



Maney, Mabel (b. 1958)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Mabel Maney.
Image courtesy of Cleis Press.

San Francisco artist and satirist Mabel Maney spins lesbian adventure tales out of perky feminine archetypes from the 1950s and 1960s. Though on the surface her novels play out as mischievous parodies of heroines such as Nancy Drew, behind their convoluted and merrily implausible plots is a conscious awareness of the era's class and gender issues. At the same time Maney, an unabashed advocate for the place of butch/femme relationships in lesbian culture, actively reappraises the gender assumptions of the present.

Born one of four children to an Irish Catholic family in Appleton, Wisconsin in 1958, Maney grew up in Ohio and graduated from Ohio State University in 1985. After coming out in the lesbian/feminist counterculture of the late 1980s she moved to San Francisco. In 1991 she received a Master of Fine Arts degree from San Francisco State University; her thesis explored the homoerotic subtext of novels featuring 1940s heroine Nurse Cherry Ames.

Before she took to writing novels, Maney's chosen medium was handcrafted books produced under her own World O'Girls imprint. Her art installations--some actually large-scale fabric constructions--probed mother/daughter relationships and 1950s constraints against women. They were mixed media experiments in which images, often kitsch graphics from that era's commercial art, provide environments for text rather than illustrate it.

She exhibited her work throughout the United States. Two of her pieces, "Nancy Clue/Cherry Aimless" and "Hardly Boys," part of the group show "Bad Girls" shown on both coasts in the early 1990s, spoofed the popular young readers' mystery series. When they came to the attention of Cleis Press a book deal resulted.

Her heroines, Nancy Clue and Cherry Aimless, parody the Nancy Drew and Nurse Cherry Ames books written for girls in the 1930s and 1940s. (The latter was created to interest girls in nursing careers during World War II.) Maney brings them together, recreating a postwar setting in which the ingenuous Cherry and the urbane Nancy meet in a San Francisco lesbian bar and carry on a fervent, on-again/off-again affair through the first three novels.

They are accompanied by a cast of dykely personalities: butch Midge and her loyal femme Velma who never can find enough privacy to--well, you know; Jackie, the handsome black city cop (in uniform!) who shows up whenever a cool head is required; and baby-butch Lauren whose brash rebelliousness will cheer anyone who ever chafed at childhood commands to behave like a lady.

Maney's rambling plots are mainly vehicles for lampooning the Ozzie and Harriet coziness of middle-class America where girls fight for justice without scratching their nail polish. In *The Case of the Not-So-Nice Nurse* (1993) the cast must rescue a clutch of kidnapped nuns and foil the treacherous priest who has evil designs on their property. *The Case of the Good-For-Nothing Girlfriend* (1994) carries the gang on a road trip to Illinois, where Nancy challenges corrupt society matrons to clear her name and expose her illustrious dad's true nature.

In *The Ghost in the Closet* (1995) the group teams up with the Hardly Boys, along with their doting uncle Nelly and his well-proportioned "friend." They introduce some not-so-subtle male homoerotic dynamics into a pursuit through secret caves after spies who are surely intent on threatening our way of life.

Maney writes with a conscious attention to class and gender roles. Her Nancy is from a privileged have-it-all background ("a living Barbie") while Cherry must work for a living, and Maney builds their rocky relationship around that axis. By contrast, her butch/femme couples are stable and loving, a deliberate departure from the later androgynous archetype. She celebrates the butch/femme dichotomy as sexy rather than limiting; her femme characters are smart and capable, the butches loyal and caring.

She sets the novels in the 1950s and 1960s to allow her characters an innocence that is not possible now. Maney describes Nancy Clue as a deliberate subversion of "pure American girlhood" whose family secret (incest) represents the dysfunctional subtext of both the original series and its era.

Maney switches gears in her next two novels, *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* (2001) and *The Girl with the Golden Bouffant* (2004). In the insouciant 1960s, the renowned Agent 007's sister--Bond, Jane Bond--must thwart a plot against the queen and outsmart some really obnoxious FBI rivals in a Las Vegas showdown (respectively). She is abetted by two cagey and tenacious operatives, Bridget and Bibi, fashionista femmes whom one is well advised not to cross. It is amazing what kind of high-tech weaponry you can pack into a charm bracelet.

Although created as parodies of earlier times, Maney's novels are mordant commentaries on the conformity of a lesbian culture that, in her opinion, takes itself too seriously. She notes that gay men have a longstanding camp tradition and feels that lesbians need something similar. Her characters may well provide the foundation.

Maney's published short fiction are brief vignettes of women ensnared in marital or gender limitations, who live vicariously through the icons of popular culture. In 2001 *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award in the Lesbian Mystery category.

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