



Nestle, Joan (b. 1940)

by Linda Rapp

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Through her writing, teaching, editing, and activism, Joan Nestle has devoted her life to promoting awareness of glbtq culture and advancing glbtq equality. She is the co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, one of the largest collections of lesbians in the world. Her literary achievements have earned her numerous awards.

Early Life and Education

A posthumous child, Joan Nestle was born in New York City on May 12, 1940. Her mother, Regina Nestle, did not have an easy life as she battled alcoholism and debt. Nestle's essay about her, "Run, Regina, Run," in *A Fragile Union: New and Selected Writings* (1998) does not shrink from presenting her difficulties, but it also points out the positive aspects of her life--her wit, her appreciation of sensuality, and her love for her daughter.

After graduating from Martin Van Buren High School in Queens, New York, Nestle continued her education at Queens College in Flushing, where she earned a B.A. in English in 1963. She went on to do graduate work at New York University, receiving her M.A. in 1968 and then completing two years of doctoral studies.

Nestle returned to Queens College to teach English and creative writing. There she participated in the open-enrollment SEEK program for minority and immigrant students. It was a typical choice for Nestle, who has always been a champion of those who suffer discrimination or who have been marginalized by society.

Femme Lesbian Identity

Nestle found herself in a marginalized position when she "entered the culturally policed queer community in the 1950s" by frequenting Greenwich Village lesbian bars. Because of the oppressive laws in force at the time, the patrons of these bars were subjected to police raids and other forms of harassment. Nestle's experiences helped set her on a lifelong quest for justice, dignity, and equality for glbtq people.

In the lesbian bar scene Nestle also began exploring her identity as a femme woman. She declares in her essay "The Femme Question" in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992) that "every time I speak at a lesbian-feminist gathering, I introduce myself as a femme who came out in the 1950s. I do this because it is the truth and it allows me to pay historical homage to my lesbian time and place."

Nestle rejects the notion that femmes are in any way weak or victims. In the same essay she states, "Butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic and social statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy. In the 1950s particularly, butch-femme couples were the front-line warriors against sexual bigotry."

Roots of Activism



Joan Nestle speaking at "Midsumma, A Gay and Lesbian Community Celebration" in Melbourne, Australia in 2006. Photograph by the Moreland Council of West Brunswick, Victoria, Australia.
Courtesy www.joannestle.com.

Nestle has spent her life on the front lines in the fight against bigotry of all kinds. She was active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, traveling to the American South to take part in marches and voter registration drives.

Nestle's Jewish heritage has also contributed to her understanding of marginalization. It informs her reading of history and deepens her commitment to safeguarding the freedom of all people to enjoy their lives without interference from governments. She is wary of the idea of biological determinism, which she calls "a very dangerous argument . . . [that] has been used to rob people of their humanity."

Nestle's work has focused primarily on glbtq rights and culture. In the wake of the Stonewall rebellion of 1969, she joined the Gay Alliance Union and lobbied for the rights of gay and lesbian teachers, students, and workers.

Lesbian Herstory Archives

In 1973 a group of women from the organization formed a lesbian consciousness-raising group, one of whose projects was the collection of publications and other materials pertaining to lesbian history. The resources would become the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), one of the richest collections of lesbians in the world.

In the first LHA newsletter in 1975 Nestle and her LHA co-founder, Deborah Edel, put out a call to lesbians across the nation to donate documents and memorabilia. Contributions continue to come in to the archives, which contain an impressive array of publications, letters, recordings, and photographs documenting the lives of American lesbians. In addition, there are numerous other items including clothing, buttons with slogans, and other possessions that lesbians sent in as emblems of their culture.

The collection was initially housed in the Upper West Side Manhattan apartment that Nestle and Edel shared. In 1976 they opened it to the community so that interested people could view the collection and do research.

The archives eventually outgrew the apartment. After a three-year fundraising effort the LHA was relocated to a three-story brownstone in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, where scholars continue to mine its wealth of resources.

Writing Career

Nestle began her career as a writer in 1978, when she became so ill with an undiagnosed disease that she could not work for a year. Lesbian friends formed a writing group to support her, and she produced her first story, "Mara's Room," which became part of *A Restricted Country* (1987). The tome won the Gay/Lesbian Book Award of the American Library Association, the first of many honors that Nestle would receive for her writing and editorial skills.

