

Compelled To Write

A writer's perspective on the question 'why do we write stories of lesbian love?'

Slide 1



Hello everyone. It's lovely to see you. Thank you for you joining us this morning.

I am Anna Larner¹, author of the debut romance novel *Highland Fling*², published by Bold Strokes Books (BSB)³. *Highland Fling* is a passionate love story set in the Highlands of Scotland that reminds us that when we fall for someone on holiday we don't really know what we're getting into. *Highland Fling* is hot off the press and will be released in April - to be followed next year by my second romance novel *Love's Portrait*⁴.

I hope you will forgive the littering on your seats of my promotional postcards, or as I like to refer to it as the brazen act of 'homo promo', but it does allow, should you wish, for you to learn more about me and to keep in touch.

¹ Anna Larner details

www.annalarner.com

² *Highland Fling* details

<https://www.boldstrokesbooks.com/books/highland-fling-by-anna-larner-2143-b>

³ Bold Strokes Books

<https://www.boldstrokesbooks.com>

⁴ *Love's Portrait* details www.annalarner.com

When I'm not indulging in shameless acts of self-promotion, I am writing stories of lesbian love. But why do authors like me write stories of lesbian love? What compels us? That is the question I want to explore in the next twenty minutes.

Firstly, a quick word about this paper. It has been written solely for us today. It is not part of a larger study. I would like you to think of this paper, therefore, as a beginning of a conversation, with findings offered up more as thoughts for potential further investigation, rather than as absolute conclusions.

When I set this question back in September, I anticipated that we would be discussing the determination of authors who write stories of lesbian love to reinforce and validate lesbian identity, to promote diversity, to challenge prejudice, and to advance political debate. And whilst, as we shall see, authors are certainly mindful of this and conscious of the impact that their work has on readers, my research, however, also indicates that there is something compellingly personal, intrinsic, and inevitable at work.

Let me explain what I mean.

Slide 2



Between the 4th and the 11th February 2017 I invited published authors who write stories of lesbian love to participate in a poll⁵. The invitation was targeted to three groups. The Bold Strokes Books business list, capturing predominantly American but also international authors; the 'Lesbian Books, writers, readers' Facebook group, a closed group capturing an international audience; and Polari's public Facebook page, Polari being the London LGBT literary salon.

⁵ The Poll was hosted on www.annalerner.com

Slide 3



Compelled to Write - Why I Write Stories Of Lesbian Love...

- ☐ I am a published author who writes stories about lesbian love.
- ☐ To challenge stereotypes
- ☐ For financial reward
- ☐ To reinforce a positive lesbian identity
- ☐ To entertain others
- ☐ For exposure and fame
- ☐ To demystify lesbian love
- ☐ To promote diversity in the wider society
- ☐ To increase awareness/visibility of lesbian love in literature
- ☐ For self expression/entertainment

Other:

Pollackly.com www.annalerner.com

Here is the poll voting form. Participants were invited to vote on a selection of 9 top level possible responses to the question ‘Why I write stories of lesbian love’.

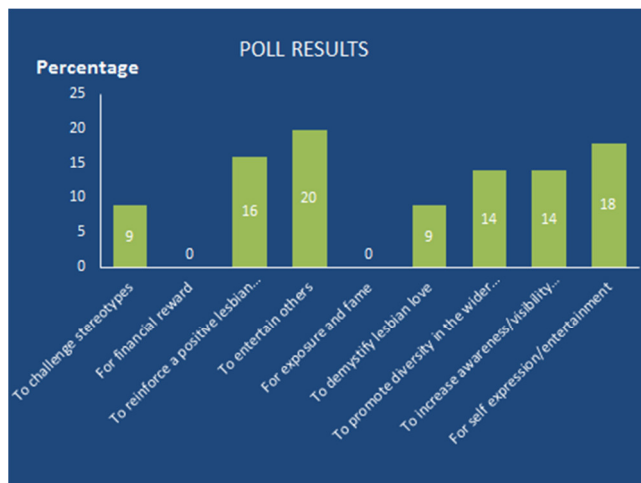
The poll was designed to be quick to complete and available on all platforms. Its purpose was to provide a ‘snapshot’ of ‘live data’, with the task of signposting the way for further analysis. It does not, for example, tease out the differing responses between published and self-published authors, or seek to establish gender, sexuality, age or nationality.

