CHAPTER 10
Lesbian Pulp Novels and Gay Physique Pictorials

Focusing on the main forms of popular homosexed entertainment during the early part of the 20th century in the United States, this chapter illustrates the manner in which popular culture helped solidify a sense of identity.

In Chapter 1, we discussed the attempts of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in England, to shame priests found guilty of sodomy by excommunicating them and publishing their crimes and sentences. As we noted, these publications eventually ceased because they drew extraordinary attention from male parishioners whose primary interest was in discussing who did what to whom [Chapter 1]. Clearly, one of the unintended consequences of making sodomy public was that a community of “interested parties” formed around a practice meant to punish men who engaged in sodomy. Nearly 900 years later, in the mid-20th century, a similar phenomenon began to emerge in the United States with the publication of physique pictorials and lesbian and gay male pulp novels. In the case of physique pictorials, magazines chock-full of photos of nearly nude male bodybuilders and ostensibly intended for a heterosexual, health-conscious readership, soon became favorites of a largely gay male audience. In the case of lesbian pulp novels and exposé texts written to titillate heterosexual males with innuendo of lesbian sex and that purported to warn of the dangers of lesbians and lesbianism, the books were so widely read by lesbians that, very early on, lesbian authors began writing them, knowing full well that they were reaching out to readers very much like themselves. Gay male pulp
novels, even those published as “literary” texts and in cloth before their publication as cheap paperbacks, served a similar function for gay men.

The 1950s and early 1960s in the United States were marked by a number of important cultural contradictions. On one hand, the popular culture was focused on policing strict gender roles; women were encouraged to refocus their creative energies and labor on the home and (heterosexual) family because men had returned from World War II and needed employment in the factories that had used women’s labor during the war. On the other hand, many women had learned during the war that they were capable of doing the high-paying industrial work hitherto reserved for men and wanted to continue in that work and contribute to the support of their families or to support themselves outside the constraints of the heterosexual family. The McCarthy era was in full swing, and much attention was paid to ferreting out Communists and “perverts” in the government, to which end Executive Order 10450 was signed by President Eisenhower in 1953. At the same time, the Mattachine Society and the DOB were formed, and both Alfred Kinsey and Evelyn Hooker were studying human sexuality in more objective ways than ever before [λ, Chapter 3]. The physique pictorials and lesbian and gay pulp novels straddled these oppositional cultural forces and became conduits through which lesbian, gay male, and transgender culture passed.

Physique Magazines

Physique magazines began in the late 19th century when Prussian bodybuilder Eugen Sandow (1867–1925) established Physical Culture Magazine in London to help publicize his Institute for Physical Culture. According to writer Jim Webber, Sandow’s magazine, “along with the Boy Scouts and the Olympics, which were founded at about the same time, became part of the ‘muscular Christian’ movement, which promoted nationalism, racial purity, and brazen heterosexuality.”

Bernarr Macfadden began publishing the U.S. version of Physical Culture at the beginning of the 20th century for a heterosexual male audience interested in diet, exercise, and overall physical fitness. By the end of World War II, physique magazines had gained a significant audience among physical fitness buffs. These magazines, and the fitness craze of which they were a part, met the demands of a culture
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in which more and more working men were employed in fairly sedentary office jobs and in which technological advances—particularly in domestic appliances—were reducing the physical requirements of maintaining a home. Charles Atlas, whom Physical Culture called “The World’s Most Handsome Man,” had by the mid-20th century posed for 30 years in scanty clothing; Atlas, an Italian whose real name was Angelino Siciliano, turned 62 in 1955, and advertisements for his exercise method, Dynamic Tension, were commonplace at that time in the United States (Waldron).

In 1956, the issue of fitness became a public concern when a study was released showing that American children were less physically fit than their European counterparts; accordingly, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports was formed. In fact, the bodybuilding, diet, and fitness boom so generally permeated American culture that Alan Miller (writing for the gay magazine Body Politic) remembers being initiated to the pleasures of beefcake magazines in a barbershop:

I first encountered Physique Pictorial in 1960. Several issues were thrown among the magazine collection of Top’s Barber Shop hidden behind a variety store on Queen Mary Road in Montreal. The six barbers were—or so I vaguely remember—not the least bit embarrassed at having these things about, let alone that a young boy would be flipping through them . . . Even when blatantly erotic, physique magazines were excused (one is not sure how successfully) as works for those interested in bodybuilding, art or nudism—anything to avoid labels being applied to the purchasers.

