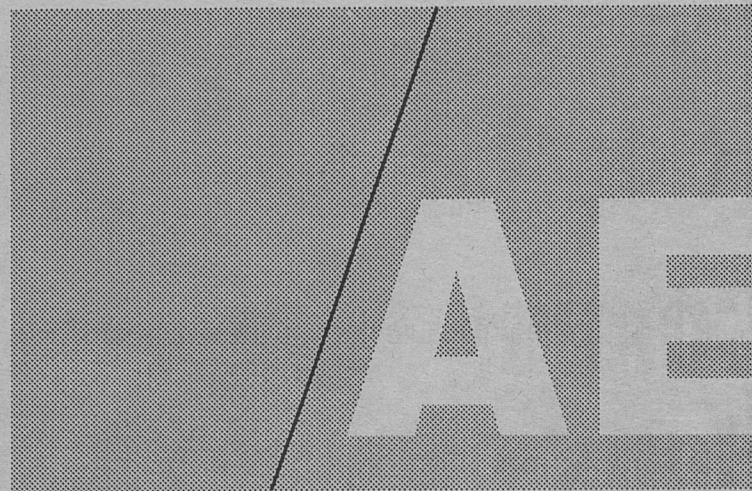
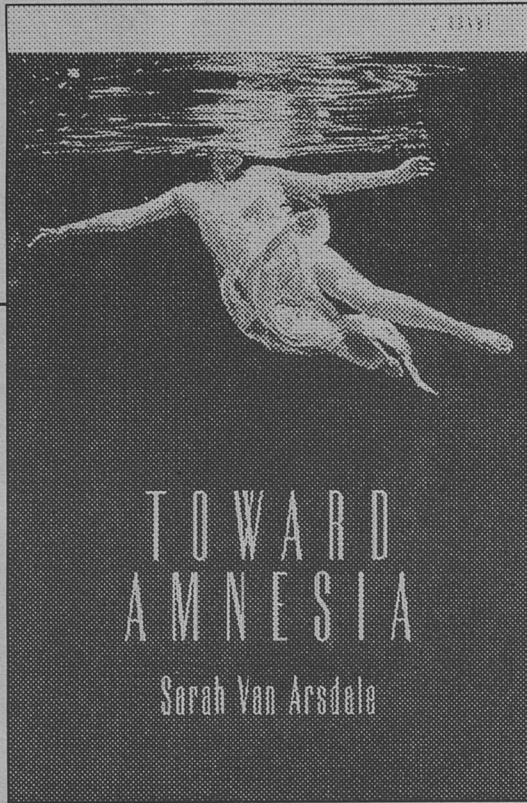


Poetry, Fiction, and Science Meet in

SARAH VAN ARSDALE



BY KATHY RESMER

If you're looking for a copy of Sarah Van Arsdale's book, *Toward Amnesia*, don't go to one of the big chains. Van Arsdale, Adjunct Professor of English at the University of Vermont, suggests that you try independent stores.

"Actually, they have one copy at Borders, but they had it in the lesbian fiction section," she says from a chair at the desk in her sparsely decorated UVM office. "I said, 'don't you think this belongs with the regular fiction?' So they switched it, but it was a hassle."

Van Arsdale seems a bit exasperated, caught in a familiar complaint. For though the main character of her book is a lesbian, there is no mention of the L-word on the book jacket. "I had them take it off," she says of Riverhead, her publisher. Instead, we're told that the protagonist's journey through loss and grief begins when she "is left by her lover and best friend of five years." We soon discover, of course, that her ex-lover is a woman. "Unless you're a blockhead, you figure it out," says Van Arsdale.

But though it is a novel with lesbian characters, it is not a novel about being a lesbian. "The subject is a lesbian," she says, "but her lesbianism is secondary, even tertiary, to the theme of the book." By making homophobia and conflict over sexuality virtually invisible in the book, Van Arsdale makes "Toward Amnesia" quietly subversive. Consequently, says Van Arsdale, "You've got a woman who goes into a book store in the South and buys the book, maybe not knowing that it's about lesbians. I've had straight people come up to me and say, 'I could relate to this' — they didn't know they could relate to a lesbian character, but they did. That, to me, is

effecting change."

