

Chapter 7: IN FRONT OF OUR NOSES
Dorothy Bryant and *A Day in San Francisco*

I might have remained only faintly aware of the ordeals of these six writers, and totally unaware of the problems of many others, were it not for my own brush with a literary lynch mob. My experience serves to represent lesser-known writers whose book was buried by outraged critical abuse and/or silence, or writers we've never even heard of because their "offensive" book was never even published. Another reason for telling my story is that I know it from the inside and can give a closer, more detailed account of the author's experience, from the conception of the book to the attacks on it and the effects of those attacks. That fact makes this section longer than the others, which does not mean it is equal or superior in importance.

I don't want to imply that, by comparing my experiences with those of the famous authors I've discussed, I am putting my writing in the same class as theirs. I don't want to legitimize my point of view by eliciting sympathy for a personal tragedy that is part of my experience. Nor do I mean to imply that my version of certain events is the only true one. Readers should remember George Orwell's admonition to his readers: "Beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of facts and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events. And beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period."

My family was part of the great emigration that, from 1880 to 1920, emptied Italy of the poorest one-third of its population. My parents were born in the same village near Turin and were brought to America as children about 1910. Their father worked in coal and copper mines in Illinois, Utah, and Montana. (Both died of silicosis when I was a child.) My father attended school until age fourteen, worked briefly in a copper mine, then trained as a mechanic. Both families moved on to California before 1920. My mother became the most highly educated of both families and all their *paesani*, managing to finish high school while working from the age of ten, first as a domestic, later as a bookkeeper. My parents married in 1925; my sister was born the next year, and I was born in 1930 in San Francisco's immigrant, working-class Mission District.

As a child I read voraciously and indiscriminately but firmly suppressed idle dreams of becoming a writer. The names on the spines of books in the public library were those of gods, not human beings like the ones I knew. Like many people of my class and generation, I married too young and had two children too soon. But I simultaneously finished the local commuter college, the first in my family to do so, and started teaching in high school at age twenty-three, an unusual (some said indefensible) choice for a young mother in the 1950s. My urge to write lay dormant or suppressed until I was about thirty, when it exploded, blowing up my marriage and much of my interest in classroom teaching (though I continued to earn my living by teaching in the Bay Area until 1976). By the late 1960s I had remarried, my children were off to college, and I had finished a novel I thought worth publishing.

Ella Price's Journal came directly out of my community college teaching. In the 1960s, women who had married immediately after high school and raised children began showing up in college classes at thirty-five and older. They were largely ignored, isolated from younger students, and increasingly alienated from the own families and community.

The subject eventually became so familiar as to make up a genre called “runaway housewife,” but in 1968, when I completed the novel, it was a hidden drama of no interest to the publishers whose rejections my agent collected for three years. The second-wave feminist movement finally opened up a place for this novel. In 1972 it was published by Lippincott, one of those old, distinguished publishers no longer in existence today. Hard-bound sales were meager, but in paperback it sold well and was used in many “re-entry” college classes.

My second novel, *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You*, was a Jungian religious fantasy inspired by my own spiritual search and my reading in the literature of the mystics. My agent hated it and refused to handle it. By a co-publishing agreement with a short-lived feminist small press, *Kin of Ata* sneaked in through the back door of Random House and was published in 1976. It is still in print (2008), a word-of-mouth survivor. It has been read by groups in communal retreats, in classes for disturbed teenagers, and in theology classes taught by professors familiar with its veiled sources.

Meanwhile, my agent was trying in vain to sell my third novel *Miss Giardino*. The eponymous protagonist was a composite of the strict old maid schoolteachers of my childhood and of my mother, who had survived deprivation and abuse which she, heroically, determined not to pass on to her children. I used her experience and my own observation of inner city schools, centering the story on the all-too-common ordeal of an aging, out-of-fashion, exhausted teacher who has given her best, only to find herself indifferently discarded. This novel, I knew, was more complex and far better crafted than my first two. I had largely completed the novel in 1972. By 1978 it was still bouncing from one New York publisher to another, and I had a backlog of three more books.

Aside from the usual marketing problems for serious novelists, even one with a track record of two books with major publishers, why hadn't *Miss Giardino* found a publisher? I think she was an unacceptable heroine on two counts. She did not fit the hero-teacher stereotype beloved by readers and film-goers—then and now. Not the creative young rebel of “Dead Poets Society” who transcends the reactionary system. Not the mellow, wise, beloved old “Mr. Chips.” Anna Giardino had begun as a creative young rebel who—like many of my colleagues on the edge of retirement—felt exhausted, despised, and discarded by young newcomers with trendier (not necessarily better) teaching styles. Furthermore, she was, at the height of the Black Power movement, a stereotype (white, old maid schoolteacher) a safe target to be labeled “racist” by students using political slogans to excuse bad study habits. (In my real-life teaching I had tiptoed around a number of issues that, in this novel, I spelled out bluntly; yet I wondered why no publisher was interested.)

Encouraged by a lively small press scene in the seventies, I started my own press and published *Miss Giardino* in 1978. I hoped that my edition of *Miss Giardino* or my next book, or the next would prove itself saleable and be taken over by a “real” publisher. I would keep the books in print and wait. It became a long wait, twenty years to be exact. I had published eight more of my books before The Feminist Press took over four of them. (Along with *Kin of Ata*, that makes five books still in print, not a bad record for most mid-list literary writers.)

This odd, and perhaps ill-advised decision—because of the indelible stigma of self-publishing—after commercial publication of my first two books, is an essential part of this story. No commercial publisher or small press would have touched *A Day in San*

Francisco in 1982. It would have been obvious that mainstream readers would be turned off by the subject and gay readers would have been infuriated. If I had not self-published, my story would be one of frustration at not finding a publisher, rather than one of attack on a published book.

The few reviews of *Miss Giardino* showed the reviewers' discomfort with my politically incorrect theme. Most reviewers praised the book more for my anti-establishment publishing than for its content. But the book sold about 4,000 copies the first year by word of mouth. It was read in some education classes at UC Berkeley and even in some classes at my old alma mater, Mission High School, where the children of more recent, non-European immigrants recognized their reality in it (or so they told me when I was invited to visit a class.)

In 1979 I published two books. *Writing a Novel* was my farewell to teaching. There had always been how-to books on writing. The worst promised best sellerdom in twelve easy lessons. The best were written in an abstract, lofty manner, imitating the tone of contempt that had greeted me in 1960 whenever I asked a creative writing teacher to recommend a helpful book. What I was asking for seemed, to me, not at all contemptible—that an older writer share a few useful, simple starting points and acknowledge some problems a beginner should expect. It took me only a few months to write down what I had been saying to my students for years. *Writing a Novel* became a favorite of local creative writing teachers. Later, many better-known writers became more willing to write user-friendly books, and beginning writers now have a wider choice.

The *Garden of Eros* was a short novel inspired by a couple I'd met briefly while traveling near Death Valley, California—a twenty-year-old blind girl with a new baby, and her husband, twice her age. I was intrigued because it seemed that the strong person in this marriage was clearly the young blind girl. I tried to imagine the love story that brought this unlikely couple together, but it dragged, then died, then was resurrected with a new structure—free association memory flashbacks in the girl's voice, while she is giving birth. Of course, within this form—from first contraction to birth—the act of giving birth becomes a subplot if not THE plot. Some reviewers called it a tour de force, which always sounds like a put-down of a book with little to recommend it but a flashy technique. I think one reader was right to say that the tension set up by the process of childbirth worked against the reader getting into the love story told in flashbacks. Other readers liked that tension, provided they could sit for two or three hours and read it straight through. Everyone agreed that the process of childbirth had never before been given such central literary treatment. Midwives bought copies for their clients. Blind people recommended the audio version (free Library of Congress edition) to one another.

In 1980 I published *Prisoners*, a novel I'd been working on ever since finishing *Miss Giardino*. Based on the experience of a friend, it is the story of a middle-aged, middle-class liberal who becomes active in the "Prison Movement," a loosely organized network which attempted to offer various forms of help—books, letters, legal aid, friendship—to the most despised and abandoned population of our society. "Sally" helps a young, talented petty criminal win parole, his release contingent on her taking him into her home. But the inspiring relationship built in their letters unravels in the reality of daily life, turning into a collision of incompatible temperaments, class values, experiences, and personalities that my well-meaning but naïve heroine is unprepared for.

Prisoners had come close to reinstating me with a commercial publisher, but in the end, the admiring editor reluctantly turned it down. “It won’t sell.” She turned out to be quite right. *Prisoners* became the most widely and most respectfully reviewed of all my books—with the poorest sales record. Most readers are uninterested in the dilemmas and paradoxes of helping the problematic needy, while readers inside or sympathetic with the prison movement, didn’t want to hear the bad news. “Why do you want to hurt the prison movement?” they asked me. In answer I showed them letters I had begun receiving from readers who had silently dropped out of parolee-help programs after harrowing experiences, worse than anything in my novel. Silently, because their complaints were unacceptable, mere signs of their lack of commitment, compassion, conviction.

