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LesbianPride

Newsletter

*Good news, positive reminders
and inspirational messages*

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The art of placing blame

by Marilda Mel White

Placing blame has become an art in America, with countless devotees. And if there is one phrase to sum up the successful blame artist, it is this: no matter what, it is always the other person's fault.

For example, if I buy a cup of hot coffee and spill it on my lap and burn myself, I can blame the people who sold me the coffee. On the other hand, if someone slips on my sidewalk, which I didn't bother to shovel, I'm not to blame because people should be smart enough to know that snow is slippery and if they're careless, they might get hurt.

Or, I can be the victim of a violent crime and I can fight back, and if the bad guy gets shot or cut, he can blame me for hurting him while I was protecting myself - and he'll get legal and financial support from various groups who wouldn't want to see the poor fellow denied his right to stay injury-free even during the commission of a felony.

On the other hand, if my gun gets stolen and is used in a crime, those same groups will say it's my fault for letting my gun get stolen, and that I (along with the gun manufacturer) am culpable for damages to the victim.

But then, everyone knows I may not be to blame at all if I kill my child or beat my neighbor or rape a woman, especially not if I had a miserable or deprived childhood and was raised in a dysfunctional family.

It gets weirder. I can get cancer and have a reasonable expectation of living a few more years with the help of an expensive treatment or medicine, but my medical insurance company can refuse to pay for it - thus signing my death warrant - and they are free from blame. Oh yeah, the company that polluted the air or the ground water that caused my cancer is also blameless. Just ask them.

But I, Mel White - by virtue of the fact that I am a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant American woman - am to blame for everything from my husband hitting me to slavery, from the mistreatment of Native Americans and Jews to the Spanish Inquisition, from losing the lease in Eden to the fall of the Roman Empire.

Add to my resume that I am a lesbian and I am suddenly, personally to blame for the decadence of our age, the decline of the American family, and so on and so forth. But of course, if I don't get the job I want or the apartment I have my heart set on, I can always blame society and claim that because I'm gay I just can't get a break.

Of course, as an American of any gender or race - sexual preference aside - it is also my fault that people died when the atom bombs were dropped to end World War II and save American lives. Conversely, and rather bizarrely, there are some who consider the terrorist attacks last September to be the fault of all Americans, too, including the Americans who were killed.

In other words, there is no end to my being able to escape or avoid responsibility for anything that happens to me or because of me personally, EXCEPT for the things over which I have no control - whether it happens to me or to anyone else, anywhere else in the world - in which case there is apparently NO END to my responsibility.

I offer this paraphrase of a popular quote in the perhaps futile but optimistic hope that somehow, some way, more people will stop playing the blame game and start being accountable for their own actions (and if it doesn't work and they don't, remember, it's not my fault):

God grant me the serenity of a peaceful life, the wisdom to make good and decent choices, and the courage to accept responsibility and consequences when I screw up. Δ

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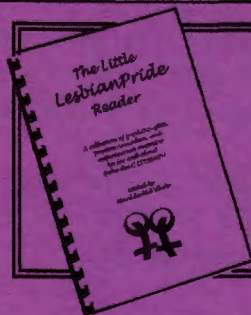
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I am succeeding through my persistence

I am growing and moving forward in all that I do. Sometimes when I experience failure, it feels like I'm not making progress, but I am learning from my mistakes. I realize my progress may not always be evident. As in learning to ride a bicycle, falling may feel like failure, but it actually is teaching me about maintaining balance. Each apparent setback is bringing me closer to that revelatory moment of realizing that I have mastered an important life skill.

When I face discrimination because of my same-sex loving, I remember that I am capable of succeeding under great odds. My life has been difficult, but I have survived. Looking at how much I have achieved, I know I can accomplish even more. I visualize success and am attaining it every minute.



