



Grier, Barbara (1933-2011)

by Linda Rapp

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As bibliographer, reviewer, collector, editor, and co-founder of Naiad Press, Barbara Grier was an important nurturer of lesbian literature.

Grier, together with her partner Donna McBride, founded Naiad Press, which became America's foremost publisher of lesbian books. But Grier's interest in lesbian literature was lifelong and expressed in a number of ways. For example, it led her and McBride to amass an important collection of lesbiana, which they donated to the San Francisco Public Library.

Grier was born on November 4, 1933 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her father was a physician and her mother a secretary. Her parents separated when she was ten and divorced when she was thirteen.

Grier realized that she was a lesbian when she was twelve. Fittingly, she researched the topic at the library before announcing her conclusion to her mother. She wrote in her memoir in *The Original Coming Out Stories* (1989) that she would have informed her father at the same time, but her parents had separated by then.

Grier always lived openly and proudly as a lesbian. She acknowledged the support of her parents, particularly her mother. When Grier was fifteen, her mother gave her Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Marcia Davenport's *Of Lena Geyer* (1936), a novel about the lesbian relationship of Davenport's mother.

Grier's mother further supported her when she fell in love at the age of eighteen with Helen Bennett, a librarian from Kansas City, Missouri. Grier and Bennett lived as a couple for twenty years. Grier refers to their partnership as a marriage.

In 1957 Grier, already a collector of lesbian writings, subscribed to *The Ladder*, the magazine of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). She soon began writing for the magazine herself, doing short book notes under the pen name Gene Damon.

Her role quickly expanded. Using multiple pseudonyms, including Gladys Casey, Vern Niven, and HB (in honor of Bennett), Grier contributed articles and short stories to *The Ladder*. In 1966 editor Barbara Gittings invited Grier to do full-length book reviews instead of "squib reviews." A collection of Grier's reviews was published as *Lesbiana* in 1976.

Grier described *The Ladder* as "the center of [her] life" in the late 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, her contribution to it was prodigious. Some issues were comprised almost entirely of her writings. She also wrote for other homophile publications during this period, including *ONE* and *Mattachine Review*.

Grier worked as *The Ladder's* poetry and fiction editor from 1966 until 1968, when she assumed the general editorship. Wanting to take the journal in a more activist direction, Grier dissociated it from DOB in 1970.

The independent *Ladder*, newly infused with women's liberation militancy, did not prove financially viable, however, and ceased publication in 1972.

The previous year Donna McBride had begun to work as a volunteer for *The Ladder*. A reference librarian at the Kansas City, Missouri, public library, McBride first knew Grier as a library patron who made frequent and numerous recommendations of books of lesbian interest that she wanted the library to buy.

Impressed with Grier's work as a bibliographer, editor, and writer, McBride sought her out. The two soon fell in love. They became life partners in 1971, Grier having separated from Bennett. In 2008, during the brief period when same-sex marriage was legal in California, they wed.

After *The Ladder* ceased publication, a new opportunity arose for Grier and McBride. Two of the magazine's subscribers, Anyda Marchant and Muriel Crawford, wanted to start a lesbian publishing company and asked Grier and McBride to run it.

Naiad Press got off to a modest beginning in January 1973. Marchant and Crawford put up \$2,000 in initial funding, and Grier contributed the mailing list from *The Ladder*, consisting of three thousand names of potential customers.

Grier and McBride ran the operation from their home near Kansas City. Naiad's first book, *The Latecomer*, written by Marchant under the pseudonym Sarah Aldridge, appeared in 1974.

Grier and McBride moved to Tallahassee, Florida in 1980. Naiad Press had been growing from year to year, but both women continued to hold other full-time jobs to support themselves as they developed the business.

In 1982 both Grier and McBride began working exclusively for Naiad. The press burgeoned into the world's largest publisher of lesbian books.

Naiad's inventory included mysteries, romances, and science fiction novels. The press also reprinted classics of lesbian writing, including Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker series.

Naiad also produced non-fiction books. Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan's *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (1985) was among the most successful.

Naiad books took a number of prestigious honors including an American Library Association Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Award and half a dozen Lambda Literary Awards. Grier and McBride won a Lambda Literary Award of their own in 1991 in the Publisher's Service category.

Having spent some thirty years in the publishing business, Grier and McBride decided to retire in the early years of the new millennium. They gradually let their books go out of print and closed Naiad Press in 2005.

The heir to Naiad is Bella Books of Ferndale, Michigan, run by Kelly Smith, who spent eighteen months working for Naiad in the late 1990s. Grier was very supportive of Bella, and noted that almost all of the Naiad writers have signed on with Smith.

Bibliophiles Grier and McBride left an important heritage to the scholarly community by donating their collection of lesbiansiana to the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center of the San Francisco Public Library. The collection, valued at \$400,000 at the time of its donation in 1995, comprises more than fifteen thousand books, monographs, and manuscripts. It also includes photographs and items of memorabilia.

Grier was always been forthright in declaring her lesbianism and strongly encouraged others to do likewise. She stated in *Coming Out Stories*, "I am positive that it [i.e. having come out and lived openly as a lesbian]

is the reason that I have been extremely happy all my life," and also said that she regards being a lesbian "as some kind of heaven-sent blessing."

Grier entitled her coming out essay "The Garden Variety Lesbian." Hers was a bountiful garden indeed.

Grier died on November 10, 2011 in Tallahassee, Florida of complications from cancer. She was survived by her wife, Donna McBride.

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