Then some high profile cases hit the headlines—like William Styron’s protégé, who escaped and raped a woman two weeks before he was to be paroled to Styron’s home, or Norman Mailer’s parolee, who killed a man shortly after his release. By that time well-known prisoner-advocate lawyer Fay Stender (also a silent drop-out) was fatally shot in her home by an ex-convict, nearly destroying the prison movement. My novel hadn’t “hurt the Prison Movement;” reluctance to discuss the realities my novel described had seriously damaged it.

My next novel *Killing Wonder* (1981) posed as a murder mystery, but was actually a satire on writers, publishing, and on some of the fatuities of by beloved feminist movement. The victim is a writer idolized legitimately for her writing, but even more for posture of victim hood too eagerly embraced (I thought) by some aspiring women writers. The suspects are women writers with motives of literary ambition. The sleuth/narrator is a naïve, idealistic young writer. I thought that my credentials as a feminist would make this gentle satire of our foibles acceptable. Wrong. Reactions among local women writers and reviewers ranged from cold to furious, seeming to justify the sexist adage of the time, “feminists have no sense of humor.” Nevertheless, the book sold well for a couple of years, partly because of the large audience for murder mysteries. I sold mass market paperback rights and a couple of translations. It was simply a book that made fun of writers’ quirks, mostly my own, not a book that came out of my guts.

The next one did.

The conception, writing, and publication of *A Day in San Francisco* is connected to a personal tragedy that became part of a world tragedy. The events that directly inspired the book began in 1979 during the trial of San Francisco Supervisor Dan White for the murder of Mayor George Moscone and gay Supervisor Harvey Milk. My telephone rang. It was my son, who frequently called me from UC Santa Cruz, where he was working on a PhD in classics. Without warning he announced that he had decided to quit his studies and move back to San Francisco.

John was then twenty-nine. He had been an unusually bright child, outstanding in mathematics, but one of those children about whom both his teachers and his friends said, “He can do anything he sets his mind to.” At puberty his energies and interests scattered, though he continued to perform impressively in whatever he tried. In 1966, at age sixteen, he confided to me that he was homosexual (though not sexually active yet), and swore me to secrecy. He had told only me, he said, because everyone else—his friends, his father (we had divorced three years before) had failed his test. I was the only person he knew who had not shown contempt at his casual mention of homosexuality; I even had

close friends who were as obviously gay as people were in those don't-ask-don't-tell days.

Almost in the same breath, John said he considered me responsible for getting psychotherapy for him because, of course, his "illness" was my fault. I allowed he must be right. So did most "authorities" in 1966. Therapy aimed at a "cure" was, of course, an expensive, sexist, infuriating fiasco. Or—not entirely. Years later John told me that just being able to talk to his second therapist (a closeted gay, we later learned, who had been at least guardedly sympathetic) had helped him, relieved him of some of his panic. I know now that I underestimated John's fear and anguish. He needed much more than my nervous acceptance, and in 1966, more than that was hard to come by.

Two years later (a year before the Stonewall Riots, now considered the start of the Gay Liberation Movement) John entered the University of California at Davis, where he seemed happier, "coming out" to class/dorm mates in a supportive, protected environment. Other elements of university life in the late sixties were more problematical. The curriculum was being challenged, if not torn apart. Students were allowed to "design" their own interdisciplinary majors. In 1972 he graduated with a BS in "Applied Behavioral Sciences," a term I never understood. Years later he shrugged, laughed, and said there wasn't much to understand. "I majored in me." After graduation he came back to San Francisco, where he took a clerical job while he thought about what to do next.

One day I gave him a copy of the recently published *The Persian Boy* by Mary Renault, a book I'd enjoyed and thought he would, for its well-written treatment of a homosexual theme set in a solid historical context. He enthusiastically read all of Renault's books, then Plato. He began studying Greek on his own, advancing with his usual speed and competency. Then he entered graduate studies at San Francisco State University, living on loans, part-time jobs, and a little help from me. He earned his MA in classics in 1987, then entered a PhD program at UC Santa Cruz. He had been there for a year, working and studying, when he suddenly announced he was quitting.

Stunned, I asked why, and he answered with what sounded like a quotation. "I refuse to live any place where I can't express my sexuality." Meaning anywhere but San Francisco? When I said that "expressing my sexuality" didn't sound like a choice of career, study, or life, he threw out a few furious words of dismissal, then hung up.

I could not believe (I still don't) that "expressing my sexuality" had much to do with his leaving graduate school. (Had W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Somerset Maugham, Tennessee Williams, etc. etc. abandoned their work in order to "express their sexuality?") What rough spot had tripped him up? Had he run into problems with his thesis director? Had he surveyed teaching opportunities in classics and decided they were too sparse? Had he really decided (as he also said) that teaching wasn't for him? What was really happening? These questions were never asked because for several years they were off limits, and later they became irrelevant.

Was I to blame? I was a Depression child, pressured to make early choice in studies and work. Other pressures of those times included early marriage. My rebellious change of direction at age thirty had taken a terrible toll on everyone involved. I did not want my children to make my mistakes. I encouraged them to be open to possibilities, to find the studies and work and the partner right for them, to try things, to experiment, take their time. Had I given the wrong advice in changing times? The expanding postwar

opportunities benefiting my generation were drying up (when I left a full-time tenured college job, I was replaced by part-timers on hourly pay, like migrant farm workers.) Except for a semester as a teaching assistant, At 30, John had held no job above a menial clerical level. Now he was dumping four years of graduate study in a subject he insisted he still loved. A friend in San Francisco would get him work as a freelance legal transcriber—a typist.

For the first time it occurred to me that, rather than “finding himself” by free exploration, my son could muddle along toward a middle age of unsatisfying work far below his ability. My concern, it turns out, was not just idle maternal fussing but enough of a real-life situation that it eventually found its way into fiction by serious writers. “Lark,” the middle-aged protagonist of Andrew Holleran’s novel *The Beauty of Men* (1996) has become “one of those people whose lives were not visible on a resumé. Lark concludes, “I’ve majored in Gay, and what has it got me? Not even a steady sex partner. I’ve failed.”) Where had John picked up this vague slogan, “expressing my sexuality”? I asked one of my gay friends, and he sighed, “That’s the gay political line this month—among the young.”

My friend’s remark reminded me of a book John had given me a month before, John Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw*. Handing it to me, my son had called it “the most important political statement of the decade.” It was a description of a night of jumping from one anonymous sexual encounter to another, one step ahead of pursuing police. I returned the book to John along with a note that said (more diplomatically than phrased here) I couldn’t define such squalor as a political act. John laughed at me for taking such a “silly” book seriously. It wasn’t worth talking about. He had obviously abandoned and forgotten his first description of the book (given to him by a friend along with the book?) and had gone on to another idea among the many exploding at the time.

And yet, looking back, I believe his original judgment of the book was, unfortunately, the correct one. After decades—centuries?—of brutal harassment by police for private behavior of consenting adults, gay rebels were flaunting their sexual preferences on the street, on their way to the proliferating bars and clubs set up for couple and group gay sex. Such behavior was indeed a political act. However, sex alone, though more fun than working for legal and social justice, is a dead end. Historian Martin Duberman summed it up in his 1996 memoir *Mid-life Queer*. “Too many gay men had, after coming out, headed directly into the arms of commercialized sex.”

John returned to San Francisco and rented a room in a house in what was now called The Castro, on the western side of the Mission District, climbing up Twin Peaks, a formerly run-down working class area surrounding about six blocks of Castro Street. The whole area west of Mission Street was recovering from a long post-war slump and suburban flight, partly thanks to an infusion of gay home buyers and businessmen. Within two months, John began, hated, and quit freelance transcribing and a clerical job in the law office from hell. With his usual intelligence and resourcefulness, he called every non-profit organization listed in the yellow pages and landed a clerical job in one of them. That was a relief to both of us. There were things to learn at this health care foundation, and chances for advancement.

Two weeks later he called to tell me he had caught a bad case of flu. The next day his list of complaints grew, and he agreed with me that he should see a doctor. He asked

me to bring him food—soup, fruit, juices. I did, and saw, for the first time, the house where he had rented a room.

It was furnished like the display window of a third-rate antique shop catering to rather morbid taste—marble death masks, crucified Christs, carved chairs that were torture to sit on. It sharply reminded me of the distance my son kept between me and his world. He called me daily and talked freely—more freely than most gay men talked about their lives with their mothers—but, with the exception of a couple of classics scholars my age, his friends, acquaintances, and lovers lived in another world. I never saw, let alone met, any of them. I had two close gay male friends, colleagues who kept a similar gap between their straight friends and their gay friends. This gap was something I had accepted without question, a necessary tradition among homosexuals, to protect each other from legal and social persecution. I had hoped my son would trust me enough not to keep this distance, but I never questioned his doing it. Why should people his age care to meet his mother, anyway?

I visited with John for a few moments, keeping my distance because of his “flu.” We both rolled our eyes at the lurid taste of his landlord. Then I left him to get some rest.

