

# A Different Light's Readers & Writers Conference: You're Not in Kansas Anymore!

by Carol Ramelb

**W**ith the refrain "This *is* San Francisco!", long-time residents attempt to explain the plethora of events in the Bay Area to newcomers wondering where to start. Do I test the waters with the tip of my toe, or just dive right in? A Different Light's *Third Annual Readers & Writers Conference* presented a 3-day-long literary smorgasbord from which I could gorge or nibble, resting the requisite hour before plunging in.

The conference, subtitled "A Bay Area Queer Literary Event," officially began with a performance in The Women's Building auditorium. Hmm...a performance... "a blend of theater and spoken word" the program promised... with several performers/acts/groups. Would it be total chaos or was there some secret code to separate the tourists from the residents? "This *is* San Francisco!" I reminded myself. Emcees Kris Kovick and Joan Jett-Blakk began the proceedings, offering their separate views of the current political and social scene. Ms. Kovick did the outraged but controlled comic commentary which had lost some of its edge—obvious targets like Forbes and Gramm had already become yesterday's news. Ms. Jett-Blakk segued into performance, reminding everyone she is again running for President. She, however, unlike the other candidates, chooses to

wait until the dust settles, then will offer herself up as the only real alternative to Mssrs. Clinton and Dole. She urged everyone in the crowd to write in her name on the ballot in November, spelling it however we chose. ("This *is* San Francisco!") The only plea for campaign funds, which resembled a batting of her eyelashes rather than an actual plea, came when she offered her poster for sale. When enough money becomes available for printing more posters, Ms. Jett-Blakk will be seen plastered

dealt with a young man's struggle with being HIV-positive. My strongest impression remains that of a straightforward yet powerful portrayal of life as it is lived, not as it is written. Mabel Maney and her Lake Merriman Players followed, with a performance of a radio play version of her latest takeoff on the Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys genre, "A Ghost in the Closet." The playlet works best in cozier settings than the cavernous auditorium, where the

non-aural aspects can hardly be appreciated. From my seat in the back row, I could barely make out the facial expressions of the players as they interacted on-stage. Unfortunately, because this *is* San Francisco, a previous commitment cut short the rest of the performance(s) for me.

The next day began bright and late (because this is *civilized* San Francisco) with a panel called "Queer through the Years", three separate talks on different aspects of queer history. Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, co-authors of *Gay by the Bay*, explained why they chose breadth over depth for their historical overview of queer San Francisco, and then whetted everyone's appetite with samplings of photos and accompanying commentary from the book. Elizabeth Summers spoke from a

personal and biographical point of view, recounting her family's history via the individual histories of her female relatives, one lesbian aunt in particular who was out, proud, and who refused to be pigeon-holed by society. From yet another point of view, Salvadoran Horacio Roque-Ramírez presented the problems encountered when stereotypes clash—the assumption that everyone who speaks a Spanish-influenced language will easily understand one another; that every concept in one language can be flawlessly trans-



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The actual performance(s) began with the DramaDIVAS, performers all 21 years of age or younger. One performer was a particular stand-out, a male in drag who rivaled Ms. Jett-Blakk for *lookin' good* honors. A moving segment

dealt with a young man's struggle with being HIV-positive. My strongest impression remains that of a straightforward yet powerful portrayal of life as it is lived, not as it is written. Mabel Maney and her Lake Merriman Players followed, with a performance of a radio play version of her latest takeoff on the Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys genre, "A Ghost In the Closet." The playlet works best in cozier settings than the cavernous auditorium, where the

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point of view, recounting her family's history via the individual histories of her female relatives, one lesbian aunt in particular who was out, proud, and who refused to be pigeon-holed by society. From yet another point of view, Salvadoran Horacio Roque-Ramirez presented the problems encountered when stereotypes clash—the assumption that everyone who speaks a Spanish-influenced language will easily understand one another; that every concept in one language can be flawlessly translated into any other; that everyone's goals in the queer Chicano and Latino communities are identical. One member of the panel, Trinity Ordonez, was called away to Los Angeles at the last minute and could not appear. (Among other things, I had planned to ask Ms. Ordonez where a Filipina could get a good haircut in San



Francisco. I'm still looking.)

