

The Front Page

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An Interview with Lesbian Novelist Jane Rule

by Yvonne Klein

Jane Rule is at once the most visible and invisible lesbian writer today. On the one hand, her novels are eagerly awaited and widely distributed. Her important study of lesbian themes in literature, *Lesbian Images*, forced reviewers in the non-gay media, perhaps for the first time, to discuss, rather than whisper about, lesbianism. An interview with Jane in a nationally-circulated Canadian newspaper supplement introduced a personable and articulate lesbian to the breakfast tables of an entire nation.

On the other hand, Jane Rule does live on a small island off the coast of British Columbia. She travels rarely and reluctantly to the usual writer's meetings and gay conferences. Though eager to speak out forcefully in support of gay issues, she scrupulously guards her privacy.

Distance prevented me from conducting this interview in the usual way. Since Jane and I see things from different perspectives, we decided that our exchange take the form of a dialogue, in several rounds of question and response by mail. The results of that correspondence, in which Jane expresses herself on subjects as wide-ranging as writing, power, children's sexuality, sado-masochism, and falling in love, are what follows.

Yvonne Klein: Although your novel, *This is Not For You*, is one of my favorites, I know it had a mixed reception from some lesbians. They saw it as a negative and guilt-ridden representation of lesbian life. Criticism of this type implies a demand for a certain kind of "political awareness" in a work of art. What relation do you think politics has, or ought to have, to the judgment of fiction? Or, to put it in another way, by what standards would you like to see your books reviewed?

Jane Rule: I don't object to a work's being considered for its political content if the questions posed are relevant to it. If the reader knows the difference between art and propaganda. There is nothing "politically incorrect" about *This is Not For You*. A minor character, Sandy, makes it perfectly clear that a lesbian can be both a successful artist and happily settled in a lesbian relationship. If writers are forbidden to examine, as I do in this book, the guilt and misplaced morality experienced by some lesbians not only in the past but today, I don't see how our art is going to represent our real experience. There are happier stories to tell, and I've told some of

them, but *This is Not For You* has been important for readers who have recognized in the book some of their own experiences and understood them better as a result. So the book can be read politically, but it would be a shame if it were read for nothing else.

YK: In Canada, you've become, through no choice of yours I'm sure, the Canadian lesbian. Does this visibility distress you particularly? Would you like to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of that position?

JR: No interviewer for the popular media is as interested in the fact that I am a writer as in the fact that I am a lesbian. My books are the excuse for the interview, my sexuality is the reason. I suspect that such attempts to sensationalize my private life sometimes get in the way of my reaching a larger audience. Since there is nothing I can do about it, short of refusing interviews, I try to use the circumstance for political purposes. I've been relatively lucky in being able to present my own life in positive terms and therefore make my small contribution to educating the general public toward a better understanding of my own minority. So I am resigned to it.

YK: Your answer refers particularly to how you are viewed by the non-gay reading public. But what about the lesbian and gay community? Do you feel any special responsibility to it as a consequence of your public position?

JR: Yes, but I suppose my working to educate the non-gay world does seem to me work for my community. I also try to do as much writing as I can for various gay publications. I still give away rather than sell a great deal of what seems to be my best work in short fiction. I also feel a special responsibility not to become a narrow propagandist but as fine an artist as I can be.

YK: I gather, from a remark you made in a recent *Fireweed* as well as from some of the implications of your novel *Contract With the World* that you feel that the situation of the artist in general has certain parallels with that of the homosexual in a homophobic society. Could you say some more about what you think these parallels are?

JR: The most obvious similarity is society's acceptance only of those artists and homosexuals of extraordinary accomplishment. Artist and homosexuals are both considered deluded, pressured to "get a job", "marry", "settle down", to the consumerism of daily life. No one thinks an athlete should stop being athletic unless he or she can go to the olympics. A journalist

doesn't have to be among the top half dozen in the country to earn a living and therefore be accepted as a useful member of the community. Most of the homosexuals who have been given some acceptance have been great artists.

YK: We had, I'm sure you remember, a rather heated exchange in 1981 with Andrea Dworkin's *On Pornography*. Pornography is one of the issues which divide lesbian feminists from the gay movement most decisively. Lesbian feminists like myself tend to feel that the insensitivity on the part of gay men to the violence against women which characterizes so much pornography makes it difficult to work closely with them even on issues of

common concern. Others seem to feel that the attack on porn threatens to ally the feminist movement with the radical right, and the right is a far more immediately serious concern than the institutionalized violence against women.

I have not found gay men unsympathetic to women's concerns about violence toward them in pornography. The erotic material gay men want protected from censorship is not the mutilation of the female body, and I suspect the majority of them would also be in favor of protecting children from exploitation. What gay men are concerned about is that laws might be made which would be used against them and their literature, and certainly

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BOOKS

Reviewed by Jesse Monteagudo

A survey taken by New York's Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in 1977 showed that Jane Rule was the author most popular among lesbian readers, edging out Rita Mae Brown, Bertha Harris and Mae Sarton.

Her first novel, *Desert of the Heart*, was originally published in 1964. Her second and third novels, *This is Not For You* (1970) and *Against the Season* (1971) were also acclaimed.

Her non-fiction work, *Lesbian Images* (1975), is considered an essential title for lesbian/feminist bookshelves. "An overview of major contributors to Lesbian literature," Barbara Grier describes it in *The Lesbian in Literature*, "combining literary criticism and biography as well as analysis of the mores affecting the writers." *Lesbian Images* is considered the best discussion of its kind since Jeanette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*.

Many of Jane Rule's books were too long out of print. Before there were lesbian or gay publishers, good lesbian and gay novels came out, were ignored, and were soon lost. Other books by Jane Rule have been available only

in Canadian editions. Even so, her reputation has continued to grow.

Her earliest novel, *Desert of the Heart*, has had a remarkable history. Never out of print since it was originally published, it has often been unavailable in the United States. Even so, it has become a major classic lesbian novel, eagerly searched out and widely read, often considered Rule's most romantic novel. Reprinted by Naiad as part of their lower-priced series, Volute Books, this new edition was planned to coincide with a projected movie version of the book (to be produced by Donna Deitch).

The Young in One Another's Arms is my personal favorite, and I'm delighted that it will soon be more readily available. Naiad Press is planning to reprint the book in the fall of this year. The book centers around Ruth Wheeler, a middle-aged woman living in Vancouver, who runs a boarding house full of assorted characters including an American expatriate escaping the draft, a radical feminist, a female Ph.D. candidate, and a young black gay man with a mysterious past. Ruth and her menage

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