Each day he called with a list of symptoms. On the fourth day, his voice shook with fear as he said the doctor’s tests had confirmed hepatitis. He reminded me that hepatitis very serious, had long-range effects, and could even be fatal. My fear matched his, of course, and, as he called every few hours with reports on his fever, his pains, I set about preparing more of the food he requested. (When there’s trouble, Jewish and Italian mothers make soup.)

His fourth or fifth phone call that day was suddenly cheerful. Friends had visited him, traded stories about their bouts with hepatitis, all of them immune to his infection. “Nine out of ten gay men in San Francisco. Plague of the gay community,” he laughed. I thought of all the times he had called me to report syphilis or intestinal disease, just as he and his sister always reported every snuffle. I made a carefully worded suggestion that a serious disease like hepatitis might be a warning to reconsider his lifestyle. His laugh now took on an angry edge. “You want me to become a monk?” Abrupt end of conversation, heading off what he knew I was thinking—not about celibacy, but about the fact that, since he broke off with his girlfriend at sixteen, he had never had an ongoing relationship, even for a few weeks. For nearly fifteen years—at first nervously, later eagerly—I had been waiting to meet and welcome his companion/lover.

I keep imagining John looking over my shoulder, correcting my memory with his own. So, if I seem to be trying to create an image of a timid, martyred, perfect mother, my daughter is ready to correct that impression with evidence of how much of my concern was expressed in anger—to her, if not directly to her brother.

She kept a letter I wrote to her, dated October 25, 1979. In it I describe a sleepless week, my concern heightened by his “calling me four or five times a day” to “assault me with his symptoms, saying he might come here to be nursed. While I cook soup to bring to him, and keep quiet on the assumption that I should not start an argument with him while he is ill. Meanwhile I can’t work. He would say that I should do my own work and leave his life to him, but that is a lie too—he brings his life, his problems to me because he knows how deeply I care.” I used dramatic phrases like “throwing his life away.” The letter concludes, “Bob and I are driving up the coast for a weekend. Maybe I’ll clear my head and come back feeling better.”

I prepared the food my son had requested. My husband and I drove across the Bay to John's house, where I put the box of food on the doorstep, rang the bell, and left. I did not want to expose myself to hepatitis again, and I was too upset to talk.

As we drove north along the coast, my mood changed from anger to a kind of helpless fear and grief. To Bob's and my own surprise, I began to cry uncontrollably. I could not explain to him or to myself why I was crying. That night came abdominal pain, vomiting, and fever—imitating my son's symptoms? For a few hours I wondered if I had caught hepatitis from him. The next morning I knew that I hadn't, that my symptoms had been part of a profound psychological crisis, leaving me with a sense of unnamable doom I had never felt before.

Two days later, when we were home again, John called. He felt much better, his voice stronger as he scolded me for not stopping in to visit him, astonished that "you even seem to be angry at me for being sick!" So I broke my silence and started to talk—fairly calmly, I think—about the obvious connection between multiple, anonymous sexual acts and disease, and the promotion of both by people with superficial values, people who, lacking his talents, were trying to elevate their triviality to a philosophical or political position. Of course, he called me interfering, narrow, and puritanical, then went further. "You've always been incapable of fun." That was new too. Another quotation? Had one of his friends thrown such an accusation at him?

"Won't you just listen to what I'm trying to say?"

"No."

"I'll write you a letter."

"I won't read it." He hung up.

I sat there asking myself, what right do I have to tell a thirty-year-old man how to run his life? Isn't my reaction just like my mother's hysteria when I divorced? Nevertheless, I wrote the letter and sent it. John never acknowledged it. A few years later he told me he would have read my letter, no matter what he said, but he could not remember it, and I can't remember what I wrote—except for one furious and, no doubt, infuriating phrase I used later in my novel, about the promiscuous gay man as "Peter Pan with gonorrhea up his ass." (A bit too clever, I now think, trying a bit too hard to prove to him that his mother was not behind the times.)

John continued to call me frequently to discuss any problem or idea for which he needed a sounding board. There was no open break between us, but an area of deep silence had been clearly marked off. Cross that line, and next time he hung up on me might be a final break. I continued to feel an indefinable sense of loss—and a grinding, irrational fear.

A Day in San Francisco was born out of my uncharacteristically emotional episode in the car, the residue of fear and loss left by it, and the ongoing but silenced, forbidden argument between my son and me.

I began to read gay books and newspapers and to make visits to the Castro, to look closely at what was happening there, to find out what kind of influences my son was absorbing. This was a more unusual act than it might seem. If you were a straight liberal, you were against oppression of gay people, and that meant you were in favor of whatever was happening in the Castro. You just didn't look too closely.

We liberals were "committed not to the fact but to the abstraction," as Lionel Trilling wrote of the liberals who ignored Orwell's book about Spain. I had long since

chosen abstraction over fact. In my eagerness to prove myself an enlightened exception to the rule of rejecting families, I said nothing when John mentioned his sex life. When he reported a venereal disease, I silently gave thanks for antibiotics. When he threw out allusions to “the baths,” as if inviting questions, I did not ask for details. I didn’t want to know. I never questioned the behavior or the written opinions of homosexuals. To do so would give ammunition to bigots, or prove me one of them under the skin.

I questioned my closest gay friend about the “baths,” and, with some embarrassment, he admitted occasionally dropping in to one. At my urging, he described the cubicles where men waited or cruised, the dark “orgy” room with its loud music, conveniences like a douche appliance, which, used indiscriminately, probably spread diseases as surely as sex did. Many, if not most, bars had a back room for quick sex. So did some shops selling gay videos and books in the front. He was embarrassed, he explained, not because these places were wicked, but because they were “shabby and sad and humiliating, but so easy—“ for a shy, aging academic like him. So it seemed that this feverish sexual scene was no longer restricted to twenty-year-olds rushing into “liberated” San Francisco from bigoted Middle America. Their excitement was a magnet drawing long-term gay Bay Area residents of various classes, profession, races, and ages.

I went to a gay bookstore on Castro Street, and began reading in current gay-themed books, few of which were found in mainstream bookstores at the time. Twenty years later, I learned that Larry Kramer’s novel *Faggots* (1978) depicted critical views of the gay bar/sex scene, but in 1979 I had never heard of it, never heard it mentioned by my son or my gay friends. According to Michael Spector’s *New Yorker* profile of Kramer (May 13, 2002) *Faggots* had been “removed from the shelves of New York’s only gay bookstore,” and Kramer himself became a “pariah” treated as “a traitor” among Gays. The same attitude seemed to prevail in the bookstore I visited. Despite a thorough search, I did not find Kramer’s novel or any fiction resembling a mixed view of gay life. The most prominently displayed novels were formulaic erotic adventures or sentimental romances. The most serious of the popular sellers that I read was *The Front Runner*—an idealized gay romance brought to an operatic end by death at the hands of anti-gay bigots.

I spent even more time at the nonfiction racks, where books detailed attacks by homophobic religious fundamentalists or offered comfort to homosexuals rejected by family, friends, or community. Health books? I searched the shelves in vain. In fact in one newly published booklet I found total, flat-out denial. I still remember its title, *Straight Answers for Straight People*, but not the author. It was written in question-and-answer form. One question was, doesn’t anal intercourse carry dangers of spreading intestinal disease? (I paraphrase from memory, now regretting that my anger at the answer made me refuse to buy the book for documentation.) The author answered that he had never experienced, known, nor heard of anyone catching an intestinal disease from anal intercourse. My son had contracted one at least two years before. At that time a physician friend told me doctors were seeing, among gay men, intestinal diseases they hardly knew or had previously recognized only as their-world diseases. John had not traveled to any third world country, but obviously one of his sexual contacts had. These infections—and some injuries—already had a catch-all name, Gay Bowel Syndrome.

The only warnings about health concerns were flyers and pamphlets put out by the San Francisco Health Department, relegated to a dusty corner, on the floor under free advertising sheets. I began collecting these from that bookstore and wherever else I could

find them, in the corners of shops and coffee houses. Were they in the gay bars? I don't know. I confess, I lacked the courage to enter one of those dark, crowded places pouring thumping music into the street. I would have felt too conspicuous, unwelcome, clearly out of place. I interviewed a physician at the 17th Street clinic, a gay man eager to tell me his deep concerns about health in the Castro. He gave me more brochures and copies of articles from medical journals, citing the spread of disease through unprecedented promiscuity among gay men, promoted by commercial enterprises like bars and baths. I had the good luck to be acquainted with a research scientist in infectious diseases. He gave me relevant medical journals as more information came out. (A year later he gave me one containing an article on a rare skin cancer showing up in gay men.)

Meanwhile gay newspapers continued to publish articles on the dangers posed by the religious right. I saw no articles on dangers to health, nor any warnings against bar-bath cruising on any other grounds. My now jaundiced eye noted the irony of jaunty bar and body-building advertising, next to discreet little ads by proctologists. Once I found a brief letter to the editor, tentatively questioning whether multiple unknown sex partners really was a good idea, let alone a political position. So far as I know, there was no answer or follow-up article.

