided for.\textsuperscript{20} The higher concentration of people in a city meant that there would be more lesbians as well, therefore increasing the chances of being able to find others like them and form a community. The transition from small town to city was also useful in maintaining anonymity. Small towns, where everybody would know their neighbour were particularly dangerous, legally and physically, for lesbians. There was rarely anyone in a small town that lesbians could talk to and if they were discovered, as they often were, they would generally have to leave the community.\textsuperscript{21}

The importance of urban communities is portrayed frequently in lesbian pulp fiction novels. There are countless stories where the lesbian character travels long distances from their small town to the big city in search of others like them. The cities vary but the ultimate destination, the ideal place to be, was Greenwich Village.\textsuperscript{22} As one lesbian interviewed in \textit{Forbidden Love}, a documentary recording the histories of lesbians in the 1950s, exclaimed; "all the lesbians obviously lived in Greenwich Village, at least that's what the books all said."\textsuperscript{23} When this woman and her girlfriend went to find the lesbians in New York, however, she found them much harder to find than she anticipated. Even in New York it was not safe for lesbians to walk around the streets actively displaying their sexual orientation. The main way to find other lesbians in those days was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{19} Forrest, xiv.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{21} Dean, 2.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{22} For examples of novels involving Greenwich Village see \textit{The Girls in 3-B} by Valerie Taylor, \textit{The Price of Salt} by Patricia Highsmith, \textit{I Am a Woman} by Ann Bannon or \textit{21 Gay Street} by Sheldon Lord.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{23} Margaret Pettigrew & Ginny Stikeman, \textit{Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives}, (Canada: National Film Board of Canada/Studio D, 1993)
\end{thebibliography}
Gay bars were perhaps the most important factor in lesbian self-development. This was especially true for working class women who could not afford suitable housing for house parties. In a time when lesbians had to keep their sexuality secret for fear of being fired, arrested or assaulted it was very hard to meet other lesbians for social or sexual contacts. As Marijane Meaker expresses in her memoir; "A gay bar was like a club. It was a place where you could meet with old friends and make new ones... There was always someone to talk to." The bars were often the only place for lesbians to express themselves and their sexuality. Butches at the time could not wear pants in most establishments, but in the bars they were free to wear what they preferred. Beebo, in Ann Bannon’s series, feels so strongly about wearing pants that she runs an elevator where her employers think she is a boy. Although she has the intelligence to get a more lucrative job, she chooses the elevator so that she can be, to an extent, herself. This was not uncommon for lesbians, especially butches, which often put these women in a lower economic class.

The gay bars were often frequented with heterosexual people but were called gay bars because they would allow homosexuals inside, though this admittance was illegal during those years. The bars that were willing to risk this were often run by Mafia, were filthy and found in dangerous areas of the city. These areas offered women additional anonymity but were not very safe. Surrounding the bars, some of the femme lesbians found work in prostitution. Their girlfriends, the butches, would wait eagerly in these establishments for their femmes to be done for the night. The bars obviously did not advertise their homosexual clientele and so word of mouth was very important. Sometimes this came from friends and sometimes from adversaries. Stephanie Ozard, one woman in the documentary Forbidden Love recounts an experience in which she was being yelled at by a stranger who told her that a certain bar was where people like her belonged. Although the experience was not pleasant, she was quite pleased that she then knew where to go to meet other lesbians. In Beebo Brinker, Beebo relies on Jack to show her where to find other

25 Faderman, 160.
26 Faderman, 160.
27 Meaker, 2.
28 Faderman, 162.
30 Kennedy & Davis, 72.
31 Meaker, 12.
32 Faderman, 161.
33 Kennedy & Davis, 71.
34 Meaker, 1.
35 Meaker, 5.
lesbians. Since he is gay himself he knows where the bars are and “took her to three or four of his favorite places.”36 While she grows to love the bars throughout the novels, they come with their share of risks.

The bars were very dangerous places to spend time. Not only were they found in the ‘bad neighbourhoods’ of the cities but they were not necessarily safe inside either. As the novel Beebo Brinker explains;

a rush of raids was in progress on the homosexual bar hangouts at the moment, with cops rousting respectable beards-and-sandalos off their favorite park benches; hustling old dykes, who were Village fixtures for eons, off the streets so they wouldn’t offend the deodorized young middle-class wives.37

Indeed, bar raids were a big concern for lesbians. In order to halt raids, bar owners had to bribe the police. Despite these payoffs there was still a strong undercover police presence in bars and raids were not uncommon.38 Many bars had a system to warn their patrons of an impending raid through the use of flashing red lights.39 When the light flashed, the people inside would know to look ‘normal’ and start dancing with someone of the ‘opposite sex.’40 When women could not avoid being arrested they faced both physical and financial danger. The police were often very violent in these raids. Sexual assaults were not unusual, nor were beatings and tauntings. It was also quite common for the names of arrested women to be collected and published in local newspapers. This was obviously a big threat for women who were employed in government jobs, where they could be fired immediately upon any suspicion of homosexuality. For many women, this threat was much greater than that of physical pain and this did hinder some women from attending bars.41

