

## Barbara Grier (1933- ): Climbing the Ladder

Victoria A. Brownworth



She's taller, more zaftig, and has never worn anything by Chanel, yet Barbara Grier and legendary chanteuse Edith Piaf share something intrinsic. Piaf's signature song, "Je ne regrette riens," is also Grier's. "I absolutely have no regrets. I've had a wonderful time," exults Grier about her life. The American lesbian icon who edited the pathbreaking lesbian magazine, *The Ladder*, collected one of the world's largest compendia of lesbian literature, and co-founded the world's largest lesbian publisher, Naiad Press, while also finding true love along the way, has enjoyed her life immensely and reaped the benefits of her achievements.

Barbara Grier—whose noms de plume under which she penned her lavender prose for lesbian publications over the years include Gene Damon, Vern Niven, and Lennox Strang—is closing in on the seventh decade of a remarkable and iconoclastic life. Born at Doctors Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 4, 1933, under the sign of Scorpio (which those who follow astrology would say explains her passionate and driven nature) and into an eccentric, theatrical family to an actress mother, feminist before her time, and a womanizing father who divested himself of a career as a small-town doctor to travel as a medical detail man, Grier's eclectic familial history includes James Jesse Strang, leader of a Mormon sect that split from Brigham Young and Joseph Smith in the mid-nineteenth century.

The eldest of three girls, Grier had two half-brothers, twelve and ten years her senior, William and Brewster (named for William Brewster, first governor of Massachusetts). Her sister, Diane, five years and eight months Grier's junior, is also a lesbian. Diane and her partner, Geyne Kent, have

been together thirty-nine years. Grier's sister, Penelope, younger by a decade, is married with a grown child.

Now that her mother is no longer living, Grier remains closest to Diane, of whom she gleefully asserts,

Diane is like I am except she's nice. I'm the "evil twin." Diane is a calm, peaceful, pleasant version of me. We have the same voice, interests, sense of humor. Diane and Geyne live in rural Willard, Missouri, so don't travel like I do, haven't seen as much. But Diane and I are incredibly similar.

When Grier speaks of being the "evil twin," it is only partly in jest. Her strong, no-nonsense manner has led some to term her a drama queen, characterized as much by the intensity of her personality as for her myriad achievements. To those who suggest she might woo more flies with honey than with her often abrasive, take-no-prisoners Midwestern approach, Grier merely shrugs. "I get things done," she states succinctly—a point few could argue in the face of her manifold accomplishments.

Just as Grier's passionate behavior and single-minded focus may derive in part from her astrological sign, her tendency toward flamboyance may be genetic; Grier comes from theatrical lineage, though accedes that her own major claim to theatrical fame is that she's fifth cousin to late British actor David Niven. All the theatricality did not go for naught. "When I trotted home at twelve and announced I was queer, my mother wasn't fazed because she had been exposed to gay men and lesbians in the theatre," Grier explains.

Precocious in most things, Grier discovered her lesbian identity early and came out quite young. Her family was living in Detroit, and as she tells the tale, she "went down on the streetcar to the library. I had looked in enough of my father's medical books that I knew the word homosexual. I went to the library to look up what I could on the word. I was twelve but I could have passed for much older. So the librarian didn't raise her eyebrows too high when I asked for books on homosexuals since she didn't know my actual age," Grier explains.

Because Mother and I were always open with each other, I told her immediately. Mother said since I was a woman, I wasn't a homosexual, I was a lesbian. She also said that since I was twelve I was a little young to make this decision and we should wait six months to tell the newspapers.

It's a response few queers in the twenty-first century can imagine receiving, let alone in 1945 when out queers were the exception and parents were likely to disown a gay son or lesbian daughter.

"Years after that," Grier continued,

she told me she was reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* when she was pregnant with me. Later I wondered why I hadn't asked her how she came to be reading a book in 1933 that had been a big scandal only a few years earlier in 1929 [when it was involved in an indecency trial]. It had only just been published here, so that seems odd now in retrospect. I wish I had asked her.