I interviewed an avowed anti-gay clergyman (without a church), a newcomer the San Francisco, a pleasant, polite man of impressive ignorance. He never mentioned the health hazards that could have given him handy ammunition for his attacks; nor the worship of youth and triviality in the Castro; nor the conformity of image already referred to then as "Castro Clone"; nor the avid focus on sex that more and more resembled the worst values of macho heterosexual men. This minister talked only about the *Bible* (which he didn't seem to know very well either) and the family. He was such a colorless mediocrity that I couldn't imagine why he was in the Bay Area instead of in some bastion of political reaction. Perhaps he was more noticed here? I had learned his name through extensive coverage in the gay press. No other media had paid much attention to him.

I scribbled pages and pages before I realized I was planning a novel. The first draft sprawled and rambled over a whole summer, then died after about 120 pages. I started with a new plan, partly documentary form, presenting concrete, verifiable facts that would change the consciousness of the protagonist and—if I was careful to get my facts straight—the reader.

It would be a short novel, the action taking place in one day, Gay Freedom Day 1980. The story would be told from a single point of view, a witness. She was to be a fiftyish mother very like me—Italian-American, born in the Mission District, a college teacher, as I had been, a liberal, mother of a gay man, a single mother like several of my friends and former teaching colleagues. "Clara" lived and taught on the Mendocino Coast, a four-hour drive from San Francisco. I made Clara an infrequent visitor to the Bay Area, out of touch, because, by then, it seemed to me that any reader would find it incredible that Clara could live in or near San Francisco, have daily conversations with her outspoken gay son, yet remain in a state of denial approaching delusion—as I had.

I decided to present the day as a journey from an accepted abstraction to a contrasting reality. I also wanted to show parallels between the present danger to Clara's son and some of the oppressive values of the fifties, which Clara herself had escaped, not unscathed. I did not (nor did medical authorities as yet) see the health hazards as life threatening, rather as secondary evidence that something was wrong, the body sending a

message to the mind in denial. Excerpts from a newspaper, a brochure, or a book Clara picks up would alternate with scenes described from her point of view.

The book opens with Clara viewing a Gay Freedom Day Parade for the first time, a bit surprised at its non-political, carnival atmosphere, but interpreting any grotesqueries as benign, amusing. She picks up a gay newspaper that contains her son's interview of a reactionary, anti-gay "psychologist" (combining right-wing articles and the interview I had done), to expose the interviewee's opportunistic bigotry. This section is intended to establish her son Frank as an intelligent, subtle questioner and writer. His interview of this ignorant bigot runs between ads lining left and right margins—just as serious articles run between ads in magazines. The difference is that, while ads in popular magazines sometimes use sexually arousing photos to attract attention to a product, in the gay publications, the product on sale was often sex or a sex enhancer. I invented toned-down versions of what I had seen in the gay press because I didn't want to foreshadow contradictions too early in the story.

The next chapter shows Clara moving—in the present and in memory—through her childhood neighborhood, noting how much has changed, except for the group of idle, restless Latino youth on a corner. She is on her way to Old Wives' Tales, one of the first women's bookstores, (featuring books by and for women which, in those days, were still relegated to the corners of mainstream bookstores) located on Valencia Street, (geographically, economically, and socially) lower than Castro Street. Here Clara reads aloud her own article on the assassination of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. To her, this double murder committed by a reactionary mediocrity representing her home district—a type familiar to Clara from her childhood—is a reaction to the loss of power by the oppressive forces of her childhood. Her (my) analysis shows the roots of the killings, not only in homophobia or in madness but also in a shift of political power that only an older resident would see. (Later, another old San Franciscan, Warren Hinckle, published a short news article viewing the killings from a similar perspective.)

Those first sixty-odd pages set a rather optimistic tone (somewhat as I did with the idealistic letters in the first half of *Prisoners*). These pages acknowledge the obvious enemies of homosexuals, as exemplified by the fictional anti-gay psychologist and the actual political assassin. Even more important, they establish Clara's credibility as a witness. She is a liberal, long ago accepting her son's homosexuality, even seeing the gay struggle against oppression as similar to her own feminist rebellion when she was Frank's age.

The turning point comes in the next chapter at a restaurant where Clara is to have lunch with her son and an older gay friend. The acerbic Arthur (a composite of three older gay men I knew) is critical of the Castro Scene and impatient with Frank's stated reasons for returning to San Francisco. Their discussion is interrupted by Frank's fearful phone call canceling lunch, announcing the diagnosis of hepatitis, and asking Clara to telephone him and visit him when she finishes lunch.

(This scene contains a late addition to the book, Arthur's gloomy news that a former lover has died of some mysterious disease. I added these three pages in the final rewrite in early 1982. In 1981, the first cases of Kaposi's sarcoma and *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia had been reported. By 1982 the medical community grouped these and other unusual maladies affecting gay men under the term GRID—gay-related

immunodeficiency disease—then thought to be caused by drug use and repeated infections that had weakened the immune system. My novel was published at about the time the term AIDS began to replace GRID.)

After lunch, when the worried Clara leaves Arthur, she makes her way through crowds and street venders to a phone booth, calls her son, and is greeted with sudden good cheer. In the background are sounds of laughing friends come to cheer him up and tease him about his initiation into the “plague of the gay community.” Franks suggests that she attend the benefit show at the Castro Theater while he takes a nap, and then come to cook dinner for the two of them. This was a plot device to delay their confrontation until Clara has had a couple of hours to take in the scene with new eyes. As Clara leaves the phone booth, she picks up one of the brochures from an ignored table set up by the City health department.

This chapter, written as a brochure, combines actual brochures, articles, and my interviews of doctors. It lists diseases and injuries, symptoms, treatments, and recommended preventive precautions. I wrote it in the style of the San Francisco Health Department brochures—friendly, non-judgmental, straightforward, encouraging caution, moving from readily cured diseases to those with treatment but no cure, ending with hepatitis, then considered the most serious health threat. My “brochure” was the most complete, up-to-date factual information then available. I knew that most readers—including gay men who knew all this by their own experience—would be taken aback at the long list of health dangers inherent in the multiple, anonymous, unprotected sex contacts promoted as an integral component, if not the heart, of gay liberation.

Clara then enters the darkened Castro Theater, where she has flashbacks to her (my) childhood attendance of movie matinees there. What happens at the benefit show came straight out of the newspaper while I was working on the book. At a recent benefit show a group of lesbians had protested a misogynist comedy routine by female impersonator Charles Pierce, a man my age, whose (newly resurrected) career had begun in a North Beach night club, during my girlhood, when such shows were enjoyed as family entertainment. Times had changed, as, perhaps, Pierce’s act had changed? In any case, the complaining lesbians in the audience were heckled and ridiculed by Pierce and by most males in the audience. The lesbians rose and walked out in a body. This news item was a rare public exposure of the strains between gays and lesbians, who lived widely separated by lifestyle, privilege, and income level—a class structure like a magnified mirror image of the larger heterosexual society where the economic gap was blurred by marriage.

Clara leaves the theater at dusk and walks uphill on Castro four or five blocks, to the house where her son is living. She prepares his dinner silently—but not for long. Conversation turns into argument, written solely in dialogue. The slogans and illogical evasions I put into Frank’s mouth came partly from things my son had said on various occasions, but mostly from gay newspapers and books, radio talk shows, and speeches. Clara’s rejoinders are my answers to this canned rhetoric. She harps on two perceptions that appall her: the defining of gay liberation by gay men in terms nearly identical to the denigrating labels of right-wing homophobes, and the pressures toward conformity and self-segregation in the name of freedom. To Clara, it seems that her son is reversing the hard process by which she dug her way out of oppressive conformity. Orwellian

doublethink is all around them. Freedom is the word for a new form of slavery, and her son has bought it.

(Rereading that dialogue scene decades later, I wince. It is so clearly a set-up for the opinions of or sermon by the author. A better book would have let Clara do what I had actually done—shut up and cook. Somehow I should have found a way to put hints of Clara’s concerns into earlier chapters, and let the reader supply the emotion Clara feels by the time she leaves, weeping as she walks down the street. Did I let my own emotions overcome good literary practice? Good literary practice in 1980?— or today, after thousand have died of AIDS? Besides, judging from the reaction to the book, if I had not spelled out Clara’s objections, flinging them at the denial of the signs of a beginning epidemic, it would have been even easier for my attackers to misrepresent me (interfering, anti-gay mother) and my motives.

In the brief final scene Clara, both her and her arguments dismissed by her son, walks downhill on dark 24th Street toward the subway. Her emotional turmoil resembles mine during that drive up the coast. She is noticed and followed by the group of Latino youth she had seen earlier in the day and which had come uphill into the Castro to prey on drunken gay revelers. However, when they see she is crying and mumbling to herself, they mistake her for a crazed street person, recoil, and leave her alone.

