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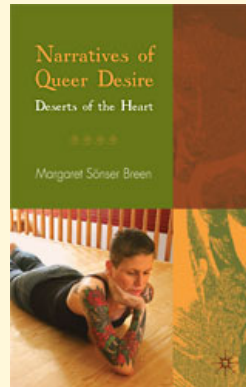
Narratives of Queer Desire

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## Narratives of Queer Desire

by [Margaret Sönsler Breen](#)

When we think about LGBT activism, do we necessarily think about literature? While activism typically assumes collective and often collaborative endeavors, the reading of literature is usually a solitary activity. Activism suggests participation in the world by working toward social change. In contrast, reading literature may well imply a retreat from the world or engagement in diversion. While activism addresses concrete and tangible aspects of our lives, reading often focuses on intangibles and abstractions.



Margaret Sönsler Breen's *Narratives of Queer Desire: Deserts of the Heart* was released by Palgrave Macmillan in 2009.

Yet, how useful are such crude distinctions, particularly when it comes to thinking about how to make glbtq lives more livable, valued, and visible? Not only in oppressive societies in which little legal recourse exists is the reading of literature a deeply powerful act: a source of comfort and a mark of political resistance. When it comes to glbtq issues, political activism and the reading of literature are, after all, powerfully intertwined.

How are we to understand literature's relationship to glbtq issues? How can literature serve as a means of advocacy for gender and sexual minorities, and of realizing an inclusive vision of culture? How can literature validate queer experiences and identities? These are just some of the questions that we should consider when thinking about the relationship between glbtq literature and social justice work.

### The Power of Literary Revision: Morality, Marriage, and the Law: The Case of Radclyffe Hall and Jane Rule

One of the ways in which literature facilitates glbtq visibility is through acts of revision. Acclaimed lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich has written that "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." Rich's statement holds true for all gender and sexual minorities.

Since "to tell" means "to count," the concept of counting is embedded in storytelling. By revising the stories we tell, we can change our perspective on which and on whose stories count. Similarly, the stories we live are bound to the stories we read. By shifting the point of view and/or by offering a more inclusive perspective, literary revision presents us with new ways of seeing; it transforms lives typically exiled to the margins of social and political consideration into subjects whose concerns are central, valid, and compelling. The lessons of literary revisionism are immediately applicable to our own lives.

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart* (1964) offer two important examples of how literary revision can challenge commonly held social beliefs about lesbian and, more broadly, queer desire.

Both novels re-work a key Puritan text written in the seventeenth century, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684). *The Pilgrim's Progress* offered Bunyan's contemporaries a guide on how to lead a Christian life.

Why would lesbian writers, more than two centuries later, want to revise Bunyan's book?

One reason lies in the moral purpose of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. By revising this religious work, both Hall and Rule raise and challenge the question of who is allowed to have a moral story: whose life will be read as moral and whose as immoral; who gets to be saved; who

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will be damned?

Another reason has to do with the literary history of Bunyan's text. By the mid-nineteenth century, writers in England and the United States (as well as in other English-speaking parts of the world), looked to *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model for storytelling; they regularly drew on *The Pilgrim's Progress* for their representations of the social progress of their characters, a social progress that for female characters necessarily entailed marriage. So, by reworking Bunyan's allegory, both Hall and Rule are also foregrounding the question of social acceptance: whose life should be understood as successful and laudable; whose not?

*The Well of Loneliness* tells the story of Stephen Gordon, a woman who, from the moment of her birth, challenges the gender and sexual plots that society has laid out for her. "Narrow hipped" and "wide-shouldered," Stephen fences and rides horses astride; she is attracted to women. She is a heroine, in other words, whose body, presentation, sexuality, and name mark her as a social outsider.

At the same time, Hall emphasizes that these very aspects of Stephen's self are inextricable from the qualities that mark her out as an embodiment of moral goodness. She is strong and brave, compassionate and self-sacrificing. These characteristics signal that for all her outsider status, Stephen is also the novelistic heir of Bunyan's pilgrim; she is the ultimate insider, a status further suggested by her birthday on Christmas Eve and her namesake, Saint Stephen.

By insisting on this doubled status whereby Stephen is both a gender outlaw and a model of Christian propriety, Hall in effect sets her heroine on a collision course with social convention that proves emotionally devastating for Stephen.

