

Queer Classics

“My Sister’s Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles”

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

Jane Bowles (1917-1973) was a queer writer in every sense of the word. Though married to the writer and composer Paul Bowles, she, like he, explored same-sex relationships on and off the page. Known for her fiendish and self-deprecating wit, she sometimes called herself “Crippie the Kike Dyke,” referring to her lame leg, her Jewishness and her lesbianism.

Her lifetime’s work, collected in a single volume titled *My Sister’s Hand in Mine*, is queer not so much for its content but for its defiance of convention. Her sensibility skews the world and hands it back to the reader afresh. I think of her writing as a tiny, strange delicacy, one you either can’t get enough of or will find unsuited to your taste buds. Perhaps because she could never be considered mainstream, she’s been described as a “writer’s writer’s writer.” But, odd as her work is, it’s never inaccessible or pretentious.

When seeking language that will delight me through any kind of mental weather, I turn first to Jane Bowles. Maybe it’s because her sentences teeter magically between tragedy and farce? Take this one from her most famous work, *Two Serious Ladies*: “Miss Goering felt as uneasy as one can feel listening to parade music in a quiet room.” While I can’t say I’ve actually listened to parade music in a quiet room, I sure do

know that feeling. Just as I know the contradictory impulse described in this sentence: “She was torn between an almost overwhelming desire to bolt out of the room and a sickening compulsion to remain where she was.” Bowles’s characters are walking paradoxes, never quite at peace with what the “normal” world is dealing them.

After her marriage to Paul Bowles, Jane spent most of her adult life in Tangier. Their circle of friends and lovers included other expatriate artists, as well as Moroccan natives. Bowles’s longest extramarital affair was with a Moroccan woman named Cherifa, a “wild girl” uniformly despised and feared by everyone around Jane. Though writing never came easily to Jane — she said she hated it but was interested in nothing else aside from the people she loved, it became nearly impossible after a series of strokes beginning when she was forty. Some believed that Cherifa had poisoned her.

The last five years of her life were

spent in psychiatric hospitals in Spain. Though Paul Bowles continued to be productive after Jane’s death, it was said much of his writerly inspiration died with her.

Because Bowles’s output was so limited, it’s possible to read her entire oeuvre in a couple of days. It’s an oeuvre that deserves repeated readings, however, particularly the novel, *Two Serious Ladies*, and the spookily hilarious story, *Camp Cataract*, which features “a stocky blond waitress” named Beryl whose “dogged attachment” to the oblivious Harriet should resonate with anyone prone to awkward, unrequited crushes.

Delineating plot in Bowles’s work is pointless. The one given is that on every page you will be surprised. Bowles herself said she never knew what was going to happen next in her writing, that it was “as if the reader and I were finding out together.” Or, as one of the characters in, *Two Serious Ladies*, says: “What makes me happy I seem to

catch out of the sky with both hands; I only hold whatever it is that I love because that is all I can really see.” Reading Bowles is indeed like holding your hands up to the sky and catching the queerly unexpected.

Further Reading:

The Dream at the End of the World: Paul Bowles and the Literary Renegades in Tangier
by Michelle Green.

A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles
by Millicent Dillon.

Quotable Jane Bowles:

“Oh, I think this is terribly, terribly gay,” said Miss Goering. “This rainbow and this sunset and all these people jabbering away like magpies. Don’t you think it’s gay?”

“My cousin used to tell me how queer you were. I think, though, that you can make friends more quickly with queer people. Or else you don’t make friends with them at all — one way or the other.”

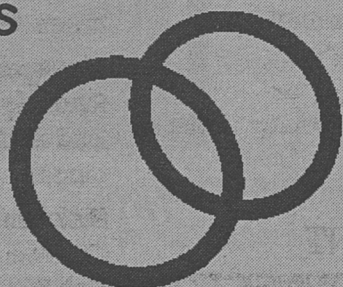


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