



## Fernie, Lynne (b. 1946)

by Linda Rapp

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An animation still from Lynne Fernie's *Apples and Oranges* (2003), a film for children.  
Courtesy Lynne Fernie.

Filmmaker, lyricist, and editor Lynne Fernie, a native of British Columbia, has had a varied career in the arts. Her principal work is the award-winning documentary *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992), which she co-directed with Aerlyn Weissman.

As a young woman Fernie moved to Toronto, where she became a member of LOOT (Lesbian Organization of Toronto), a lesbian-feminist group in existence from 1976 to 1980.

In 1978 Fernie, along with other members of the Women's Writing Collective in Toronto, founded *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly of Writing, Politics, Art & Culture*. She co-edited that journal's first lesbian issue (Issue 13) in 1983. Later she worked as co-editor and then editor of *Parallelogramme*, a magazine of Canadian contemporary arts.

Fernie has been the lyricist for various Canadian recording artists, most notably the group The Parachute Club. She won gold records for her work on two of the group's albums and received a Juno award--the Canadian equivalent of a Grammy--for their single "Rise Up" (1983), which became an anthem of the Toronto gay community.

In 1989 Fernie was among a group of Canadian artists who founded the Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival, which is held annually in Toronto.

Fernie directed a documentary, *Fiction and Other Truths: A Film about Jane Rule*, for which she won the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television's Genie Award for short documentary in 1995. She also directed an educational video, *School's Out!* (1996), that places society's views towards homosexuality in a historical context and is intended for use in high schools to promote discussion of homophobia. In 1997 she directed another video for high school students, *Jane Rule...writing*, in which the lesbian author discusses her writing process.

Fernie is best known as the co-director of *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, which won the Genie Award for feature-length documentary in 1993.

*Forbidden Love* was a product of Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada, the first publicly-funded unit for women's films. In 1989 the executive director of Studio D, Rina Fraticelli, brought together Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman, a Vancouver filmmaker, to develop an ambitious project that would survey international lesbian history. Eventually, however, they decided to make a film with a very specific focus, the lesbian bar culture in major Canadian cities during the 1950s and 1960s.

Fernie and Weissman considered it essential to let the women of that milieu speak for themselves. For that reason they eschewed voice-over narration, opting instead for an interview format that allowed the women to tell their own stories of coming out and frequenting the bars, as well as what had happened to them in later years.

Weissman expressed their aim by saying, "Lynne and I felt quite strongly that it was important not to overlay the experiences of these women with a vocabulary of nineties feminist discourse. We really tried to structure the film in a way that would allow the women to speak for themselves, to give their experiences as they lived them, but to provide their contexts as well."

Nine women, ranging in age from approximately forty to eighty, described their experiences. They were a culturally diverse group, including a member of the Haida Nation from British Columbia, a Black immigrant from Costa Rica, and a white woman who had been a middle-class Toronto housewife prior to coming out as a lesbian. Archival footage supplements these first-person accounts.

The period depicted in *Forbidden Love* was the heyday of lesbian pulp novels, paperback romances of a formulaic nature generally centered on college sorority members, dissatisfied housewives, or habituées of Greenwich Village bars. Ann Bannon, author of the extremely popular "Beebo Brinker" series of pulp novels, is among the women interviewed in the film.

Bannon's discussion of her experiences as a novelist and also a suburban wife and mother who explored the Greenwich Village lesbian bar scene helps tie together the recollections of the women and the fictional elements in *Forbidden Love*.

Departing from the standard documentary format, Fernie and Weissman interspersed a pulp-style love story with the reminiscences of the interviewees. Using the technique of freeze-frame and dissolve, the film moves from images of covers and illustrations in the style of pulp novels to the film-within-a-film.

The tale recounted in *Forbidden Love* is that of Laura, a country girl who moves to the big city, where, with some trepidation, she goes to a lesbian bar. There she meets and falls in love with Mitch.

The lesbian love affair brings fulfillment to Laura, and her story has a happy--even triumphant--ending. This is at odds with the typical dénouement of the pulp novels, which generally ended with the protagonist going mad or dying. (Bannon's novels were an exception to the pattern.)

It is also inconsistent with some of the stories of the interviewees, whose accounts include discussion of the difficulties and dangers that they faced in trying to create a public lesbian space in a homophobic society. Nevertheless, the women emerge as clever, witty, and courageous. Their stories of survival and endurance can be regarded as a triumph.

*Forbidden Love* garnered positive reviews in both the gay and mainstream press. In addition to the 1993 Genie, it won awards at the Durban International Film Festival and the International Women's Film Festival in France.

In 2003, Fernie completed *Apples and Oranges*, a short documentary/animation film for elementary-aged school children that addresses issues of homophobia and bullying. Classroom discussions about these subjects are brought to life when two paintings made by children magically morph into animated stories based on characters the kids created.

In the first story Anta, her two moms, and her all-girl band find a way to overcome a bully; in the second, a friendship between skateboarders Habib and Jeroux runs into homophobia when Jeroux reveals that he is gay. Produced and distributed by the National Film Board of Canada, the film has been screened at numerous festivals in Canada, the U.S., and Europe, winning awards at many of them.

Fernie teaches film and video production at York University in Toronto, where she is also a programmer for the Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival.

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## About the Author

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