In the course of the novel she is betrayed by her first lover and then disowned by her mother. While she eventually meets and falls in love with a woman who returns her feelings, Stephen ultimately sacrifices the relationship so that her partner can find social acceptance and stability by marrying a man.

Much as in Bunyan's narrative, so in society: a woman's progress depends upon the possibility of marriage. In revising Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hall is not saying that a lesbian's story is inevitably one of loneliness; her point is rather to foreground the injustice of such an outcome. As Stephen cries at the novel's end, she has a "right to existence!"

Published in the summer of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness* initially met with favorable reviews only to be banned shortly thereafter. Hall and her publishers lost the resulting obscenity trial in England, but won it in the United States. In part because of the trials, the novel gained a great deal of publicity, which led to interest and sales. While not available in England until 1948, when the ban was lifted, it could be purchased in France, as well as in the U. S. The novel has never been out of print. Despite its tragic ending, it has been a must read for generations of lesbians.

Writing *Desert of the Heart* in 1964, Jane Rule wanted to provide her readers a lesbian love story with a happy ending. The novel may be read as a revision of *The Well of Loneliness*, and in particular a revision of its locating a lesbian story within the moral progress narrative laid out by Bunyan.

Whereas *The Well's* unhappy ending hinges on Stephen's realization that she can never offer her lover marriage and so afford her the kind of social respect and security that a man could, *Desert* begins with protagonist Evelyn's determination to divorce her husband of sixteen years.

"Conventions, like clichés, have a way of surviving their own usefulness," observes the narrator in the first sentence of the novel. For Rule, marriage is such a convention; referencing *The Pilgrim's Progress*, she implies that a society that relies on marriage to guarantee a woman's personal happiness and growth is an empty, deluded society—a Vanity Fair.

When Evelyn meets and falls in love with Ann, the two women articulate their commitment not by repeating the marriage vows but, instead, by locating their love in the vital and indeterminate immediacy of "an indefinite period of time."

Clearly, *The Well of Loneliness* and *Desert of the Heart* are two canonical lesbian novels whose arguments regarding the importance of marriage in the lives of lesbians differ markedly. In the earlier novel, the main characters yearn for marriage; in the later, they reject it.

These responses might be understood as bookends on the current marriage equality debate in the United States and other countries. Indeed, these novels participate in a larger literary discussion of the role of marriage in glbtq lives. Recognizing these contrasting points of view allows readers to draw on LGBT literature as a way to understand and contextualize the current marriage equality debate.

## The Case of Ann Bannon's *Women in the Shadows* and the Current Marriage Equality Debate

One novel whose analysis provides a compelling way into thinking about revising restrictive social and legal conventions regarding marriage is *Women in the Shadows* (1959).

Written by the queen of lesbian pulp, Ann Bannon, *Women in the Shadows* is the third of the author's Beebo Brinker novels; it is also one of the "strange marriage" novels that appeared in lesbian and gay pulps in the 1950s and 1960s.

This subgenre explored how gay men and lesbians could sustain their homosexuality even as they participated in the social norm of marriage. Thus, long before the U. S. marriage equality debates of the 1990s, "strange marriage" novels, in effect, queered marriage.

*Women in the Shadows* tells the story of Laura Landon, Beebo Brinker, and Jack Mann, along with minor characters Tris and her husband Milo. When the novel opens, Laura and Beebo are on the verge of breaking up. Gay best friend Jack offers to marry Laura; marriage, he reasons, will afford them social and emotional stability; they can still have their sexual relationships on the side. After leaving her volatile butch lover, Beebo, and after a tortured affair with the sexually and racially ambiguous Tris, Laura commits to Jack. The novel ends with Jack and Laura married and Laura pregnant via artificial insemination.

Contemporary readers of *Women in the Shadows* can take away many lessons regarding marriage, especially regarding the political significance of the marriage equality debate.

First, Jack and Laura embrace the promise of social respectability but do so at the expense of not realizing their sexual passions. Within the novel as within the late twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century marriage equality movement, there exists an impulse (individual as well as collective) to erase sexual desire. Queer passions (such as, for example, within the novel, Beebo's) have no readily identifiable discursive place within the marriage debate.

Tris's role underscores another vexing problem faced whether one is queer, a person of color, or both: historically marriage has been bounded by gender and racial sexual taboos. Tris's attraction to both Laura and Beebo is transgressive as much because it crosses racial lines as because it is markedly lesbian.

