Contemporary Homosexual Fiction
and the Gay Rights Movement

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Introduction

Art has the potential to expand our knowledge and manipulate our emotions and beliefs. Homosexual fiction can make a valuable contribution to the gay rights movement. It can present the gay experience to individuals who might otherwise have little direct knowledge of homosexuality. Moreover, it can convey images of homosexuality which challenge the stereotyped view that homosexuals are sick, disturbed individuals. Art cannot make a revolution, but it can prepare the ground for one. It can assist in developing what David Margolies has referred to as the "emotional consciousness on the basis of which men make a revolution..." Social change involves more than restructured attitudes and feelings, but what people think and how they feel influences what they do and how they act. If homosexual fiction can affect what people think about homosexuality and how they feel towards it, it can directly influence their behavior. This is the stuff of social change.

Do contemporary authors of homosexual fiction take advantage of this literary potential? Do they, through the images of homosexuality presented in their writings, exploit this power of art? This essay attempts a tentative response to those questions through an examination of selected works of two contemporary authors of homosexual fiction, Patricia Nell Warren and John Rechy.

Warren's Image of Homosexuality: Just Like You and Me

At first glance, Patricia Nell Warren's work appears to be dominated by her desire for commercial appeal. Her obvious attempt to reach a wide audience suggests that her novels trivialize the problems of homosexual experience. This first impression is wrong, as her novels are radical in their very ordinariness. Both The Front Runner (1974) and The Fancy Dancer (1976) isolate and elaborate upon the experience of homosexuality in a manner that strips it of the mystique of strangeness. Moreover, the message which she conveys to the reader
is that the source of a homosexual's suffering and despair is outside the individual and part of a larger system, not a result of personal weakness or inadequacy. Her characters move from a position of confusion to one of understanding and fulfillment.

*The Front Runner* explores the relationship between Harlan Brown, a track coach, and his lover and star runner, Billy Sive. When the story opens, Brown is teaching at a small private college. He is jolted by the appearance of three runners, including Sive, who announce that they have been thrown off their previous school's track team for homosexual offenses. The three petition to join Brown's team and attend his school. Brown, a homosexual, recognizes the possibility that his relatively quiet and contained existence could be shattered if he accepts the runners. Nevertheless, he accepts the trio and, as the story unfolds, become more and more involved with Sive.

Warren uses the characters of Brown and Sive to depict two common but conflicting images of coming out. Sive, who was raised by his homosexual father, has no conflicts with his homosexuality. His is a "natural man" type of character, open and comfortable with what he is and has always been. Brown, in contrast, had to undergo a painful process of self-realization. His description of his first conscious encounter with homosexuality reveals the elation he felt when he first came to terms with his true self:

On the bus, roaring along the parkway, I sat motionless in my regular clothes, with sunglasses still on, still shattered. But there was also a glistening manic elation at having tasted what my nature had craved for so long. I was surprised to find that I did not feel in the least guilty and soiled. I was sure I was not insane. It might be possible to feel good about being gay—as long as I could keep it hidden from the rest of the world.³

His furtive weekends in New York City, away from his wife and sons, emphasized to him that the homosexual is victimized by society.

It wasn't long before I felt that bewilderment, that choking rage, that the gay feels. We were hunted animals. We were huddled underground in the dark, like the Christians in the catacombs, sheltering the tiny flame of our sexual faith. What just emperor would declare the edict that would let us out into the light? What harm did we do? Murderers and thieves harmed others, but we harmed no one except possibly—in our confusion—and unresolved guilt—ourselves.³

*The Front Runner* is first and foremost a love story, albeit a particular kind of love story. Again, in Brown's words, "(T)here is no society, no law, no social convention to keep two gays together."⁵ Warren's sensitive portrayal of the relationship between Brown and Sive challenges the stereotyped view that gay love is transient and
meaningless. Moreover, her decision to cast Sive's father as a civil
rights attorney consciously places the issue of gay rights in the context
of the struggle for minority rights. Even her treatment of Brown's
experience as a hustler offers an alternative view of the lifestyle. The
gay hustler, in Warren's world, is depicted not as a pervert or outcast
but as a survivor. "There was something about the harshness of
hustling that reminded me that I was surviving, that the straights
would not crush me." 6

