

# books

## Conferences Are Murder by Val McDermid Spinsters Ink \$12.00

REVIEWED BY MICKEY CARTER

**M**y expectation on picking up this book was that it would be yet another lesbian detective novel with murder as a backdrop for a steamy erotic relationship between the detective and the survivor or suspect. I was not ready for an intricate, realistic plot with well-developed male, female, right-wing, and left-wing characters.

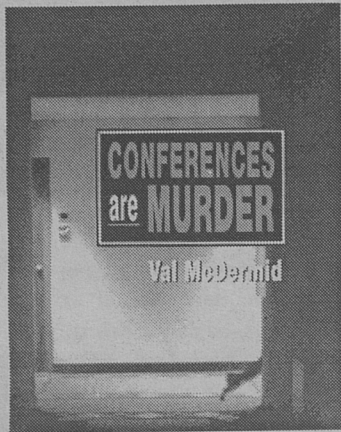
What a pleasant surprise! For once, it's almost incidental that the central character, UK journalist Lindsay Gordon, is a lesbian. The turns of plot and subplot catch and hold your interest while you find your footing in the unfamiliar cultural landscapes of Glasgow and Sheffield.

With flashbacks, foreshadowing, and daydreams, McDermid puts the reader immediately into the unsettled frame of mind that assails Lindsay in the wake of the deaths of her lover, Frances, and one of her colleagues. We are swirled in confusion again when Lindsay is questioned as a suspect in the murder of her adversary Tom "Union" Jack. This trauma is woven with union politics, media jargon, and the intrigue of "who's screwing whom" during two national Journalistic Union conferences set nine years apart.

With the help of her partner, Sophie, Lindsay travels to union headquarters and the site of the first conference, looking for evidence to prove her innocence. She uncovers a twisted trail of blackmail and corruption, leading her to all manner of unexpected conclusions.

In addition, the story offers an underground tell-all newsletter, harassment, flirtation, closet cases, and homophobia, none of which gets tied into a neat little bow at the end.

This work is tremendously well-crafted and well-researched, opening a window into the business of media in the UK that most of us never knew existed. It is definitely a book I will read again. ▼



## Witness by Dann Hazel

REVIEWED BY MAX STROUD

The night before Thanksgiving, I sat in a pew in a black Baptist church in Philadelphia and listened as the congregation was called to witness.

For close to an hour, I was captivated by the ways people shared in the spoken word and in song stories of thankfulness.

It's often struck me – not without a touch of irony – how similar the Christian tradition of witnessing and the GLBT community's tradition of coming out are. I've attended more than one speakout where the tone of the speakers sharing details of coming out has brought me back to the days of church camp, when I listened to passionate tales of salvation by the light of the campfire. Sharing our stories plays an important role in the way we make meaning out of this world we inhabit – and in how we come to share that meaning-making with others.

In his recently released *Witness*, Dann Hazel combines these traditions from the religious and GLBT communities to explore the often tenuous ground inhabited by gays and lesbians who find themselves called to the Christian ministry.

The book begins with a meandering and chaotic look at the spectrum of religious and political issues that intersect with the lives of GLBT clergy in mainstream America. It offers a cursory introduction to biblical interpretations, the role of the religious right in shaping mainstream opinions, social justice issues faced by the GLBT community, and the degrees of acceptance and discrimination found in the official doctrines of various American denominations.

While Hazel's attempt to encapsulate these issues into a cohesive overview in the first 30 pages is cumbersome and confusing at times,

the witnessing that comes after it is well worth the initial wading through the first chapter.

Hazel interviewed a number of gay and lesbian clergy who inhabit a range of positions in relation to the church, from a completely closeted Catholic priest to an openly lesbian minister in the Metropolitan Community Church.

Within this spectrum, Hazel interviews clergy forced into "exile" from their denominations due to their refusal to remain silent or celibate, as well as those who choose to remain within the church and do what they can from the pulpit while hiding or denying themselves a social life.

The stories of the men and women interviewed in the book – including those of partners Christine Leslie and Martha Dyson of Burlington, VT – are a testament to their ongoing faith in a loving God and willingness to pursue a spiritual life in an unwelcoming, if not hostile, church environment. The tales of their spiritual journeys are interwoven with their coming out stories, creating a tapestry of struggle, affirmation, and personal acceptance bound together by a deep and abiding belief in love.