The Women's Building overflowed from floor to ceiling with budding and bloomed writers and readers attending nine different workshops running the gamut from how-to sessions like finding an agent and writing a book proposal, to a queer studies overview, to writing of various kinds like international queer writing "cross-gendered queer porn." I zeroed in on the "Writers as Activists" panel, still seeking a feminist perspective, not having any preconception of what that might be or what the panel would present. Apparently the title of the panel was quite amorphous to several of the panelists as well, as they began by saying they didn't quite know what they were supposed to be talking about. Interesting facts and amusing anecdotes abounded. Helen Zia told about how *Ms. Magazine* contacted Maxine Hong Kingston and Alice Walker to get their perspectives during a period of racial tension between Asians and African-Americans in L.A. in 1992. According to Ms. Zia, the women's reactions were almost identical—"Is there tension? Why...that's terrible!" Eric Rofes, in response to a question from the audience, offered his list of what is necessary to avoid activist mid-life burnout: 1) a simple lifestyle, 2) 8 hours of sleep every day, and 3) a circle of good friends. In my naiveté, I expected terms to be defined before the panel began, such as what exactly qualifies as "activism," and does writing need to be defined in terms of its "purpose" before its quality can be discussed. Is the quality of the writing even an issue? Is writing meant to persuade or expose always as intellectually honest as it should be?

Readings were held throughout the afternoon, culminating on Saturday night with a Poetry Slam and a kickoff reading for the *Queer View Mirror* anthology, which features over 100 "short-short" pieces from Bay Area writers. The high quality of the pieces from the anthology was a welcome surprise; the unusually fine and nuanced readings of so many of the contributors absolutely astounded me.

The final day began with nine more workshops and three more readings. I should have made a baseline for the "Editorial Ethics" panel to ask my previous night's questions, but intellectual paralysis set in. "Moving to San Francisco" conflicted with "Editorial Ethics," followed by a panel on "mixed-blood writers...at the crossroads of gender, race/ethnicity, cul-

ture, sexual orientation, class, religion/spirituality, language and (dis)ability," followed by "Keeping Your Day Job." Reasoning that there would certainly be a Fourth Annual Conference next year, I saved my energy for the last event at the Women's Building, a panel entitled "Mainstreaming Queer Lit/Queering Mainstream Lit." The Hawaiian name of moderator Lisa Kahaleole Hall drew me. Jewelle Gomez began her talk by saying she couldn't understand how the panel could discuss the topic at hand without a white gay writer present, because white gay males have always had the most success finding mainstream publishers. The viewpoints on the question of whether or not a queer writer should publish with a small press or a large publishing house seemed to come down to the race of the panelists. Katherine Forrest and Meredith Maran, one an out lesbian and the other a writer who happens to be queer, one who began with a small press and is moving to a large publishing house and the other who has already been with a large publishing house for a long period, both spoke of the relatively large book advances they are given. Ms. Forrest, presently the best-selling lesbian author in the world, stressed that her decision to move to a large publishing house was based on her desire for more exposure for her writing. To illustrate the problems encountered by queer writers of color during discussions with representatives of large publishing houses, Jewelle Gomez said she was told something along the lines of "...if you could write like..." or "...we've already done the African-American book for the season..." She adamantly supports small presses, saying they have always been around and will continue to flourish. All participants seemed to agree that being labeled "gay" or "lesbian" was almost absolute assurance that one's book would not be reviewed in the mainstream media. Someone offered the historical footnote that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was first published by a lesbian press. I would have liked to have learned how the current love affair of large publishers with Asian fiction is helping or hurting queers of color.

Like the sandwiches offered in the lobby, there was something for everyone at the conference smorgasbord. Literary events were never this much fun in Honolulu—"This is San Francisco!" ▼