That Grier's mother seemed so undaunted by the revelation speaks to the unprecedented level of acceptance Grier enjoyed growing up. "Mother gave me wider world validation," Grier states. "It's a pretty easy jump to see why I began collecting lesbian fiction a few years later—Mother opened me up to many, many things."

Grier asserts, "I grew up in a very loving family and I think that's why my mother's approach to my sister's and my being lesbian was just 'Okay, now what's for dinner?' My mother was really the strong person in the family. My parents divorced when I was fourteen, having separated when I was ten."

Grier credits the closeness of her immediate family for the acceptance she received as a young lesbian, but there were other intriguing elements to her upbringing that may have influenced her as well. Her great-grandfather, James Jesse Strang, also known as King Strang, head of the Mormon sect the Strangites, had five wives. One of Strang's wives dressed in men's clothing and traveled with him as a man during his evangelical tours. This wife was pregnant with Grier's grandfather while she was passing as a man, a fact Grier finds fascinating.

These familial revelations were Grier's entree into the complicated world we have come to call queer. Grier met her first transgendered person when she was eleven, a woman who lived in a cabin near Grier's then-home in Colorado. Grier would hike into an area in the Colorado Mountains near the town of Cascade. The woman lived in the mesa above Cascade where Grier says she would have been totally isolated for parts of the year. "She was probably in her later fifties," Grier muses.

She was rough and crude, could easily have passed as a man and probably had at some point in her life. I was fascinated with her. I basically stalked her. She didn't make me leave. She let me pick flowers out of her yard. She wasn't friendly or welcoming, but she let me come near

her. Later I wrote a story about her for *The Ladder* and gave her a fantasy life to fit her appearance.

When Grier came out a year or so after meeting the passing woman in the cabin, she had another intriguing experience that also points to the complexities of being queer in the 1940s.

My first serious girlfriend was two years ahead of me in school. She had a boyfriend and my mother discovered that he was a girl. The boyfriend was twenty-one, the girlfriend was sixteen, I was nearly fourteen. The boyfriend spent the whole day at my house [during the Christmas holidays] because my mother was so welcoming. We ate, decorated the tree. At some point the "boy" was sitting on the edge of the sofa, legs spread. Mother told me later, "You need to know this is almost certainly not a man." She told me there was no hint of beard stubble, even though he'd been at our house for twelve or so hours, and from seeing "him" sitting with "his" legs spread, my mother thought there were no male genitalia either. There is a kind of insularity that comes from big city living. People believe there can't be anything like that in other places, but there were all these different things and I was experiencing them from day one.

During her childhood and adolescence Grier's family moved from town to town throughout the Midwest and West. Divorced and struggling to eke out a living, Grier's mother kept herself and her daughters in proximity to Grier's father so child support did not become too elusive. The family traveled from Detroit to Colorado to Oklahoma City to Dodge City, Kansas, and then finally to Kansas City, Kansas. By her high school years the family had settled in the Kansas City area, where Grier remained for thirty years, until 1980. It was in Kansas City that she met her first long-term lover, Helen L. Bennett, a librarian.

Although she hasn't lived there in over two decades, Grier remains rhapsodic over the charming town at the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers that fed her lesbian soul and introduced her to the two most important women in her life. "Kansas City has more boulevards than Paris, more fountains than Rome," Grier notes for those who think of queer life and queer culture as beginning and ending in huge coastal metropolises. "It's a beautiful city with the undeserved reputation of being a cow town." Kansas City proved no cow town for Grier, rather it became the locus of her literary career and romantic life.