Warren's The Fancy Dancer continues her process of the
demystification of homosexuality. In this book, she locates
homosexuality in a world which denies a role to any form of sexuality.
Tom Meeker, the book's central character, is a Roman Catholic priest.
The story centers on his relationship with Vidal Stump, a town "hood"
who becomes Meeker's first lover. Warren's decision to make the
protagonist a priest allows her to portray the conflict between the
homosexual and two different realities, that of the small town in
Montana in which he resides and that of the Catholic Church. Meeker's
difficulty in dealing with the bigotry and sexual hypocrisy of some
of the townspeople is matched only by his conflict with his Church.
The Church, as Warren depicts it through the characters of Father
Vance (Meeker's parish superior), Father Matt (Meeker's spiritual
advisor), Father Doric (Meeker's homosexual priest friend), and Father
Carney (Meeker's bishop), has rules for every aspect of Meeker's life,
including his sexuality. The rules for the latter are particularly
straightforward: the Church demands celibacy for its priests.
Throughout the action of the novel, particularly in terms of his
conversations with Doric, Meeker begins to question not just his own
sexuality but the entire Church teaching on the subject.

What is most significant about this novel, however, is Warren's
treatment of the source of Meeker's unhappiness. His journey is
depicted as one of self-discovery in which he must uncover what others
have known all along. Meeker, for example, was aware of the special
feelings he held for Doric during their seminar days, but he was
unable to label them. He did understand that Father Matt discouraged
his friendship because of some insight that Meeker could sense but
not fully comprehend. Later in the book, when Meeker reveals himself
to his parents, he discovers that they had known since his teen years
about his homosexuality. Meeker, whom Vance refers to as a
"pilgrim," is in effect a character without a consciousness of himself.
"Pilgrim," the ranchers' word for a useless outsider, fits Meeker well.
His only consciousness is of his aloneness and estrangement, his sense
of alienation in a world which he had tried to shape through his
vocation:
Suddenly I felt devastated by aloneness there in the clustered living room. I was a priest of God, of Divine Love. I should be like a holy high-tension wire humming with the shock current of love, carrying love from God to man, and back. But I felt alone, and empty. His pilgrimage gradually absolves him of the feelings that his alienation is a result of personal failure. He defines his problems in political terms and becomes convinced that it is the town’s and the Church’s attitudes about what he is rather than who he actually is that is the source of his alienation. He comes to a new appreciation of his suffering:

In spite of the pressures on them, or maybe because of the pressures, gay people had found the ability to explore and express a richness of inner human experience that straight people had somehow missed. The Church would impoverish herself to the degree that She refused to tap this richness. The character of Doric reaffirms Meeker’s new consciousness. For Doric, the Church had made “theological criminals” of homosexuals. It was the Church’s teaching on homosexuality, he argued, which was wrong and which was the source of personal suffering.

The character most central to Meeker’s pilgrimage, however, is Vidal Stump. Stump views himself as a permanent outsider, not comfortable with his Indian heritage but not willing to abandon it. As he indicates, “I’m outside for good.” One of his primary roles as antagonist is to shatter the myths with which Meeker has encircled himself. Stump, for example, argues that the Church’s attitude towards homosexuality served a function in its time but had no intrinsic truth. His determination to confront Meeker with his ideas forces the latter to rethink what he had formerly accepted and internalized. In his characteristically blunt fashion, Stump offers his interpretation of the roots of the Church’s position:

And I notice that the Jews hated it because all their enemies did it. Also, they had to have babies and survive. That’s just politics, Father, it has nothing to do with divine truth. Meeker’s rebellion involves a rejection of personal guilt and inadequacy. It is initiated and developed in terms of his contacts with those, like Stump and Doric, who affirm rather then deny their sexuality.
Warren’s message is that homosexuality is not a perversion and homosexuals are not perverts. The revolutionary nature of her message is presented in a conventional form. The uniqueness of her work is defined in terms of the interplay of ordinary form and non-ordinary content. In this respect, her work stands in stark contrast to the novels of John Rechy. Warren’s ordinariness gives way to Rechy’s exotica.

Rechy’s Image of Homosexuality: Raw is Better

Rechy’s first novel, *City of Night* (1968), presents the image of the homosexual as political rebel, but his subsequent works serve only to support the dominant view of the homosexual as an undesirable deviant.

