



Ann Bannon today and (right)
her groundbreaking book

Ann Bannon

Queen of Lesbian Pulp

IN THE LATE 1950S A MARRIED MOTHER PENNED NOVELS THAT BROUGHT LESBIAN LOVE TO LIFE FOR THOUSANDS OF ISOLATED WOMEN. NOW AGED 80, SHE TELLS SARAH COPE THE TALE BEHIND THE FAMOUS BOOKS

In 1957, a lesbian pulp fiction book was published in America, going on sale for just a few cents. It was intended to be a “throwaway” read; something to titillate male readers, to be read in a gulp and discarded. However, the book, *Odd Girl Out*, became a lesbian classic, and its author Ann Weldy, who wrote under the pen name Ann Bannon, became the queen of lesbian pulp fiction.

Bannon went on to write four more novels in the series, and her work paved the way for an explosion in lesbian pulp fiction. Isolated women all over the country who were struggling with their sexuality in the most repressive of times would pluck up the courage to buy these books, and would find solace and

kinship within the pages. What they didn’t know was that Bannon herself was married with two young children, leading a double life in order to bring the books to fruition.

Now 80, Bannon lives in Sacramento, California. She spoke to DIVA about her life and career.

“I think I wrote,” she says, “because I needed to write. The first one came out in 1957, and the last one was published in 1962, so I think it was five and a half [years] – so it was very, very intense. I had my babies in the midst of that. So I look back and I’m kind of surprised that I did it myself, but I just felt very keenly about having my say, and was terribly lucky to be in print, so I kept going.”

Bannon was encouraged to write by fellow lesbian pulp fiction writer Vin Packer (real name Marijane Meaker, partner of the author Patricia Highsmith). Having read Packer’s novel *Spring Fire*, published in 1952, Bannon struck up a correspondence with the writer, and went to New York so that the two of them could meet. Packer introduced Bannon to both the lesbian scene and to her editor, Dick Carroll. “There would not really be an Ann Bannon if Vin Packer hadn’t been the agent for meeting the people I needed to know,” she comments.

However, Bannon admits that after a rift in their friendship – according to her, Packer could be somewhat “crisp” and “feisty” – she

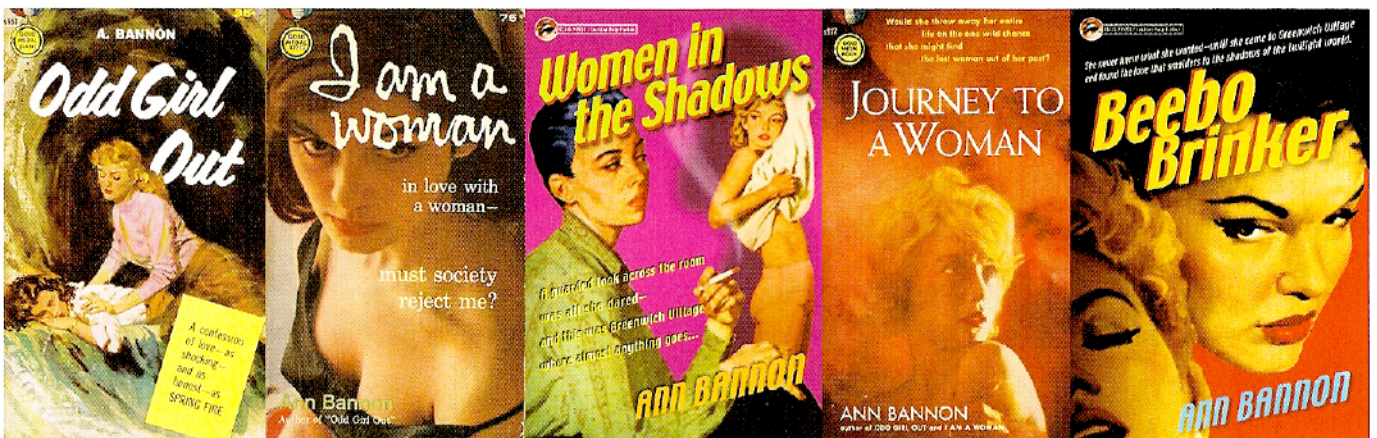


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created a less than flattering depiction of Packer in her novel *Journey to a Woman*, using her, in part, as a basis for the rather manipulative character of Nina Spicer. "That was rather a sharp portrait!" laughs Bannon. Has Packer ever commented about the depiction? "No! I have a sense she may not have read it, or if she did she didn't recognise herself! And I'm certainly not going to foist it on her!"

