



Califia, Patrick (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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Never one to shy from controversy, Pat Califia is an outspoken advocate of sadomasochism and pornography, drawing the ire of some other lesbians and feminists. She has also earned admirers, however, for her courageous stands for individual freedom and for her writings, both fiction and non-fiction.

In 1999 gender outlaw and sexual anarchist Califia began the process of sexual reassignment, thus continuing his exploration of the variety of human sexuality and of the sex-gender system.

A Mormon Childhood

Califia had a somewhat nomadic childhood. Born in Corpus Christi, Texas on March 8, 1954, she lived in various places from South Carolina to Utah as the family followed her father, a miner and road-construction worker, from one job to another.

She did not have the happiest of childhoods. Her father was an angry and violent man, and her mother a pious woman whose focus was on achieving happiness in the afterlife rather than in the world. Both were devout Mormons.

Although Califia's sexual philosophy is deeply transgressive in the eyes of the Mormon church, he stated in a 2000 interview that there is an element of Mormon thought in his approach to life. "One of the primary tenets of Mormonism is that if the truth has been revealed to you and you don't speak out, you are culpable for any wrongs that are committed in those realms of life," he said. Califia has never been one to remain silent.

Califia felt a sense of difference even as a child, insisting that she was not a girl when her parents told her that she could not become a train engineer because of her gender.

Califia began writing stories and poems almost as soon as she was able to read. A good student, she was able to leave high school a year early and enroll at the University of Utah in 1971. There she met other lesbians and recognized her own sexual orientation. She fell in love with another student who did not, however, return her affection.

Her parents took the news badly and decided to put her into a mental institution. The stress of the situation drove her to a nervous breakdown. She dropped out of college, evaded her parents, and became involved in political causes including the women's liberation and anti-war movements.

Lesbian Sex Wars

In 1973 Califia moved to San Francisco, where she wrote for *Sisters*, the magazine of the San Francisco chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, and joined the lesbian separatist movement. When in 1975 she spoke in favor of sadomasochism (S/M), however, she found herself excluded from the lesbian feminist community.

"The first time I came out, I lost my nuclear family. The second time, I lost my gay family," she commented.

Califia became increasingly involved in the practice of S/M, not only with other lesbians but also with gay men. She was among the cofounders of the lesbian S/M group Samois in 1978. Soon thereafter her articles on lesbian sexuality began to appear in various publications including the *Journal of Homosexuality* and *The Advocate*. Her sex manual *Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* came out in 1980.

Califia later described her writings about S/M as "an opening salvo in the Lesbian Sex Wars." They, combined with her stance in favor of pornography, made her a lightning rod among lesbians and feminists. As a consequence, many of her writings were censored and she was regularly denounced for her views and "aberrant" sexual practices.

Women with opposing views, notably Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, argued for censorship of pornography, calling it an example of the patriarchal domination of women by men and thus inherently oppressive. Radical feminists extended this interpretation to lesbian relationships, especially those of the sadomasochistic variety, since they necessarily involved a relationship between a dominant and a submissive person--and also violence--mimicking patriarchal patterns used to subjugate women.

Califia acknowledged the inequality of power immanent in lesbian sadomasochistic practices, but contended that exploration and open discussion of these roles would not only lead to liberation but could also be extended to other issues of inequality within the feminist movement such as the marginalization of women of color and lower-income women.

This debate, which was particularly contentious during the 1980s, resurfaced in 1994 when the Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium, a gay and lesbian store in Vancouver, British Columbia, challenged a 1992 decision by the Canadian Supreme Court in *Regina v. Butler* holding that pornography was not covered under the right to free speech. The writings of American feminists opposed to pornography, including MacKinnon, had weighed heavily in the decision.

The Little Sister's case against the Canadian Customs service included a question of discrimination against gay men and lesbians since 40 percent of the material being seized was destined for that market.

Califia, whose collection of short stories, *Melting Point* (1993), was among the confiscated works, testified at the trial. With reference to the importance of the books to the glbtq community, she stated, "If you find no fiction that portrays people who have the kind of sexuality you would like to have, the kinds of feelings you have, you begin to think that you are crazy."

In its decision--not rendered until January 1996--the court upheld the constitutionality of the law but ruled that it had been applied in an arbitrary manner that discriminated against Little Sister's as a gay and lesbian bookstore.

Califia's Writings

Califia's writings fall into three general categories: non-fiction works such as *Sapphisty*, fiction and poetry, and advice columns, including a long-running one in *The Advocate* that she began in 1981.

