



Brinig, Myron (1896-1991)

by Earl Ganz

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Myron Brinig in a photograph created by Cady Wells in 1935. Image courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

One of the first Jewish-American writers of his generation to write in English rather than Yiddish, Myron Brinig was also one of the first to create homosexual characters. Between 1929 and 1958 he published 21 novels. A homosexual himself, he remained publicly closeted all of his life, a stance he thought necessary, not only for his writing career, but also for his place in American society.

Born in Minneapolis on December 22, 1896, Brinig moved with his family to the rough and tumble mining town of Butte, Montana when he was three. Like many Jewish immigrants to the far west, his father opened a dry-goods store that catered to the needs of copper miners.

Brinig grew up working in the store, and sold candy in brothels and newspapers in bars. He saw first-hand Butte's horrific labor problems, particularly its long strikes and the mayhem the Anaconda Copper Company committed in breaking those strikes.

In 1914 at age 17 Brinig left Butte to study at New York University, where he took writing courses with the poet Joyce Kilmer.

In 1917 Brinig's education was interrupted by military service. When he returned to New York City in 1919, instead of going back to school, he found a job at the Zanuck film studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey reading novels and stories in search of script material. Except for rare visits to his family he never returned to Montana, perhaps because he knew that he could never live even secretly as a homosexual in Butte.

Brinig published his first novel with Doubleday, Doran & Company. *Madonna Without Child* (1929) is a character study of a woman obsessed by someone else's child.

When his editor, John Farrar, joined Stanley Rinehart to form a new publishing house, Brinig went with them. That same year Farrar & Rinehart published *Singermann* (1929), the story of Moses Singermann, his wife Rebecca, and their six children. It is a story of what the new American freedom does to the family's traditional Jewish values. It is here we first meet Harry and Michael, the two gay Singermann brothers.

Margy Rochlin observes that Harry, the overtly gay sibling, is "the least interestingly written character" in a novel that is clearly autobiographical. She speculates that perhaps "Harry's vague rendering is indicative of Brinig wanting to document the true landscape of his life as richly as possible without outing himself in the process."

For the next six years Farrar & Rinehart would bring out one Brinig novel a year: *Anthony in the Nude* (1930), the story of a successful love affair between narcissists; *Wide Open Town* (1931), Brinig's best labor novel; *This Man Is My Brother* (1932), the sequel to *Singermann* in which Brinig continues the story of the two gay brothers, a novel recently described by Anthony Slide as "compelling in its emotional strength"; *The Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933), a satire of Los Angeles arts culture; *Out of Life* (1934), a character study of a

man about to become a father; and *The Sun Sets in the West* (1935), another Butte labor novel.

In 1933, on a visit to Taos, New Mexico, Brinig met Mabel Dodge Luhan, the famous patron of D. H. Lawrence. She immediately took a liking to him and invited him to stay with her.

Brinig spent that summer in one of Luhan's guest houses with the modernist painter, Cady Wells, the scion of a wealthy eastern family. He and Wells would live together as lovers for the rest of that year and most of the next.

In 1935 Brinig moved to San Francisco without Wells and for the first time since 1929 did not publish a novel. But he resumed writing in 1936 and created his best-seller, *The Sisters* (1937), which begins in Butte and climaxes with the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

Warner Brothers bought the film rights to *The Sisters*. Directed by Anatole Litvak and starring Bette Davis and Errol Flynn, the movie was released in 1938. It was a box office success, and with the money he made from the movie, Brinig returned to Taos and bought a house where he lived for the next 16 years.

He would go on publishing a novel almost every year. The best of these later novels are *You and I* (1945), a Hansel and Gretel story with a dark forest as wide as America and with Hansel marrying Gretel at the end, and *Footsteps on the Stairs* (1950), his last Butte novel. The latter book contains one of his best characters, Jimmy Joyce, scion of a wealthy Butte Irish family who goes to San Francisco, where in a beautifully rendered scene of drunken desire has a one night stand with a man he meets in a bar.

But Brinig's next two novels, *The Sadness in Lexington Avenue* (1951) and *The Street of Three Friends* (1953) sold poorly. Publisher Stanley Rinehart, who in 1946 had split with John Farrar, dropped Brinig from Rinehart's list. It was quite a blow. In 1955, in an effort to save his career, Brinig sold his house in Taos and moved back to Manhattan.

In 1958, he published another novel, *The Looking Glass Heart*, at a different publishing house. It was the 21st of his 25-year career.

Did Brinig write too much? Perhaps. Yet a lot of it was very good writing, which was generally very well received.

The question is why did the literary critics of the second half of the twentieth century ignore him? This neglect is particularly glaring among the Jewish critics, Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin. *Singermann* is only the third Jewish immigrant novel written in English rather than Yiddish. That fact alone should have earned him notice and critical consideration by students of Jewish-American literature.

Brinig also received the same neglectful treatment from literary historians of the American labor movement. Walter Rideout in his *The Radical Novel in the United States: 1900 to 1954* never mentions *Wide Open Town*, Brinig's novel about a famous Butte strike with a graphic lynching scene of a Wobbly organizer. Under the heading "Strike Novels," Rideout discusses several awful Communist Party propaganda novels but not *Wide Open Town*.

The decisions to ignore Brinig were conscious. These critics understood that Brinig was a homosexual and that several of his characters, while not designated as such, were homosexuals. Rather than deal with these facts they chose to ignore Brinig and his work, perhaps out of embarrassment or homophobia.

Ironically, just as Brinig faded from the scene, young homosexual writers such as Gore Vidal and James Baldwin were beginning to explore homosexuality with a frankness not theretofore seen in mainstream

American literature. But these were men of a different generation, much braver and surer of themselves than Brinig.

Brinig died on May 13, 1991 at the age of 94. He had witnessed his own literary disappearance, first from bookstores, then libraries, and then the public's memory.

Yet the last third of his life was a happy time. For 35 years he lived with the man he loved, had many friends for whom he played the piano, and with whom he frequented a First Avenue bar, appropriately called The Closet, where he could be himself.

Today gay and Jewish critics are taking note of Myron Brinig and finding a place for him in the history of the American novel. *Wide Open Town* was re-issued by a Montana press in 1993, some 62 years after it was first published, and has been in print ever since. Perhaps as interest grows, more of his novels will be re-issued.

But will he ever be considered as he was in this 1931 review of *Wide Open Town* from *The Forum*, in which he is compared to Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman? The anonymous reviewer wrote: "The book lacks the astonishing skill and variety of characterization which distinguished *Singermann*: the separate stories in it are less firmly knit together; it sometimes runs wild and becomes a kind of Whitmanesque chant in praise of America. It is, however, an extraordinary if undisciplined novel. Like Thomas Wolfe Mr. Brinig has great power and great vitality. He is among our best young writers."

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About the Author

Earl Ganz is a former resident of Missoula, Montana, where for thirty years he taught creative writing at the University of Montana. He now resides in Lake Charles, Louisiana. His novel, *The Taos Truth Game* (2006), depicts Myron Brinig's friendships with the painter Cady Wells and the art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan.