

Joy Bridges' Book World

From Suicide to Bisexuality to Blackmail, 'Lovers' Woes Know No End

Lovers and Tyrants

by: Francine du Plessix Gray

This novel depicts the life history of Stephanie from childhood to the present as she involves herself in the major conflicts of a woman of today--marriage, politics, feminism, and religion.

Each stage of her life points out the fact that for a woman life is often an "either-or" proposition. One can have love or liberation, security or freedom. As the author puts it, "The most tyrannical despots can be the ones who love us the most." Lovers can be tyrants.

Stephanie's first tyrant was a governess who took her temperature twice a day and confined her to bed as much as possible in order to control her. Since Stephanie did not attend school or play with other children and had indifferent parents, she was entirely at the mercy of the governess for attention and affection. As Stephanie looks back it seems to her that this governess instilled in her a sense of isolation from others and an addictive need for protection.

When World War II came, Stephanie and her mother fled to America while her father went off to fight for the Free French. In the United States Stephanie's mother worked as a hat designer and began to know her daughter who had been brought up almost as a stranger to her. Stephanie also learned about her mother. Her calm, aloof, poised mother screamed every night in her sleep, remembering

her trials as a child when her father had abandoned her during the upheaval of the Russian Revolution, and a mother who she hated.

During this time, Stephanie had no word from her father. Then, through a friend, she found out that her father was shot down on his very first flying mission and had been dead for a year. Her mother had not told her because she felt she was too young to understand. Stephanie's feeling of being deceived and betrayed by this withholding of the truth only increased her feeling of isolation.

Stephanie endured a private school for girls and then went to Radcliff, after which she escaped to Paris to become a journalist. Her boss was an Englishman who hated the French and made occasional suicide attempts in the office. Fortunately, they were all failures, such as the time he tried to hang himself by jumping off a stack of telephone books but only achieved a very sore throat.

Paris could be a very lonely city for an outsider so Stephanie fell into an affair with a melodramatic, impoverished descendent of Napoleon. She knew that eventually he would marry a girl that his family selected for him. Her family wanted his title and he wanted her family's money. Stephanie knew that he was despicable, but at least he was not boring like her lover from her college days, Paul, who showed up every

three months--proposed marriage once again--and then faints! Paul represented safety to her and she really did not want safety, at least not quite yet. ("Oh, save me God, but not quite yet," as St. Augustine put it.) Stephanie realized that Paul was using emotional blackmail--that the security he was offering was a form of oppression.

Stephanie fell ill and broke up with her impoverished, snobbish prince in a loud scene in which she told him exactly what she thought of him, in excruciating detail. He later married his heiress but still sent Stephanie sentimental letters on her birthday.

Stephanie returned to the United States and married Paul, and it was just as safe and boring and predictable as she knew it would be. Stephanie spent the fifties being the perfect wife and mother and going quite crazy. She kept dreaming that she was a spinster who wanted a home and a family.

By the time the sixties had arrived, Stephanie had managed to have a breakdown, a hysterectomy, a separation from Paul, and a young bisexual lover. She turned her back on domesticity and sought adventure and self-discovery. Stephanie reached a point in her life where she realized that lovers can be the worst tyrants but that they could not do it alone. No one can make anyone feel inferior without one's own permission. Freedom comes when one takes responsibility for one's own life.

Jill Adams: Spinal Column

Christmas: Lists, Gifts, and Zelda Lou

In the past, the Spinal Column has been satirical, derogatory, undignified, foul, contemptible, corrupt and a host of other degrading things. But, since Santa Claus is coming to town, and Rudolph is coming to T.V., I have got to start being a good girl (as soon as I finish this column). Thus, I've decided to change my outlook on life, to succumb to the "Xmas Spirit", let the spiritual beauty of the season guide me through the coming days, and, oh yes, stop beating on my roommate. After all, I have something to live for (seeing Santa burn his posterior when he slides down the chimney), and I am glad to be alive (because I might just get a car for Christmas).

Christmas is a truly wonderful time of the year. The spirit of giving (and the hope of receiving) overwhelms the soul, warms the heart, and bounces the checkbook. Personally, I can't wait to make my list; and browsing through the stores is such a delight, especially

when I'm with someone who is shopping for me.

I hope that when I return home, there will be a great reception awarded me--the "Prodigal Daughter". What I surmise is that my family will stop whatever they're doing long enough to mutter, "What are you doing here?"

Of course, home is the place to be for the holidays. Warmth is generated by the enjoyment of being with one's loved ones. Decorating the tree, baking goodies, wrapping presents, singing Xmas carols, and family arguments are always so much fun (especially when you win the arguments).

I can't wait 'til Xmas morning, when we all gather around the Xmas tree and fight about what belongs to who. A sample: "#%&*, I'm the one who asked for a watch, so it belongs to me!", I scream at my sister. She replies, "Well then, if it's yours, what's it doing in my stocking?", and so on.

Later in the day, when aunts and

uncles and cousins and in-laws and second cousins once removed and boyfriends and girlfriends of cousins and the ninth husband of my crazy aunt, Zelda Lou, are sitting at the table that belonged to my great-great-grandfather of pre-Civil War days, my crazy uncle Beauregard (though not quite as crazy as Aunt Zelda Lou) will propose a toast of iced tea (we are devout Southern Baptists) to Xmas. "To the wonderful season," he will say, "that brings us together, spiritually, as well as physically. To the love that binds us during the Christmas season, and throughout the entire year. To the joy that we feel, and the special happiness that we share at Christmas, and to our wonderful family with which we share our happiness. With that, shall we raise our glasses," and as I fume over presents I didn't get and the argument I lost last night, I raise my glass, too. "...to our wonderful family at this wonderful time of the year...."