

FEEDING THE HUNGRY GAY BOOKWORM

BARBARA GITTINGS

I'm a girl-woman, 19, discovering that all is not heterosexual with me and that the only person I've loved at all was a woman. I need information, more information, and a belief that there are others like me with a need for other kinds of love stories.

- I found your address in *The Gay Crusaders* and right now it seems you're my only hope. I have decided to search out a gay group and it is close to impossible. I have tried looking everywhere that I know of but have had no luck. You see I need and want to talk to someone who has gone through some of the things I'm going through now. I need to talk to someone so desperately. Please reply.
- I have recently accepted my homosexuality and I feel like the world is on my shoulders. I know I can't run from it any more, but I'm still very frightened. If you would send me any information at all, no matter how simple or initiation-like it may seem, I would be eternally grateful.
- Hello. I'm a lesbian and I'm also a college student. Last year I did a research paper on my people (gays) and half the information was all lies. I was so furious. Since then I transferred to a different college, and again I have a paper due. This time I plan to have true facts. Please send me your bibliography.
- I have just begun reading *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*. I am 26 and although I have never had a homosexual experience, I know that I am a lesbian. Before I began reading this book I felt as though I were the only one in the world. Now I know that I am not, but my only friend is that book. I have no idea where to go or what to do. I'm frightened and very alone. I would appreciate any information you could send me so that I may come in contact with others like myself.
- I am desperately looking for

some kind of gay group in _____ . If you know of no such group, could you put me in touch with someone who might? I am 18 and going absolutely insane playing straight. I have one friend who is homosexual (we are not lovers) and that's just not enough. Please help me.

Letters like this have come to our organization for years. For thousands of gay people who aren't active in our movement, information is more than finding gay books and newspapers—it means finding other gay people. Our group, the Gay Task Force of the American Library Association, is sometimes the first connection they make.

Two librarians, a woman and a man, founded the Gay Task Force at an American Library Association (ALA) conference in 1970. Their boldness and energy fired up the handful of others who wanted to raise gay issues in the library field and promote more and better gay materials. Just a year later, the group put on an ambitious show at the ALA conference with a hospitality suite, handed out the first edition of *A Gay Bibliography*, had three speakers, waged a successful campaign to have ALA pass a gay-rights resolution, and initiated the first Gay Book Award (to *A Place for Us* by Isabel Miller, later republished as *Patience and Sarah*).

But what really put the group on the map was our Hug-a-Homosexual booth in the exhibit hall one afternoon. On the bare grey curtains forming the back wall of the booth, we hung signs reading "Women Only" at one end and "Men Only" at the other, and four of us stood under the appropriate signs, offering free same-sex kisses and hugs to librarians roaming the big exhibit hall. Well, our aisle was jammed—but nobody came into the booth. They all wanted just to watch the action. Maybe the *Life* photographer and two local TV cameras on hand made them feel shy.

Each year thereafter we created a lively presence at ALA conferences. Our extra activities, such as two one-act plays, a display of famous art works showing same-sex couples, and a gay puppet show, never again eclipsed our

main program event. We quickly got a reputation for putting on programs that appealed to librarians' professional interests but are also entertaining. Examples "The Children's Hour: Must Gay Be Grim for Jane and Jim?" (about negative gay themes in teenage novels); "Serving the Fearful Reader" (skits illustrating gay-related problems in reference service); "Gay Film Festival" (18 documentary gay films); "An Evening with Gertrude Stein" (featuring Pat Bond); and "It's Safer to Be Gay on Another Planet" (about gay images in science fiction/fantasy). Our programs have always been open to the gay community in the host city; no need to be registered for the conference or even be a librarian—just walk in.

Most years we have had a Gay Book Award to confer. And always we had our *Gay Bibliography* to distribute. We had begun this list as a selective guide to the small crop of positive, gay-supportive books that were just beginning to appear in 1970-71, plus a few key gay periodicals and pamphlets. Naturally we wanted the list to reach not only librarians who buy for their libraries, but also gay people who might be looking for material in libraries and bookstores. So we started getting mentions of *A Gay Bibliography* and our group in books then being published, such as Del Martin's and Phyllis Lyon's *Lesbian/Woman* (1972). (In 1983 we're still getting letters from this one source as people come across this book in libraries.)

For some who write to us, it's their first contact with a gay group, hence the calls for help out of loneliness and isolation. What a boon it was to us when *Gayellow Pages* first appeared and we could steer people to that!