As Miller’s experience indicates, bodybuilding and beefcake magazines soon became popular homoerotica.

According to David Bianco, though, Bernarr Macfadden “didn’t intend his magazine for sexual titillation. When he became aware of its homosexual following, he publicly denounced his gay readers as ‘painted, perfumed, kohl-eyed, lisping, mincing youths,’” whom he encouraged other men to “beat up.” Nonetheless, the popularity of bodybuilding magazines helped create a climate that allowed photographer Bob Mizer to begin publishing gay-oriented Physique Pictorial in 1951. As early as 1948, Mizer distributed a catalog of photographs he advertised as “invaluable for artists, inspirational for bodybuilders” (McGarry and Wasserman 117). Mizer and others capitalized on bodybuilding magazines’ underground gay male following. James M. Saslow says, “Under cover of the venerable physical culture movement,
monthlies like *Tomorrow’s Man* and *Adonis* printed reams of bodybuilders and sportsmen in the scantiest G-strings that would pass censorship. Bob Mizer . . . set up [the] Athletic Model Guild . . . to connect would-be poster-boys with artists and photographers” (252–253). U.S. postal codes, though vague, were generally interpreted as prohibiting full-frontal nudity, so models in Mizer’s original catalogs and in *Physique Pictorial* wore posing straps and showed no body hair below the neck (McGarry and Wasserman 121). Bianco points out that the number of physique magazines aimed at a gay male readership grew until, by 1958, there were “several dozen” with as many as 70,000 readers.

Tom of Finland, whose given name was Touko Laaksonen, was probably the best-known illustrator to contribute work to physique magazines. He began publishing in *Physique Pictorial* when Mizer used one of his drawings for the cover of the spring 1957 issue. Micah Ramakers claims that Bob Mizer invented Laaksonen’s pseudonym, though other sources claim that Laaksonen chose the name “Tom” himself because he worried that Touko would be difficult for the American tongue. Tom of Finland would eventually publish more than 100 images in Mizer’s publication and in other physique magazines, and many of those appeared on the covers (Ramakers 4).

Highly stylized pieces featuring muscled men with enlarged penises and torsos, Tom’s work often portrayed men engaged in sexual acts with one another. Many of his subjects wore uniforms—law enforcement, military, athletic—signaling a masculinity at odds with some sexologists’ assertions that homosexual men had the souls of women trapped in male bodies (Chapter 2). The drawings were often inspired by the photos appearing in the very magazines for which Tom was working and, as Ramakers points out, were “intended to complement the photos of desirable young men, which were the basis of the physique magazines’ success” (48).

Clearly, beefcake magazines served a particular function for white gay men. However, they also reflected the pervasive racism that has so plagued U.S. constructions of maleness and, by extension, male homosexuality. Tracy Morgan points out that when the Mattachine Society and the DOB were protesting the McCarthy purges of...
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white homosexuals from government jobs, “few Black people were federally employed” at all (284). Morgan notes that the kind of racism that excluded blacks from government employment was reflected as well in the pages of physique magazines, where the portrait of masculinity was “patriotic, strong, and white” (284) and that gay men who found these images sexually arousing might enjoy the magazines less if the images were more racially diverse. This does not mean, however, that no men of color appeared as models in physiques. Of the three main types of magazines Morgan found—those using a Grecian metaphor, the “all-American” style directed at fitness buffs, and those that served as “early homophile publications” (287)—the second type was the most (though not significantly) racially integrated. Morgan says,

Black men were generally underrepresented in physique publications in relation to their actual numbers in U.S. society during the years 1955–60. . . . The “all-American”-style physique magazines I surveyed included more than four times as many images of Black men as did the Grecian publications. In the latter category, in approximately twenty-six volumes published over a five-year period (1955–60), a paltry four images of Black men made it into print. . . . In contrast, the magazines oriented toward bodybuilding. . . . included an average of one Black male image per issue, and often more. (289)