The response options given were listed in this order - to challenge stereotypes; for financial reward; to reinforce a positive lesbian identity; to entertain others; for exposure and fame; to demystify lesbian love; to promote diversity in the wider society; to increase awareness/visibility of lesbian love in literature; for self-expression/entertainment. The suggested options offered a mix of personal, social, and political motivations.

For the purposes of this paper where I refer to ‘personal’ I mean that which is particular to the individual. By ‘social’ I mean that which involves an individual’s ‘social’ self, their awareness of those with whom they have an affinity, a shared experience, rather than society at large. And by ‘political’ I mean that which refers to the external wider society, beyond the social group.

Participants could vote for none, one or as many of the responses as they wished. The poll allowed for short additional replies to be included under ‘other’. I also invited longer comments outside of the poll.

Slide 4



Let's have a look at the results.

Over the week, 13 authors completed the poll. With a small sample care must be taken as to what we deduce from it. However, a second data source, I will come to in a moment, will help us to understand what might be behind the poll results. As you can see, topping the poll with 20% of votes was the desire to entertain others, closely followed by self-expression/entertainment with 18% share of the votes.

A notable result was that no votes were recorded for financial reward or for exposure and fame. This deserves further investigation as I would be interested to understand what, if any, effect this might be having on the discoverability and impact more widely of lesbian writing.

Slide 5

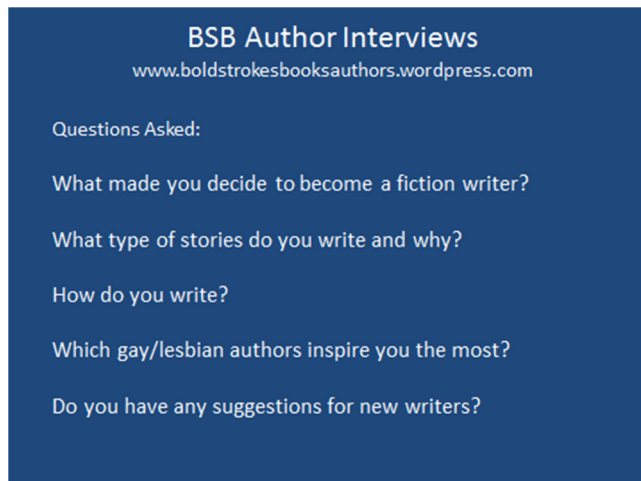
Additional Reasons Given (Other):

- Because the characters I want to write about are lesbians.
- To remind us about our past and to stress that we have a place in history too.
- To provide lesbians with positive images of lesbian romance, sex and passion.
- I remember when the only books about lesbian love were warped and twisted.
- To challenge homophobia.

5 participants left additional reasons/explanations under 'other'. These were: 'Because the characters I want to write about are lesbians;' 'To remind us about our past and to stress that we have a place in history too;' 'To provide lesbians with positive images of lesbian romance, sex, and passion;' 'I remember when the only books about lesbian love were warped and twisted;' 'To challenge homophobia.'

Here, like the response to the fixed suggestions there is a mix of personal, social, and political motivations expressed.