— Eleanor Ruth Wagner
Lavender Reflections

Reminder:

*It's never okay
 to push through your fear...
 Instead, listen
 to what the frightened part
 needs from you
 in order to feel safe
 to go ahead...
 Act on that information!*

— Robyn Posin
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Whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings — that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide.
 — Buddha

On the Amazon Trail

by Lee Lynch

One Queer Voter

Why not be a one-issue voter? I hear this complaint about those of us who vote for the peace candidate or the green candidate or the gay-positive candidate. In these times when the fate of the earth itself is in danger from over-population, pollution and corporate greed, and when fundamentalism produces terrorists from suicide bombers to anti-gay graffiti scribblers, I have to choose my priorities.

Lately there have been so many changes in my life I never thought to make what has always been for me one of the most important notifications — changing my address with the county clerk's office so I could vote. I haven't missed an election since I first registered thirty-five years ago. So a day past what I'd thought was the deadline I made a panicked dash to the courthouse to plead my case. The normally somnolent clerks were apparently so glad to see someone who cared about being able to vote that they leapt to my assistance and had me out of there, a legal voter, in under five minutes. I felt relieved and mightily proud. The grammar school teachers who taught me my democracy lessons would have been pleased.

But when the ballot arrived in the mail I wondered why I had bothered. The paucity of selection was dispiriting. It forced one to choose among several mediocre gubernatorial candidates. I give the person in that office a good chunk of the money I earn every year and I would like to be sure s/he's got some outstanding attribute, belief system, intellect or even charisma to recommend her/him.

This is a primary election. As a registered Democrat, I get to help choose who will run against a Republican. There are no third party candidates. It's an irony of this democratic system that third parties usually can't even get on the ballot, much less win an election. Sometimes I wonder how democratic America really is. Did the founding fathers really intend our choices to be so narrow? The people who want this particular job are an ornery white male, a black male who has held a state office with such a low profile he might be wishing about now that he'd generated a harmless scandal or two, a white woman rumored to have an attitude

problem and another white male no one seems to know anything about. I'm really getting passionate about voting for...none of them.

Even the ballot initiatives are innocuous, but all want to amend the state constitution. Not likely, fellas. The only good thing about this election's crop of initiatives is that the gay rights-crushing Oregon Citizens Alliance has not managed any sneak attacks. It's going to take an issue like adding sexual orientation as a protected category or recognizing animal rights as a government priority to get me behind making changes to any constitution. I'm about to put a new bumper sticker on my already well-festooned car — "Just Vote No."

The initiatives thus addressed, I turned to the candidate choices and did what any good American in an electoral quandary does: I polled my gay family to find out how to vote. More specifically, I asked the Issues Maven, the woman with the real skinny on who's who and what's what, the person who not only has Opinions and is willing to voice them, but knows what she's talking about. We disagreed on one of the selections, but that's because there is no good choice.

She suggested the candidate most likely to win in the November election because so much rides on the outcome. I gag on voting for a man who, in another office, trampled the rights of a skimpily protected group of Americans, victims of on-the-job injuries, in favor of the employers who will pull any kind of stunt not to compensate loyal workers who have lost careers, seniority, retirement assets and their livings to the great capitalistic bottom line.

I feel passionate enough about workers' rights to vote my conscience, but the Issues Maven had a point. Rather than vote for Ralph Nader in the last presidential election, I wanted the gay-positive candidate who had a chance to win. With Nader's green votes behind Gore there would have been no fooling around with Florida election results. Gore would have been the Prez right now and the so-called gay agenda would not be ignored or set back. My political conscience wants to vote for the greatest good for the greatest number, but even it agrees that my need to have my queer rights protected is greater. I simply can't risk a Republican governor.

Why not be a one-issue voter? What matters more to me than being queer? Nothing. As long as I'm at risk for being who I am, as long as there is any chance that my democratic government, in the wrong hands, can punish me for my desires, I need to make my choices based on the fact that I'm still a second class citizen who needs as many gay advocates in positions of power as I can vote in to protect me. Of course I'm a one issue voter. Δ

(C) Lee Lynch 2002

On sacred ground



by Joy Parks

It Takes All Kinds

One of my biggest concerns about the state of lesbian literature now is its undeniable "sameness." Lesbian publishers, and for that matter, lesbian writers, seem far too content to continue to churn out the same kinds of books (mostly mysteries, romances and erotica collections) usually populated by the same undistinguished characters. And these books continue to be bought and read by readers who have either become too complacent to demand better, or have never been exposed to more challenging books. Perhaps it is the result of the mainstreaming of lesbian culture or perhaps our collective memory is short. But the point is, without diversity, lesbian literary culture, like any culture, is in danger of stagnation or death. And we just can't risk that. Which is why we need books like those featured this month to remind us that it really does take all kinds.

