

# THE EXPLODING FRANGIPANI

LESBIAN WRITING FROM AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

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EDITED BY CATHIE DUNSFORD & SUSAN HAWTHORNE



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*Lesbian Writing from Australia  
and New Zealand*

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Cathie Dunsford & Susan Hawthorne

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbians write about our lives. Although the outside world defines us by our sexuality alone, we write about as wide a variety of themes as you would find anywhere, because we are everywhere and we exist in every culture in the world. We are sexual, we are sensual, just as we are political and spiritual, and just as we might swim or kayak or garden or run corporations or write. We are good and bad. We are always journeying and crossing new boundaries – over land and inside our heads. We are reclaiming our power as women, and as lesbians. A vital part of this reclamation lies in exploring language and inventing new languages. While we have ancestries that go back to Sappho and beyond and to the ancient wise women witch doctors, we are also exploring our possible futures – language and imagination are essential ingredients in this process.

Lesbian writers have a tradition of experimenting with language and with new ways of being and relating, just as we have tried out and fought for new ideas, pushing at the horizons of women's conventional limitations in every sphere of our existence. We are only just beginning to realize the possibilities we share. There are some global similarities we share that help us understand each other across cultures as no other group on earth has done as successfully. There are also differences that push us to the extremities of understanding. We are outsiders. We have become adept at inventing other lives for ourselves, our lovers, as a means of survival. While we may often abhor this trait, it has taught us about invisibility and assimilation. Theoretically, we are in a better position to understand the struggles of others.

In this collection we are exploring the themes of colonialism, assimilation, solidarity, invisibility, language, art as transformation of consciousness, land struggles, aroha, culture and our relationships with other women: mothers, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, friends and heterosexual women. We also explore our relationship to nature and the wilderness, to patriarchy and to

corporatization, to resistance of these things and to the institution of heterosexuality which we aim to subvert through the inventiveness of our own partnerships, yet into whose traps we sometimes find ourselves falling.

When we must rely on ourselves so much, and when the cultural institutions are so much against us, the difficulties facing lesbian writers are sometimes paralyzing. Most lesbian writing has an underground life at some stage. Word of mouth spreads information about new writers – lesbian writers – in print, or about the works of past writers, such as Gertrude Stein's *Lifting Belly*, that are newly reprinted. These underground, oral networks function as the lifeline of lesbian culture, informing us about films, art exhibitions, plays and other cultural activities. Some lesbians find a niche in the mainstream. But what is our literary territory? And how do we define lesbian culture? As Australians and New Zealanders we rarely find our lives reflected in the literature of lesbians. Although many of us are widely read in the works of northern hemisphere writers where we find similar concerns, styles, struggles and celebration, there is little that reflects back to us our island communities. The similarities between our global lesbian communities are obvious. The differences are more subtle. Both are exciting.

North-South perspectives are confusing, mixing, as they do, a range of cultures and colonizations; subsuming some under the obvious differences of others. For the most part the East-West distinction still predominates. The East gave spirituality while the West ignored its indigenous spirituality and gave back materialism. Apart from South Africa, most of the southern hemisphere is invisible to the northern hemisphere, except in terms of that most ardently racist of institutions: tourism.

Sometimes our distance from the assumed centres of power and culture enables us to appreciate the 'others' in ourselves. At other times the same difficulties are repeated here as occur elsewhere in white colonized countries.

We know that this collection is important to us as Australian and New Zealand lesbians. And we hope that now we will no longer be invisible to lesbians in the northern hemisphere. We are invisible when all that is seen below the equator is beaches, farms, deserts, crocodiles, kiwis and macho men. Apart from the crocs and the boys we are the tax-free holiday destinations. An exotic place yet to be explored or discovered.