Slide 6



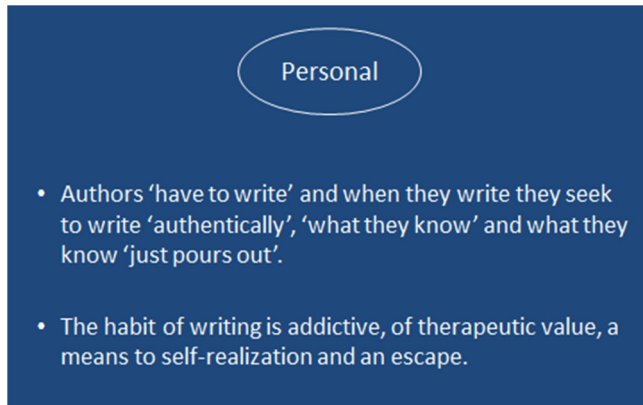
To gain a more sensitive understanding of the poll results, I turned to a second set of data provided by a series of interviews with newly signed authors conducted by Bold Strokes Books. The interviews are published on the public blogsite www.boldstrokesbooksauthors.wordpress.com.

Each author was asked the same 10 questions. Of those questions 5 were particularly pertinent for us today. What made you decide to become a fiction writer? What type of stories do you write and why? How do you write? Which gay and lesbian authors inspire you the most? Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

I selected a random sample of 20 authors who all indicated that they wrote a form of lesbian romance. On reading through these interviews, really interestingly, *all* of the authors expressed motivations which can be interpreted as ‘personal reasons’ as a compelling factor as to why they write lesbian love stories. This might explain why the category ‘for self-expression/entertainment’ scored highly in the poll.

Let’s dig a little deeper.

Slide 7



Personal

- Authors 'have to write' and when they write they seek to write 'authentically', 'what they know' and what they know 'just pours out'.
- The habit of writing is addictive, of therapeutic value, a means to self-realization and an escape.

Repeated themes in the interviews can be teased out as revealing particularly personal motivations. Let's have a look at the most compelling:

Many authors stated that they 'have to write' and when they write they seek to write 'authentically', 'what they know' and what they know 'just pours out' of them.

All authors baulked at the notion that they had 'decided' to be a writer and many stated a simple compulsion to write - they have to write.

Furthermore, a repeated piece of advice given to authors and given by authors revealed by the interviews surrounds the point to write what you know. A number of authors commented that when they wrote honestly, from the heart, their writing flowed, and was of better quality. Many authors reported that in this state of flow⁶ the stories wrote themselves, that the characters led the way, and that the author was simply the means of delivery.

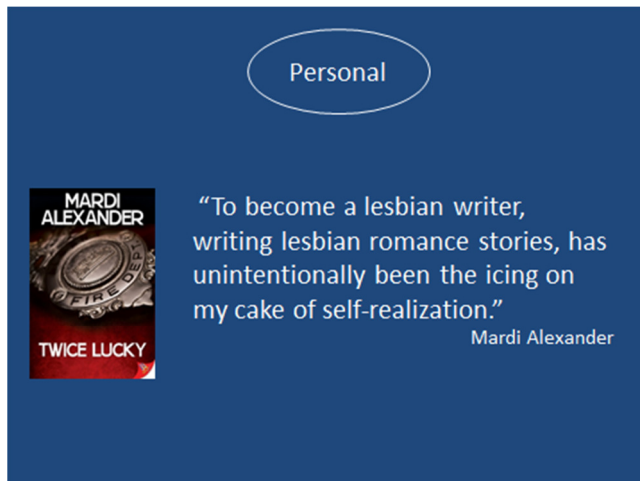
And here is perhaps the key point of the paper – if you are a lesbian woman writing a love story and you are writing from your heart you will inevitably write stories from your experience. You will write in flow about what you know. You will write stories of lesbian love. We should perhaps also add to this the notion that imagination is not a self-conscious, outward looking process, but something deeply personal.

⁶ The psychologist Csikszentmihalyi has studied 'state of flow'. Reference to his work and ideas can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihaly_Csikszentmihalyi


Another compelling personal reason for writing lesbian love stories emerging from the interviews concerns what the act of writing gives the author.

Authors comment that the habit of writing is addictive and not only that but it can be of therapeutic value, a means to self-realization, and serves as an escape.

