

Events

Writers Gather at 2nd Annual OutWrite Convention

by Guy Kettelhack

Imagine over 2,000 lesbian and gay poets, playwrights, novelists, essayists, biographers, journalists and self-help book writers in one place for three days and you might imagine formidable chaos. In fact, the second annual OutWrite Conference, held at Cathedral Hall Hotel in San Francisco on March 2, 3, and 4, was, despite its size (with 55 panels and 263 panelists), remarkably harmonious. It was the first writers' conference I've been to that actually seemed helpful — even kind — to writers.

I'm not a big fan of most writers' conferences; in my experience what they mostly succeed at is intimidating writers. Writers generally do their work in solitude, and conferences are terribly public. Our all-too-assailable egos regularly swing from grandiosity to self-loathing; never do these swings seem more pronounced than when we are in each other's company.

Writers also are not, by and large, thrilling public speakers. We may sometimes succeed in getting the right dramatic truthful effect on the page, but we're rarely

Maggie Smith on the podium. The average writers' conference can seem like an organized nervous breakdown.

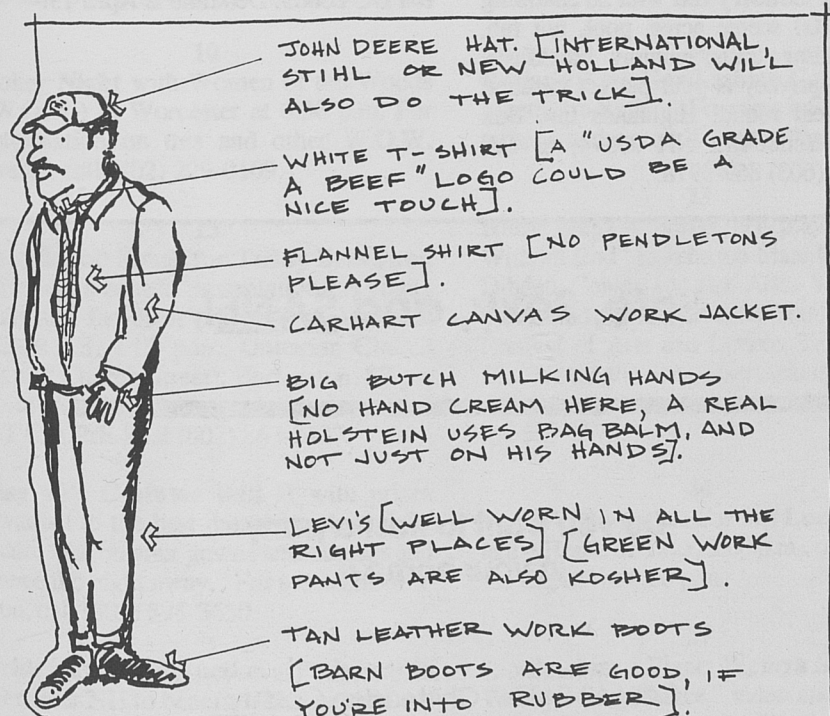
But, amazingly, OutWrite '91 wasn't like that at all. It was phenomenal that people from so many different backgrounds with so many different agendas could create the climate of warmth and genuine helpfulness I felt in every panel discussion I attended.

Not that there wasn't "sturm und drang." Paul Monette (author of *Borrowed Time*) spoke angrily and movingly about ongoing, appalling blindness and bigotry fueling the AIDS plague; JoAnn Loulan (author of *The Lesbian Erotic Dance; Butch Femme Androgyny, and Other Rhythms*) had every human being in the room re-examining what it means to have the sexual fantasies and "archetypes" we do; the prism was turned on Chicano, Native American, Jewish, and other ethnic minority gay and Lesbian writing in ways that made us question what we all were writing and reading. Expectations and assumptions were held up to new light, yet an

overriding feeling of encouragement colored criticism: our fragile egos were safe.

Kate Millett, Edward Albee, Paula Gunn Allen and John Rechy gave keynote speeches. Unfortunately (some people told me fortunately), I missed that marathon — Albee came in for loud booing for his insistence that there was no such thing as a "gay writer" (the San Francisco press made the conference seem as if it were a tribute to Albee — latching onto his Pulitzer rep and name recognition, which was unfortunate). But the point and soul of the conference lay in its panels and the discussions they engendered. It was extraordinary to see such general caregiving and caretaking. My sense of myself as a "gay writer" (yes, Mr. Albee, there is such a thing), my sense of lesbian writers and lesbian issues, my understanding of a whole range of minorities even within the larger minority we call "gay" all expanded — and many of my assumptions got profitably kicked in the butt.

But it didn't hurt. The impossible happened: this was a loving writers' conference. I very much hope to go to the next one.

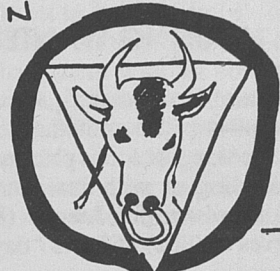


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