Grier met Bennett when she was nineteen and Bennett was thirty-five. Bennett, whom Grier describes as "five foot two and one hundred pounds

wringing wet," was partnered with Grier for twenty years, until Grier was wooed away by Donna McBride, her partner since 1972 and Grier's unabashed grand passion. After graduating from high school in Kansas City, Kansas, Grier traveled to Denver with Bennett while Bennett got her library science degree. While in Denver Grier worked for the *Denver Post* newspaper. Bennett's father was a Christian minister and her brother, who was gay, was an evangelist. While Bennett and Grier were living in Denver, Bennett's brother was killed in a train wreck and Bennett felt obligated to return to her family in Kansas City. Back home, Grier worked for Sears Roebuck and then for the Kansas City, Kansas, library. In 1960 she and Bennett moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Bennett became curator of the Snyder Collection of Americana at the University of Kansas City (now University of Missouri at Kansas City). Grier notes with fondness that she used to say of the petite Bennett, "Helen was not as tall as her title." Bennett finished her career there.

The years spent with Bennett were tumultuous for Grier as well as for the budding lesbian feminist movement of which she became a key figure. Always a bibliophile, during her years with Bennett the librarian and archivist Grier herself began to work in libraries and develop her own bibliographic talents, cataloguing books with queer content. She poured over magazines and library journals searching out books that might have lesbian or gay themes imbedded in them. Having learned about the art and skill of bibliography from maverick researcher Jeannette Foster, author of the pathbreaking bibliography *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, Grier went on to compile her own extensive bibliographies, including several volumes of *The Lesbian in Literature* (1967, 1975, 1981). It was during this search for queer-themed literature that Grier stumbled upon the lesbian publication *The Ladder*. Grier says, "From the first issue I saw, the March 1956 issue, I said this is what I am going to spend my life doing. I thought it was wonderful. I wrote to them and offered my body, my soul, my heart, my money."

What would become Grier's literary legacy began then, with her letter to then-editor Phyllis Lyon. The first U.S. magazine for lesbians, *The Ladder* was published monthly by the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) from 1956 through 1968, then bimonthly through 1970. Controversy over the feminist political content and management of the publication under Grier developed in 1968, and Grier and then-national DOB president Rita Laporte wrested control of the now highly visible and politically important publication from DOB leadership in 1970.

*The Ladder* was published independently by Grier from 1970 until it ceased publication in 1972. The magazine contained reviews, original fiction and poetry, news stories, political commentary, features, and letters. Grier worked on *The Ladder* in one capacity or another throughout its evo-

lution, in part writing under the pseudonym Gene Damon. Grier's research on queer-themed books and her budding collection of lesbian literature found their way into *The Ladder* via a column she wrote called "Lesbiana," which reviewed queer-themed literature. She was also editor from 1968 through 1970, then editor and publisher until the final issue in the fall of 1972.

In its early days *The Ladder* was an obvious labor of love, mimeographed and distributed by volunteers such as Grier, Lyon, Del Martin, Laporte, and others. No mere bar rag, *The Ladder* was highly informative, particularly on issues of politics and culture. The quality of the writing was superb and included such lesbian literary luminaries as Rita Mae Brown, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Jane Rule. The publication also sparked controversy throughout its lifetime, generating debate over a range of issues, including coming out: original editor Lyon had published under the pseudonym Ann Ferguson for several issues, then declared her true identity. Other controversies included discourse on the role of feminism in lesbian life. *The Ladder* showed prescience in other areas, with articles on queer marriage and military service predating current controversies by decades.

Because *The Ladder* had become a large publication—forty-eight pages for most of its lifetime, equivalent to most local weekly queer newspapers today—the costs and time required to produce it were prohibitive. As Grier notes, *The Ladder* always lost money, which is why it finally ceased publication. "*The Ladder* plateaued out," explains Grier.

Our subscriptions cost \$7.50 in 1972, which was considered incredibly high. We couldn't keep publishing—we couldn't get enough income. The only advertising we could have gotten would have sent our readers screaming into the night, especially given that we got lambasted for having women kissing in our stories. You can imagine the kind of advertisers a lesbian publication could have attracted in those days. It couldn't happen. And so October 1972 was the last issue.

