

Patience and Sarah, Alma, and Isabel: Lesbian Novelist, Isabel Miller 1924-1996

by Andrea L.T. Peterson

Writing at a time when it was considerably less than prudent to be writing lesbian romance novels under one's own name and because of her children, and because it indicated a change from who she was before coming out, Alma Routsong took the pen name Isabel Miller. Miller was her mother's maiden name; Isabel an anagram of lesbia.

As Miller, Routsong wrote several classic lesbian works, first and foremost *Patience and Sarah*, still required reading for a budding lesbian. Routsong, who died at 72 years of age this October, was born in November of 1924. She considered herself a self-taught feminist who learned about the oppression of women through her own experiences. She only encountered feminist writings after she understood for herself feminist ideals.

Leaving the "American Dream"

Before coming out, Routsong had been married for 15 years. She was the mother of four daughters and was living a very heterosexual life. At 30 she had had no gay experiences, but she knew that something was interfering with her "happy" heterosexual life. She sought the counsel of a therapist, but her passage would be one where she developed a strong lesbian and feminist consciousness.

At the time Routsong decided that heterosexual life would never be emotionally fulfilling, she was steeped in the so-called American Dream. She had even written a successful novel considered by some, as she said, "a sort of textbook of happy heterosexuality."

In 1975, she told historian Jonathan Ned Katz' that she "had an inkling" she was a lesbian before she got married. She "kept falling in love with" her women friends! But her only early attempt to act on her feelings resulted in rejection. Living a lesbian life became very closely aligned with pain, rejection, and frustration in the writer's mind.

Writing *Patience and Sarah*

Patience and Sarah, originally titled *A Place for Us* and self-published in 1969, is a classic love story. It departs from the traditional romantic narrative, of course, right from the start, with the lovers being two women. But *Patience and Sarah* is not only a love story: it is a story based on the lives of Miss Willson and Miss Brundidge, two women who lived in Greene County, New York, in the early 1800s. The book is dedicated to Willson and Brundidge who, Miller says in the book's dedication, "quite a while ago, lived something like it." Although it is clearly fiction, *Patience and Sarah* contributes a piece or two to the enormous puzzle that is gay and lesbian history.

Miller's interest in Mary Ann Willson and her female companion began when Miller and her lover were touring through New York State and her lover spied a primitive painting of a mermaid by Willson in a folk art museum. A book of primitive painters indicated that Willson had had a romantic attachment to the woman she lived and farmed with, one Miss Brundidge.

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Isabel Miller



photo: Julie Weber

Miller lost all interest in their travels. She wanted to do nothing other than return home, research these two women who had captured her interest and imagination, and "write a book about them." A year of research was less than rewarding, but the fictional product is a tribute to Miller's investment of time and energy.

Literature and Politics

Originally, she explains, *A Place for Us* was to be followed by *A Time for Us*, but just two chapters into *A Time*, Miller suffered from a writer's block so severe that she never completed it. Other books have, however, followed: *The Love of Good Women* (1986), *Side by Side* (1990), *A Dooryard of Flowers* (1993), and *Laurel* (1996), published just a month after Miller's death, all published by Naiad. *A Dooryard of Flowers*, published more than 20 years after *Patience and Sarah*, was, as Miller says in her introduction to the book, "plucked from oblivion and brought to the women who wish they knew more about *Patience and Sarah*."

In her books, particularly *Patience and Sarah*, Miller is very clear about the feminist underpinnings of her own thinking. Male clothes, for example, which the fictional Sarah wears, are not to be confused with "male identification." They are "freedom." They afford Sarah male privilege when she passes as a boy and as a young man. This is a basic distinction still overlooked by many people today, including lesbians.

This awareness is equally clear in *The Love of Good Women* in which the author looks at the lives of women during wartime, a time when women's work outside of the home was needed, respected, and reasonably well paid. Like thousands of others, Milly discovers "the missing dimension" in her life and like so few others, takes "the first steps to escape" her "domestic prison."

Although Miller denies any political intent behind the writing of her first lesbian novel, Katz feels that it fits snugly within a "Lesbian literary-feminist tradition." "The Lesbian defense in fictional form," *Patience and Sarah* was, argued Katz, "an act of Lesbian resistance." Miller told Katz in 1975 that she felt she was relatively [and erroneously] "unproductive," but she did believe [and rightly so] that she was "a good writer."

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ISABEL MILLER

Miller, the Person

"She was one of the wittiest people I have ever known," says Barbara Grier, Miller's publisher and friend of more than 30 years. "She was hilarious to talk to," Grier says, and she admired her "forthrightness." Miller loved to challenge younger lesbians and had the occasion to do so when she agreed to an interview in her home.

Miller, who had graciously invited the reporter to her home, took her through her "gallery of lesbian" photos gracing one of her Poughkeepsie home's hallways. How many could the reporter identify, Miller wanted to know. She later lamented to Grier, "Well at least she knew Martina Navritalova!"

On another occasion, Grier says, a young reporter asked Miller what else of hers, aside from *Patience and Sarah*, she should read. "Everything," [Miller replied], "Which I just love," says Grier. "She was just delightful," Grier muses.

Life as a lesbian was not, for Miller, as she had initially feared—full of pain and rejection. She had several long-term relationships and is survived by her companion of about 20 years, Julie Weber. Weber, nearly 30 years Miller's junior, lives in the couple's home in Poughkeepsie. Miller also had a fulfilling professional life, although she did not seem to realize that her legacy would be more than a few novels. Her legacy would include undoubtedly the creation of the quintessential lesbian love story, in many ways still unrivaled, as well as a number of great lesbian romances.

Andrea Peterson is a writer who publishes widely in the gay press.

¹ Katz, Jonathan Ned. *Gay American History*, New York: Meridian, 1976, revised.