That final scene was also rooted in fact. In 1977 my son (a big man without effeminate touches of clothes or haircut, but very light-skinned and blonde) had been attacked by a gang of Latino teenagers yelling “queer” and “faggot, go home!” as he sat studying Greek in Dolores Park, half a block from his apartment and adjacent to my old high school, at two p.m. on a sunny afternoon. In the old days “The Castro” was just part of the “The Mission.” By 1980 Mission Street divided upscale “Noe Valley/Castro” from the eastern side of Mission Street, an area dominated by poor Latinos, though expanding pockets of gentrification were making all of the The Mission too expensive for poor people of whatever ethnicity. The proximity of many prosperous, white gay men to very poor immigrants of a macho culture was volatile. There had been beatings, and Hallowe’en in the Castro had already seen its first murder attributed to roaming, drunken gangs. (A quarter century later the problem has become so serious that Castro Street Hallowe’en parties have been canceled and businesses closed for the night.)

I finished the first draft in January 1981, but I had no idea what to do with it. Not only would it infuriate my son, it would shock and shame my chronically ill mother, who had never been able to accept my son’s homosexuality of my acceptance of it. I hesitated, decided to think more about it, and put the manuscript away. Two months later my mother suddenly died.

I went back to work on it, refining, polishing, rethinking. That was when, in response to health bulletins, I added the death of Arthur’s lover. If this new immune-deficiency syndrome were caused by multiple infections—as it was then thought to be—my son, apparently in excellent health, had been lucky—so far. All the more reason to publish, to shake him up somehow, since the subject was taboo in our almost daily talks. But physical ills were still only reinforcement for my real theme, the gay Castro ethos as a betrayal of a liberation struggle.

Or was something else taking over? Not just writer’s ego, but something like a sense of writer’s mission? I was not innocently blundering into controversy as Turgenev, Arendt, and Styron had. I knew, as Kate Chopin and Thomas Hardy had known, that I

was breaking a strong taboo by laying out facts some preferred to deny. Perhaps I was closest to Orwell's motive, with his sense of urgency that what he saw in Spain must be known. Orwell knew that what he had seen might be considered unimportant in the larger struggle against fascism. But he believed that denying any small truth would damage the larger cause from within. He expected that some communists would call him a liar. What he was not prepared for was the silence of the larger left and center he had thought would be grateful for his warning. As my motives resembled his, so did my expectation of anger from some gay people. But I expected the simple weight of the facts I presented would change some minds, would awaken others to the problem, and would support those who already shared my concern.

By the beginning of 1982, I had a final revision. It has been checked out by my medical advisor and my closest gay friend, both of whom made minor corrections. My three or four unofficial-literary-editor friends had read it. All of them asked only one question, in appalled tones: "You *are* sure of your facts?"

The next time I saw John, I took a deep breath, then told him that I planned to publish a novel that might annoy him. "You have a right to see it before I do." I handed him a copy of the manuscript. "If I get something wrong, I hope you'll correct me. But I will publish it." He asked me what it was about. I took another deep breath, preparing for another explosion of his anger. "It is very critical of the Castro lifestyle." I thought he might start by challenging me to define and defend this shorthand term, "Castro lifestyle." But he didn't. He was silent for a moment, then looked—relieved? Glad I had raised the forbidden subject? He shrugged. "I don't know what's happening. Everyone seems to be getting sick with one thing or another. Half the time now, when I go to a bar, I just come home alone." He took the manuscript home with him.

Still, when he telephoned me the next morning, his voice was taut with anger. He had been up all night, reading the manuscript. He dismissed the book as ignorant and mean-spirited, then hung up. Okay, now I've done it, I thought. This will be the final break between us. I felt sick. All day and all through a sleepless night I thought about calling him back and promising not to publish. But I didn't.

The next morning he called again. "Hi." Breath. Then, "You know, you got some things wrong." He suggested some word changes, which I instantly adopted. "And these ads you're sketched out—I can think of much more authentic ones." We went on discussing these fixable details. "I want to go through the manuscript again, more slowly, then confer with you on it." I controlled my wobbly voice as I said I'd be very grateful if he did. "He said, 'I think you ought to dedicate it to me.'" Then, briskly, "I'll write the dedication."

The dedication he chose was, "For John, who chose a happier path." In July he introduced me to René. Soon they were living together, monogamous, so abruptly cut off from the bathhouse-bar scene that René made some feeble complaints about giving up some friends. John had already moved out of the Castro and was advancing rapidly through administrative jobs in a large state institution. He was in touch with Classics scholars who asked him to write for their journals. Clearly my book had merely nudged him in the turn he was already taking, away from the lifestyle he would not reject openly.

Again I considered canceling publication, and I would have if I had seen any book, any serious gay press coverage of the concerns my book raised. If anything, there seemed to be more pressure against discussion, more denial—as young men arrived daily

from all over the country as to a great carnival. Furthermore, John was urging publication. He was now openly angry at the commercial interests promoting silence, at the gay politicians afraid to speak. He submitted a well-written but strongly (perhaps too strongly?) worded article on the subject to gay publications. No one would print it.

Before I sent my manuscript to the printer, something—perhaps John's initial reaction, then reversal—made me call Patricia Holt, then book editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who had been a staunch supporter of my writing and self-publishing. I told her a little about the manuscript and asked if she would read it as a sort-of advance galley, in case she had suggestions I could incorporate into it before it went to the printer. I had never done this before. In fact I had avoided any contact with her when I was about to bring out a book, so as not to seem to be asking for special favors. What I had in mind was that if Pat, as a lesbian, had an initially angry reaction, like John, showing it to her in manuscript gave us a chance to talk, to cool off, to make my intentions clear. She agreed to look at a copy of the manuscript.

A week later she telephoned me and said, in sternly sad tones, that the novel was all wrong, except for the essay on the assassinations, and, indeed, anti-gay. Clara "can't seem to hear or understand what Frank said. She is too judgmental and keeps missing the point," about the "unapologetic and active sexuality" of gay men that society must accept. Pat included a note written by her partner, who'd also read the manuscript. The note listed some books that might "help to educate" me and free me from my prejudices, like Randy Shilts' biography of assassinated Supervisor Harvey Milk, which, of course, I had already read. Well, that's it, I thought. I won't even get a review in the one major medium that has so far been open to me. I mentioned this to John, and he said, "Publish."

Two weeks later Pat called me. This time her tone was cheerful, even—excited? "I can't get this dang book out of my mind! We were out the other night and these guys were—well, I wasn't amused—so many things look different to me since I read your manuscript." Pat even said the maybe SHE had been missing the point, that it didn't matter what she disagreed with some of Clara's (or my) views. "Clara cuts through the rhetoric of the day because she sees a health crisis that endangers her son." (I didn't see this interpretation as a complete statement of the theme of my book, but, like Pat, I decided we didn't have to agree on everything.)

Like John, Pat had reacted, then thought, rethought, then not only changed her mind, but admitted it, a rare talent. She questioned me closely on my sources, my fact-checking, then said she wanted galleys as soon as possible and would aim for a review to appear near the end of January 1983.

Galleys had gone to *Kirkus Reviews* (mainly read by librarians) months before. Their November 1982 review was encouraging. It summarized the plot and concluded, "a painful, probing novel that goes far beyond the homosexual-lifestyle issues—as Bryant again traverses that arid plain between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to,' zeroing in (with uncommon power) on lives shrunk within the best of intentions." Books were with wholesalers and reviewers by December. I named January 1983 as the publication date, to give reviewers lead time. I sent out more copies of the book than I usually did, not only to teachers and writers, but to social and political activists.

The *Kirkus* review made me hopeful, but not hopeful enough to schedule my usual readings and signings in bookstores. I imagined gay men appearing at these readings to attack me, as young blacks had attacked Styron, who hadn't even criticized

Nat Turner's rebellion. Writing the book had already taken an enormous emotional toll on me. I was too shaky to face the harangues of even a few gays who might mistake me for another oppressor.

That's a poor reason for ducking a controversy I had intentionally started. But there was another, better reason to stay home. The first question people ask at readings is, "What inspired you to write this book?" To answer that question would have been to invade my son's privacy, to take unfair advantage of his support. Since we have different surnames, he need not be recognized as my son unless he chose to be. He certainly was not "Frank," the son in my books. He had never been so completely a mouthpiece for confused rhetoric. And he had already been more than generous. He even planned a small party at his apartment for a few of his and my friends.

The centerpiece on the food table at John's party, mounted on bright red paper and standing among flowers, was the first review printed in local gay paper, *Coming Up*, the weekly I had found to be the best written, most broad in its coverage, and the one that had printed the letter to the editor questioning multiple sex acts as a political act. The review was a brief, blistering attack that accused me of presenting gay men as "muscle-bound, sex-crazed, misogynist, diseased idiots, dying off at astounding rates of K.S. (in 1980?) . . . where the only people who aren't white are 'Latino thugs' intent on killing queers. Clara is . . . admired for her open acceptance of her son's homosexuality. But we, the reader, know how she really feels . . . I would think that the point would be to demonstrate the pain a mother feels when she can't accept her son's gayness. But what comes across is rabid homophobia on the part of the author . . . this book is just sadly laughable—and terribly enraging . . . a straight mother who degenerates into a babbling idiot over the horrors of her son's lifestyle. And in the hands of the Moral Majority, this book could be lethal." I tried to laugh off the review as John did, but I was shaken by it. I had expected some strong reactions, but was shocked at how this reviewer could misquote and misconstrue my book, could lie to her own community, could cover up facts she probably knew much better than I did, and had known much longer than I had.

