

Wanderground: Archiving Lesbian Legacies, Words, Creativity in Rhode Island

Research Summary – Installment #2

Blog Post – February 11, 2022

I Found My People

What were our first encounters with Lesbian publications and how they made us feel.

As early as the 1960s, Lesbians began to more openly express their feelings and life experiences in poetry, stories, and essays. The Women in Print Movement (1970s-1990s) emerged as Lesbian-focused writers, publishers, and bookstores positively shaped and affirmed Lesbian thought and writing. Despite adversity, those vibrant spaces and voices encouraged women/Lesbians, to discover and affirm their own identities, claim their own strength and power, and gain support and a sense of well-being. They had a profound effect on Lesbians struggling to come out. As Lesbians came to an awareness of themselves as Lesbians, they found each other and formed alliances and communities.

Though I was very involved in the Women in Print Movement while living in other cities, I did not live in Rhode Island during that time. So, I was curious to learn more about what Lesbian words or publications contributed to specifically Lesbian visibility and activism in Rhode Island.

In this summary section, I will share the responses to these questions on the survey:

- Do you remember the first Lesbian book, magazine, or other publication you read?
- Where did you typically get your Lesbian reading materials?
- What do you remember about how that publication made you feel?

Overall, most respondents (80%) had clear memories of their early Lesbian cultural experiences. They were able to provide book titles and authors, some that were named frequently. Others remembered being influenced by periodicals or magazines. In some cases, these experiences involved music or events.

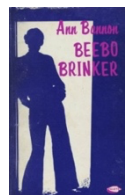
[Note: In this list, I've added comments and details as I know them. Many of the book titles are listed in the [Wanderground Collection](https://cloud.collectorz.com/wanderground/books), <https://cloud.collectorz.com/wanderground/books>]

The Resources

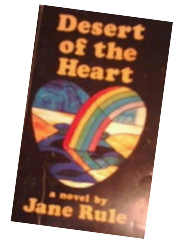
NOTE: All quotes are from survey respondents unless indicated.

Books (in alphabetical order):

- **Beebo Brinker Series**, Ann Bannon – “*Well of Loneliness* was, of course, dreadful to read. But reading *Beebo Brinker* was a lightning bolt of affirmation.”
[Researcher note: The series included five titles: *Odd Girl Out*, *I Am a Woman*, *Women in the Shadows*, *Journey to a Woman*, *Beebo Brinker*.]
- **The Case for the Feminist Revolution**, Shulamith Firestone
- **The Color Purple**, Alice Walker



- The **Coming Out Stories** by Julia Penelope Stanley (editor), Susan J. Wolfe (Editor), Adrienne Rich (Forward). 1980. "I came out in college in 1987-1988 and this book was passed around from friend to friend (cover ripped off for privacy). When my friend passed it to me she said, 'some stories you'll relate to and some you won't, but overall I think you'll find it really helpful.' It was my first incredible introduction to stories of women loving and having sexual relationships with women."
 - **The Original Coming Our Stores** (*This title was mentioned by a different respondent. Researcher Note: It is a reprint/updated version of the title above*)
- **Country Women** (*Researcher assuming Country Women: A Handbook for the New Farmer by Jeanne Tetrault and Sherry Thomas*)
- **Curious Wine**, Katherine V. Forrest
- **Desert of the Heart**, Jane Rule. "That book and the movie (*Desert Hearts*) made me want to write novels ...and also become screenplay writer for more lesbian entertainment in general."
- **Dykes to Watch Out For**, comics by Alison Bechdel
- **The Fingersmith**, Sarah Waters
- **In Every Port**, Karin Kallmaker
- **Lesbian Nation**, Jill Johnston
- **Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence**, edited by Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan
- **Lesbian Short stories**. About or by Lesbians
[NOTE: There is not a title by this name, but there are several Lesbian short story anthologies, including the Coming Out Stores mentioned above]
- **Nightwood**, Djuna Barnes -- "Which I still stand by as a masterpiece - I think I was as taken by the devastatingly beautiful prose and relationship to the *avant garde* as with the queerness - but of course it's all interrelated."
- **[Our Bodies, Ourselves**, Boston Women's Health Book Collective, perhaps?] "It was a section in a very fat book my mother had, about women's health and all kinds of aspects of women's lives. I knew its name very well but I cannot dredge it up now. I was 61, it had never occurred to me I might be a lesbian, although I was often aware that I was weird. I was being flirted with by the woman who was painting our house. I was interested and liked her a lot, but was wondering who are these lesbians anyway?"
- **Patience and Sarah**, Isabel Miller
- **Rubyfruit Jungle**, Rita Mae Brown was the most popular item with six (7) mentions
- **Say Jesus and Come to Me!**, Ann Shockley
- **Stone Butch Blues**, Leslie Feinberg (2 mentions)
- **We Two Must Love** and **We Two Won't Last**, Ann Aldrich. "I bought them at a local drug store in Warwick in the early 1960's."
- **Well of Loneliness**, Radclyffe Hall (2 mentions)
- "I read Radcliffe (Radclyffe) books or any of the lesbian relationship/love fiction books found at the public library."