As gay materials grew in quantity and quality—and as our *Gay Bibliography* got longer, to 563 items in the 6th edition in 1980—we began getting requests for shorter lists, lists crafted for a particular audience or focusing on one topic or kind of reading. An aide to a midwestern state legislator asked for no more than a dozen basic gay items to start educating lawmakers who knew little about homosexuality. "If you give them a long list, it's too much to grasp and they won't look at

anything," she said. Lesbians and gay men both wanted guidance to novels, since our bibliography had only non-fiction and biography/autobiography. Founders of the early Parents of Gays groups wanted to pinpoint materials about gay people's relationships with their families. Once a librarian at a men's prison wrote that some prisoners wanted to be able to use gay materials without advertising the fact; would we make up a list of gay male books without the words "gay" or "homosexual" in the titles or showing on the covers? We did. One challenge we simply can't meet, however, is the occasional request along the lines of, "Please send all available information on homosexuality. My term paper is due next week."

Out of the requests we got most often came a series of special lists. The two most in demand, *Gay Resources for Religious Study and Gay Aids for Counselors* (each a handy sheet printed both sides and including a list of organizations) are up to date; the other short lists, such as *Gay Materials for Use in Schools*, will be revised when possible.

One special list we started in 1976, of gay materials in format for the blind, has since been adopted, with our gratitude, by another organization far better equipped to keep it up to date and circulate it; Lambda Resource Center for the Blind, 3225 N. Sheffield, Chicago, IL 60657.

Now that we're finally getting good gay literature, how, people asked, can we get it into the libraries? So we produced in 1979 a pamphlet of tips for non-librarians, explaining library selection policies in a general way and telling what individuals and groups can do to get a library to buy more gay books and periodicals.

Most of our work is guidance and encouragement with respect to gay materials produced by others. The one kind of information on homosexuality that we're tackling directly is encyclopedia articles. Encyclopedias are often a first source of information, and they carry authority, especially with school students who assume the material in them is the best available. What students read about us in encyclopedias ranges from dismal to depressing, and has the kind of relevance of a skin doctor writing about black people. Our committee on encyclopedia changes is working with gay psychiatrists and psychologists who have the M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s that encyclopedia editors still insist on for articles on homosexuality.

Because we have made our Gay Task Force so visible in and out of the American Library Association, some people think we're a big official unit of ALA with an office and paid staff. Actually we're a tiny handful of volunteers around the country, getting things done by mail and phone from our homes. We run on drive and dedication and a lot of help from our friends. Non-librarians have been key members of the group from the start, and at ALA conference time we draw on dozens of people, especially in the host city, for substantial help in running our activities.

We get no money from the American Library Association. Our only money allocation, \$300-\$400 a year, is a fair share of the small money pie of our parent group within ALA, the Social Responsibilities Round Table. For the rest of our expenses we rustle up donations or dip into our own pockets. Our publications are priced to just cover costs of producing and mailing.

To get a list of all our publications, or more information about us, call or write: Barbara Gittings, Coordinator, GTF-ALA, P.O. Box 2383, Philadelphia, PA 19103, (215) 471-3322.

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GAY GRAB-BAG

Suppose we had to make up an emergency-rations package of just ten gay titles, a core collection that would help isolated gay women and men, librarians just starting to acquire gay materials, and non-gays looking for a manageable dose of basic information and enlightenment. What would we put in the gay grab-bag?

Adair, Nancy and Casey Adair, editors. *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*. New Glide/Delta, 1978.

Baetz, Ruth. *Lesbian Crossroads: Personal Stories of Lesbian Struggles and Triumphs*. Morrow, 1980.

Boggan, E. Carrington and others. *The Rights of Gay People: An American Civil Liberties Union Handbook*. Revised edition, Bantam, 1983.

Brown, Howard. *Familiar Faces, Hidden Lives: The Story of Homosexual Men in America Today*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

Bulkin, Elly, editor. *Lesbian Fiction: An Anthology*. Persephone Press, 1981.

Fairchild, Betty and Nancy Hayward. *Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

Green, Frances, editor. *Gayellow Pages*. Renaissance House, annual editions. (Classified directories of gay/lesbian organizations, businesses and services in the United States and Canada.)

Picano, Felice, editor. *A True Likeness: Lesbian and Gay Writing Today*. The Sea Horse Press, 1980.

Richmond, Len with Gary Noguera, editors. *The New Gay Liberation Book: Writings and Photographs About Gay (Men's) Liberation*. Ramparts Press, 1978.

Weinberg, George. *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. St. Martins, 1972.

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