

# The Front Page

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## An Interview With Rita Mae Brown

by Karla Jay

When I went to meet Rita Mae Brown at her hotel last summer, she was in the midst of a large scale publicity tour to promote her fine novel, *Southern Discomfort* (Harper & Row, \$13.50). Despite her obvious fatigue, Rita graciously took time out from a hectic schedule to talk to me about art, politics and her personal life.

Rita had come a long way from the old walkup she used to live in on West 15th Street when I first met her in the late 1960's to the posh Fifth Avenue hotel where we now talked, but her hard-hitting style and wit and her determination to say whatever she feels is right, no matter what the consequences, hadn't changed one iota.

In the following interview, Rita gives her views of the American government ("a bunch of jerks"), the Moral Majority ("I have so much respect for the Christian right wing"), the women's movement ("We're just full of shit"), the potential future ("We have no choice but the democratic party"), the gay movement ("It is the paradox of oppression that it is always incumbent upon the oppressed to humanize and teach the oppressor"), the ERA and gay legislation ("It's not gonna work), coming out ("If what you're talking about is so great, why don't you stand up for yourself"), pornography ("One of those wonderful issues where men and women will never see it the same way"), boy love ("I just want to shoot them"), sado-masochism ("bad taste"), and Rita's future ("I would like to get married").

Rita's comments will make you laugh and make you angry, but most important, they are sure to make you think, for as I said in a review of *Southern Discomfort*, Rita is still one of the best minds in the women's and gay movements today.

Karla Jay: What responsibilities do you feel that a lesbian writer or artist bears towards the larger lesbian/gay and/or feminist communities?

Rita Mae Brown: The responsibility she has to any community, which is to tell the truth. It makes no difference whether it's a lesbian community or straight community or no community. A writer has to tell the truth or a writer shouldn't write. Otherwise, you're just a hack.

KJ: What do you think is the relationship of art in general to the larger society? Do you think that this is the same thing, just to tell the truth?

RMB: It's there to amaze, entertain, and provoke people.

KJ: Why did you decide to be one of the co-writers on the "I Love Liberty" special?

RMB: Because Norman Lear asked me, and I'd never done television, and I thought, wow, what a way to learn at the top. I learned a lot. I was real happy to be there. And also very happy to celebrate the First Amendment, which we are in danger of losing. It won't get wiped off the books, it'll just be wiped out in practice. The whole show is really built around that amendment.

KJ: Do you think that the First Amendment really exists for women and minorities that don't have access to presses, and so on?

RMB: You and I still aren't thrown into jail for saying what we think, and I've been with people who have been in Argentina, Rumania, Yugoslavia. It ain't great, but shit, we're ahead of those people.

KJ: That was one of the themes of the show, and there seemed to be a blanket statement that certain groups, including gays, physically challenged people and so on, have it better here in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world. Did you feel comfortable with that kind of a message?

RMB: Well, maybe it is (better elsewhere), but who cares what happens in Holland? I mean, that's the problem. This is the center of the free world, and what happens here affects what happens everywhere. From what I've seen, it's better here. Obviously, I don't think it's great. I've been protesting since the '60s. But I still am not in jail. I mean, I've lost my livelihood sometimes. I've had jobs taken away from me, or never got them sometimes. I've been subjected to all of those pressures, but as long as I can open my mouth, I will.

England has these wonderful laws on the books, right? And homosexuals are still treated like total shits, especially women. Women are just the total... just the bottom of the barrel. Their earning power is zip. So, what good are the laws? They don't do you any good, unless you're rich enough to enforce them. But Americans like to complain: "Oh, we have a hard life." That's bullshit. We have a great life, better than many others who would rather be here than in Chile. It's just that I'm

not going to settle for it. I'm not going to settle for Reagan. Bunch of jerks. I mean, these are the people who gave us Watergate, they'll bomb us back into the dark ages if we give them half a chance.

KJ: I remember several years ago, you suggested a titling to the movement. Do you want to go into that a little bit as a philosophy? I don't know if people understand that.

RMB: Every church in the world exists on the principle that a parishoner gives 10 percent to the church. The irony of this never escapes

me. The women's movement is basically white, middle-class women or women who come from the middle class. And by virtue of renouncing the privileges that come from attaching yourself to white, middle-class men, they have less than they might, but these aren't poor women. I mean, they always have money for dope and stereos; they get around. I haven't seen anybody on the welfare lines yet. And I don't want to. So...they don't give 10 percent, but I *religiously* cough up money to

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Photo by Robert Lewchyn

Rita Mae herself.

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