To understand the presence of black men in some physique magazines as indicative of any kind of effort to resist the racism in the larger culture would be a mistake. As Morgan notes, black men were often photographed with “props” like heavy chains and cargo crates, and the few Latino men who appeared in the pages of physiques, though “generally represented with fewer accoutrements, occasionally don straw hats while surrounded by rum bottles” (290). As is clear, the racial stereotypes of the mid-century United States and the tendency to exoticize the racial other were reflected in these magazines, and as we will see in a later chapter, Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs of black men in the 1980s may represent a later version of this practice [x, Chapter 12].
texts that tended to reinforce ideas popularly held in the culture. Pulp novels had their heyday between 1950 and 1965, and they were sold on newsstands, as well as in drugstores and bus terminals, usually for about 25 cents. Their low price and pocket-sized format meant that most people considered them disposable in the same way that their predecessors, pulp magazines, had been. Scholar Yvonne Keller describes lesbian pulps as “typically lurid, voyeuristic and frequently homophobic, easily the opposite of ‘high literature.’ At the time, they were called ‘trashy,’ or ‘dirty books’; they are somewhat like National Enquirer in book form” (“Ab/Normal” 177–78). Initially, lesbian pulps were written with a heterosexual male audience in mind, an audience that would find their contents titillating and would read them with a voyeuristic gaze. Hence, many of the early authors of lesbian-themed pulps were men.

The covers of lesbian pulp novels, as Jaye Zimet shows in Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949–1969, often featured illustrations of busty, scantily clad, traditionally beautiful, almost always white women, and most often there were two women on the cover—one kneeling or lying on the floor or a bed and the other standing above her or sitting nearby, either looking at the first woman or gazing out at the viewer/reader. With titles like Women’s Barracks (1950), Female Convict (1952), Women in Prison (1953), Women without Men (1957), and Reformatory Girls (1960), these books promised to reveal the sultry underside of environments where nontraditional women—soldiers, prisoners, and wayward teens—lived together as emotional and sexual companions. Of the women portrayed on pulp covers, Ann Bannon says,

Who were these “girls”? Gazing at the pulp-art covers of lesbian fiction published half a century ago is like reconnecting with old acquaintances; I hesitate to call them friends, since I never really recognized them as such. In fact, over the years as my own books [the Beebo Brinker series] were published, I looked in astonishment at the choices the editors and art directors had made. The books arrived in brown packets, for the very good reason that they were deliberately evocative of shady sex. With only small adjustments, and sometimes none at all, the young women I was looking at could easily have walked off those pulp covers and onto the pages of Harper’s Bazaar to sell the “New Look.” Many could have graced the ladies’ undies section of the Sears, Roebuck catalog just as they were. (qtd. in Zimet 9)

The covers of lesbian-themed pulps, then, were not the lesbians with whom most women—those who knew they knew lesbians, that is—were familiar, especially early on; these were the lesbians of heterosexual male fantasies.

Women’s Barracks, by Tereska Torres, was the book that started “the golden age of paperback originals” (Stryker 49). The novel is based at least partially on Torres’s experiences serving in Charles de Gaulle’s Free French army during World War II.
Though *Women’s Barracks* deals openly with the sexual dalliances among the military women who are its characters, that is not its primary focus.

The book sold over a million copies in 1950, and eventually, it gained such notoriety that it became the focus of obscenity trials in Canada and the United States. Noting that, after World War II, Canadian newsstands “were opened to a huge range of mass market publications from the United States,” Mary Louise Adams explains that Crown Attorney Raoul Mercier showed no interest in “the parts where heterosexual women find themselves pregnant, or where they discuss their plans to sleep with married men or where they attempt suicide. The definition of immorality was too narrow to include them. For Mercier, what made this book obscene was its discussion of lesbianism” (111).

In 1952, *Women’s Barracks* was brought before a U.S. House of Representatives committee led by Congressman Ezekiel Candler Gathings; the committee “refused to quote it in their *Report of the Select Committee into Current Pornographic Materials*, claiming that its lesbian passages—which were restrained by contemporary standards—were too graphic to be included in a government document” (Stryker 51). According to Stryker, the report from the Gathings Committee resulted in publishers attempting to tone down the sexual content of their books and placing “greater emphasis on stories that drove home the generally tragic consequences of straying from the straight and narrow path” (51).