Periodicals (in alphabetical order):

- **Curve Magazine**
- **Equal Times** (A Boston publication)
- **Gay Community News**
- **(The Ladder?)** - "I can't remember the title but it led me to the [Daughters of Bilitis](#). The chapter was in Boston and I traveled there to meet with its members."
- [Lesbian Connection](#) (5 mentions)
- **A Lesbian Position** (Local monthly publication in New Haven, CT)
- [Options Magazine](#) (5 mentions)
- **Sojourner** (A Boston publication). "I especially remember the Cambridge-based Sojourner -- was it published monthly? Biweekly? It was a touchstone for me."
- "I picked up a weekly LGB newspaper at Giovanni's Room bookstore in Philadelphia where I lived at the time"

Miscellaneous Memories and Comments by the Respondents

- Ferry Beach Unitarian Universalist summer camp catalog description of Sappho's Sisters camp for Lesbian women.
- Can't remember the title, but it depicted women like me! I connected with the characters.
- I don't remember in particular just a lot of lesbian feminist stuff
- Mystery/detective fiction; one of the female characters was the police detective.
 - A mystery that began a series of books to come.
 - Some lesbian erotica
- titles by Andrea Dworkin
- Women's music from [Ladyslipper](#). Used to buy cassette tapes from the catalog.
- I actually do not remember the first Lesbian book that I ever read but I do vividly recall reading in 1974 a story in **Aphra - The Feminist Literary Magazine** that had a profound impact. I have that and the next issue still. I believe I read Rubyfruit Jungle early on - of course, and spent time at a feminist book store in Cambridge and also at the Dorrwar Book Store on Thayer St. in Providence.
- It may have been **Sisterhood is Powerful**: (An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement by Robin Morgan). Around that time, I was also introduced to a few feminist journals and newspapers... I "met" lesbianism through feminism.
- That was along time ago, but I remember these awakenings (not all exclusively lesbian materials but they helped me identify myself as a lesbian): images in Playboy, Betty Dodson book about masturbation (with hand drawn illustrations of labia) posters around Cambridge MA and Iowa City IA for lesbian events. Whatever the monthly (?) or so newsletter in IC? Those were all positive. The Well of Loneliness was discouraging. [Researcher Note: **Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love Dedicated to the Women**]
- Theater by **Sharon Bridgeforth**, Black Lavender experience at Brown University



Where did Lesbians get these materials?

In general, Lesbians found their reading materials in small and independent venues. As one woman commented:

- *I want to **specify independent bookstores** because regular bookstores in the 1980's and early 90's didn't have anything when I went searching.*

And another noted:

- *...back when Lesbian bookstores existed ☺*

Most lesbians seemed able to access Lesbian/women's/gay independent bookstores (77%) but a significant number (36%) did find materials in other bookstores such as a secondhand bookstore in Vermont. One woman mentioned finding something in the local drugstore.

- *...indie bookstores, locally run, large bookstores with tiny feminism and lgbtq sections, especially few books re: Lesbians*

Several comments indicated frustration at not being able to find reading materials about Lesbians.

- *Had little or no reading materials until I found **Lesbian Connection**.*
- *...wasn't much around to read*