Anti-miscegenation laws may no longer be in effect in the U. S. (as they were in the late 1950s when Bannon was writing), but many issues of social oppression remain, including oppression based on gender, race, and sexuality, and they render invisible or legally invalid a range of relationships based on intimacy and interdependence.

Reading Bannon's novel in the twenty-first century thus teaches us to locate queer marriage advocacy within a larger struggle to recognize and support the variety of forms of family and kinship on which so many people (whether queer or straight) depend.

Reading *Women in the Shadows* also makes us consider the many relationships that exist in the shadows of our own society. If the social ideal in the U. S. is the nuclear family, it is important to recognize that most U. S. households do not reflect this ideal.

In addition to married couples with or without children, and blended families, other kinds of relationships exist in the U. S. today, including relationships based on medical caretaking, families whose members are citizens and non-citizens, families in which adults are raising children to whom they may or may not be biologically related, siblings living together, elderly friends or partners cohabitating, as well as gay and lesbian couples.

As this range suggests, these relationships fulfill different kinds of needs, including economic, emotional, medical, sexual, and social. Working to expand access to marriage is thus only one aspect of a movement to validate and stabilize, particularly legally and economically, a variety of intimate and interdependent relationships that exist beyond traditional marriage.

### **The Importance of Literary Diversions: Queer Turnings and Yearnings Away from Normative Patterns of Social Storytelling: "Rip Van Winkle" and *The Farewell Symphony***

LGBT literature can teach us much about the marriage equality debate and its connection to larger social justice movements. But reading LGBT literature and, more broadly, literature that focuses on gender and sexual fantasy can also call our attention to the sexual desires and gender presentations that are left out of the marriage debate: desires and presentations left out both because they ostensibly threaten normative understandings of gender and sexuality and because they disclose how violence can be used to maintain marriage as a cultural ideal and social norm.

At first glance, Washington Irving's early nineteenth-century story "Rip Van Winkle," written nearly a half century before the term

homosexuality had been first used, and Edmund White's late twentieth-century novel *The Farewell Symphony*, which offers a poignant account of gay life in New York City from the 1970s through the 1990s, would seem to have little in common.

Yet, both works speak to desires typically elided by discussions of marriage equality; and in both melancholy plays a key role, marking the border between reality and fantasy; between the allowed and foreclosed possibilities for gender and sexual expression. Reading the two texts together, we can see that gender melancholy has profoundly shaped not only contemporary LGBT literature but, really, American literature from its inception.

Recognizing the recurring presence of gender melancholy in American literature tells us something of the haunting presence of queer possibilities within the American cultural imagination.

"Rip Van Winkle" recounts the tale of a pleasure-loving, indolent man who, living in upstate New York, regularly retreats to the mountains in order to escape work and his nagging wife. On one such occasion he meets a curious group of melancholy men whose old-fashioned clothes recall those worn by the Dutch who explored the area many years before. The men are playing ninepins and drinking. Rip's entire encounter with them takes place in silence. He joins them in drinking and soon falls asleep.

When he awakes and returns to his village, he finds that he has slept for twenty years. Much has changed in the interim: Rip's children are grown, and his wife is dead; his sleepy farming village has become an industrious town; and its inhabitants are no longer British subjects but rather citizens of a newly formed United States. Rip, now an old man, is welcomed back into the community; a beloved symbol of an earlier and simpler time, he delights in telling the story of his adventure among the strange, sad, and silent men in the Catskills.

In effect, the story of Rip's encounter with the quaint Dutchmen marks both his and his community's desire to escape a society organized by work and marriage. His story expresses an individual and a collective yearning for homosocial connection. Importantly, though, this fantasy cannot be enacted within the community itself; rather, it must take place beyond it, in the mountains. Moreover, the fantasy encodes a desire that can never be fully articulated: Rip's interaction with the men is silent. There is no language available for expressing this desire to be part of an all-male community.

For the narrator-protagonist of *The Farewell Symphony* there, of course, is such a language. A modern-day gay Rip Van Winkle, "a fat, sleepy old man," he candidly tells the story of his queer sexual experiences, which range from shit scenes to S/M role playing to club sex.

Sadness, though, permeates his accounts of sex and fantasy. So many of the men he has known are dead of AIDS. As he describes person after person who has died, we realize that the novel is offering a tribute to lives that a homophobic society and state have immersed in silent indifference.

Queer lives, lives whose sexual activity is not exclusively heterosexual or monogamous or vanilla, the narrator-protagonist tells us, are treated as expendable. The lack of funding for AIDS research is but one example of such widespread disregard.