Slide 8



Personal





"To become a lesbian writer, writing lesbian romance stories, has unintentionally been the icing on my cake of self-realization."
Mardi Alexander

Australian romance author, Mardi Alexander, comments⁷, "To standing up and embracing who I am and for writing a story about someone I would have loved to have read about when I was growing up. It was an opportunity to feel comfortable in my own skin, to be proud of who I am, my lifestyle, my choices...and that all of this can be so accepted so normal. To become a lesbian writer, writing lesbian romance stories, has unintentionally been the icing on my cake of self-realisation."

⁷ Mardi Alexander's interview can be found at <https://boldstrokesbooksauthors.wordpress.com/?s=Mardi+Alexander>

Slide 9



"There is so much pain and suffering in the real world that, when I read, I want to remove myself from all of it. I hope what I write will give readers the same escape, even if only for a few hours."

C A Popovich

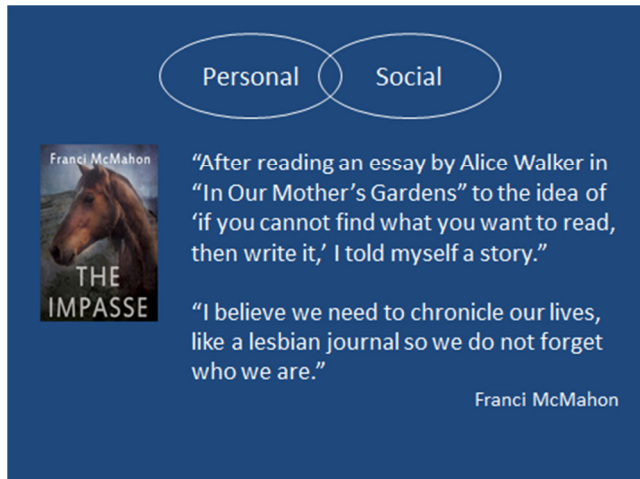
Romance author Carol Popovich explained in her interview⁸ how she valued the sense of escape writing lesbian love stories gave her. "I write romance stories with happily-ever-after endings. It's what I love to read. I'm fascinated by the chemistry between couples. What draws a woman to one particular woman? Why not to the one standing next to her? Or to her best friend? Why the one running the cash register at the grocery store? In my opinion, there is so much pain and suffering in the real world that, when I read, I want to remove myself from all of it. I hope what I write will give readers the same escape, even if only for a few hours."

Carol's explanation can be seen as a blend of personal and social considerations, and this blending is seen in a number of the interviews. This supports the findings given by the poll, where the social motivation of 'entertaining others' just pipped self-expression to score highest.

Many of the authors interviewed, like Mardi, expressed that they write what they want to read, what did not exist when they were young. This personal motivation has an important social impact, not lost on the authors.

⁸ Carol Popovich's interview can be found at <https://boldstrokesbooksauthors.wordpress.com/?s=C+A+Popovich>

Slide 10



Personal Social

Franci McMahon
THE IMPASSE

"After reading an essay by Alice Walker in 'In Our Mother's Gardens' to the idea of 'if you cannot find what you want to read, then write it,' I told myself a story."

"I believe we need to chronicle our lives, like a lesbian journal so we do not forget who we are."

Franci McMahon

Author Franci McMahon left this comment⁹ after completing the poll, and explains more.

"After reading an essay by Alice Walker in 'In Our Mother's Gardens' to the idea of 'if you cannot find what you want to read then write it'. I told myself a story. It was published in Firebrand, and then I told myself more stories. I believe we need to chronicle our lives, like a lesbian journal so we do not forget who we are."

The imperative of writing lesbian love stories to make visible that which does not exist or is invisible, or misrepresented, in the 'real world' is compelling for authors. This is supported by the poll results where to reinforce a positive lesbian identity scored highly. And it also speaks to the comment in 'other' made anonymously which drew attention to the terrible stories of the past with warped and twisted narratives.

⁹ Franci McMahon's comment can be found at www.annalerner.com

Slide 11

Personal Social

The importance of positive characters in lesbian fiction writing.