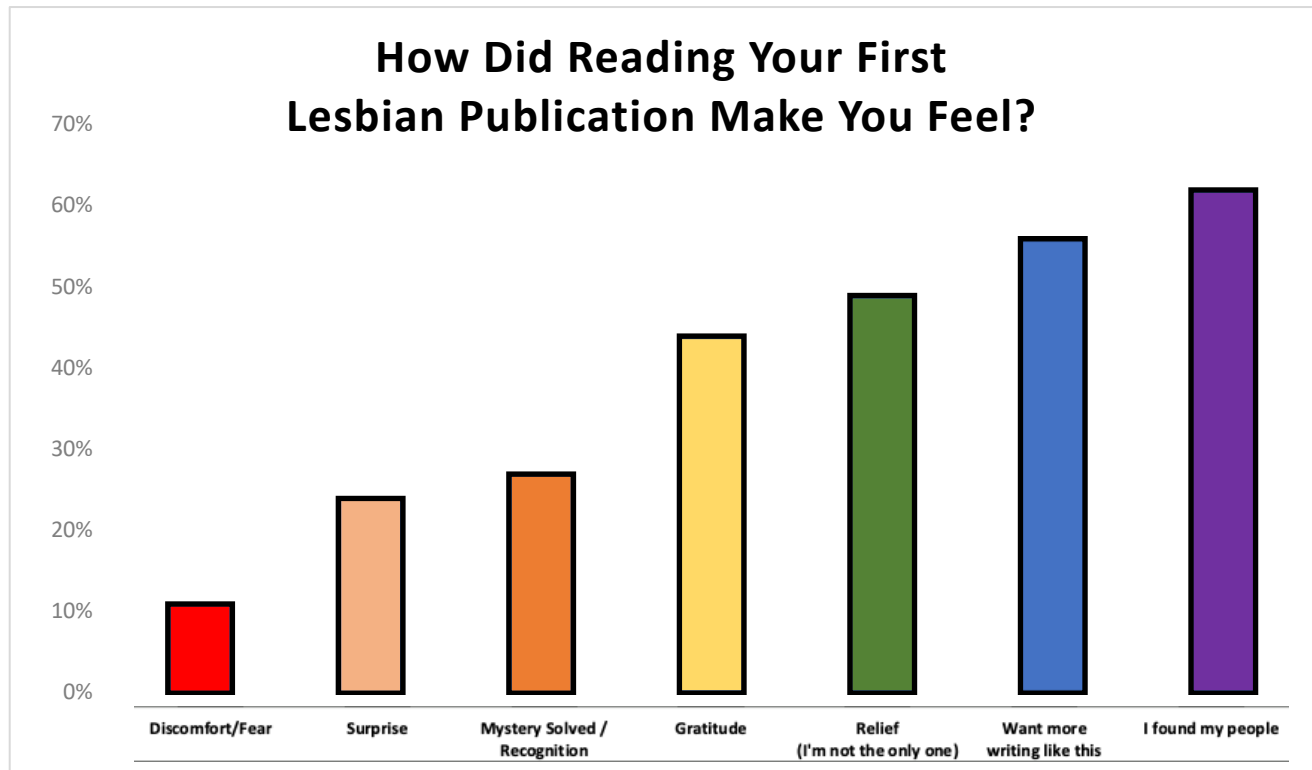
The "alternate" Lesbian Economy played a significant role as 21% mentioned borrowing from friends, a local Lesbian coffeehouse to LGBT community center/organization (13%), and university-based women's centers (Sarah Doyle Center at Brown in Providence and Northeastern University in Boston). Several Lesbians purchased their book directly from the publishers (13%).

Libraries seemed to have the least significant impact (only 9%).

- *I found the Well of Loneliness in a college library after surreptitiously searching the card catalog. It was under the subject heading, "homosexual." Most of what I found that day was utterly depressing.*

It seems that the observation of *surreptitiously* is the most revealing here as many Lesbians did not want to be seen and remained careful about any public exposure.

I Found My People!



The responses to the question “What do you remember about how that publication made you feel?” clearly indicate a range of emotions (see graph above). While few did experience discomfort or fear (11%), more women experienced surprise (24%). Closely associated with this, many Lesbians experienced recognition, a mystery solved about who they are and their emerging identity as a Lesbian (27%). In some situations, Lesbian writing not only opened recognition of one’s sexuality, but also created a larger understanding of women in society, sexism, and misogyny. Representative comments include:

- *Intrigued, but uneasy*
- *Exhilarating with a little bit of fear mixed in.*
- *I was curious. Still straight identified, but happy to learn about a segment of the population I didn't know existed, and that they were normal people, but oppressed. I had a strong Italian-Catholic background, so Lesbian or Gay had never been mentioned in my presence.*
- *Intrigued, but uneasy*
- *I distanced myself to some extent from fully embracing feminism on account of having been socialized to see women as second-class citizens, but I immediately recognized the issues. They were compelling and transformative - suddenly I understood why I had so often felt invisible and excluded.*
- *Works by **Andrea Dworkin** really opened my eyes deeper to feminist writings and misogyny in general*

In gratitude (44%) and relief/“I’m not the Only One” (49%), we can feel the collective sense of exhale and commonality. Examples of this include:

- *They're just women, like me!*
- *First time I read that there were other women sexually interested in other women also.*
- *Although...I resisted recognizing myself as a lesbian for several more years.*
- *It gave me a vocabulary for what I was feeling*

Once introduced to Lesbian writing – regardless of the type – many Lesbians experienced a hunger for more (56%) and some sense of connection or community (“I found my people” – 62%).

- *It was in Madison Wisconsin in the '70's, and was probably a local flyer. But then I went to a feminist bookstore, and the lesbian world became alive to me!*
- *Continually blowing my mind!*
- *Excitement. Thrilling. Looked forward to the mail delivery every issue.*

The next comments hint at the larger impact of Lesbian writing and culture.

- *I found a woman who was bisexual and exchanged email with her which was helpful. I found Women Outdoors which was such a great group of women to do outdoor things with. Not a lesbian group but everyone in the RI contingent seemed to be lesbian. I went to the last NEWMF (Northeast Women's Music Festival) with them which was an eye-opening experience.*
- *I had been digging around for months trying to find local lesbian community*

Next Week

Be sure to come back next week for Installment #3... **Creating Communities & Activisms**

Beyond publications, where else did we find other Lesbians? Where did we go to find ourselves and each other? How was Lesbian/feminist organizing impacted by Lesbian artistic expression?