Ultimately, the narrator-protagonist's melancholy discloses how the widespread dismissal of queer lives as livable, is a kind of violence, a violence that plays a constitutive role in that socially agreed upon heteronormative fantasy known as "reality."

### **Lesbians, Literature, and Sexual Violence: Healing through Storytelling in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *The Way the Crow Flies***

Gender and sexual violence is a very real threat for glbtq individuals. How do we deal with the possibility of such violation? There of course need to be laws that protect targets and punish perpetrators. Gender and sexual assault are notoriously underreported, and this underreporting reflects a pervasive culture of prejudice. All too often, victims of sexual and gender violence are themselves blamed for their attack.

What is the role of literature in the struggle against such violence and more generally a culture that tolerates it? In their respective novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *The Way the Crow Flies* writers Dorothy Allison and Ann Marie MacDonald demonstrate the power of storytelling for their lesbian protagonists who as children experience physical and sexual abuse.

In both cases the narrative point of view follows the protagonists' responses to abuse and in so doing reveals how violence is linked to familial and broader cultural narratives of gender and sexual normalcy. In this sense the writers' storytelling counters the widespread storytelling within society, which often blames the victims of sexual and gender violence. Storytelling, for both Bone in

Allison's novel and Madeleine in MacDonald's, proves a crucial means of personal validation and healing.

*Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the coming-of-age of Bone Boatwright, who from about the age of five is abused by her stepfather, Daddy Glen. The abuse is long suspected and eventually witnessed by Bone's mother, but Anney does not stop it until after her now twelve-year-old daughter has been raped by Glen. Anney becomes complicit in the abuse.

As Allison poignantly reveals, Anney's complicity discloses the power of conventional gender and sexual roles to produce and sanction violence. She is herself so young and so invested in wanting to be loved that ultimately she chooses to leave with her husband and give Bone over to the care of Anney's siblings, Bone's aunts and uncles. For Anney the desire to be with Glen—to be his wife—overrides her ability to protect her daughter.

*Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the story of how conventional caretakers—a mother and a father—fail to look after their child. Indeed, in Daddy's Glen's case his perception of his inadequacy as a father—his failure to produce a son—and more generally his inadequacy as a man—his failure to provide a middle-class life for his family—engender his abuse.

Who, then, takes care of Bone?

Importantly, Allison gives the girl who, because of her age and gender, has so little power, the power of storytelling. She is the novel's narrator. Reading the novel we recognize that she develops her narrative authority through her responses to Daddy Glen's violence. She cannot stop him, but she can exercise a degree of agency through her own sexual experiences, whereby she links storytelling to sexual pleasure.

She masturbates to elaborate and often violent fantasies. We may understand these fantasies as rewritings of Daddy Glen's abuse. While she cannot prevent this abuse, she can control and derive pleasure from the stories of violence she tells herself as she masturbates. Bone's queer sexual storytelling is a strategy for survival.

This is an important insight that Allison, in this quasi-autobiographical novel, offers readers. Often sexual fantasies, whether masturbatory or part of BDSM role playing, are condemned as perverse or misunderstood as violent because they enact a choreography of danger, yet Bone's sexual fantasies offer her the very safety and consent that Daddy Glen's violation denies her. The girl who could not prevent her physical and sexual abuse exercises a queer narrative authority over her account of her young life.

MacDonald's *The Way the Crow Flies* in turn explores a different patterning of heteronormativity and abuse. Protagonist Madeleine's parents, especially her father, are loving, protective parents. Yet, their commitment to conventional gender roles makes them blind to the sexual abuse their daughter and other little girls are suffering at the hands of their teacher, Mr. March.

Like Bone Madeleine cannot stop the violation, nor can she articulate what is happening to her and her classmates in a way that her parents can understand. Cross-gender fantasies, however, provide her with one steady comfort. She reads *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and imagines herself as Huck. At night, too, she and her brother pretend that she is a boy named Rob.

Again, the experience of abuse does not produce the stories that Madeleine tells herself; instead, those stories counter the experience. They offer a validation and agency that abuse itself denies.

As an adult, Madeleine reaffirms the power of personal storytelling. Storytelling serves as the vehicle for both her coming to terms with her childhood experience of sexual abuse and her coming out as lesbian. It also proves the means for piecing together the facts of a murder committed by two of her classmates at the time of their abuse.