Safe HARBOR RADCLYFFE

Poppy Jenkins CLARE ASHTON

MLR MY LESBIAN RADIO

Clare Lydon interviews Clare Ashton.
The Lesbian Book Club,
hosted by My Lesbian Radio.


It was no surprise therefore to find that leading romance author Radclyffe led the way as the most inspiring LGBT author of the 59 authors mentioned in the interviews. Both readers and authors are drawn to Radclyffe's depiction of strong, capable lesbians. For example, in *Safe Harbour*, the main characters falling in love are the town's heroes - the fearless police officer and a life-saving doctor.

The importance of a positive portrayal of lesbian sexuality for readers cannot be overstated. Let's step away from the BSB author interviews for a moment and focus on author Clare Ashton's latest novel *Poppy Jenkins*, a lesbian rom com, if you will, set in Wales where she grew up. When Clare set out to write *Poppy Jenkins* she had thought originally that she would write something darker but that in the end she didn't have the 'heart for it', and instead told a love story from the point of view of the positive, well-adjusted, Poppy. In an interview with fellow romance author Clare Lydon¹⁰ here is what Clare Ashton said about her approach to writing *Poppy Jenkins*.

[To play clip embedded in slide 11 go to [https://www.clarelydon.co.uk/category/audio/the-lesbian-bookclub-podcast/ Clare Ashton 12.58-14.48](https://www.clarelydon.co.uk/category/audio/the-lesbian-bookclub-podcast/Clare%20Ashton%2012.58-14.48)].

¹⁰ The Clare Ashton interview with Clare Lydon features in The Lesbian Book Club, hosted by My Lesbian Radio.com and can be found at <https://www.clarelydon.co.uk/category/audio/the-lesbian-bookclub-podcast/>

Slide 12



Shira Glassman

Book Review of
Poppy Jenkins

"A woman's sexual—not just romantic but sexual—attraction to another woman is depicted as innocent and wholesome. Do you have any idea how fucking healing that is?"

"I can say right here and now that if I'd have had a book like this to read when I was a teenager I would have grown up happier and felt way more validated."

Shira Glassman

When asking for Clare's permission to use that clip, she drew my attention to the following review by Shira Glassman¹¹:

"Poppy may as well be a 21st century Anne of Green Gables or other costume drama small-town girl, full of buoyancy and enthusiasm, as well as love for her village and its people. But by making her this, the author doesn't rob her of her sexuality, and that's what makes this so wonderful. *A woman's sexual – not just romantic but sexual – attraction to another woman is depicted as innocent and wholesome.* Do you have any idea how fucking *healing* that is? For Poppy to come back from college to her village with a couple of ex-girlfriends' worth of experience under her belt and still be covered all over with the tinsel of "this character is An Innocent" is revolutionary...I can say right here and now that if I'd have had a book like this to read when I was a teenager I would have grown up happier and felt way more validated."

¹¹ Shira Glassman's review can be found at <https://shiraglassman.wordpress.com/2016/09/>

Slide 13



 "I would certainly not define myself – ever – in the terms of my oppressor."
Rita Mae Brown, Washington Post, May 2015

 Dedicated "For all of us."
Annie On My Mind
Nancy Garden, 1938 -2014

History has shown us that those works regarded as pivotal in their expression of LGBT experience, have a tendency to become political symbols, whether or not this is overtly intended by its authors. It does not escape an author that the moment they publish their work the meaning of the work automatically belongs to the reader, to the audience, and is interpreted within the context of the time of both reading and writing.

For example, Rita Mae Brown causes confusion when she attempts to explain that her pivotal 1973 novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* was written without intent to promote the LGBT cause specifically. In an interview with Barnes and Noble¹², Rita said, “When I write, things just pop up, I expect every writer falls back on experience and observation to some extent, but can’t untangle the web.” We know from this paper that this is entirely valid. Rita sees all labels of LGBT as oppressive, given to the LGBT community by their oppressors¹³. Rita observes, “Your sexuality is the least interesting thing about you or me.” The heroine of *Rubyfruit* Molly Bolt is loved by readers for her positive, unapologetic approach to her sexuality. We see Molly as an LGBT role model, Rita would rather we see her as figure promoting the notion of individual freedom more broadly¹⁴.

