



Wolverton, Terry (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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Throughout her varied career as a writer, editor, teacher, and performance artist, Terry Wolverton has consistently worked to document glbtq history and increase the visibility of the community.

Terry Lynn Wolverton, born August 23, 1954, grew up in Detroit and attended the city's most prestigious public school, Cass Technical High School, among whose graduates are not only many scientists and engineers but also entertainers including Diana Ross and Lily Tomlin. Wolverton studied stagecraft and dreamed of a career on Broadway.

After her graduation in 1972 she enrolled in the BFA program in theater at the University of Detroit but was discouraged by the lack of support from her instructors, all of them male, who gave choice roles to women who "were both conventionally pretty and submissive to authority."

Disappointed by the treatment of women students, she left the program after a year. Frustration with political developments in 1972--especially the reelection of Richard Nixon and the defeat of an abortion rights proposal in Michigan--led her to move to Canada. She enrolled at the University of Toronto, which had a fledgling women's studies program. While there, she began to combine her interests in the women's movement and acting by performing in feminist theater works.

Early in her second year at the University of Toronto, though, Wolverton dropped out. She returned to Detroit, where she supported herself by working as a waitress.

In Detroit, Wolverton felt "isolated both as feminist and artist." She was therefore delighted to read an article in the *Detroit Free Press* about "an independent institute for the study of feminist political theory" at Goddard College in Plattsburgh, Vermont. She was accepted to the first session of the Sagaris Institute in the summer of 1975.

Wolverton was pleased that the faculty included luminaries such as Charlotte Bunch, Mary Daly, and Rita Mae Brown and that the student body was, by her estimate, "approximately 80 percent" lesbian. Her experience at Sagaris proved disappointing, however. Discord over the vision and direction of the program led to rancorous squabbling that spelled its doom.

In the fall of 1975 Wolverton continued her studies at Thomas Jefferson College, an experimental institution near Grand Rapids, Michigan. Students were able to design their own majors, and Wolverton chose to work in feminist theater. After the administration revoked permission for her to present her performance piece for a women-only audience, she "no longer believed TJC was a supportive environment in which to produce [her] work." Also disappointed in the lesbian community of Grand Rapids, whose members did not see art as part of the revolution, Wolverton moved to Los Angeles in October 1976 to study at the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW).



Terry Wolverton at the West Hollywood book fair in 2006. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Photograph copyright © 2006 Angela Brinskele.

The FSW had been founded only a few years before and, after convening in improvised spaces, had found a home in the Woman's Building, a squat red-brick structure built by the Standard Oil Company in the 1920s, located in a bleak industrial district that local gangs called "Dogtown" after an animal shelter that had recently closed its doors due to budget cuts.

In this unpromising environment Wolverton found a community that nurtured her as an artist. She completed her studies at FSW and stayed on at the Woman's Building, first as a teacher and then an administrator. She eventually became executive director.

In her memoir, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building* (2002), Wolverton wrote, "No one could ever describe the Woman's Building. It would require a language that could encompass the passage of time as well as contradictory points of view. Perhaps no language could accomplish it. Perhaps only music would be capable of sounding those myriad notes--the harmonies, the dissonance, syncopation, counterpoint--to arrive at a composition of the whole."

Her comment reflects the complexity of the lesbian experience of the period. Feminism and the empowerment of women were ideals to be embraced, yet there was disagreement about how best to accomplish the goal. Some argued for lesbian separatism; some advocated a wider community. Each was seeking to find her own voice.

Wolverton initially found that expression in performance art. She staged *FEMINA: An Intraspace Voyage*, a story of women who leave Earth to create a new society, in 1978, and *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* the following year. She was also able to explore topics of both social and personal importance, notably in the Incest Awareness Project, three years in the making, in the course of which she was finally able to talk to her mother about abuse by her stepfather, from whom her mother was by that time divorced.