Some lesbians, most writing under pseudonyms, began to author lesbian-themed pulp novels specifically for a lesbian audience. Vin Packer, whose given name is Marijane Meaker and whose other pennames were Ann Aldrich and M. E. Kerr, wrote what was probably the first of these novels, *Spring Fire*. The novel is about Leda and Mitch, two sorority sisters who become involved in a dramatic, sexually charged romance marked by overwrought drama and betrayal. The story ends tragically with Leda lapsing into psychosis and Mitch clearly “scared straight” by the entire sordid affair.
Meaker is quick to point out that previous to the publication of *Spring Fire*, a lesbian market was not evident to anyone at Fawcett (the book’s publisher), which was merely spurred on to publish more lesbian-themed paperbacks by the economic success of *Women’s Barracks*:

[*Spring Fire*] was not aimed at any lesbian market, because there wasn’t any that we knew about. I was just out of college. I was gay . . . it wasn’t a prurient book . . . Tereska Torres wasn’t aiming [*Women’s Barracks*] at any market either—just telling her experiences the best she could, as I was. We were amazed, *floored*, by the mail that poured in. That was the first time that anyone was aware of the gay audience out there. (qtd. in Keller, “Was It Right” 390)

Stryker echoes Meaker’s characterization of the impact of *Spring Fire*, claiming that it “called attention to an enthusiastic lesbian readership whose extent had not been appreciated previously but one to which Fawcett and other mainstream paperback publishers would cater for the next fifteen years” (57). Perhaps for the first time, and clearly by accident, a lesbian market had emerged.

Roberta Yusba notes that “perhaps 40 or 50 lesbian novels were written by women and were also good enough to become underground classics. Dog-eared copies of books by Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor, Artemis Smith, and Paula Christian were passed among friends in lesbian communities . . . and also reached isolated, small-town lesbians who could read them and see that they were not the only lesbians in the world” (qtd. in Nealon 748). Though the publishers still had ultimate control over the covers of the books, the stories between the covers tended to act as “tour guides” to places where lesbians seemed to congregate and interact with one another—places such as Greenwich Village, where much of Bannon’s Beebo Brinker series takes place.

They also functioned as what Joan Nestle has called *survival literature* in
that they helped provide a sense of what romantic relationships between women might look like. In her anthology of excerpts from lesbian-themed pulp novels, Katherine V. Forrest explains that very little biographical information exists for the novelists who produced these books because many of “the pulp fiction lesbian writers were deeply closeted, and some have dissolved into the mists like Cheshire cats, leaving only their printed words behind” (xi).

Two authors who did not exactly dissolve into the mists were Patricia Highsmith (Mary Patricia Plangman) and Ann Bannon (Ann Weldy). Highsmith, writing as Claire Morgan, produced what many claim to be the first lesbian novel to end “happily”—that is, with the possibility that the two main characters, Therese and Carol, might enjoy an ongoing lesbian relationship with one another. *The Price of Salt* was not a paperback original, but it reached the height of its popularity after it appeared in paperback in 1952. Because it was published first by a mainstream publisher, Highsmith’s novel had less of the potboiler character of paperback originals and more of the relative complexity of mainstream literature. Although a popular novelist, Highsmith (author of *Strangers on a Train, The Talented Mr. Ripley,* and other books) did not acknowledge until 1984 that she was indeed the Claire Morgan who wrote *The Price of Salt*; the fact that it sold a million copies indicates that it met a need for a lesbian readership hungry for representation.

By contrast, Ann Bannon’s Beebo Brinker novels were published as paperback originals; they tended to have more fully developed, less stereotypical lesbian characters and plots as well as slightly more hopeful endings than
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of the pulps. Bannon’s novels were rereleased in the 1980s and 1990s by well-known lesbian publishing house Naiad Press and in the 2000s by Cleis Press, and all of Highsmith’s novels were recently rereleased by W. W. Norton.