Even as these stories are inspiring, there are also voices missing. There is no mention in the book of race or class, but it appears to represent white, middle-class, gay and lesbian clergy. How do these experiences differ from that of a young gay black man with a dream of ordination? Do church organizations deal less tactfully with bisexual or transgender clergy? What is it like for a lesbian Korean to serve her congregation?

Witnessing is powerful because it relates an aspect of the human experience in a way that invites listeners to share in that story, to be affected by it, to begin to understand it. This is the power of *Witness*. ▼

## Bardo By Krandall Kraus Alyson Publications \$12.95

REVIEWED BY ERNIE MCLEOD

**K**randall Kraus's admirably ambitious new novel, *Bardo*, is probably not for readers who require a straightforward narrative or tight plot-line. Kraus casts conventional storytelling aside in favor of an existential and elliptical look at the range of possibilities within an individual life at the moment of death. Yet in spite of its philosophical intentions and the sometimes abstract nature of its prose, *Bardo* offers a world the average reader can easily enter: it's a complex, contrived novel with a simple, uncontrived heart.

The term 'bardo,' as the author explains in the novel's foreword, refers to the Tibetan Buddhist belief in an "in between place," the state in which one thing ends and another begins. *Bardo* is so brief it "virtually transcends time and space," and has "a quality of uncertainty, even paranoia."

The foreword outlines the challenge Kraus has set for himself and warns the reader that what is about to unfold takes place in a fraction of an instant – and a less than fully coherent instant at that.

The bardo concept provides

not only the novel's philosophical core, but also a handy structural gimmick giving the author great latitude to wander – back and forth in time, between that which seems real and that which seems fantastic or dreamlike, between what was and what might have been. It's a gimmick Kraus cleverly uses to meld several different types of narratives into one; the reader, meanwhile, is left to pull a whole life from the fragments the author has scattered around him. This task could be "challenging" (as the press release optimistically hopes) or irritating, depending on the reader's point of view.

I must admit I dipped skeptically into *Bardo*. I'm leery of literary gimmicks, particularly ones with a philosophical bent. How easily the philosophical slides into pretension; how swiftly the author's challenge becomes the reader's nightmare! The New-Agey Buddhist cover art wasn't particularly reassuring.

I was pleased, then, to discover that though Kraus sprinkles Buddhist musings

throughout the novel, his spiritual touch is relatively light, allowing the reader to remain grounded amid the shifting sands of reality and time. And for all of the novel's experimentation in form, Kraus is, by and large, a clean, direct writer.

The essential story is that EG, who, on July 2 at 10:19:59:58:28 A.M., lies in a White Room on his deathbed. From here, Kraus zigzags through pivotal moments in EG's life, focussing repeatedly on certain scenes – a boy getting into bed naked with his father, a slimmed-down Catholic college student confronting and seducing his childhood tormentor, an old woman in a nightgown peeling an apple with a scythe, a man tumbling beautifully to his death. Each time the scene appears from a slightly, or sometimes radically, different viewpoint.

Complicating matters is the inevitable impression that EG is not one character but many: a San Franciscan AIDS veteran tending a dying lover and seeking solace with his dog in a

place called Anchor Bay; an aging Hollywood actor pining for his glamorous past and attempting one last seduction; a brutal leader of a gay paramilitary unit seeking sadistic revenge on "Breeders"; a man in Houston with a fiancée and a dying mother; a disabled young man in love with his abusive attendant.

As if that weren't enough, early incarnations of (presumably) EG crop up as the innocent yet sexually curious child called "The Boy," and as the overweight but clever Catholic adolescent called "AD." In some scenes, The Boy communicates with the adult EG, acting as a sort of inner child simultaneously needing and offering affection. The Boy helping EG rediscover innocence in desire, EG helping The Boy discover desire in innocence.

To Kraus's credit, describing *Bardo* is more complicated than reading it. Though, ultimately, the author puts more balls up in the air than one book can handle without a few of them landing with a thud, surrendering to *Bardo* is not the onerous feat it could have been. I rarely suspected Kraus was playing literary tricks just for the sake of it. Rather, I had the sense the author himself has faced mortality – his acknowledgments include a doctor "who kept me alive long enough to write this" – and felt certain this was his best method for describing a moment we might contemplate but can only experience when it's too late to be articulate.

The overtly psychological/philosophical portions of the novel dip into clichéd jargon – which Kraus amusingly acknowledges in the occasion-

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