Grits, Gravy and Girls by Kristen Garrett bears what has to be one of the worst titles ever given to a book, but at least it's memorable and hints at the kind of random nuttiness that can be found between the covers. This cryptically comic novel offers readers — at least those willing to submit to the seduction of its larger-than-life characters and relative absence of plot — a tremendously honest look at how many lesbians think, love and live their lives. The book is basically a quick and hilarious romp through the lives and bedrooms of one time "Bama" state Basketball s/hero Dimples Rooney and the four wonderfully overdone lesbian characters connected to her as lovers, exs and lovers of lovers. Sound familiar? Factor in the general eccentricity that comes of setting a lesbian novel in the south and there's something faintly reminiscent of a roughly written Rita Mae Brown. Despite occasional lapses in language and pacing, an annoying need to clothe her characters in the physical aspects of conventional beauty (when did blonde, long-legged and often scantily dressed become character traits?), Kristen Garrett deserves to be praised for *Grits, Gravy and Girls*, particularly for giving us such a viciously sincere but easy-to-take look at ourselves. [*Grits, Gravy and Girls*, Kristen Garrett, Writer's Club Press (iUniverse), \$13.95]

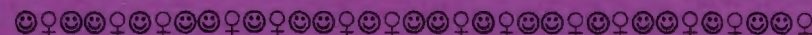
For many years, poetry was viewed as an essential factor in the ren-

aissance of lesbian culture in the 1980s. Poets like Judy Grahn, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Marilyn Hacker shaped our world with their words. *Unraveling at the Name* by Jenny Factor will remind readers of these poets. In fact, serious poetry readers will sigh with relief knowing that here is one a new generation that will keep lesbian poetry alive and well. Jenny Factor has a tremendous ability to see those minuscule events that loom large with extraordinary significance and she is as fully aware and rich with language whether she's writing about love or learning to drive a car with a stick shift. There's an undeniable femaleness to her poems, which are as accessible as they are pure and wonderful. [*Unraveling at the Name*, Jenny Factor, Copper Canyon Press, \$14.00]

Sacred Classic: *A Restricted Country*

As a femme, I'm ever vigilant and often loud about the fact that there just aren't enough authentic femme voices in our literature, that femmes are more likely to be written about than to speak in their own voices. One glaring and extremely powerful exception to this is Joan Nestle. Her classic *A Restricted Country*, published in 1987, is important because it brings together both Nestle's incredibly passionate butch-femme fictions and her political non-fiction writing that deals with a myriad of issues: her relationship with her mother, her sexuality, human rights and lesbian feminism. *A Restricted Country* contains some truly amazing, honest and often difficult work, including "Esther's Story", which is probably one of the most poignant descriptions of what it means to be stone butch ever written from the femme perspective. Readers will also find the classic "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950's," which deals with the power available to marginalized groups, as well as other writings that stem from her work as the cofounder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Butch-Femme sexual dynamics are part of diversity and our culture and Joan Nestle writes about them with understanding, passion and truth. Which makes *A Restricted Country* a vital, must-read collection. [*A Restricted Country*, Joan Nestle, Firebrand Books, original price, \$8.95]

Ask for these books at your local feminist bookstore.



I'm not going to limit myself just because people won't accept the fact that I can do something else.
— Dolly Parton

On the Back Porch

by Leslie McGirl

Visions of Ellen

When I was 12 years old, I fell out of the barn loft and landed a-straddle an old wooden fence on my pelvis, like falling onto the bar of a boy's bike. It was a sensational and embarrassing accident, not to mention painful. I was with a gang of all boys. I was the leader as it was my barn, and I could whip every boy there. I was hospitalized for the first, and hopefully last, time in my life.