Bannon came across lots of barriers that could have stopped her writing, but she was determined to have her say. It was not uncommon for the FBI to keep files on lesbian pulp fiction writers, and Bannon feels it is likely that she was being monitored; indeed, she says this felt like a "shadow" hanging over her when she was writing. Furthermore, her husband of the time – whom she has long since divorced – was far from keen on his wife's writing career. "If I hadn't been married, I think I would have stuck with the writing life, I would have kept going. But it was hard on my husband. He was relatively tolerant, but he never did read the books. He was somewhat mollified when finally my royalty cheques began to come in; he realised this could be a significant source of income."

Reflecting on how her life unfolded, she says: "I did what so many women of my generation did. I grew up in my parents' house, I was delivered to the university. In those days, they had curfews, they had house mothers. I went from that into the care, as it were, of my husband, and so there had never been a period of youthful freedom in my life when I could explore and step back a little and learn something about myself. I was just moved along this assembly line, from parents to house mother to husband and children, and there was never a door opened along the way that I could choose to walk through, that would give me something different, and so I used to think what a shame not to have that, to be my own agent making my own choices. Instead, they were made for me."

What was also not in Bannon's control was other people's ability to, as she puts it, "catapult" her out of the closet. She recalls



"I went from parents to husband and children, and there was never a door opened along the way that I could choose to walk through. Choices were made for me"

how, on one occasion, a teenage girl who was babysitting her children, came across one of her manuscripts. "Actually, the way it unfolded was that my brother didn't know we were out for the evening and he dropped by and this girl had the whole manuscript spread out on the floor, and she had called some of her high school friends over. They were all down on their knees, giggling..." Bannon laughs at the memory, but says: "We weren't particularly close with any of [the neighbours], but I did get some funny looks. It just made it very awkward, as I recall."

Because Bannon's novels spoke to so many women across the country, it wasn't long before she started to receive huge volumes of letters from desperate, isolated women. "It was very touching and it was a

little frightening," she says. "I was nowhere near as well informed as I needed to be for a situation like this. I was asked to be an advice columnist. I hadn't lived my life that way and I didn't have authority. This was a very sore point with my husband because I had given my home address to some of [my correspondents], and he was very upset that there might be people at the front door. And there were a few..."

Although Bannon's novels are now held in high esteem, there was a time when they came under fire for their less than rosy depiction of lesbian existence. Alcoholism, domestic abuse, mental illness: all feature in Bannon's writing, although Bannon maintains that "if the books have one very strong thing going for them it's their value as social history. Yes, I was embarrassed about some of the language; some of the behaviour was over top".

When the novels were reprinted, Bannon was given the chance to edit them for modern audiences. Was she tempted to do so? "I thought, no, they are what they are, this is how we were, and if I pretty it up, the books will somehow carry a meretricious message, and that's not what I want them to do."

So what's next for Bannon? "I made a start on a memoir which I then abandoned about five years ago. I found it very difficult to write about myself!" she laughs. "I know people want to know more than I've actually said in anything published so far, so I think I might be able to resurrect that manuscript and do something with it."

Let's hope Bannon does indeed complete that project. It's sure to make fascinating reading. **D**

PULP IN PRINT

Ann Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* (1957), *I Am A Woman* (1959), *Women in the Shadows* (1959), *Journey To A Woman* (1960) and *Beebo Brinker* (1962) are currently published by Cleis Press and available in Kindle and audio formats. *Vin Packer's Spring Fire* (1952) is also available from Cleis.

cleispress.com