MacDonald thus shows that storytelling can register the complexities of situations, can assess guilt and offer exoneration in far more nuanced and meaningful ways than can other systems of truth telling, whether those systems are based in legal proceedings or conventional (and problematically narrow) understandings of gender and sex. In this novel as in Allison's, storytelling proves a powerful medium for demanding personal and social accountability.

### **Monstrous Gender, Literature, and Translation**

Reading literature, then, is a crucial act in the reckoning and revising of the cultural, legal, and social equations that lay out whose story matters and whose life counts.

Literature invites us to engage in a queer calculus of reading, an empowering engagement whereby, book in hand, glbtq people can recognize that they are themselves embodied readings of their own



sexual and gender desires. For people who because of their gender and sexuality, as well as, for example, their race, age, accent, disability, and citizenship, have long been considered monstrous and transgressive, literature offers an empowering context for reevaluation.

Part of that reevaluation happens through acts of revision that reading and storytelling offer us. Another part happens through the recognition of literature as a realm of translation, a dynamic space that allows readers to measure not only characters' abilities to "live up" to their real-life counterparts, but also their own real-life capacity to "live up" to the possibilities of expression that their fictional counterparts engender.

In my own life, the work that speaks to me most powerfully about the interconnections between literature, gender, sexuality, and translation is Kafka's early twentieth-century novella *The Metamorphosis*.

In this text, a young man, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning to find that he is a bug. What soon becomes apparent is that apart from the question of whether he has physically transformed into a bug (and if so, what kind?), Gregor has led a bug-like existence. As a traveling salesman he has dutifully met gender expectations at terrible personal cost: a good son and brother, he has supported his family, but, as a consequence, has had no social or emotional life. His desire for personal connection is limited to his making of a frame for a picture of a woman that he has cut from a magazine.

Once Gregor becomes a "monstrous vermin," he can no longer go to work; because he is no longer useful, because he has failed gender norms, his family rejects him, and he eventually dies.

When as a sixteen-year-old I first read *The Metamorphosis* I recognized myself in Gregor. As a boyish lesbian I knew that I would never be able—nor would I want—to fulfill expected gender roles. My challenge became how to avoid becoming a bug.

More than thirty years after first reading it, I continue to think about how Kafka's text can teach me about the importance of translating my monstrous gender into terms that make for a livable life. To a limited degree, that act of personal translation has meant moving between cultures and languages (Austrian and American; German and English); most certainly translation has entailed centering my life on my lesbian desires rather than on the narrative of gender and sexual desire into which I was born.

Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century classic *Frankenstein* offers another important example of how the act of reading for translation can help one face and overcome the imputation of monstrosity.

The monster is Victor Frankenstein's embodied translation of himself: Frankenstein assembles the monster from bones he has taken from charnel houses. What results is a failed translation or, more accurately, the understanding that any translation is necessarily inferior to an original.

Importantly, the novel bears the name not of the monster—he, in fact, remains nameless—but rather of his creator. That the title directs our attention to Victor even as the storyline focuses us on the monster reminds us of how this novel delineates a hierarchy between "original" and translated works: literary texts as well as gendered bodies.

Susan Stryker has written compellingly of how for her the monster's body brings to mind the post-operative transsexual body. From Victor's perspective the body that does not conform to the gender expectations of its maker is the monstrous body. Yet *Frankenstein* does not completely validate this view that gender and, more broadly, text should be understood in essentialist terms. The monster remains a compelling, even sympathetic character, whose tragedy seems to be less about his own translated being than about his rejection by his creator.

In his 1999 film *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*), Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar explicitly engages the connection between translation and gender. In contrast to the world of Shelley's novel, that of Almodóvar's film celebrates the connection.

While not immune to violence—indeed, still targets of it—differently gendered and transgendered people are nonetheless presented in the film as figures of both personal and, indeed, national and political resilience. Whether through theatrical performances (including ones of translated plays), through surgery, or through mourning, the film's main characters all explore how to translate their understanding of gender into livable terms.

### Conclusion

Literature offers glbtq readers a key site of personal nourishment, as well as political empowerment, and activism. Insofar as we understand our lives as stories—stories shaped by social and legal possibilities, constraints as well as yearnings—then thinking about

the stories that literature tells allows us to understand that literature is not only a powerful LGBT resource, but also a guide that helps illuminate contemporary issues.

The reading of literature lays a critical groundwork for engaging in queer social justice work.

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