Like a "real" publisher, I keep files of reviews. The file labeled *A Day in San Francisco* contains a total of eighteen reviews published in the early months of 1983. Most of them matched the tone and content of the review in *Coming Up*. Most were written and published locally, five of them by gay writers in gay media. (A short, haughty dismissal in a straight suburban daily "doubted the veracity" of the book. No fact checker had called me.) ALL of these reviews said that central to the book was the mother's inability to accept her son's homosexuality. One stated that the novel "shows how hard it is for someone outside the gay community to write well of it . . . and sorely tests one's faith in the absolute freedom of artists to express their own visions." Another stated that Clara favored celibacy and called disease a punishment for homosexuality. (No passages were quoted because, of course, no such ideas are stated by Clara.)

Several reviewers raised the familiar question of "balance," pointing out that Frank's behavior and attitude are not true of all gay life nor of all residents of the Castro. The evasive tactic of demanding "balance" is one way of refusing to deal with undeniable facts by turning toward other facts. (Like straight people who say of a gay protest novel, "But not all of us are anti-gay," or white people who say of a black protest novel, "Many of us aren't racists.")

Another criticism common to the reviews was the objection to Clara as “just too right about everything.” One reviewer wrote that Frank’s only problem is “his overachieving parent” who expects too much of him. (Describing a woman teacher who writes articles as “overachieving” evidently did not strike this reviewer as demeaning to all women.) The truth was that in creating Clara I had unwittingly broken a taboo even stronger and more widely accepted than the taboo against criticizing the lifestyle of some gay men. I had presented a middle-aged mother as an intelligent, liberal, sympathetic character with good reasons for concern about her son. Such characters are all over the place in real life (at least where I live), but they are scarce in Freud-ridden twentieth-century books and films.

The most furiously hostile local gay reviewer asked, “Isn’t it more rational to find cures for sexually transmitted diseases once and for all instead of asking males to stop being males?” Finally, here was a phrase, “asking males to stop being males,” that obliquely touched on what I wrote. Clara says that multiple sex partners extolled as gay liberation is a form of compulsive behavior—a detour from and a waste of life. This reviewer and other gay men—like Gore Vidal, who certainly has not wasted his life—disagree. The homosexual, according to some articles by Vidal, is the ultimate male, free to do what heterosexual males would also do if they were not inhibited by custom, religion, women’s resistance, and the burden of a family. The point is, at least, arguable. But the issue in my novel was not promiscuity in itself. The story makes it clear that, whatever her own beliefs, Clara does not challenge Frank’s sexual activity until he abandons his chosen work, then contracts a serious disease while “expressing my sexuality.”

The first part of the question, “Isn’t it more rational to find cures for sexually transmitted diseases once and for all,” is even more interesting, reflecting a widespread attitude that made it hard for gay men to believe in health dangers and use simple, traditional precautions. It had been thirty-five years since the discovery of antibiotics. We had—all of us—begun to forget the former frequency of death from infection. And a whole new generation had nothing to remember—had never lost a father to syphilitic dementia or a sister to pneumonia or a friend to tuberculosis or a co-worker to septicemia. That was history. This very recent success in curing some diseases had made many people believe that the right pill or some injections of the right drug would—ought to—cure any disease “once and for all;” some were irate when doctors couldn’t deliver. (Of course, we were still years from being reminded of a harder law of life—that bacteria causing disease evolves into resistant strains.)

About this time a few gay voices tried to separate political issues from health issues. Among the reviews I filed, I found a single news clipping dated March 1983. It described a gay leader who “courageously” addressed a group in San Francisco. What did he say that required courage? That the appearance of new diseases frightened him. “We have to make changes . . . to me that means not going to the baths, the bookstores, not having anonymous sex.” Carole Migden (then lesbian activist, later San Francisco Supervisor, then State Assemblywoman) was quoted in the same article. “There is a perception by some gays that it’s homophobic to say we are at risk . . . it will have a powerful impact that our most respected gay leaders have the courage to make personal statements about altering their lifestyle, and we hope they will serve as role models.”

I was glad that one review began “one of the major topics of conversation in town is ‘what did you think of *A Day in SF*?’” But then the review went on to condemn my book in the usual, irrelevant terms. What really shook me was that it was written by a lesbian acquaintance who, just before it appeared, had told me privately, “You’re dead right, but it would be politically awkward right now for me to defend you.” (I had thought she was apologizing for her silence, not for a planned attack.)

Nevertheless, despite hostility in the gay press, and not much of anything elsewhere, the first 5000 books sold briskly. I ordered a second printing.

Six favorable reviews trickled out late in 1983, five of them published in other states, far from the “gay mecca” of San Francisco. One of these was especially gratifying. Susanna Sturgis (*Lammas Little Review*, Washington D.C.) related *A Day in San Francisco* to my other books, where “a particular theme recurs insistently: the individual’s effort to break out of the prisons that thwart the development of her identity and talents. The prisons are various: mediocrity, the family, the past, fame, an actual jail. The escapes—never easy, often short-lived—involve the rigorous questioning of the most cherished certainties and the slow forging of new human connection.” The other favorable reviews concentrated on the health issues, which had suddenly begun to overwhelm everything else.

Pat Holt had warned me that she would have to give the book to a gay reviewer, who would, no doubt, savage it. But she promised to print a balancing answer to it.

On Sunday, January 23, 1983, the front page of the *SF Chronicle* Book Review had featured two opposing reviews of *A Day in San Francisco*. First came a review by a young gay male, an attack that was later echoed vehemently by the gay press reviews I’ve already quoted. I was characterized as an ignorant outsider who presented an unbalanced, prejudiced view of gay life, and who advocated celibacy.

The second review was signed by Pat Holt. She focused on Frank’s interview of the bigoted self-designated psychologist and on Clara’s essay analyzing the assassination of Milk and Moscone by Dan White. Pat’s was the only local review that acknowledged the existence of these parts of the book. She ended with a short list of questions on the health issues exposed in the novel.

Given the times and the place, she was sticking her neck way out in order to qualify me as the “first liberal-thinking person to ask the questions so few people in ‘tolerant San Francisco’ have been able to ask.” I have never asked her what that review cost her. Probably some broken friendships and, at the least, furious confrontations within the gay community. But she never mentioned any such problems to me.

She did mention the hate mail that instantly began to arrive, addressed to both Holt and me. These letters continued to come to me throughout the 1980s, about one a week during 1983, slowing to a trickle of one per month thereafter. Each one, as it came, had the effect its writer intended, making me almost physically ill. I learned to read only enough to see what it was, then tore it up into very small bits, and threw them away, into the garbage can *outside* the house—as if to neutralize and remove a potent charm or curse. For a year or two, I opened any letter from a stranger with an apprehensively churning stomach. I wish that I had thrown the letters unread into a file and kept them for this record, but, as events unfolded in the next few years, I lacked the cool judgment to do so. (I also wish I’d confiscated the copy of *A Day in San Francisco* I found in a Berkeley branch of the public library, every page of which was scrawled with denials and furious

accusations of my evil intent. A few years later, I went back to look for it; it had disappeared.)

Somehow I inadvertently dropped three angry letters into the reviews file. One was from someone who had read a review, but not the book. Another, from a man who had read the book, covered three legal-pad pages on both sides with an angry defense of gay men, like the writer, who “aren’t promiscuous.” He seemed to want an answer, carefully giving two addresses, East Coast and West Coast. I thought of writing to him that obviously my book wasn’t about him, and that we probably were in basic agreement—but I didn’t. I was frightened by the tone of the letter and by some phone calls I was receiving. The phone calls were not exactly threatening, but their tone, their questions, had an edge to them. A couple of calls issued odd-sounding invitations to meet with an informal group in a private home. They might have been perfectly innocent, but they made me uneasy too. I was glad I had not scheduled any public appearance. I asked the phone company to omit my address in the next directory.

I did keep all the favorable letters that came over the years. Two were from supportive writer-friends. The third was from a concerned mother of a gay man. Three more were from gay men, who said the book spoke the truth as they knew it, and came out of love. Total of six favorable letters, gratefully answered.

To my knowledge only one letter was written to any media in my defense. It was dated August 6, 1983 and addressed to a gay weekly by a lesbian friend. She was writing in answer to repeated attacks by the local gay author whose review had excoriated me for “asking males to stop being males.” He tirelessly to write attacks on both Pat Holt and on me. In this cool, welcome defense, there was one ominous sentence. “Regarding the ‘Dorothy Bryant Controversy,’ whether the novel is black-listed by offended book-buyers or shelved among travel books, the issue remains the same . . . by now more has been said about the book than was printed in it . . . by people who have not read it or not understood it.”

I soon learned that some of the offended book-buyers doing the blacklisting were librarians. One librarians’ newsletter, edited by an apparently friendly lesbian neighbor had already labeled *A Day in San Francisco* harmful, “not recommended.” (As good as blacklisted for quite a few libraries.) Another librarian friend mentioned the rejection of another of my books at a buying-committee meeting she attended. Someone had said, “No, Bryant is anti-gay.” And the committee went on to the next book under discussion. I asked my librarian friend what she had said when she heard that. “Said? Well, uh—nothing.”