Califia has been nominated for Lambda Literary Awards for her short-story collection *Macho Sluts* (1988), her novel *Doc and Fluff: The Dystopian Tale of a Girl and Her Biker* (1990), and a compilation of her columns, *The Advocate Adviser* (1991).

Califia's writings have been controversial within the glbtq community, with some fearing that the graphic depictions of S/M are stigmatizing and others praising Califia for an open and positive attitude toward sexual diversity in all its forms. Ian Barnard commented in 1994 that "in feminist debates around

pornography Califia has clearly positioned herself in opposition to those who would make binary and classist distinctions between 'erotica' and 'pornography' in order to validate the former category and denounce the latter."

Indeed, Califia has looked at sexual identities, practices, performance, and fantasies as a continuum rather than as sets of polar opposites, and has consistently both participated in and encouraged others to join the debate and exploration of the variety within that continuum with the objective of bringing all people to value themselves and others for who they are.

Bryn Austin suggested that "arguably the nadir of the reviews [of Califia's writings] has not been negativity but rather the disappointing mediocrity of the criticism," adding that critics rarely delve into the complexity of Califia's work or the challenging issues that underlie the writer's S/M tales.

Califia's advice columns, which have run in several glbtq publications, have won many fans. Califia, who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1981 and later a master's degree in counseling from San Francisco State University, is now a licensed marriage and family therapist in California.

Califia, who described herself as "a sort of psychic hermaphrodite," authored *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* in 1997. Starting from history, autobiographies, and interviews, she examined "the way differently-gendered people's perceptions of themselves and the perceptions of those outside the gender community have evolved, and some of the complex medical, sexual, political, and social issues these phenomena present." It was her hope "that someday gender will be a voluntary system for self-expression, used chiefly to enhance the pleasure we take in one another's unique realities."

Gender Reassignment

A new phase in Califia's life began in 1999 when she decided to initiate the process of becoming a female-to-male (FTM) transgendered person by having injections of testosterone. Since Califia was about to begin going through menopause at that time, her doctor had suggested a regimen of hormone replacement therapy, a frequently prescribed treatment. Califia vigorously rejected the idea of taking the female hormone estrogen, however, saying, "I could not put this chemical into my body on purpose."

She had considered gender reassignment while she was in her twenties but had been leery of the quality of the surgery available at the time. Thereafter, Califia stated, "the strategy that I employed to deal with my gender dysphoria was to be a different kind of woman." Regarding the stark categories of "man" and "woman" Califia concluded, "neither one is really a very good fit for me." Nevertheless, gender reassignment seemed the preferable option, and Califia proceeded with it, adopting the first name of Patrick for his new life as a man. He now identifies as bisexual.

Califia's partner at the time, Matt Rice, also in the process of becoming an FTM, had had to suspend testosterone therapy due to side effects and wished to become pregnant. Rice successfully conceived through artificial insemination. Although the parents are no longer together, Califia remains devoted to his young son, who is autistic.

Prior to gender reassignment Califia had been anxious about its effect on her career since she had built her reputation as a lesbian writer and activist. According to Heather Findlay, editor of the lesbian *Girlfriends Magazine*, readers "begged us to maintain Pat as the [sex advice] columnist." (The magazine did, however, change the title of the column from "Girl Talk" to "Kiss and Tell.")

Califia Today

Califia has also continued publishing and now has over twenty books to his credit, including a recent vampire novel, *Mortal Companion* (2004). More are in prospect.

In recent years Califia has suffered from fibromyalgia, an auto-immune disease that causes nerve damage. Despite pain and fatigue due to the condition, he continues to write and to be as active as possible in conferences and community events.

Califia has always been candid in his views and also forthright in acknowledging past stances that he now believes to be in error. In a 2000 interview he stated that he no longer supports the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) or the abolition of age-of-consent laws. In both cases his reasoning has to do with the welfare of young people.

His initial support for NAMBLA stemmed from his conviction that people should not be harassed for expressing their views, no matter how unpopular those are. He now takes issue with NAMBLA, however, on the question of sex between men and young boys, which he calls "developmentally inappropriate." Similarly, he has dropped his opposition to age-of-consent laws because he feels that parents frequently fail to provide their children with adequate sex education to permit them to make informed decisions.

Califia's continuing sexual journey has been an extraordinary one, and her, now his, views have often been outside the mainstream. Even those who disagree with his political opinions or his advocacy for S/M, however, may applaud his consistent call for all people to be treated with dignity and respect.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.