



Bradley, Marion Zimmer (1930-1999)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A matriarch of fantasy fiction, Marion Zimmer Bradley also authored lesbian paperback pulps and articles for *The Ladder* and *Mattachine Review*. Her lifetime output of more than 70 novels spanned multiple genres and inspired an ardent fan base, especially among those seeking strong female characters.

Marion Eleanor Zimmer was born June 3, 1930 in East Greenbush, New York (near Albany), to a farm family struggling through the Great Depression. A precocious reader, by age 16 she had devoured Sidney Lanier's *Tales of King Arthur* and all ten volumes of James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and was already writing stories.

Financially unable to pursue her dream of an opera career, she enrolled in New York State College for Teachers (now SUNY-Albany) in 1946. Eventually she graduated from Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas in 1964 with a triple major in English, psychology, and Spanish literature.

She married Robert Bradley in 1949, moved to Texas with him, and continued writing. Her first published stories appeared in *Vortex* magazine in 1953. Her first novel, *The Door Through Space* (1961), was a typical "space opera" of the times.

She and her husband separated in 1962 and she continued generating science fiction potboilers to support herself and her son. She decided to retain Bradley's surname because of her emerging recognition in the genre, often as "MZB."

Bradley credited her agent for discerning same-sex eroticism in her fiction and acquainting her with the Daughters of Bilitis. Her articles in *The Ladder* during the 1950s and 1960s, sometimes published under the pseudonym "Miriam Gardner," show her in a period of self-examination, characteristic of women who recognize their lesbianism after marriage, and ambivalent about masculine-appearing women.

Bradley collaborated with Barbara Grier (writing as Gene Damon) on several updates to Jeannette Foster's 1956 bibliography *Sex Variant Women in Literature*.

Under several pseudonyms Bradley penned her own lesbian pulp fiction--as Lee Chapman: *I Am a Lesbian* (1962); as Morgan Ives: *Spare Her Heaven* (1963) and *Knives of Desire* (1966); as Miriam Gardner: *My Sister, My Love* (1963) and *Twilight Lovers* (1964); and as John Dexter: *No Adam for Eve* (1966). Grier lauded several of these in her *Ladder* columns. They are now collector's items.

Bradley's most celebrated work, however, is genre fiction featuring heroic female protagonists and woman-centered plots. Though she also produced gothic, romance, and mainstream fiction, her fame derives essentially from her prolific Darkover science fiction series and her 1983 fantasy epic, *The Mists of Avalon*.

Bradley's planet Darkover is the setting for an offshoot human society that forewent scientific technology in favor of expanding its telepathic abilities. Several of the more than 20 novels in the series highlight an autonomous guild of women known as the Free Amazons or Renunciates, who reject traditional gender

roles. In particular, the trilogy of *The Shattered Chain* (1976), *Thendara House* (1983), and *City of Sorcery* (1984) features lesbian relationships and is a significant contribution to modern Amazon lore.

In this series, Bradley's Amazons can be either heterosexual or lesbian. This flexibility drew criticism from radical feminists. Fittingly, the Renunciates' debates in the series mirror those then current in women's communities.

Gay male attractions on the part of forefront or secondary characters figure in *The Forbidden Tower* (1977), *The Heritage of Hastur* (1975), and *Sharra's Exile* (1981). In *The World Wreckers* (1971) love develops between a Terran male and a Darkovan androgynous hermaphrodite.

The stories "Hawk-Master's Son" (1980), "Man of Impulse" (1988), and "The Shadow" (1987) probe the complex psychology of the predatory Dyan Ardis, the gay villain of some Darkover novels.

Bradley's characters possess credible psychological depth. They ponder moral and social choices and contend with the consequences and costs of freedom. Though Bradley rejected the label feminist because of her aversion to radical polemics, her female protagonists are thoroughly embroiled in struggles over gender expectations and self-actualization.

Through short story anthologies and multiple collaborations on later novels, Bradley invited other writers to expand the Darkovan canon. The narrative arc developed over 30 years, prompted by readers' demands for more; consequently, later segments are somewhat inconsistent with early ones. John Clute lists the titles by their storyline sequence.

The Mists of Avalon, which attained mainstream popularity, is Bradley's retelling of the Arthurian myth from the viewpoint of its women. In the novel, Christianity displaces the indigenous earth-centered Goddess worship as priests vie with Avalon's advocate Morgaine (Morgan Le Fey) for influence over the throne. Bradley delivers a feminist reading of the familiar legend, even imparting an erotic edge to the bond between Arthur and Lancelot and that of the otherwise heterosexual Morgaine with another priestess. (These elements were missing in Uli Edel's 2001 TV miniseries based on the book.)

Other female-centered work by Bradley includes *The Ruins of Isis* (1978), a novel exploring matriarchal society; *Warrior Woman* (1985), a lusty action yarn about female gladiators; *Lythande* (1986), stories of a magician compelled to live in male disguise, with occasional allusions to her love of women; and *The Firebrand* (1987), Cassandra's account of the Trojan War and the ascendancy of patriarchal religion. Garber and Paleo provide a detailed survey of her gay and lesbian characters and subplots.

Teenage eroticism is central to *The Catch Trap* (1979), one of her few works of standard fiction. A gay relationship between two young acrobats plays out against a richly detailed backdrop of American circus life in the 1940s and 1950s. Although the furtiveness and self-doubts of those decades affect the characters' actions, the youths struggle to maintain their bond despite the objections of adults.

Bradley also edited *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* and numerous *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies. She is also credited with co-founding the Society for Creative Anachronism in 1966.

Although coy about her views on Neo-paganism, Bradley explored occult spirituality, was ordained in a modern Gnostic denomination, and considered contemporary goddess worship to be consistent with a historically pure form of Christianity. By the 1990s she identified as Christian and her funeral rites took place in a Berkeley Episcopal church.

In 1964 Bradley married eccentric numismatist Walter Breen, who shared her interests in science fiction and Gnostic Christianity; they had two children. Breen, who under the pseudonym J. Z. Eglinton wrote *Greek Love* (1964), was an advocate of man/boy love and there has been speculation that awareness of this

side of his personality influenced the undercurrent of sexual plots involving young people in some of Bradley's fiction.

Bradley and Breen were Berkeley neighbors after their 1979 separation. Bradley's final years were scarred by a lawsuit implicating her in Breen's 1991 conviction for sex with a minor; Bradley was accused of knowing about but not acknowledging his activities. The lawsuit was dropped as the result of a financial settlement with the victim just prior to Bradley's death in 1999. Breen, meanwhile, died in prison in 1993.

After a series of strokes beginning in 1987, Bradley died in Berkeley of a heart attack on September 25, 1999. Her ashes were scattered on Glastonbury Tor in England.

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