Gay Male Pulp Novels

ike their lesbian-themed counterparts, which were much “more numerous and popular than those that dealt with male homosexuality,” gay male-themed pulps “represent, beneath a veneer of enticing exploitation, a compendium of the not-so-hidden preoccupations and fears of the tempestuous and socially unstable postwar years” (Bronski, Pulp Friction 3). Michael Bronski notes, though, that the “trajectory for gay male pulps is very different [from that of lesbian-themed pulps]. There was no burgeoning market for gay male novels in the 1950s because they apparently had little crossover appeal for a substantial heterosexual readership” (Pulp Friction 4). Although some gay male-themed pulp novels were published as paperback originals, many were republications of earlier novels originally published in hardback by mainstream houses.

A few gay male books were written and published in hardback during the 1930s and republished in paperback format after World War II. For instance, André Tellier’s Twilight Men was originally published in 1931 and republished in paperback by Greenberg in 1948 and by Pyramid Books in 1957; Blair Niles, a woman best known at the time for the travel and nature writing she wrote collaboratively with her husband, wrote Strange Brother, also originally published in 1931, then republished in 1952. Forman Brown’s Better Angel, published in 1933, was republished in 1951 as Torment under the pseudonym Richard Meeker. Novels by mainstream authors such as Gore Vidal (The City and the Pillar, 1948) and Truman Capote (Other Voices, Other Rooms, 1948) received critical attention.
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and notoriety because of their gay male content—explicit in the case of Vidal and implicit in the case of Capote.

We should not assume, however, that Vidal’s fame and connections granted his gay-themed novel immunity from homophobia in the publishing business. *The City and the Pillar* “so unnerved The New York Times it refused even to print the publisher’s ads” (Young). This rejection was surely a factor in how Vidal composed the original ending of his novel. The first edition of *The City and the Pillar* ends with the main character, Jim, murdering Bob, the childhood friend with whom he has been in love ever since their sexual encounters in the woods when both were teens. The murder occurs in the context of Jim’s realization of Bob’s homophobia. The 1965 version of *The City and the Pillar* was revised by Vidal and ends with Jim raping rather than murdering Bob, ostensibly because Vidal no longer needed to conform to publisher mandates that the book end in the death of one of the main characters. Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* focuses on Joel Knox, who is sent to live in a rural Alabama mansion with his estranged father and a cast of other characters, including Randolph, who is a transvestite. Near the end of the novel, the reader is led to believe that Randolph is also the character described by Joel earlier as the “queer lady” who appears in one of the mansion’s windows. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* did not enjoy great critical success because reviewers saw it as contrived and lacking in narrative structure. However, the implicit homosexual themes in the novel, combined with the provocative jacket photo—Capote lounging on a sofa and giving the camera a come-hither look—caused a controversy that helped make Capote a literary star. Vidal’s novel was republished in paperback in 1950 and Capote’s in 1949, making theirs among the first gay-themed novels to appear in paperback format.

Like *The City and the Pillar* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) [Chapter 9] appeared in paperback after experiencing little success in its initial hardback printing. *Giovanni’s Room* is a book Michael Bronski characterizes as among those gay “self-hating novels . . . which end in either murder or self-destruction” (“Queer Eye”). As a Signet pulp, however, featuring a sexy Giovanni on the cover and a pseudo-journalistic subscript (“A daring novel that treats a controversial subject

Figure 10.9  Truman Capote’s jacket photo for *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. 
Giovanni’s Room sold much better than before—signaling, perhaps, a growing mainstream interest in frank treatments of homosexual lives. We should also note that some of the women writing lesbian pulps were also writing books with gay male themes. Vin Packer (Marijane Meaker), for example, published Whisper His Sin in 1954. Stryker says of this novel, “Prior to the mid-1960s there were simply no mass-market books that dealt with male-male desire that did not somehow couch it in terms of bisexual conflict, illustrate it with misleading cover art containing both men and women, or hide it behind pathologizing marketing blurbs. This was certainly the case with Whisper his Sin . . . which did a little of all three” (107).