Produced wholly by women devoted to the cause of connecting lesbians to each other through the written word, *The Ladder* had the same effect on most women as that first issue had on Grier. She remembers,

The movement was entirely run by people who had no money to give. It's hard for this generation to understand, when we have these huge marches and events and lobbying organizations with hundreds of thousands of dollars changing hands. But I remember days like the day the box of pens came, the day the box of brown envelopes came. These were big moments in the life of a publication like *The Ladder*.

Grier adds, "I'm sure people were ripping off their bosses—cadging things here and there. Helen Sanders [second editor of the publication] worked at Macy's and went to the basement at work and used the mimeograph machine to print out copies." Grier's own tenure as editor proved a turning point for both her and *The Ladder*.

I wanted to make it more feminist, less gay-oriented. I got Jane Rule, Margaret Lawrence, Martha Shelley, Rita Mae Brown to write for me. We got *The Ladder* more feminist, broadening the base, making it physically larger, getting good writers. Some people stayed over and became part of the early years of *Naiad*. The last two years of *The Ladder* we had amazingly good stuff in it. When I look back now it's kind of amusing because I went from doing that to doing *Naiad*, which isn't what most people consider highbrow. *The Ladder* was a very literate magazine. We even made Mary Renault angry enough at us to write us a letter and I really loved being able to put Mary Renault in *The Ladder*. Renault didn't like the fact that I wrote in *The Ladder* about her writing which in the forties had been very explicitly lesbian. And of course she wrote some very famous gay male novels. But that's the kind of publication we were.

The importance of *The Ladder* may be lost today, claims Grier, because times have changed so much. "People now can't imagine what it was like then, because there are at least a dozen TV programs now where gay is everywhere and there are books and magazines and newspapers and radio. But there were no gay images. That's why *The Ladder* was so important."

The demise of *The Ladder* coincided with a sea of change in Grier's own life. For years Grier had been "reading every piece of literature and belle letters that appeared in the U.S. and reading the reviews of everything that might be remotely gay and lesbian." She was infamous at the Kansas City, Missouri, Public Library for being "that woman who read those books" and had quite a reputation in the library for calling up and barking orders to hold this or that publication for her perusal. Donna McBride worked at the library for a woman Grier knew who was also a lesbian. "So unbeknownst to me she was trailing me," admits Grier. In March 1971 Grier called the library and told McBride, "You're new. Get a slip and write these numbers down of books I want to reserve." Grier got a shock when McBride asked if she could work for Grier at *The Ladder*, to which she was a subscriber. Grier went to live with McBride in 1972 when McBride was thirty-two and Grier thirty-eight. Bennett was fifty-four when Grier left her for the much-younger McBride.

"I didn't leave Helen because Donna was younger," Grier explains about the tumultuous period in her life. "If there was anything negative about Donna it was that she was younger because I was always involved with women who were older." As for the split with Bennett, "Helen did not take it well, as you might expect," Grier asserts. "Helen was raised to be socially correct. She was an entirely private individual and you were either on the inside of that wall or on the outside. She has very few friends and will not walk across the street to make a new one. Helen was never involved with another person after we broke up. Someone would have had to run her to ground to get involved with her, she's that private." Although Grier admits she and Bennett are no longer close, they still talk from time to time.

As for the partnership with McBride, life-long femme Grier admits, "Donna pursued me and nailed me down. Donna does not go around bushes; she goes through them. She wanted me, she got me, we've been together ever since." She adds, "If you asked what the most important thing I've ever done in my life was, I'd say it was meeting Donna and having a life with her."

Professionally the most important thing Grier has ever done was found Naiad Press, the publishing house noted African-American writer Donna Allegra calls "the place we go to find books that validate us as lesbians who love being lesbians, where the girl is never just going through a phase and doesn't end up with a man at the end." Although founded by several women on January 1, 1973, as a publisher of books by, for, and about lesbians, Grier was Naiad's driving force from the outset. Grier and McBride were joined in the venture by attorney Anyda Marchant, who wrote lesbian novels under the pseudonym Sarah Aldridge, and Marchant's partner Muriel Crawford.