¹² Rita Mae Brown’s interview with Barnes and Noble can be found at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/teen/your-sexuality-is-the-least-interesting-thing-about-you-rita-mae-brown-on-the-eve-of-rubyfruit-jungles-rerelease/>

¹³ Rita Mae Brown’s interview with the Washington Post can be found at https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/rita-mae-brown-awarded-as-pioneer-of-lesbian-literature-scoffs-at-the-term/2015/05/30/60169a62-00a5-11e5-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html?utm_term=.13d6ea1739bc

¹⁴ Rita Mae Brown’s reference to ‘freedom’ as the goal can be found at <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/find-your-next-read/extracts/2016/jun/rita-mae-brown-introduces-a-new-edition-of-rubyfruit-jungle/>

The notion of individual freedom is picked up by Nancy Garden in her much loved Young Adult novel, *Annie on My Mind*. Written in 1982, Annie tells the story of two New York teenagers Annie and Liza falling in love and negotiating the varied reactions of an adult world. Nancy set out to write *Annie on My Mind* to provide young adults with positive lesbian figures, with hope, and an affirming message¹⁵. “Don’t let ignorance win. Let love¹⁶.”

Nancy defended *Annie on My Mind* in court when in 1995 a Johnson County, Kansas school district ordered *Annie* to be removed because it contained gay and lesbian themes¹⁷. When *Annie on My Mind* won in the federal court, we all won. The dedication page of *Annie on My Mind* reads “For all of us”. A social motivation became a political milestone.

Authors understand the political importance of writing lesbian love stories and this is revealed in the poll results where to promote diversity in wider society scores highly.

¹⁵ In a 2007 interview with Kathleen Horning, of the Cooperative Children’s Book Centre, University of Wisconsin, Nancy stated that the motivation to write *Annie on My Mind* came from, “my desire to tell the truth about gay people - that we’re not sick or evil; that we can and do fall in love and lead happy, healthy, productive lives.” p247, A Conversation with Nancy Garden, interview with Kathleen Horning, *Annie on My Mind*, 2007 Edition, FSG

¹⁶ “Don’t let ignorance win...let love.”p232, *Annie on My Mind*, 2007 Edition, FSG

¹⁷ Gene Balloun, <http://jcfaf.org/in-memory-of-nancy-garden/#ALSC>

Slide 14

So...why do we write stories of lesbian love?

- Authors write for personal and social motivations and, even if without overtly intending, with political effect.
- Personal motivations are particularly compelling. Authors write because it is intrinsic not only to them as individuals but to the creative process.
- Authors care about their readers, they want them to experience the consolation that writing has given them.

So...we do we write stories of lesbian love?

The 'live data' poll and the author interviews have shown us that authors write lesbian love stories for personal and social motivations, and, even if without overtly intending, with political effect.

Personal motivations are particularly compelling. Authors write because it is intrinsic not only to them as individuals but to the creative process. They write what they want to read, to see their lives validated in fiction, when they cannot see themselves in the real world.

Authors are aware as they write of the impact of their work, so much so they give it as a leading reason for writing. Authors care about their readers; they want them to experience the consolation that writing has given them.

Slide 15

[To play the video clip embedded in slide 15 go to <https://www.facebook.com/LoveBTCFilm/videos/1143735979042413/>].

I leave the final words of this paper to romance author and LGBT publisher Radclyffe, who explains that for author and reader alike lesbian fiction quite simply offers hope. Here Radclyffe is speaking as part of the documentary on romance writing called Love Between The Covers, written, directed and produced by Laurie Kahn.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to hearing your thoughts.