**Transgender Novels**

At mid-century, North American and Western European ideas about the nature of homosexuality—which deeply affected the packaging of pulp novels—still reflected the influence of the German sexologists’ ideas about gender inversion [λ Chapter 2]. As a result, post-World War II pulp novels often portrayed lesbians and gay men as possessing the qualities commonly associated with the “opposite sex.” What’s more, U.S. popular media and culture, profoundly affected by advances in technology, were asking ethical questions often associated with technological progress—How far is too far for science to go in altering nature? What is the relationship between science and nature? In previous generations, these questions had manifested themselves in fascination with the human potential to create monsters in the name of science—as in, for instance, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. In 1952, this type of fascination focused on transsexuality when the news broke that Christine Jorgensen, formerly George, had received successful sex reassignment surgery in Denmark. According to Stryker, though Jorgensen’s autobiography (with an introduction by Harry Benjamin) [λ Chapter 5] would not be published until 1967, the “journalism trade publication Editor and Publisher announced in the spring of 1954 that more newsprint had been generated about
Jorgensen during the previous year than about any other individual—over a million and a half words” (73).

As is evidenced in the work of B-movie director Edward D. Wood Jr. (featured in the 1994 bio-pic *Ed Wood*, by Tim Burton), in 1950s U.S. popular culture, almost no distinction was made among transvestitism, transsexuality, and intersexuality. Capitalizing on the Jorgensen media frenzy, Wood directed *Glen or Glenda* based on Jorgensen’s sex change operation. Humorously dubbed the “Worst Director of All Time,” Wood supplemented his income as a producer by writing pulp novels, most of which contained transvestite characters or focused exclusively on transvestitism. Among the titles are *Black Lace Drag* (1963), featuring a transvestite hit man named Glen and his drag persona, Glenda, and its sequel, *Death of a Transvestite* (1967). Wood’s quickly composed, sensationalist work—both in film and in print—has gained such a following in recent years that there is currently an Internet religion called The Church of Ed Wood, which boasts a membership of more than 3,000.

Stryker points out that some “novels written in the late 1940s, well before the Jorgensen media blitz, suggest that transgender issues were actually quite central to postwar American anxieties about sexuality, and to the paperback phenomenon itself” (77). One example of how these anxieties were expressed is Stuart Engstrand’s *The Sling and the Arrow*. Engstrand’s sensational novel is about a man who not only cross-dresses but asks his wife to do the same; he eventually becomes psychotic, imagines that he has transformed into a woman, kills his wife, and “drives off into the night where he takes his place near the head of a long line of gender-bent pop culture killers” (Stryker 78).

Lesbian pulp novels were seen for at least a decade following the advent of feminism as having very little positive to say to women wishing to build identities not constricted by stereotypes and sexist constructions of gender. However, queer pulps and, more recently, pulp cover art have reemerged as popular artifacts. The current use of pulp covers as refrigerator magnets, postcards, and T-shirt transfers celebrates campy images that recall, if not a more difficult time, then at least a more closeted time. The celebration of pulp reveals a sense of connection to a past today’s LGBT people both eschew and embrace. Many critics focus on the unhappy endings and bizarre characterizations in these books, but Katherine Forrest proclaims, “Their words reached us, they touched us in different and deeply personal ways, and they helped us all” (xix). Though it is clear that most pulp texts were meant to teach readers that queers were . . . well, queer, and therefore doomed to difficult lives filled with sleaze and shame, our predecessors found in them important connections to one another.
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Questions for Discussion

1. Works of pulp fiction, despite their often tragic endings, can be great fun to read, particularly as they offer an insight into what gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered lives might have been like in mid-century America. Read a few pulp fiction stories from Katherine V. Forrest’s anthology of lesbian pulps or Michael Bronski’s anthology of gay male pulps. What characterizes the representation of gay and lesbian lives or homoerotic desire in these novels and stories? For instance, what bisexual plots do you see? Are there any similarities between these pulp representations and contemporary figurations of queer life in mainstream media?

2. The art of Tom of Finland typically eroticizes uniformed, jackbooted, muscular men in scenarios where they dominate other men. What do you believe the artist intended viewers to experience? Is there any political or social meaning to Tom’s art?

3. The selection from Ann Bannon’s pulp novel *I Am a Woman* included in the readings for this chapter focuses on the coming-out conversation between Laura and her controlling and abusive father. During the course of this conversation, Laura accuses her father of having caused her to become a lesbian. Consider this idea in light of the discussion of 1950s pop Freudianism in Chapter 3. What are some of the major narratives purporting to explain why people are L, G, B, or T?