According to Grier, Marchant "wanted to get her books published, so that's how it started. Now we've been all over the planet, published in eleven languages including Portugese, French, Flemish, Spanish, and German." In 1973 Grier and McBride lived in Bates City, Missouri, a town forty miles outside Kansas City. In 1980 the two moved to Tallahassee, Florida, where McBride had taken a library position. Naiad has been centered there ever since. Naiad has published nearly 500 original titles since 1973, making it the world's largest lesbian publisher. Grier's acumen as a bibliographer served her well when seeking out lesbian authors. Not only was Grier responsible for reprinting works by noted lesbian writers such as Margaret Anderson and Natalie Barney's poet lover, Renee Vivien, but she also published Ferro-Grumley award-winning novelist Sarah Schulman's first book as well as launched the career of noted mystery novelist Katherine V. Forrest.

During her years with Bennett, Grier had begun an enduring friendship with Canadian writer Jane Rule. The two had much in common—including



lovers named Helen who were both nearly seventeen years each woman's senior. Rule and Grier remained close after Grier and Bennett split up, and Rule became one of Grier's most prized authors at Naiad. Her 1979 book, *Outlander*, was a critical success and Naiad's first big seller. This was followed by the comedic novel *Faultline* by Sheila Ortiz Taylor which sold 30,000 copies in the first two years—then an absolute marvel. While touring with Taylor, Grier met Forrest whose first novel, *Curious Wine* (1982), held the title of the world's best-selling lesbian novel for over a decade, selling nearly 200,000 copies. Forrest began a long association with Naiad, which included numerous novels as well as an editorship.

The book that put Naiad on the cultural map, however, was the 1985 anthology *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence*, edited by two former nuns, Nancy Manahan and Rosemary Curb. The book flew off the shelves and propelled the editors into the national spotlight. It also landed Grier at the center of a raging controversy. *Penthouse Forum* approached Grier about serializing the book and Grier, ever the astute businesswoman, agreed. The very same lesbians who would have been horrified to see sex-specific advertising on the pages of *The Ladder* were distraught at Grier's decision and believed she had courted the sex magazine simply to make money.

"*Penthouse Forum* approached us," Grier asserts. "We didn't even know they existed." But controversy swept the lesbian community and found voice in various lesbian publications. Although somewhat dismissive of the volatility that surrounded the serialization in *Penthouse Forum*, Grier believes the shift from so-called "downward mobility" in the lesbian community to moneymaking played a significant role in the controversy. "I actually believe retrospectively that people were angry with Rosemary and Nancy because being successful was a no-no in those days," she concludes. "It just wasn't cool to make money or even think about it. I think there was a lot of resentment about these women and Naiad making this kind of choice."

And that choice made Naiad a household name in households that weren't lesbian. "The stuff that happened around *Lesbian Nuns* wasn't like anything we'd ever experienced," Grier recalls.

We'd come home and UPI and AP reporters would be racing up my driveway in the country. I wish I could convey how strange this was because of how incredibly rural the area was. And perfect strangers would stop us on the street and talk to us. We went from being barely known to being totally out to everyone. It was just amazing. The book was so successful there was even an excerpt in the Flemish TV guide!

The success of breakout books like *Lesbian Nuns* and *Curious Wine* afforded Grier the opportunity to expand the press with new titles and reprints

of long out-of-print books and classics of lesbian pulp fiction, such as Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*. Grier finds "an ironic and funny coda" to Naiad's history of best-sellers. Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart* became an instant best-seller for the press when Donna Deitch's film *Desert Hearts* premiered. In 1999, because of the attention, both critical and regarding the imbedded queer content, to the film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, based on the Patricia Highsmith novel, *The Price of Salt* also became an instant best-seller. But Grier remembers when she first saw the Highsmith novel—published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan.

