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point of view

Bisexuality in Honor Moore's Memoirs

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Public Personae, Private Lies: Bisexuality in Honor Moore's Memoirs

by [Thomas Uskali](#)

Honor Moore is the author of two fascinating biographies that could have been written only by a family member. She is the daughter of Paul Moore (1919-2003), former Episcopal Bishop of New York City, and granddaughter of artist Margaret Sargent (1892-1973).



Honor Moore. Image courtesy W. W. Norton.

What makes *The Bishop's Daughter: A Memoir* (2008) and *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margaret Sargent by Her Granddaughter* (1996), both recently reissued in paper by W. W. Norton, particularly notable is that they explore the homosexual and heterosexual relationships in the subjects' lives, as well as in the author's.

Moore's writing is breathlessly chatty, documentary, and poetic. She captures the world of privileged lives with insider gossip and an astute sense of storytelling. She knows her way through the layers of "well bred" politeness like a latter-day Edith Wharton.

In both works, personal correspondence and interviews are drenched in euphemism—these are maddeningly reserved people. Therefore, it is difficult to determine just how much went on in terms of sexual intimacy, especially regarding same-sex affairs. Readers may not necessarily want prurient details, but for a contemporary audience, knowing "who did what, and to whom," can help contextualize a relationship.

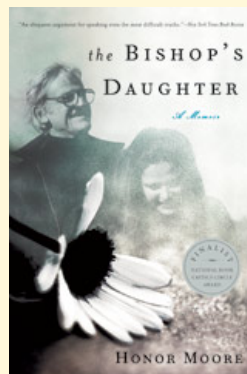
As the story of Paul Moore, *The Bishop's Daughter: A Memoir* is not a definitive biography, but a window (albeit a very polite one) for tantalizing glimpses into his life from his daughter's perspective. Part annotated diary, part biography, this book captures intimate details, as well as a sense of the safe distance that kept many family secrets just out of earshot.

In *The White Blackbird*, Moore ticks through the years in Margaret Sargent's life, documenting events, emphasizing action and description rather than emotional and psychological revelation. While this does not add up to a rich psychological portrait, there are rewards for those willing to read between the lines and listen for the subtleties in hushed conversations and innuendo.

Paul Moore's family were founders of Bankers Trust; their tremendous wealth sheltered him from the wider world during his early life—the Great Depression barely touched them. Moore attended all-male St. Paul's School, where he first found himself drawn to the Anglo-Catholic strand of the Episcopal Church, and spent his college years at Yale.

Moore enlisted in the Marines at the height of World War II. Severely wounded at Guadalcanal in 1942, he became a decorated war hero. His daughter noted the transformation others saw in the "society boy" after his long recovery: "My father's new self was stronger, but also broken."

Military service seems to have strengthened Moore's resolve to enter the priesthood, and he chose to attend General Seminary in New York City. For Paul, a successful life in the church also meant that he must marry; his social status all but designated his choice of wife.



The Bishop's Daughter: A Memoir (2008) by Honor Moore.

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Paul had met Jenny McKean, daughter of Margaret Sargent, when she was just 20 years old and he 24. Paul was stationed on the west coast and visited New York frequently.

Caught up in the whirl of courtship, Jenny wrote that she had "an intense sexual drive," confessing to him later, "I was just going too fast and you got scared." Despite the time and effort that Paul devoted to her, he later admitted to "not loving" Jenny.

Their letters hint at a degree of sexual intimacy, wildly conflicted emotions, and a casual certainty that they would eventually end up married.

However, during the war Paul apparently had sexual encounters with men, including one long-term relationship. While at sea, he wrote a long, rambling letter, thick with allusion: "A woman should know men not only from her own point of view but also as they are of themselves . . . Let me tell you a story or two, first about the love of a man for a man . . . Perhaps when you finish reading you will understand."

Seen in context, the letter is a confession, but an oblique one that avoids outright honesty, and epitomizes the inner struggle that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

Once married and at General Episcopal seminary in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, Moore led a dual life—young husband and father at home, devoted student and sexual partner of a few peers at school.