The rebellious quality of *City of Night* is manifested in both its style and substance. The story is told in a first person stream of consciousness-like fashion which negates any attempt at containment. Society, like the traditional structure of the novel, cannot absorb the force of homosexual rebellion. The book’s refusal to follow a more structured format reinforces the restless, searching quality of its central character. This nameless figure is the narrator and key protagonist of the book which details his journey from city to city throughout the United States.

The narrator’s sexuality is a rebellion against society’s organization of sexuality. His homosexuality is there, a protest against “procreative sexuality.” His is not a goal-directed sexuality characterized by genital supremacy; but, rather, is an acknowledgment of total eroticism. Stephen Adams refers to this as Rechy’s celebration of “an anarchic sexuality in which defiance and not the plea for tolerance forms the keynote.” Rechy, as Adams notes, has “cast the homosexual male in the role of a new frontiersman, glorifying in his outlaw existence.” The narrator’s estrangement and his alienation are his rebellion. “And I began to sense that this journey away from a remote childhood window was a kind of rebellion against as innocence which nothing in the world justified.” The narrator’s narcissism is flaunted. “Yet I was beginning to feel, too, a remoteness toward people—more and more a craving for attention which I could not reciprocate: one-sided, as if the need in me was so hungry that it couldn’t share or give back in kind.” His remoteness constitutes his rebellion, his denial of anyone’s hold over him. “From my father’s inexplicable hatred of me and my mother’s blind carnivorous love, I fled to the Mirror.”

Rechy, who denies that *City of Night* was a social protest novel, does admit that it was meant to convey the anarchy of the hustler life. Homosexuals, for him, are symbols of alienation and despair.
but also of nobility, and it is these characteristics which infuse the novel with its rebellious message. The narrator's sexual rebellion, his homosexuality, appears as a political act in a world in which politics infiltrates the instinctual sphere. At one point in the book, the narrator encounters a character identified as the "Professor." the Professor, an invalid who pays young men, his "angels," to sit and listen to his pronouncements, verbalizes what the narrator's actions imply.

But our unbudging standards of morality impose certain ugly names: The only immorality is "morality"—which has restricted us, shoved into the dark the most beautiful things that should glow in the light, not be stifled by darkworlds, darklights, darkwhispers.¹⁹

The central character of City of Night does not go beyond his sexual rebellion. Indeed, Rechy has indicated that his purpose is only to describe the existential nightmare which is characteristic of all existence, not to suggest a way out of it. His use of the phrase "no substitute for salvation" in all of his works is meant to convey the truth that there is no redemption, no possible salvation.²⁰ Rechy's narrator is a rebel, however. His homosexuality has political implications—is political—because it symbolically negates the ethics, the values, and the sexual mores of the Establishment.

Rechy's work subsequent to City of Night abandons this image of the homosexual as political rebel. Interpreters have noted this shift in Rechy's writings. Adams, for example, is critical of Rechy's non-fictional Sexual Outlaw. "The separation of sex from the individual's everyday world and its relegation to the safety-valve of 'outlaw country' is a dubious model of revolutionary freedom."²¹ Rechy's work post City of Night testifies to the fact that different lifestyles per se are not revolutionary. As Jeremy, also a figure in City of Night, indicates, "But what a short rebellion which relies exclusively on how long you can look young!"²² Rechy, ironically, becomes the apologist for the view that homosexuality is nothing but a deviation and his later novels support the worst social fears about what will happen if perverts are not stopped.

The elements of rebellion present in City of Night are absent in Numbers (1967). The narcissism of the earlier book appears as an outcry against the orthodoxy of object-directed sexuality. In contrast, the narcissism of Numbers appears as an end in itself. Johnny Rio, the central figure, prowls for scores to feed some hunger in himself, to be desired because he is better than any other person. Johnny's effort to connect sexually with anonymous men becomes a routinized mockery of the everyday world, complete with quotas,
rules of behavior, and goals. But *Numbers* is not meant to be taken satirically. It presents an image of sexuality which is a mockery of the total eroticism of *City of Night*. The homosexuals of *Numbers* do not negate, symbolically or otherwise, the presence of society in their instinctual structures. If anything, they reinforce the image that homosexuality is purely a person sickness.