A number of themes emerged as the collection gradually came together. Many of the writers in this collection are resisters. They resist the temptations

of passing as heterosexual, or of accepting the rules of the dominant culture. Instead we learn to define ourselves, since 'who will represent us except us' (Linda Weste) and because 'Only other dykes are proud of dykes.' (Gillian Hanscombe)

Because resistance is part of the way we define ourselves, many of us, when first tackling the issue of our own lesbian identity, find it necessary to learn to stand alone, to endure and come to love, a kind of solitude not usual in women's lives. And so we develop the ability to 'speak with steak knives' (Susan Hampton) or to be 'the curators of our own psyches' (Sandy Jeffs).

Amongst the writers in this book are those whose links with the land and culture go back millennia and who are now learning new ways of resistance to the invading white culture. Eva Johnson's Alison finds solidarity with other black women through their writing and challenges the stereotypes of Aboriginal women. She claims her Aboriginality as a 'radical feminist, anarchist, amazon, lesbian warrior' and dreams of starting a new revolution with her white lover, Sara. For Ngahua Te Awekotuku it is Auntie Roi and Auntie Hira who provide support for their niece Tahuri. They say, 'The feelings you have for your friend from up the river. We know. That it's right. For you. It's right. He tika. It is, Tahuri, it's right . . .'

And there are also those from immigrant families coming raw and shockingly into the new land. The daughters, used to being outsiders, adapt easily to lesbian existence. They take to it like a platypus to water. And they vow, like the immigrant daughters in Annamarie Jagose's *Milk and Money*, never to allow themselves to be assimilated or colonized like their parents were. But not all experiences of immigration are the same. For Sue Chin, it is not a matter of capturing past traditions but about finding a language sensitive to 'transitions and emotional fidelity to landscape, and its relationship to dreams'. She writes about displacement and the advantages and disadvantages of having lived in at least two different places.

Some of the writers play with the possibilities of new rituals and new languages that better express the needs and concerns of lesbians. Doors wide enough for three to pass through, or languages that resonate like music, triggering particular emotional responses. Some use humour or irony to make their point. Others return to the language of mythology; to Baubo's skirt lifted to cheer the grieving mother, Demeter; or the reverse, a daughter's rejection of her mother's values. The world of the mythical Amazons is expressed, reflecting strength through solitude whether it be in the hull of a



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boat or by tilling the land. Wendy Pond's amazon boats threaten the patriarchal patterns. She writes:

*Distilling. You say women are commandeering men's boats, you say we are muscling in on opportunities you have created for yourselves, you say you reserve the right to take over when the boat is in danger. I say you create hierarchical relationships between us, I say you regard us as embroidery to your lives. I say we have crossed an ocean. I say men have commandeered women's bodies.*

Whether it is our bodies or our minds; whether it is the way our work places are organized or the shape of our relationships; what the writers here are attempting is the creation of a map, a navigational chart that can help us explore our own hidden mythology and a way of finding paths into the future.

The journeys are not all outward. Strength can come from internal struggle, from facing that most difficult and elusive of beings: the self. For lesbians, often estranged from families or communities, friendship and the chosen family of friends can make it possible to endure some of the most difficult of experiences: madness, exile or death. The solidarity that comes with friendship of this kind is crucial to the existence of lesbian culture. Sometimes solidarity is found with strangers, through graffiti on the toilet walls – an anonymous dialogue with other lesbians. Sometimes it is the simple observance of dress codes or ways of moving, of walking into a party. Sometimes lesbians find that their families are less conventional than they expected; that support can come from mothers, grandmothers, aunts and daughters; that simply facing the unexpectedness of an unimagined life can create solidarity where it was least expected.

Friendship and culture go hand in hand. Some of the writers refer to the works of other writers or to the tradition of innovation in lesbian literature; some write of the simple pleasure of gazing at a full moon, or a frangipani, or a voluptuous aubergine. Some refer to ancient goddesses such as Pele, Hecate, Kali. The power of patriarchal and natural images, the power of our own passion, burst through like an exploding frangipani, defying the forces that have attempted to suppress our energy. We offer this selection of our work as a significant part of our collective vision.

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