Moore's first assignment as a priest was at Grace Church in Jersey City, New Jersey, which became a trend-setting parish with its mission of social outreach in a struggling urban center.

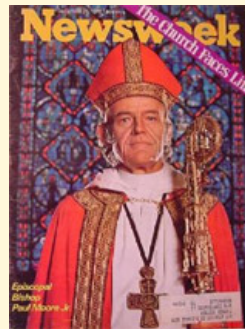
In the early 1950s, "Anyone interested in changing the Episcopal Church in those days passed through Jersey City." It was here that Moore made a clear break from his parents' conservatism, using his family's money and influence to enact radical changes. A lifetime friend commented: "That money was always [Paul's] cross of gold," and for him, "the chief thing to do with it was to use it for the human good."

Despite success at Grace Church and a rapidly growing family (the Moores would have 9 children), the couple was dissatisfied. As Honor Moore notes, "Having entered into a marriage of their time, my parents had no language to explore what was wrong with their erotic life."

By the time they lived in Jersey City, both were seeing psychiatrists, Jenny for what she called her "frigidity" and Paul for his homosexuality, but apparently they never shared their insights with each other. It took Jenny Moore decades to finally admit to a friend, "I am having some problems with my marriage."

The Moores remained married until Jenny's death from colon cancer in 1973. They moved from Indianapolis to Washington, D.C., and finally to New York in 1972, where he would serve as Bishop until 1989.

As Bishop of New York, Moore became one of the most famous clergymen in the country and a bastion of the liberal establishment. His activism extended beyond his support for the Civil Rights and anti-war movements into the realm of sexual politics. He was, for example, the first Episcopal bishop to ordain an openly lesbian priest.



Newsweek featured Paul Moore on its cover in 1972, the year he became Bishop of New York.

Considering his own position as a deeply closeted bisexual, it is interesting that he defended his action by pointing out that there were many homosexual priests but only a few with the courage to acknowledge it.

In 1990, Paul Moore finally revealed his sexuality to his daughter. His second wife, Brenda Hughes Eagle, whom he had married 18 months after Jenny's death, separated from him after discovering his homosexual affairs. He tells Honor Moore simply, "It's come out that I've had gay affairs." The conversation that follows is strangely unenlightening.

The magnitude of the revelation is undercut by a desire to rationalize or quickly explain, to move to the next point, as if Moore were holding his same-sex desires at a distance. Andrew Verver, with whom he'd had a relationship since 1975, put it simply: "Your father could never accept it. His homosexuality."

Honor Moore was in college at Radcliffe in the early 1960s where she experienced the first stirrings of the sexual revolution. Her recollections of dating and social life are a fascinating look into another era, and underscore a shift in attitudes about sexual

behavior. She had a series of relationships with men, and then acted upon her own same-sex desire in the early 1970s.

Honor writes that although she had fallen in love with women, she was "afraid of her desire for men," something she couldn't reconcile until she knew about her father's secret.

She concludes: "I came to understand that my own sexual development was inextricably tied up with my father's complicated erotic life, and that because I was a writer, understanding meant telling." It is interesting to note that she later returned to heterosexual relationships, one further twist in a complicated story.

Paul Moore remains enigmatic in *The Bishop's Daughter*, despite the author's efforts to illuminate his contradictions.

In the Bishop's compartmentalized life, bisexuality or homosexuality did not hinder his career path, because he seems to have treated sex as merely one of the components of his life, not as the overarching influence that it actually was. The portrait that comes through is that of an inspiring, visionary clergyman with virtually no sense of introspection.

Margarett Sargent (1892-1973) is linked by blood and temperament to Honor Moore. Both are described as determined, artistic women, both were raised in a world of privilege, and family members often said that they were "like minded."

Sargent chafed at the strictures inherent for the member of a prominent family; nevertheless, she had a strong, innate desire to fulfill both her own aspirations and those of her family.