*Rushes*, Rechy's 1979 novel, replaces the frenzy and rambling quality of *City of Night* with a sense of confined tension. *Rushes*, which is set in the period after the bar riots which signalled the beginning of the contemporary gay liberation movement, confirms the suggestion, implicit in *Numbers* that homosexuality is a phenomenon confined to maladjusted, sick individuals. "Rushes" is the name of a cruise bar, an environment in which the search for sexual conquest reveals only cruelty and aggression. Eroticism has no place in Rushes. Gone is the suggestion that homosexuality can symbolize a new sexuality, a new way of relating to the world. Chas, the most grossly overdrawn in *Rushes*, symbolizes sexuality gone amuck. Chas and the others like him at the bar do not challenge the socially defined image of masculinity, they accept it and rejoice in it. Masculinity becomes a synonym for control and strength without compassion:

> Here at the Rushes all that counts is sexual power... And what the fuck? Outside it's another kind of power that reigns. Why should it be different here?21

Endore, the most sympathetically portrayed character in *Rushes*, is troubled by the consequences of liberated sexuality:

> When did abundant sex—which he extolled—become a soulless reduction, a sacrifice of, all human contact? It didn't have to! Where did the sexual power endemic to all sexual contact trespass into oppression, even when willing? It didn't have to! But at the point where such a soulless reduction occurred as absolute, and sex, benumbed, insensate, pushed into pain for mere sensation, he would, he knew, warn against it, oppose it, while, always, supporting its right to be—and supporting, too, the intrinsic enrichment of abundant sex with one or many.24

Rechy appears to be a man shocked by his own vision, frightened rather than inspired by the promise of liberated sexuality. The more open and liberated the environment, he apparently sensed, the more sexuality is freed to wreak havoc. The more society releases controls of instincts, the more the natural cruelty and aggressiveness of people surface.
Summary and Conclusions

The intent of this essay, as initially stated, was to examine the contribution of contemporary homosexual fiction to the gay rights movement. Admittedly, this review has tapped a small segment of only one source of homosexual fiction, the novel. Seymour Kleinberg's *The Other Persuasion* is a reminder that the short story cannot be overlooked in any analysis of homosexual fiction.25 Future studies in this area must also consider the literature of lesbianism. Jane Rule's *Lesbian Images*, for example, provides excellent documentation on the relationship between fictional portraits of lesbians and evolving religious and psychological concepts.26 Sandra Scoppetone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike* is specifically geared to a young adult audience and presents a realistic view of coming out.27 The image of homosexuality it presents is useful for gays as well as straights.

It is possible to offer some tentative conclusions about the relationship of contemporary homosexual fiction and the gay rights movement. Warren does more than merely record homosexual experience, she makes that experience more intelligible to the reader through the ordinary nature of her characters and their environments. In effect, what Warren does is make homosexuality more accessible and familiar to her audience. Through her placement of her characters in familiar locales and her character development, she presents an image of homosexuality that challenges the stereotyped view that homosexuals are deviants. Her message is that homosexuals are not some form of incomprehensible species, they are ordinary people.

Rechy's novels take an approach that is diametrically opposed to the one used by Warren. Rechy sets out to shock his reader, to present homosexuality as a form of rebellion, to challenge accepted ways of viewing sexuality and civilization. He succeeds in these goals, but do his novels make a contribution to the gay rights movement? As noted earlier, Rechy's *City of Night* refuses the image of the homosexual as passive victim. His central character is portrayed as an actor who rejects the goals and values of a society that would make him miserable. Any movement for human liberation needs this kind of image. Rechy's later novels, however, present an image of homosexuality that is potentially destructive and harmful to the goals of the gay liberation movement. His characters reinforce the attitude that views homosexuals as deviants, as threats to what we cherish. The literature of homosexuality Rechy produced following *City of Night* reinforces society's fears that uncontrolled sexuality will result in the atmosphere of the Rushes unleashed upon us all.

Homosexual fiction has an important role to play in the struggle for gay liberation. In Marcuse's words, it can inform the strategy of the oppositional movement through the presentation of alternative
images of homosexuality. It can bring the experience of homosexuality to those who have little direct contact with it. In addition, it can present the important idea that the source of an individual homosexual’s suffering is not due to a personal deficiency but to something in society that would deny the individual’s right to self-fulfillment. To date, contemporary homosexual fiction has done its work well.

Notes

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9Warren, *Dancer*, p. 188.
14Adams, p. 83.
16Rechy, *City*, p. 18.
17Rechy, *City*, p. 18.
19Rechy, *City*, p. 70.
20Giles, p. 20.
21Adams, p. 97.
22Rechy, *City*, p. 359.
24Rechy, *Rushes*, p. 94.

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