References and Further Reading


Lesbian Pulp Novels and Gay Physique Pictorials


Lesbian pulp Novels and Gay physique pictorials

READING

➤ Ann Bannon
(1959–), United States

From I Am a Woman

He didn’t know, and she didn’t want him to know. She was the one who cared about their relationship, who wanted love and trust and gentleness between them. Not her father. He didn’t give a damn, as long as she minded him. “You said you had no daughter,” she repeated bitterly.

“You wanted it that way, Laura.”

She turned to stare at him, incredulous. “I?” she said. “I wanted it that way?”

“You denied my existence before I ever denied yours,” he said. “You ran away from me.”

“You forced me to.”

“I did no such thing.”

“You made life intolerable for me.”

“I didn’t mean to.” It was an extraordinary admission, completely unexpected, and she looked at him speechless for a moment.

“Then why didn’t you show me some kindness?” she said. “Just a very little would have gone a long way, Father.”

He crushed out his cigarette in the heavy ashtray with an expression of contempt on his face. “You women are all alike, I swear to God,” he said. “Give you a little and you demand a lot.”

“What’s wrong with a lot?” she said, trembling. “You’re my father.”

“Yes, exactly!” he said, so roughly that she ducked. “I’m your father!”

“Did you treat my mother this way?” she whispered. “Her life must have been hell.”

He looked for a minute as if he would strangle her. She stood her ground, pale and frightened, until he relented suddenly and turned his profile to her, looking out the window. “Your mother,” he said painfully, “was my wife. I adored her.”

Laura was absolutely unable to answer him. She sat down weakly in the stuffed chair by the dresser and put her face in her hands. Her father—her enormous gruff harsh father—had never spoken such a tender word in her presence in all her life.

“I could never marry again, when she died,” he said. Laura felt frightened as she always did when her mother’s death was mentioned. She expected him to turn on her unreasonably as he had so often before. “I never struck her.”

“Then why me?” she implored out of a dry throat.

He turned and looked at her, his mouth twisted a little, running a distraught hand through his hair. “You needed it,” was all he would say.

“What for?”

“You needed it, that’s what for!” And she was afraid to push him further. After some minutes he said, “Laura, you’re coming back to Chicago with me.”

“No Father, I can’t. I won’t.”
“That’s why I waited for you,” he went on, as if she had said nothing.
“I won’t go to Chicago or anywhere else with you. I’m through with you.”
“You could look for work with a radiologist, if you like it so well. I won’t insist on
journalism. You have a flair for it, it’s a waste to leave the field, but I won’t insist. You
see, Laura, I can be human enough.”
She stared at him. She had never heard him talk like this. He glanced at her,
annoyed by the look on her face. “I’ve made reservations,” he said, “for June first.
That’s Saturday. I could probably get earlier ones.”
“Father.” She stood up. “I can’t come with you.”
“Don’t say that!” he commanded her, so sharply that she started.
“I can’t,” she whispered.
“You can, and you will. That’s all I want to hear on the subject.” As she started
once again to protest he held his hands up for silence. “No more discipline, Laura. I
promise you that. I was a fool. You were too, but never mind that now. I was too hard
on you, it’s true. I see that. Well, you’re more or less grown up by this time. I guess
we can dispense with spanking.”
“Spanking! It was more than that and you know it!”
“Don’t argue with me, Laura.” He turned on her, his voice low and fierce. Then,
making a visible effort to calm himself, he said, “Get your things together and I’ll see
about the reservations.”
“No.”
“Don’t fight me, Laura.”
“Father, there’s something you don’t know about me.” I have to tell him. I’ll never
be free from him till I tell him. Till he knows what he’s made of his only child. “There’s
something you don’t know about me,” she whispered.
“I don’t doubt it. Now hurry up, we’ve wasted enough time.”
“Father . . . listen to me.” It was almost too hard to say. Her legs were trembling
and her heart was wild.
“Well, out with it, for God’s sake! Jesus, Laura, you go through more agony . . . Well?
What is it?” He frowned at her tense face.
“I—I’m a—homosexual.”
His mouth dropped open and his whole body went rigid. Laura shut her eyes and
prayed. She held her lower lip in her teeth, ready for the blow, and felt the humiliating
tears begin to squeeze through her shut lids. She moaned a little.
He made up his mind fast and his voice cracked out like a lash. “Nonsense!” he
snarled.
“It’s true!” Her eyes flew open and she cried again, passionately, “It’s true! It was
her bid for freedom; she had to show this courage, this awful truth to him, or she
would never walk away from him. She would spend all her life in a panic of fear lest
he find her out. “I’m in love with my roommate. I’ve made love—”
“All right, all right, all right!” he shouted. His voice was rough and his face con-
torted. He turned away from her and put his hands over his face. She watched him,
every muscle tight and aching.
At last he let his hands drop and said quietly, “Did I do that to you, Laura?”
Without hesitating, without even certain knowledge, but only the huge need to
hurt him, she said, “Yes.”
He turned slowly around and faced her and she had never seen his face like
that before. It was pained and full of gentleness. Perhaps it looked that way to her
mother now and then. “I did that to you,” he said again, to himself. “Oh, Laura. Oh, Laura.” His heavy brow creased deeply over his eyes. He walked to her and put his hands on her shoulders and felt her jerk with fear. “Laura,” he said, “have you ever loved a man?”