Nestle has described "Mara's Room" as "an expression of rage about what was happening to my body," adding that "I used the memory of erotic moments as a way to reclaim my body that was my enemy during the throes of illness."

Choosing to write erotica, and in particular erotica that portrayed butch-femme relationships, plunged Nestle into the middle of the lesbian sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Nestle, along with other writers such as Jewelle Gomez, Pat Califia, and Dorothy Allison, was in the "sex positive" camp (or the pornographers, as their detractors called them). Their leading opponents were Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin.

Adrienne Rich was another writer holding an opposing viewpoint, and Nestle recalls that they "were often pitted against each other" at conferences in the 1980s. Nestle described her encounters with Rich as ones

"that shifted between generosity and alienation."

For many years the two women carried on a dialogue both in public and in private. Although they disagreed, Nestle declared herself "deeply impressed" by Rich's good faith in listening to opinions opposed to her own. For her part, Nestle, also showing a generous spirit, said of Rich that despite their philosophical differences, "for the risks that she has taken in this country of so-called free speech, where the disdain of the establishment can crush a writer's spirit, I will always honor her."

Nestle's writings about lesbians include the *Women on Women* series (1990, 1992, and 1996), which she co-edited. The first of these won a Lambda Literary Award, as did her anthology *The Persistent Desire* and her lesbian studies volume *A Fragile Union*.

Although much of Nestle's work has been concerned with lesbian culture, she embraces the entire queer community. She teamed with John Preston to edit *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write about Their Lives Together* (1994), another Lambda Literary Award winner.

Nestle's consideration of sexuality has led her to explore the issues raised by the transsexual and transgender movements, which, she has stated, call into question the very terms "man" and "woman." In 2002 she co-edited *GENDERQUEER: Voices from beyond the Binary*, for which she garnered yet another Lambda Literary Award. The anthology examines the topic of sexual identity and, characteristic of Nestle's projects, features the voices of a diverse group of individuals. Nestle sees the individual as a complex of identities, "a layering of selves," that combine and evolve to make a person who he or she is.

Nestle's life as a writer and activist is the subject of Joyce Warshow's 2002 documentary *Hand on the Pulse*, which has won several prizes at gay and lesbian film festivals.

Illness and Transformation

Nestle has twice been diagnosed with cancer, first in 1995 and again in 2001, and she has undergone surgery both times. As she had done at the beginning of her career, she turned to writing as a way of reclaiming her own body. Of her essay "A Feeling Comes" in *A Fragile Union* critic Jeannine DeLombard wrote, "Nestle explores the transformation of her sick-bed into a tousled bed of pleasure and back again, using her intimacy with illness to stretch the boundaries of erotica and to complicate in new ways the relationship between pleasure and pain, love and loss, body and mind."

After her second round of cancer surgery Nestle moved to Australia, where she has joined her partner, law professor Diane Otto, on the faculty at the University of Melbourne. She has stated that she has been invigorated by being back in the classroom and watching young people at once discovering history and building the future.

Living in another country has also made Nestle keenly aware of the lack of rights for glbtq people in the area of immigration laws.

Fragile Hope

Nestle's writings encompass both intensely personal experiences and the wider scope of history and public debate, with the two often intertwining. After her first episode of cancer she wrote in *A Fragile Union*, "I found this to be a time of great passion in my life, a time of increased commitments to the forging of fragile solidarities that, if of the body, may last only a night, and if of a more sweeping kind, carry me more humbly than ever into historical processes."

In the same volume she reflected, "I have experienced three sublimely beautiful things in my life, and each has been judged unacceptable by large parts of society: the taste and touch of women lovers, the wondrous

feeling of being part of a people working to free themselves, and for almost thirty years, the trust and attention of students many others did not want to teach."

She further stated, "In all these places I saw how fragile hope was and yet how tenaciously it survived in the lives of those below the gaze of national power."

Fragile hope may be, but through her bravery, candor, and generosity, Nestle has done her part to fortify it in the glbtq community.

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