The performance piece that Wolverton created, *In Silence, Secrets Turn to Lies / Secrets Shared Become Sacred Truth*, was affecting and effective. The theatrical production was paired with an art exhibition at the Woman's Building. In addition, Mayor Tom Bradley supported the project by declaring October 1979 Children's Defense Month in Los Angeles. As the result of a vigorous media campaign, the exhibit was the Woman's Center's most successful in terms of attendance and also among the most rewarding because hundreds of people called the center's hotline and were referred to sources of support.

When the Reagan era began in 1981, the Woman's Building was among the many non-profit institutions that lost support and struggled to survive. Despite some success at fundraising in the latter part of the decade, the Woman's Building remained seriously imperiled.

During the 1980s Wolverton was unstinting in her efforts to keep the Woman's Building going. At the same time she was questioning how best to express herself artistically. As much as she enjoyed performing, she was increasingly drawn to writing.

Wolverton's first book, *Blue Moon* (1977), a collection of prose and poetry, was the outgrowth of an FSW class. Other members of the program contributed illustrations and volunteered their printing skills to help her self-publish her work on the Woman's Building's presses.

In 1989 Wolverton decided to leave her post at the Woman's Building to devote herself to writing her own poetry and fiction and to supporting other queer authors by editing collections of their work.

Wolverton's first major publications were editorial efforts. *Blood Whispers: L. A. Writers on AIDS* (volume 1, 1991; volume 2, 1994) had its genesis in a writing workshop for people with HIV/AIDS that she began teaching in 1988. She stated in a 2000 interview that working with gay men caused her to move beyond the

separatist lesbian feminist views that she had held in her younger years. Because of her experiences with gay writers, she "found a lot of [her] former anti-male attitudes just falling away."

Wolverton soon began a very successful professional partnership with gay novelist and editor Robert Drake. Together they produced *Indivisible: New Short Fiction by West Coast Gay and Lesbian Writers* (1991). "It was our mission, with that first book, to get gay men and lesbians to read one another's work," she stated. The groundbreaking anthology of both gay and lesbian writing earned favorable reviews, but, said Wolverton, "no one knew how to market this idea."

Wolverton and Drake hoped to bring out *Indivisible 2*, but, she stated, "no publisher would touch it." Faced with this problem, Wolverton proposed compiling companion volumes of gay and lesbian stories. This approach proved more marketable, and Wolverton and Drake produced *Hers: Brilliant New Fiction by Lesbian Writers* and *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers* in 1995.

Both were well received. A review in *Publishers Weekly* called the collection in *His* "rich, imaginative and diverse," and Whitney Scott described *Hers* as "a thought-provoking compilation worthy of nonlesbian readers' attention."

Wolverton and Drake collaborated on two further volumes of the series, *His 2* and *Hers 2* (1997) and *His 3* and *Hers 3* (1999). They were nominated for several literary prizes and won a Lambda Literary Award for *His 2*.

In reviewing *His 3* and *Hers 3* in 1999, critic Keith Banner arrived at the same conclusion that Wolverton and Drake had reached years before: "the boy-girl thing seems oddly outdated, especially in the context of the stories that often flaunt and transpose and chuckle at the gender divide." He ratified Wolverton and Drake's original intention of presenting a unified queer anthology, observing, "both books form one fabulously variegated collection."

The productive editorial partnership tragically came to an end in January 1999 when Drake was savagely beaten in Sligo, Ireland by two men who later claimed to be "the victims of a homosexual pass." The attack having left Drake in a coma, Wolverton persevered alone to complete the third collection of *His* and *Hers*, as well as two more companion volumes, *Circa 2000: Gay Fiction at the Millennium* and *Circa 2000: Lesbian Fiction at the Millennium* (both 2000), "painstakingly trying to recreate [Drake's] vision from a fragmentary set of notes and files . . . , determined to keep alive the legacy of his vision."