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“How have you ever wanted a man?”

Again she shook her head.

“Do you know what it’s like to want a man?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Do you want to know?” His eyes were wide and intense, his grip on her shoulders was very hard.

“I’m so afraid of them, Father. I don’t want to know.”

He seemed to be in another world. Laura was utterly mystified by his strange behavior, blindly grateful for his sudden warmth, and she let herself weep softly.

“Laura,” he said, as if he derived some private pleasure from saying her name over and over. “Your mother—you look so much like your mother. You never looked like me at all. Every time I look at you I see her face. Her fragile delicate face. Her eyes, her hair.” He put his arms around her. “Come back to Chicago with me,” he said gently.

“You don’t have to love a man, Laura. I don’t want you to. I don’t want you to be like other girls, I don’t want you to go off with some young ass and give him your youth and your beauty. I don’t mind if you’re different from the rest. I can take that if you are able to.”

Laura clung to him, astonished, fearful, grateful, anxious, a whirlwind of confused feelings churning inside her.

“I want you to stay with me,” he said. “I always did. I won’t let you go.”

“You made me go, Father. You punished me so.”

“No, no Laura! Don’t you see, it was myself.” He was holding her so hard now, as if to make up for years of avoiding her, that she ached with it. She began to cry on his shoulder.

“Oh, Father, Father,” she wept. “You never told me you wanted me to stay with you. You made me believe you hated me.”

“No,” he said. “I never hated you.” He spoke in a rush, as if he couldn’t help himself, as if it were suddenly forcing its way out of him after years of suppression.

“Never, Laura, it was just that I was so lonely, so terribly lonely; I wanted her so much and she was gone. And there was only you, and you tormented me.”

“I?” She tried to see his face, but he held her too close.

“You were so much like her, even when you were a child. Every time I looked at you, I—oh, Laura, it’s myself I should have punished all this time. I was punished. I’ve suffered. Believe me. Laura, please believe me.”

Laura was suddenly shocked rigid to feel his lips on her neck. He put his hand in her hair and kissed her full on the mouth with such agonized intensity that he electrified her. He released her just as suddenly and turned away with a kind of sob. “Ellie! Ellie!” he cried, his hands over his face.

Laura was shaking almost convulsively. At the sound of her mother’s name she grabbed the thick and heavy glass ashtray from the dresser, picking it up with both hands. She rushed at him, unable to think or reason, and brought the ashtray down on the crown of his head with all the revolted force in her body. He slumped to the floor without a sound.
Laura gaped at him for a sick second and then she turned and fled. She left the door wide open and ran in a terrible panic to the elevators. She sobbed frantically for a few moments, and then she pushed the down button. She jabbed it over and over again hysterically, unable to stop until an elevator arrived and the doors opened. She stumbled in and pressed into a back corner, helpless in the grip of the sickness in her. The operator and his two other passengers stared at her, but she paid them no heed, even when one asked if he could help her. At the ground floor the operator had to tell her, “Everybody out.”

She turned a wild flushed face to him and he said, “Are you all right, Miss?” And she glared at him, violently offended by his manner, his uniform, his question.

“Don’t you know those pants won’t make a man of you?” she exclaimed acidly. And rushed out, leaving him gaping open-mouthed after her.

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