Nothing was broken; only the swelling was so bad that surgery was needed in which to place a catheter to relieve my bladder. I had to take a little inflatable toilet seat to sit on at school at my desk. I eventually recovered and I took a lot of teasing; had to talk about my vagina with a lot of people at a young age. No big deal. I rose to the occasion. I like a good story. I handled it.

But the shocking thing was that years later, in my thirties, when I was coming out to my poor old Methodist small town mom, she and sis were sitting around discussing my sexuality in front of me (I was probably cooking supper or something, and discussions about each other in front of each other are common in our family) and they decided that it was that fall from the barn that "turned" me lesbian. I was so shocked. It confounded me. In fact, I think I even stopped and went back over the ordeal to see if there was any truth in what they said. You know how you do; you question things all the time, and if you're lucky enough to turn out to be a lesbian in a rural small town in the Midwest, well, you question tons.

So, I just had to laugh about this fall from the barn. If only it were that simple. For me I came out of the womb lesbian and much of my life and its dramas have been contorted around this issue and trying to find a validated place in this heterosexual world. Country and Western songs, John Deere tractors, a little girl in 4-H with a filthy neck and a crush on a gal down the road — where were my role models??

Where was MY validation about who I was?? What I was?? Those feelings, those noble feelings a tomboy has for mother and father and family and community? We've had

some tough times. The last year alone was full of many tragic events. We can all name some, but sitting here looking back I guess I'm just having a thankful moment. That's all. I can see that some things have changed for the better.

I have access to more gay and lesbian imagery in my daily life out here on the prairie. I'm thinking of Ellen Degeneres, K.D. Lang, Lily Tomlin, Billy Jean King, Rosie O'Donnell, Will and Grace, others I can't remember at the moment — all the people who came out so publicly in the last couple of years. What a difference that has made to me.

So validating. So talented that even my mom can't resist their charm. I'm sending blessings to them and all the other gutsy folk who are "in your face" about their sexuality. My family has quit trying to figure out what "turned" me gay. Things are better in that area.

So that's me — old thankful Les sitting here with a little warm halo of gratitude around my head. The sun is shining, no tornadoes in the forecast. I got my bikini on and a 6-month crop of hair on my legs.

Life is good. I'm feeling thankful. Thought I better share it. Big L McGhee.

© Lester McGirl

Of love and law by Eric Mueller (in the *Advocate*)

Being an attorney, Carrie Stone knows about being practical. So when she and partner Elisia Ross decided to formalize their commitment, Stone knew rings and a ceremony wouldn't get them the same legal protection afforded to married couples. "We wanted to be sure we wouldn't ever be in a situation where we would lose everything," she explains. Creating trusts and wills for themselves led them to offer workshops and information to help other same-sex couples. Their Internet site RainbowLaw.com offers the various legal documents gays can use to protect themselves and their relationships as well as legal facts and resources.

Part of the year, the women travel with a tiny pop-up camper to pride festivals, promoting the importance of proper legal coverage. Next year, to celebrate their 50th birthdays, they plan to bike across America, stopping along the way to give workshops at gay and lesbian community centers and do interviews with local gay publications to spread the word. ♀



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Lesbian Health Organization Wins Major Funding

The Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer has won the largest grant ever awarded for lesbian-specific smoking prevention and cessation. The Mautner Project was selected to receive \$499,000 over three years as part of the American Legacy Foundation's \$21 million Priority Populations grant program to build and strengthen tobacco prevention and cessation efforts and develop creative solutions to populations currently suffering from tobacco's grip.

"Smoking kills more lesbians each year than hate crimes, suicide, and breast cancer combined," says Mautner Project Executive Director Kathleen DeBold. "We are sick to death of losing our sisters...this grant will make a difference in our ability to change that."

"People respond best to health promotion and disease prevention programs and messages designed specifically for them by other members of their community, and delivered by messengers and media they are familiar with and trust," says DeBold. "The Mautner Project's anti-smoking programs will be lesbian-designed and lesbian-focused project." For more information, contact Alex Khalaf at 202-332-5536 / akhalaf@mautnerproject.org



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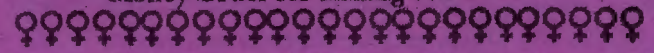
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