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# 50's Pulp Fiction Writer Gave Voice to Silenced Community

by Bonnie Osborn

In this season of Pride 2013, it's easy for those of us fortunate to live in a progressive community to feel the fight for equality and acceptance is won. Of course, it only takes a visit to the Midwest, a glance at the headlines, or a look at our history, to remind us that much work remains.

A part of that history is captured by author Ann Bannon, who wrote the stories of a generation before Stonewall. And although times have changed, the human yearning, fears and struggles encompassed in her stories still resonate with audiences today.

When Bannon first put pen to paper in the early 1950s, she was a young, suburban housewife looking for a creative outlet and hoping to earn a little money on the side. She stumbled into what turned out to be a highly marketable genre – lesbian pulp fiction – almost by accident.

The first manuscript she showed to a publisher, via her friendship with lesbian author Vin Packer, was a coming-of-age story featuring a cast of characters loosely

famous character, a glamorous, tough-but-lovable butch lesbian, came to life, in a series of five more books that would come to be known as the *Beebo Brinker* chronicles. While Beebo and the series' other characters seem rigidly stereotyped today, they mirrored the pre-Stonewall LGBT community.

"There were no gay or lesbian people on TV, no one in the movies, no community centers, no support groups," she says. "There were a few organizations – Daughters of Bilitis and Mattachine Society for the men. There were a few publications like *The Ladder* for women, *One* for men. But you had to be so cautious about sending material in plain brown wrappers, literally. People's lives could be ruined, jobs lost. It was very



Ann Bannon with book covers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Photo by Morgan Gwenwald.

modeled on Bannon's recent experiences as a college sorority girl.

The publisher, who specialized in pulp fiction, quickly zoomed in on the star-crossed love story of two coeds, whose forbidden lust and doomed relationship made for a steamy tale that appealed to both women who saw their own forbidden desires reflected in it, and straight men turned on by the girl-on-girl sex. After a rewrite, the book, *Odd Girl Out*, was a success.

"It never entered my mind that I was writing 'sleaze,'" Bannon would later recall. "I was writing a romantic story of women in love."

Following the success of her first book, Bannon's lovelorn protagonist landed in New York's Greenwich Village, then the locus of the burgeoning Beat movement and ground zero for all things bohemian and exotic. Bannon found it equally alluring, stealing time away from her conventional married life to tour the gay and lesbian scene there. "Talk about Dorothy arriving in Munchkin Land," she says.

It was in the Village that Bannon's most

frightening"

Women coming out as lesbians were type-cast as either butch or femme. "You were instantly shunted into one or the other role."

Bannon's own life was 180 degrees removed from that of her fictional characters. "My husband was a nice man, but of course he wasn't very happy about letting me go [to visit Greenwich Village]," she says. "While he never read any of my books, he kind of picked up the idea. But he reconciled himself to it when the royalty checks started coming in."

After about 1962, Bannon's occasional visits to the Village ended, sacrificed to the exigencies of raising two daughters and keeping the marriage intact. She would not return for some 40 years, to a very different scene. "I can only think of it as my dream place," she says. "At the same time, there was a real melancholy because I had made the choice to marry, like almost everybody of my generation."

PULP  
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# Claude

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**Do you have good memories of Sacramento? Where did you hang out?**

I love Mackramento. In fact the hardest part about leaving to pursue my dreams was saying goodbye to my friends. We spent lots of time and money hanging out at FACES, Badlands, the Depot and the Merc. When we weren't there, we would be at Social, D30, Dive Bar or The Park. Sacramento has a great night life, great people and a lot of my best memories were made there.

**You currently live in Las Vegas, which is like another planet to those of us who have only**

**vacationed there. What's it like to live there full-time?**

I moved to Sin City and fell in love. It's an unconventional city, but I have had an unconventional life so for me it's a perfect fit. Bright lights, casinos, open 24/7, Chippendales, nightclubs and drag queens. What's not to love?

**What's next for you?**

I will be on your TV's again this fall on a weekly basis as a part of a major network reality show. For now, you can check me out at MackenzieClaude.com.

# Pulp

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After six books, she stopped writing. Daughters grew up, the marriage ended. Bannon returned to college and got a teaching credential and ultimately a Ph.D. She spent the 1960s and 1970s building an academic career, eventually becoming an associate dean at Sacramento State University. Ann Bannon, the writer, had ceased to exist. For a time she thought the *Beebo Chronicles* had died away as well.

But they kept resurfacing, and continued to do so each decade, often in different forms. In the early 1980s Naiad Press bought rights to publish five of the books. "They really brought Beebo back to life," Bannon says. The series' original cover art was featured in Jaye Zimet's 1999 book, *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction*. Playwrights Kate Moira Ryan and Linda S. Chapman featured the novels in their


off-Broadway play, *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, which debuted in 2007. Cleis Press of San Francisco currently publishes the books, still available in LGBT or alternative bookstores. And Bannon, who resides in Sacramento, still travels to book fairs and university symposiums all over the country to speak about LGBT history and her timeless tales.

"There is still a lot of interest, to look at the books as maybe a socially historical journey, and at the way in which life hasn't changed that much," she says. "Human nature hasn't changed all that much in the last century. They still have appeal as lively books, and the feelings and fears and hopes in them are still very much the same."

For more about Ann Bannon and *Beebo Brinker* and friends, visit [annbannon.com](http://annbannon.com).

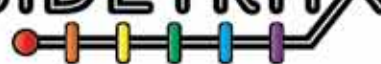
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