In addition to the more obvious threat of bar raids, there was also the danger from the alcohol being consumed. Ann Bannon states that many women suffered from alcoholism in those times42 and Marijane Meaker repeats this sentiment.43 At the time, the bars were really interested in all the money they could bring in from these women who had no other place to meet and mingle so there was strong pressure to drink. Many bars imposed a rule that any patron must have a drink in front of them at all times. As well, many women who worked low-paying jobs and who had to constantly hide their identity felt that drinking offered them one of few pleasures. With these influences, there was a large occurrence

37 Bannon, Beebo Brinker, 3.
38 Faderman, 164.
39 Pettigrew & Stikeman.
40 Faderman, 164.
41 Faderman, 165-166.
42 Bannon, I Am a Woman, xiii.
43 Meaker, 4.
of alcoholism within lesbian communities. Yet another reason why lesbian bars were dangerous was because of the lesbians themselves. In the lower class bar scene the butch/femme dichotomy was strongly upheld. The butches were known to be quite violent and fights erupted frequently in bars. Although there were no hazards for femmes, a butch could be implicated in a bar fight for simply looking at the wrong femme. The lesbians were so well known for their fighting that many male gay bars would not allow women inside because of their supposed rowdy temperament.

Butch and femme culture is contentious since some women claim that it is a replication of heterosexual norms and other women vehemently disagree. These women claim that it was a different system that was unique to lesbians. The butch/femme binary was very strictly regulated in the lower class lesbian culture and if a woman did not identify with either she would often be forced to choose a role and they could not date within their identity.

In Forbidden Love Stephanie Ozard recounts her experience of having to become a femme to be with her butch lover. She explains that they “lived very much as a straight, married couple would live.” She would stay home during the day doing laundry, dishes and cleaning. She would rarely speak and could especially not speak to other butches.

Another woman in the film, Nairobi Nelson, claims that butches were always wonderfully sweet and gentle to femmes but did act tough and wear men’s clothes. In the Beebo Brinker Chronicles Beebo serves as the butch while Laura is femme. One example of this is through financial support. Beebo insists on paying for Laura and enjoys buying her expensive gifts such as dresses.

The butch was often portrayed as not only masculine but actually being like a, or striving to be, male. It was very common in pulp paperbacks for lesbians to be compared, in looks, to men or boys. Beebo is described a number of times as appearing masculine or actually like a boy. She is

44 Faderman, 163.
45 See Jack and Beebo (as well as many others) in the Beebo Brinker books by Ann Bannon, Lisa in Desperate Asylum by Fletcher Flora, Leda in Spring Fire by Vin Packer, Chris in Chris by Randy Salem.
46 Kennedy & Davis, 72.
47 Faderman, 168.
48 Pettigrew & Stikeman.
49 Pettigrew & Stikeman.
50 For example, in the novel Beebo Brinker, the character Beebo is sent away from home and shamed by her family after she dresses up in her brother’s good clothes and walks around a farm auction as a man. In Women in the Shadows, Beebo says that “I’d sell my soul to be an honest-to-God male” (p 27). Beth in I Am a Woman is described as “taller and quite boyish” (p 66). Many characters in Women’s Barracks, as seen prior, are described in male terms as is the character Mitch in Spring Fire.
said to be "male-inclined," described as "awkward in [her skirt]," with "the face of a boy," "broad shoulders and hardly a hint of bosom." Unfortunately, the women who appeared more masculine were often at a much greater risk of being identified and thus persecuted; they could not pass as heterosexual as many other lesbians could.

**Conclusion**

"Bit by bit, and almost in spite of ourselves we found that we were simultaneously informing the world at large that we were here, that we were fully human, fully loveable, and fully competent human beings, that we were not going to go away."  
-Ann Bannon

While there has been recent scholarship on the lesbian pulp fiction genre as well as the significance of these novels on the lesbians of those years, there has been very little attention paid to readings of the novels themselves. Though scholars may study the cover art or the tragic endings of the paperbacks they often do not look further at the content. Content is perhaps the most valuable asset of these novels as it can be indicative of many levels of the society including the government, the media and the lived experience of lesbians. It can be taken literally, as a reflection of the lives of these women, but, due to outside pressures, they are often not accurate portrayals of lesbian culture. It is therefore more useful to look beyond the literal to examine the pressures and influences of the society on the written word; to look at the social and political climate that predisposed the language, portrayals and scenarios of these novels. These texts provide a starting point from which analysis of lesbianism in the 1950s and 1960s can begin.

---

55 Quoted in Dean, 6.
88 FOOTNOTES

Works Cited


