

Lesbian Pulp Fiction

By Jennifer Trainor

Originating in 1939, the mass-market paperback boomed during the post-war years as readers in an era of labour-saving devices suddenly had more leisure time to fill. With GIs home from the war after exposure to a "more diverse range of sexuality" (Zimet 1999, p.18) overseas, publishers of paperback novels capitalized on the popularity of sensationalized stories of "sex, drugs, and illegal or salacious behaviour of all kinds" (Zimet, 1999, p.19). Early lesbian-themed paperbacks were written specifically for this market: publishers assumed a male readership for these books, and as such, many of them were written *by men for men*. The majority were written by and for women though, and despite the often negative portrayal of themselves in these books, they were still popular with lesbians since it was the only available literature with lesbian themes and characters (Zimet, 1999). Despite cover art that was clearly aimed at men, women learned to read the covers "ironically": "if there was a solitary woman on the cover, provocatively dressed, and the title conveyed her rejection by society or her self-loathing, it was a lesbian book"(Zimet, 1999 p.12).

In 1952, as a reaction to the increase of sensational literature available in the marketplace, the U.S. House of Un-American Activities Committee condemned Tereska Torres's *Women's Barracks* - a book that contained lesbian characters and situations - as one of several examples of material that should be censored. Committee members refused to read from it because of its "pornographic" content, which, by today's standards, is relatively tame (Bianco). *Women's Barracks* went on to sell over three million copies.

Fawcett Books, the company that started the paperback original (or PBO), sought to take advantage of the popularity of *Women's Barracks* and hired Marijane Meaker, a Fawcett secretary, to write about the homosexuality that occurred at her boarding school. The only restriction that the publisher stipulated was that the story "couldn't have a happy ending" (Zimet, 1999, p.20). Meaker wrote *Spring Fire* under the pen name Vin Packer and kept her promise to the publisher: at the end of the book, one woman goes back to her boyfriend and the other is committed to a mental hospital, thus "establishing an important convention of the genre" (Zimet, 1999, p.20). *Spring Fire* also went on to become a multi-million copy bestseller and is widely credited to be the book that really started the lesbian-themed novel (Zimet, 1999).

After reading *Spring Fire*, Ann Bannon - another acclaimed writer of the genre - also got her start writing for Fawcett. Bannon wrote to Meaker, who encouraged her to send in a manuscript, which was eventually published as *Odd Girl Out* (1957). Bannon, too, noted the insistence from the publisher that the story not have a happy ending. She sums it up as there being "some kind of retribution that was essential at the end [of the novel] so that you could let them have a little fun in the meantime and entertain the reader" (Zimet, 1999, p.20).

Books such as Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (written under the pseudonym Claire Morgan) contained a more sensitive portrayal of lesbians than some of the other pulps published at that time. Highsmith, who was a lesbian, commented on this unique portrayal of lesbians when she noted that "the lovers came out alive at the end and with a fair amount of hope for a happy future" (Bianco). Highsmith's book sold one million copies in 1953 alone and received thanks from lesbians and gay men at the time for finally providing a happy ending (Bianco). As Ann Bannon notes, there "was a Golden Age of lesbian writing and publication that came to pass in the fifties and sixties . . . we suddenly reached out and connected with women who were very isolated" (Zimet, 1999, p.21). She adds that while these books may be flawed by censorship and 1950s sensibility, "they speak truly of that time and place as I knew it" (Zimet, 1999, p.21)

Lesbian pulps created an underground community of lesbian readers, even though they didn't even think of themselves as a community at that time (Zimet, 1999). Despite lurid covers and sensational stories, these books were "in the vanguard of what later became a proud and brave social movement" (Zimet, 1999, p.15).

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