Her silence was similar to that of other straight friends, most of whom never acknowledged the existence of the book. Some of them might have been truly unaware of it. But others, I knew, were very much aware of my book and the hostile reaction to it. They seemed confused, uncomfortable, disappointed that I had caused some kind of unpleasantness. They didn’t ask me any questions. They seemed to assume that “Frank” and “Clara” were my son and I, and that I had caused, then publicly exposed, an actual break with him. The only one who did speak up was an old friend on a brief visit from L.A., a brilliant social activist and teacher, and a mentor to me. “Why are you so angry at John?” as if I were tastelessly airing family problems. “We have lots of gay friends, and they’re nice folks,” he added, irrelevantly. (A few years later, in a letter to me, he praised

the book. When I reminded him of his initial opinion, he denied ever saying such a thing.)

Patricia Holt published three of what she called the “printable” letters written to the *SF Chronicle* Book Review. One of them called the health questions Holt had raised “silly.” Another concluded that “Bryant is terrifying! Your ‘questions’ absurd.”

The third, longer, and apparently more thoughtful letter did not consider health questions absurd, even used the word “epidemic”—strong language in 1983. However, the letter went on to state, “By the way, the AIDS epidemic affects not only homosexuals but Haitians, I.V. drug users, and hemophiliacs . . . high number of sex contacts is only one factor.” Only a few years later that statement would have read like a rational description of the means of contagion of AIDS through blood as well as sexual fluids. But in early 1983 AIDS was not generally perceived as a contagious disease. Possible causes most discussed were (1) sheer number and types of sexual acts (2) recreational drug use (3) weakening of the immune system by repeated bouts with diseases like syphilis. In other words “high number of sexual contacts” did not, at that time, point definitely to a contagious disease. Nor was illness in IV drug users or hemophiliacs yet considered a sign of infection passed on in blood. Nor was it pointed out that Haiti is a very poor country then frequented by many gay male vacationers. The writer of this letter had signed his name with M.D. after it.

That was what had so shocked a lesbian friend who called to discuss this letter with me. She knew the gay physician who had written it. In fact, he was the person who had mentioned to her the dawning suspicion of medical researchers that AIDS was caused by a virus or bacteria. This man knew exactly how the affected groups he had listed fit into these suspicions of communicable disease. He had taken facts, knowingly twisted them into a lie, then used his medical credentials to validate the lie.

When I asked Pat Holt about the letters, she explained that, wrongheaded as they were, they would help start the ball rolling, leading to other reviews and a more intelligent discussion.

A call inviting me to be interviewed on the Morning Show of the local ABC channel, before a live audience, seemed the beginning of the ball rolling. The telephone pre-interviewer tried to make it a joint interview with a gay man, but I rejected that, fearing I could be set up as an adversary of homosexuals. Then she suggested inviting some prominent gay writers, and I agreed, but they all refused her invitation. I suggested that questions from gay members of the audience would be appropriate and welcome.

Twenty years later, I reviewed a video of that telecast to refresh my memory. Most of the twenty-minute interview I spent dodging the interviewer’s attempts to probe my son’s private life or to place me in the category of mothers-appalled-by-son’s-homosexuality. I kept bringing her back to my novel, which, of course, she had not read, and to the issues it raised, about which she knew nothing. (I kept expecting to be cut off quickly as the previous guest had been. Why was I kept on camera, talking, so long? Later I learned that the producer of the show was a concerned mother of a gay man.)

Audience questions came from two young gay men, one of whom had AIDS. He suggested that AIDS was linked to being homosexual. I covered my shock (what if I had said such a thing?) and answered that my infectious diseases source had just told me researchers were looking toward the possibility of a virus. The other gay questioner ignored that statement and proposed a genetic source of AIDS—also linked to

homosexuality. (Remembering this insistent denial of infectious origin in 1983 might strike us as bizarre, but not as past history. In 2002 those who still insistently questioned the connection of HIV virus to AIDS included a University of California professor and the president of South Africa.)

A couple of radio appearances during 1983-84 were more satisfactory. One was a program hosted by conservative Quentin Kopp, then a San Francisco supervisor, later a state senator, then a judge. He hadn't even been on my review-copy mailing list, but had actually bought and read the book. When he welcomed me to radio studio, he took an amused off-air swipe at my "naïve liberal idealization" of the assassinated Mayor Moscone in "Clara's" essay. Otherwise, political orientation never came up. On the air, he spoke as a concerned San Franciscan, concentrating—again—mostly on health issues. It occurred to me that, ironically, having a mostly conservative constituency, he had little to lose if he offended gays by giving me a hearing. In any case, he was the only local politician who acknowledged the existence of the book. Probably liberal politicians were quietly trying other means to arouse some sensible talk on at least the health issues. If so, they would carefully avoid mentioned my book, which, by that time, was sure to associate them with a perceived enemy of homosexuals. Kopp—slightly right of San Francisco center—was the most conservative person who has ever contacted me in all the years since the novel came out. The Moral Majority, named by the *Coming Up* reviewer as a "lethal" threat if armed with my novel, ignored it. If any of them skimmed the early chapters, they knew I was no friend of theirs.

I spoke on a couple of FM-radio talk shows. One of them was an hour-long interview and call-in with a gay host. I accepted his invitation with trepidation because I knew he was a close friend of the gay reviewer who had challenged me on the grounds of "males being males." That reviewer wrote for all the gay weeklies, and no matter what the format or subject at hand, he continued to throw in an attack on Pat Holt and me. I needn't have worried. My host David Lambie was professional, courteous, and non-confrontational, easing my anxiety so that when his friend called in, spewing hostility, I was able to answer him calmly, logically, and, I think, effectively (because he couldn't see me sweating?) To my surprise, most of the callers were civil, concerned gay men and women, with intelligent questions. (Was it because they were speaking anonymously?) One of them, with friendly amusement, pointed out a typo on the first page of the novel.

Even though these radio interviews were easier than the TV appearance, I finished each of them in exhaustion and migraine. While imitating clam assurance, I was inwardly about as calm as an unarmed woman walking through battlefield crossfire. I knew my panic had no relation to the actual situation, but knowing that didn't help. I also knew that it was growing fear among my attackers that made them so determined to "kill the messenger." Knowing that didn't help either.

At the time KPFA-FM, a local non-commercial, left-wing station, broadcasted the Morning Reading on week days. A couple of time each month, I did the reading, enjoying the freedom of reading excerpts of my choice, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Maxine Hong Kingston. I also read an excerpt from each of my books as they came out. This time I didn't even mention the book. I had sent the Lesbian and Gay Department a copy, but I was content when they ignored it. Then in 1984—the year the AIDS virus was identified—the director of Drama and Literature, an older man who happened to be gay, and who had never mentioned the book, called me in and insisted that I read the entire

book, in prerecorded installments, to be broadcast over a two-to-three week period on the Evening Reading. It would then go into the Pacifica archives, to be played on affiliated stations. It was an unprecedented amount of air time given to one book. He didn't say why he had broken precedent, and I didn't ask.

I did the reading in nine or ten installments. When I came to the argument written as a dialogue between Clara and Frank, I asked John if he wanted to read with me, playing part of Frank. "Sure," he agreed, and one night at the station, his lover René in the studio with us, he read with gusto all the Frank's wrong-headed arguments. With a real flare for the dramatic (like what he had shown in his high school production of *In White America*, the civil rights docudrama by Martin Duberman, in which John had played all the bad-white-guy parts) he gave a far better reading of Frank's part than my weary-sounding reading of Clara's words. It is one of the painful ironies of life that I have it on cassette tape, my only recording of John's voice.

Except for those few, limited effects, the front-page reviews in the *SF Chronicle* Book Review had been followed by a great silence—unless you count the hate mail Pat Holt continued to receive. She said incredulously that not one daily paper had followed up with a review. I asked her, "Do other book editors in the Bay Area know about the attacks on you?" "Probably. Yes, word gets around."

Exactly. There are so many books to review. Why should other reviewers—especially in the San Francisco area—bring trouble on themselves? Or perhaps editors referred the book to a gay staff member, who buried it. If *A Day in San Francisco* had been written by a renowned writer backed by a corporate publisher (an unlikely scenario), it would have been necessary for more newspapers to review the book. But I had a small, scattered following and the stigma of self-publishing. It was easier just to ignore the book. Holt continued to ask, how could such an important book—the only book—on so timely a subject be ignored? Regardless of the rules of commercial publishing, she insisted, my book was what book editors long for, treatment of an emerging controversy that will draw attention to the less frequently read Book Review section, or even move the controversy to book nirvana—the main news section.

