

The Amazon Trail: The Quietest Heroes

When I was a tiny dyke, a pre-schooler in pre-butch gear – snowsuits and leggings in winter and short pants in summer – I'd remove my cowboy hat long enough to gallop to the library with my mother. To this day I have an abiding fondness for butch gear and galloping to the library.

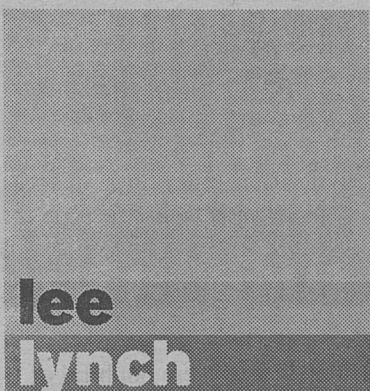
Some of my earliest memories are of the old stone library in my hometown. Cathedral-like, instead of a second story there were high ceilings with balconies around the main circulation room. The balconies, nooks, and bay windows offered by this sanctuary were way better than the theme parks of today – the imagining hadn't already been done for me.

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One of the nooks opened to the children's library. The room seemed huge to me, filled with books and books and books – and tables and chairs my size. Soon my mother learned that I'd stay put, transfixed, while she climbed up the wide lovely stairs to the main floor. I can't remember the day I got my first library card, but I know it was the proudest moment of my little life.

When I started school and discovered that there was a school library, well, would these riches never end? I can recall with clarity every library I've patronized, and certain highlights come back: walking to the library almost daily the summer I read all the Doctor Doolittle books; making my first purchase at a sale in the junior high school library (I still have it); checking out my first book in the adult section, Charles Lindbergh's *We* and finding *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes.

I imagine that I picked



up *Nightwood* because the title sounded variant. By that time I'd come out and was hungry for more books about my secret kind. I lurked in the criminology and sociology sections, reading about deviants like me. I was excited to find any words about lesbians and was learning at the library that not everything adults thought was true.

It never occurred to me to wonder who had put *Nightwood* on the shelf. Never did I imagine that a librarian might be gay. My first hint didn't come until I was in my twenties and learned that the editor of *The Ladder* was partnered with a librarian. I was so impressed. They kept cropping up in my life, these gay book people, and I continued to be awed by their sacred duty. They were guarding my treasured books, weren't they? I even tried to join their ranks by taking a couple of library science courses, but this was too much like entering a world of inscrutable mystery – I didn't have a vocation for it and had to accept that I would always be a wannabe librarian.

Then I started writing books, but they were queer books. I knew no library would buy them. I can remember my shock and disbelief when a publisher sent me a review of one of my books which had been written by an actual librarian. This was truly the big time.

At Women's Studies conferences, I got to meet lesbian librarians. I did my best to act like it was no big deal to hang out with them, but I was a tongue-tied, hero-worshipping fool, impressed by them and impressed that I was in their company. These were people who got to spend their days among books and had devoted their lives to the care and distribution of holy texts.

Then I found out that the Oregon State Library had my books. I was astounded: my work in a library? So baby dykes like I had been could find – Ohmygawd – my books in a library!? One year a state

librarian invited me and my books to their annual conference. Everywhere I looked were librarians. And here I was, just a queer writer, like I belonged there. But that was the point, I did belong there.

I started, shyly, getting involved with my local library. The right wingers in town were trying to control what went on the shelves and the library director was under siege. I became aware that every September, Banned Books Week is celebrated across the country with posters, events, displays and buttons. I learned that many of the librarians I met were also civil liberties activists.

I saw how library collections are a litmus test for the assaults caused by political repression and how librarians are among the first, if not the first, to resist erosion of intellectual rights. Without fanfare, they held the line when Oregon, for example, was threatened by the anti-gay ballot measures which would have removed books like mine from public libraries. They are holding the line right now against the incursion of the federal government, in the form of the Patriot Act, into library user privacy (www.ala.org/washoff/Patriotres).

Librarians are a lot more than retiring bookworms. Many are and always have been activists. They go about their business quietly and with a solemnity that befits champions of American freedom. They do it so little kids in butch gear – or not – can gallop to the sanctuary of a library in search of themselves. ▼

Lee Lynch is the author of eleven books including The Swashbuckler and the Morton River Valley Trilogy. She lives on the Oregon Coast and comes from a New England family.

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