This is not to say that Van Arsdale is hiding anything. She stood in front of hundreds of students at the University of Vermont's National Coming Out Week Speak Out and read Mark Doty's poem, "Charlie Howard's Descent," about a gay man killed in Maine.

Later that evening she had a reading of her own, part of the National Coming Out Week schedule of events, where she read an excerpt from "Toward Amnesia" as well as an essay and some of her poems.

In fact, although her novel has brought her recognition, garnering reviews in the *New York Times*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Van Arsdale considers herself a poet.

Before coming to UVM, she received a B.A. in English from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and an M.F.A. in poetry from Vermont College. She came here from San Francisco, where she spent a few years working as a secretary and focusing on her writing.

So how did this poet become a novelist? "I was in a writer's group when I lived in Northampton, and I think, in part, being in that group showed me that it was possible to write fiction. I started writing vignettes. Somebody said, 'Those are all in the same voice,' so I put them together."

Van Arsdale describes the formation of the book using an analogy from the Old Testament, in the Book of Ezekiel: "There's this passage about the valley of bones. There are all these bones of

different skeletons in the valley. God breathes on them, and the bones get up and become rearticulated. That's the novel — all these bones have become an articulate, breathing entity."

In addition to her novels (she's shopping a second to publishers and is two-thirds of the way through a third), she's currently working on a collection of essays about "different parts and systems of the human body, the location of the soul, and Judaism." This book project focuses more on what she calls her "second love," science. "Working in poetry and fiction pulls me away from that," she says, "and the essays allow me to pursue it."

Poetry and science seem to be almost antithetical, but Van Arsdale sees at least three connections between the two — "not getting paid for what you do, being forced to pursue it on your own, and coming up with a hypothesis and seeing if it works. In science, you might change the chemical balance. In poetry, you change the line breaks."

The language and imagery in a sentence on the first page of her novel illustrate the way she combines her three worlds — prose, poetry and science. "We were astonished that morning first to hear, and then to see, a huge living moose rise from the depths, all fur and

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rack and legs, dripping water and reeds like some prehistoric therapid."

She often incorporates scientific terms in her poetry, as well.

In "Molecular Diffusion in the AIDS Ward" she speaks of "scent molecules...freighting the sky with Canada lily / kiting up toward equilibrium." In her poem "for Matthew Shepard," she speaks of the "dark fan of mesentary unfolding at last," and asks, "did you hear a whistling / in the lumen of your veins?"

Perhaps the most striking piece she read that evening was the descriptive "At The Pierre Bonnard Exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art." "A woman in a bath, / light fracturing around her, her body / floating in the glaucous water

... I know how that is. I could tell you / all about women and baths, the curving / line of the throat, the long whistle / of the water, the breast, the soap. / How, in bath water, a woman's body dissolves, / water erasing the outlines of flank and thigh and rib / ... I could tell you how I've wept in bathroom doorways / while a woman bathed, not listening, / anger and steam condensing between us, / how I've heard a woman in a bath laugh, saying, / "tell me a story" ...

Oddly enough, these highly sensuous lines are framed by Van Arsdale's descriptions of the man she identifies as the one "whose smokey scent I've woken with." In the first stanza, Van Arsdale comments on the women in the paintings who are "passing / through a room of complicated light." Indeed, the poet is herself enacting this motion; she recently began dating a man, after having identified as lesbian for most of her adult life.

She was nervous, she says, before the UVM reading. She read an essay in which she writes about identifying, not as lesbian or bisexual, but as "queer," a term that is not gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, but means all of the above. But then, she says, "I realized I didn't have anything to fear from this audience. There are people out there who will persecute you for being queer, but in the queer community, it's a whole different thing. They may disagree with the things I say, but they will never persecute me the way that straight people might."

She stops and smiles. After all, she says, "I walked into the room and thought, 'these are my people.'"

Sarah Van Arsdale will read at the Rhombus Gallery on Wednesday, November 11 at 8pm. See the calendar listing for details.

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