That vision, stated Wolverton, was "to capture the best of [gay and lesbian writing that] was being published at the turn of the new century." Critics recognized the success of these efforts. Sarah Van Arsdale noted in a review of the lesbian volume of *Circa 2000* that "[Wolverton] and Drake just may have found several stories that will last beyond our lifetimes."

The healing process was long and slow for Drake, who did eventually recover his speech, a certain degree of motor function, and his sense of humor. Because of his limited ability to walk, he has made use of a wheelchair. Since the summer of 2002 he has written a column entitled "Handicapable Like Me" for the *Philadelphia Gay News*.

His assailants were sentenced to eight years in prison in February 2000.

In addition to editing, Wolverton has authored a number of books. Her memoir, *Insurgent Muse*, not only traces her own development as an artist and a feminist but also paints a vivid and frank picture of the triumphs and conflicts of the early years of the modern lesbian and feminist movements and the ensuing challenges that have arisen. It is a valuable documentation of a pivotal time in women's history.

Wolverton's first major book of poetry, *Black Slip* (1992), was an impressive debut in the genre, earning her a place as a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. Reviewer Mary Ann Daly described the writer's voice as "an amalgam of down-to-earth and bravado," further noting that "Wolverton's work is highly personal, even confessional, without seeming self-indulgent."

Wolverton has produced two additional books of poetry, *Mystery Bruise* (1999) and *Embers: A Novel in Poetry* (2003). The latter is based upon the experiences of her often dysfunctional family. Central to the tale is Wolverton's grandmother Marie Girard, who lived a hard-scrabble life in gritty Detroit, enduring through the Great Depression, wartime, and race riots.

Girard's long struggle with mental illness kept her moving in and out of institutions, and her failed marriages created a complex--"blended" is hardly the word--family whose members had to deal with issues including betrayal, rejection, sexual orientation, and AIDS. Reviewer Jane Van Ingen commented, "Wolverton has transformed the memoir into a beautiful package. Each poem is about one person or written from one person's perspective, giving us a clear-eyed view of a large, diverse family."

Wolverton is also the author of a more traditionally structured novel, *Bailey's Beads* (1996). Throughout most of the story, the central figure, novelist Bryn, has no voice of her own because she is in a coma after a car crash. The reader must get to know her through the images of her held by the two women who love her most, her lesbian partner, Djuna, and her mother, Vera.

While united in their desire for Bryn's recovery, Djuna and Vera are otherwise at odds, vying to be the most important person in Bryn's life and presenting differing images of Bryn's identity. Although the comatose writer cannot participate in the debate over her own future, Wolverton inserts Bryn's novel *Splinters* into the major narrative to allow readers a glimpse into who she actually is. She also intersperses poems reflecting the apparently not completely unconscious Bryn's befogged attempts to understand what is happening to her and around her.

When Bryn finally emerges from the coma, she has no short-term memory and cannot recognize Djuna, a devastating blow for her lover. The novel ends with their future course unresolved but leaves space for hope.

In a 1996 interview with Owen Keehnen, Wolverton said of *Bailey's Beads*, "I wanted to talk about the post-modern notion of how identity is constructed. I think that as gays and lesbians, and this is a big generality, we're somewhat more conscious of these constructions." She hoped that readers would share her curiosity about the subject, adding, "I would like them to come away asking some questions about identity, about fiction, about how well . . . they know the people they think they know."

Wolverton works at guiding writers as well as readers to explore new ideas. She has taught creative writing for more than two decades. In 1997 she founded Writers at Work "to provide a space for writers to stretch the imagination, strengthen their craft, produce new work, fulfill their goals and build a community for their work." The program is open to all serious writers, but its statement of philosophy notes, "we have a particular interest in those individuals whose stories have not been as widely recorded in this culture: women, lesbians and gay men, and people of color."

Writers at Work is headquartered in Los Angeles, where Wolverton resides.

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www.writersatwork.com.

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