In June 1952 I saw *The Price of Salt* in downtown Kansas City in the Jones Department Store. This was before the days of Borders and Barnes and Noble, of course, and department stores generally had big book departments. I remember it so clearly. Contrary to revisionist history the book wasn't a pulp novel but a hardcover. There it was on a table in Jones' with a picture of a salt shaker on a tablecloth on the cover. Highsmith had tried to get her publisher of *Strangers on a Train* to publish it. The Hitchcock film had been hugely successful so they found her a publisher, but she was forced to use a pseudonym. Of course anyone who worked in a library could find out who she was and I did. It was the only book she published under a pseudonym. Highsmith was a lesbian but feared republishing the book would lose her fans—she was from that era of intensely internalized homophobia. But it's an interesting story—for Naiad and for lesbians interested in where their books come from.

Despite these successes, Grier says it was nine years before anyone was paid to work for Naiad Press. "It was pure coincidence that I quit my job right before our first big seller happened," she concedes. "I was Naiad's first full-time employee and Donna became the second full-time employee in 1982." In the intervening years until 1999, when Naiad divested much of its list to the newly formed Bella Books so that Grier and McBride could "stop working eighty-hour weeks," the press employed eight full-time staff members.

When Grier hasn't been proving her mettle as a hardworking Midwesterner at Naiad, she has been honing her skills as a collector of lesbian literature. When asked what her single most defining contribution has been in life she says unequivocally, "I think the most important thing I have done is define lesbian literature."

Grier compiled the largest collection of lesbian literature in the world, now housed—having traveled from Tallahassee to San Francisco in an eigh-

teen-wheeler—in the James C. Hormel Collection of the San Francisco Library in a section with a plaque bearing the names of Grier and McBride. “I am a historian by inclination even if I have no legitimate claim,” explains Grier.

I had the largest collection of lesbian books in the world. Almost fifteen thousand books and several hundred feet of papers went to library. We were looking for someplace to put this stuff. [Publisher] Sherry Thomas arranged the archive. Donna and I had been everywhere to find someone to take the collection. Sherry got the NEA and Xerox to CD-ROM and deacidify the whole thing, so even when the originals disappear, it will be around. Eighty percent of these books hadn't even been catalogued. It's instant immortality—it's a lot better than having children.

Grier did keep

a couple hundred books for while I was still alive. I kept a few things—several hundred pounds of letters from Jane Rule—left untouched until we've both trotted on. I gave away a lot of things. It bothers me a little because now I am losing my memory a bit and so I don't have my references right there anymore. But I feel so gratified that all that collecting and work has a place now, forever.

Although Grier has no plans to wind down her life, a certain nostalgia tinged recollection of her past endeavors. “We were all wild-eyed maniacs then,” she concludes.

You had to be so earnest, so committed, think that you were going to save the world. I remember actually thinking things like, I am going to lead my people out of the wilderness. Everything was very, very different. There were different things wrong then than there are now. After a certain age you realize you aren't going to change the course of human history forever, things will change in ways you can't even anticipate and things will always need changing—nothing remains static.

Nevertheless, Grier concludes, hers has been an eventful and surprising life. “I didn't know it would be successful, but it was. And I have had such a wonderful time.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Grier, Barbara. *The Lesbian in Literature*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1981.
- Grier, Barbara and Reid, Coletta (Eds.). *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from The Ladder*. Oakland, CA: Diana Press, 1976.
- Grier, Barbara and Reid, Coletta (Eds.). *Lives: Biographies of Women from The Ladder*. Oakland, CA: Diana Press, 1976.

Barbara also edited or co-edited a series of books reprinting erotic love stories by Naiad Press authors. Among them are: *Dancing in the Dark* (1992); *The First Time Ever* (1993); *The Touch of Your Hand* (1998); and *The Very Thought of You* (1999).