But in 1983-84, would it have drawn any attention other than abuse from a few gay readers? Ultimately, the main reason the book could so easily be buried lay in the 96% heterosexual population. A few reactionary fundamentalists called down their god's curses upon homosexuals, but the vast majority of people simply didn't care. Most—outside of San Francisco, New York, or Los Angeles—still believed they didn't even know any homosexuals personally. They also believed that whatever was happening could affect only homosexuals, about whom they—and this includes liberal, socially conscious people in San Francisco—preferred to know as little as possible. The clearest expression of homophobia was not what I had written in my novel, but the indifference to what I had written about the dangers—from within and from without—threatening this oppressed minority.

I began planning my first historical novel, *Confessions of Madame Psyche*, which required extensive research in the history of Northern California. I buried myself in that effort and mostly managed to put *A Day in San Francisco* out of my mind.

Occasionally a hate letter briefly shook my concentration, or a social gathering became awkward, as when a lesbian acquaintance suddenly strode across a crowded room to accuse me of trying to restrict her civil rights. I should have welcomed this

opportunity to discuss the growing confusion on the definition of “civil rights” and hostile stance of so many lesbians, whose life-style had nothing in common with that of gay men. The trouble was that we were at a reception to welcome visiting Swedish writers, who surrounded us, and her angry tone was attracting confused attention. I froze up, silent, until she stopped lecturing me and moved away.

The stories of coming to my defense, brought to me occasionally by a friend or acquaintance, weren’t reassuring. Like the creative writing teacher who had stood up to his students’ protest against being assigned *Writing a Novel*, written by the “vicious homophobe, Dorothy Bryant,” who had written some anti-gay book none of them had read. I appreciated his support, but stories like his—and the one related by the librarian on the book-buying committee—only made me wonder how many such incidents I was not hearing about and what effects they were having on reception to all my books.

In 1985, gay men began to sicken and die in large numbers. Sales of my book came to a sudden halt. Only the occasional hate letter reminded me that it was still being read. The AIDS debate dominated the media, reflecting the mounting confusion about what was a public health issue and what was a civil rights issue. There were protests and lawsuits over attempts to screen blood donors. Several gay people informed me that AIDS was a government germ warfare plot to kill homosexuals. Some children with AIDS were barred from public schools, then reinstated by court order. The discharge of a nurse who had AIDS was designated discrimination by the federal department of Health and Human Services. San Francisco hospitals were legally prohibited from testing for HIV in the blood of surgical patients. (This hit the news when a surgeon left San Francisco, saying she was tired of dressing like a space cadet for every surgery she performed—just in case.) The US Department of Justice disagreed with its own civil rights division on what constituted “civil rights” protections for AIDS patients. Meanwhile the mayor and the Health Department were still trying unsuccessfully to close down San Francisco bathhouses, opposed by demonstrators who called their efforts anti-gay infringements of civil rights.

In late 1985 the blood test for HIV (the term coined that year) became available. John and René immediately took the test, eager to reassure themselves that nearly four years of monogamy had saved them from the disease that was now claiming their friends. Both tested positive.

There had been many times during the three years since the book appeared that I wondered if I should have published it. Maybe people were right to say it could be used against gay people. My son had changed his lifestyle—removing my personal motive before the book went to the printer. And within a few months of publication some gay leaders began to speak out, albeit timidly. Maybe I had one nothing but make enemies. What reception might the many mainstream gay reviewers and librarians give to my next book? These questions were once and for all silenced. When I knew that my worst fear—no, catastrophe inconceivable to me when I started the book—was a certainty, I put aside my doubts. I knew that if I had canceled publication, I would always wonder if I had backed away from an opportunity to save my son’s life.

In 1986, less than a year after testing positive, René was hospitalized with his first bout of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia.

At that time, I was launching *Confessions of Madame Psyche*. Going ahead as usual with promotion of this book would give me something to think about besides what

was happening at home. Reception was generally good. It seemed that after four years everyone had moved on from *A Day in San Francisco*. Or everyone was relieved that I'd gotten off that subject. Not that I care much about their reaction nor any of the possible reasons for it. I began to feel comfortable at readings and signings again.

One of the readings was to be at a lesbian café/bookstore, offshoot of the first women's bookstore in the Bay Area, run by the women who had first promoted my books, and whose efforts had indirectly led *Kin of Ata* to Random House. They sent a woman to interview me for an article in their newsletter promoting the event at which I would appear. The newsletter appeared when René was back in the hospital again, and I was battling the feverish flu that often hits me when I'm under stress.

In this newsletter, articles coinciding with an author's appearance were always celebratory, detailing the author's life and work. Not this time. More than half of the article was an account of the reviewer's personal experience as a frequenter of mediums (the central character of my novel is a fraudulent medium). Then came the first mention of my writing. She wrote that she still remembered starting the read *A Day in San Francisco*, then throwing it across the room against the wall, in fury. But this new novel showed that "Bryant has worked very hard to come to a better understanding of lesbian life."

I telephoned the store and was greeted by the principal owner, who was also the editor of the newsletter. I asked her why she had printed an article likely to revive hostility against me. On the contrary, she assured me, she had printed the piece because she hoped it might "help lesbians forgive you." Forgive me for what? I demanded that she name one line from *A Day in San Francisco* that could be construed as an offensive statement about "lesbian life." She hesitated, then admitted she really couldn't say—she had never read the book. I canceled my appearance and hung up. No, I did not tell her about our personal crisis. To do so would have "explained" my "over-reaction," would have assured her that it was my problem, not hers. And at that moment I knew I could not bear to listen to the sympathy and "understanding" she would surely offer.

René was treated with the drugs available at the time. He had a year of comparatively good health before he began a steep decline. He died in 1988.

That was when I received the third of the hate letters I kept (perhaps because by that time I was indifferent to expressions of hate or threats). It was from a self-identified "drag queen" who accused me of "advocating the murder of gay men." He signed his letter, "In fury." Reading the book in 1988, he might not have realized that it had come out six years before. Who, he must have thought, would write such a book in 1988, except a rabid homophobe who took satisfaction in the rising death count?

By then I had accidentally fallen into historical play-writing, creating a role for an actor-friend of mine. In the next decade I wrote five more historical plays and one historical novel.

An exception to my bio-historical writing was a short novel *The Test* (1991) begun after René died—when I was, so to speak, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like *A Day in San Francisco*, its protagonist is a fiftyish mother and teacher, and the story takes place in one day. "Pat" knows that at the end of a frustrating day with her increasingly senile widowed father, she will join her son in his vigil by his lover's hospital bed. *The Test* is a meditation on grief and reality and memory, and the closest I have ever come to direct autobiography. Its tone—a mixture of anxiety, sadness, anger,

and desperate humor—reflects personal feelings that began with the positive HIV tests in 1985 and may have colored my consciousness ever since.

By the beginning of the nineties, everyone had forgotten that there had ever been a book called *A Day in San Francisco*. Or—not quite everyone? In 1992 my play *Dear Master* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* shared the Bay Area Critics Circle Award for Best New Script. The *San Francisco Chronicle* printed a complete list of all the winners in all categories (acting, lighting, sound, etc.)—all except me. Just a simple error, my little play forgotten in the excitement over *Angels in America*? Yes, of course. And yet, the co-presenter of awards at the ceremony I had attended was none other than the gay writer who had relentlessly harassed me in print for four years. Was he also the one who had turned in the list of winners to the newspaper? I obsessed about this for about five minutes. Then I laughed. Then I called John so that we could laugh together about my paranoia or that guy's petty vengeance or both. We were grasping at every possible occasion to laugh, because John was recovering from his first AIDS-related illness.

John died on April 26, 1994, just short of his forty-fourth birthday. We spent much of his final weeks together. During one of our last talks he said he wondered what his life would have been like had he been born later and come to adolescence after 1980, after the decade when the excitement of gays breaking down closet doors turned into the self-destructive self-parody that sometimes swallowed up lives as fatally as AIDS had. He referred to the 1970s as if they were a period of ancient history grown dim and somewhat puzzling in his memory.

Nearly three decades after *A Day in San Francisco*, it is even harder to conjure up the time when self-appointed gay spokesmen referred to straight people contemptuously as “breeders,” and predicted the inevitable transformation of San Francisco into a “gay city,” where erotic and free brotherly love would take the place of worn-out traditions like marriage and the family. Today homosexuals focus on demanding the right to marry and to adopt children, insisting that in their hopes and dreams they are just like everyone else. Today, as AIDS patients live longer and longer, under treatment with new drugs, consciousness of AIDS has dimmed to vague awareness and the mistaken illusion of the disease as a distant calamity, somewhere in Africa.

A critical survey called *Confronting AIDS Through Literature* (1993) cited *A Day in San Francisco* as “the first AIDS-themed novel.” Three years later, in a *Washington Times* series on ignored or forgotten books, Joanne Greenberg summarized the attacks on me and called the book “prophetic.” Both of these citations seem only peripherally connected to my book. Granted, my impulse was an emotional crisis that could have been intuitively prophetic of a danger to my son. But I still see physical disease as a minor part of *A Day in San Francisco*. The novel is about a crisis of values. It is about how a liberation movement can be bought out, sold out, stalled, in the name of freedom. It is about how love, not always blind, may cut through intellectual abstractions and political rhetoric to see what is “in front of our noses.”