She attended Miss Porter's School in Connecticut along with young ladies from the Northeast's "best" families. Deep friendships and girlish, ritualized courting were established traditions at the school, and Margarett was a favorite among her peers.

She attended finishing school in Italy so that she could pursue her growing interest in art. However, her mother, a stern Bostonian, often lamented, "If only we hadn't sent her to Europe."

A brief engagement in 1912 to Eddie Morgan, of the Morgan banking family, ended abruptly. Friends speculated it was because of his drinking, but Sargent admitted later that she told him, "I want to marry you, but I can't," offering no further explanation.

Sargent then devoted herself to sculpting, working with George Luks and Gurzon Borglum (of Mount Rushmore fame). In her relatively brief period of productivity, from the early 1920s until 1936, when she abruptly abandoned her art, she achieved a good deal of success, moving from sculpture to painting and drawing.

Indeed, she became a painter of real talent. Fittingly for a distant cousin of John Singer Sargent, she created memorable portraits of the members of her privileged class, from dandies in evening dress to mannish women in tweedy suits. She also became friends, and possibly lovers, of such diverse members of the artistic world as Berenice Abbott, Betty Parsons, and Fanny Brice.

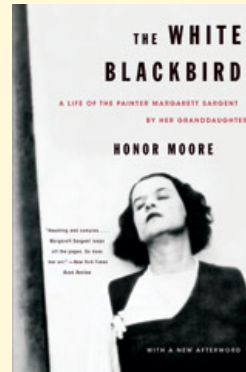
During her early career, Sargent lived with Marjorie Davenport, a friend from Miss Porter's. Although no details of sexual intimacy come to light, theirs was a long-standing relationship. When Margarett finally married, Marjorie was "devastated."

Sargent's marriage to Quincy Adams "Shaw" McKean (in 1920) was a pragmatic choice. After years of being pressured to find a husband, it took her one step away from her family. She noted, "I will marry to defend my independence." Commenting on their rather loveless union, Honor Moore writes, "Shaw was in the wrong marriage, but Margarett was in the wrong life."

Friendships and liaisons throughout Margarett's life were driven by her whims. She hungered for admiration, companionship, and excitement. A friend explains: "She had . . . such physical magnetism plus that fantastic, witty brain. The combination was just devastating."

But while Sargent was willing to flout social conventions, she was unable to break away from the rigid code of her social group, as if she knew exactly where to draw the line at what would be considered *louche*. In fine: "She knew that as long as she was discreet, she could do as she pleased. If she was a lady in her behavior, her secret life, however well known it was, would not interfere with invitations to dinner."

This is a troubling aspect of Sargent's personality, and could



The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent by Her Granddaughter (1996) by Honor Moore.

account for her cavalier way of dealing with same-sex relationships—they could be set aside when "polite society" called. But this "split life," as Honor Moore calls it, led one person to ask, "is there anything sacred to Margaret?"

Even late in her life, Sargent was cagey in discussing her sexual relationships with women. Her conversations with Honor Moore reveal little beyond what Moore already knew, and Sargent frequently dismisses the idea that she was ever intimate with women.

One of her friends said, "Margarett considered direct expression of feeling a weakness." That is a stumbling block for her granddaughter's narrative—between the two of them, their combined "polite reserve" seems to have kept Moore from pursuing difficult questions when she received a dismissive or guarded response. As is also the case in *The Bishop's Daughter*, the best family secrets are kept at a distance.

Honor Moore (b. 1945) is a poet, essayist, and memoirist, living in New York City. Her own sexuality and its expression owe much to the time in which she lives. While at Radcliffe in the mid-1960s, she had sexual relationships only with men, but she was open to expressing same-sex desire. Unlike her parents and grandparents, she was never pressured to marry, and lived far more independently than they could have imagined.

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Thomas Uskali is the book page editor for *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, a publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and is a contributing editor for the *Mobile Press-Register* book page, where he focuses on southern fiction and queer social history.



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