

Lesbian Newsletters, Pulps, and Manuals: A Primary Source Analysis

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Lesbian women were not always able to hold their girlfriend's hand or watch queer films in public. They used to attend invite only gatherings, and get married to men for economic freedom and societal comfort. Most importantly, they used to write and write and write. Writing was the lesbian outlet for their feelings not allowed to be said aloud. From lesbian pulps to lesbian newsletters, it is clear the community was tight-knit in America in the 1940s and 1950s, even if their communication could only be on paper. In all four publications reviewed, the queer community had a sense of humor about their status in American society, and took the secrecy they needed to maintain very seriously. Lesbians presented themselves to the world as fiercely opinionated, funny, respectful, resilient, and academically inclined, and this is seen in the stories they wrote, media they reviewed, and how they protected themselves and their community in these publications. The values seen in all of these lesbian publications were safety both for the individual and for the community, how to spend your time focused on homosexuality both in person and through your media, and how important it was to get the queer community more widely accepted for women, as the acceptance for gay men was growing.

Many scholars have discussed how the publications from the homophile movement in American queer history shaped an open forum for the community to discuss topics that could not be brought up in public.¹ The publications were written and often circulated by hand rather than by mail, so the information would only reach the intended audience, homosexuals other homosexuals knew they could trust. Elizabeth Coretto argues in their thesis that the development of lesbian publications widened the diversity of the male-dominated homophile publication scene.² JD Doyle published all editions of *Vice Versa*, the first known lesbian publication in the

¹ "Research Guides: LGBTQIA+ Studies: A Resource Guide: Before Stonewall: The Homophile Movement," n.d. <https://guides.loc.gov/lgbtq-studies/before-stonewall>.

² Elizabeth Coretto, "'The Fountain Pen and the Typewriter': The Rise of the Homophile Press in the 1950s and 1960s," *Undergraduate Research Commons*, 2017. <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/214/>.

United States with his own commentary. Doyle includes his correspondence with the first editor of *Vice Versa*, Lisa Ben, and defends his belief that Ben and her publication shaped the way lesbian women were discussed in queer media.³ Ben is praised by Doyle for her work of gay parodies, and how her publication was just the beginning of the activism she would go on to engage in. It's been explained by scholars of queer studies that the lesbian publications were inspired by gay men's newsletters like *ONE* and the *Mattachine Review*.⁴ This paper argues that while the lesbian publications may have been *modeled* from the gay men's newsletters, their inspiration is purely their own, sharing book reviews, poems, and advice solely for lesbian women. The lesbian publications and organizations collaborated with gay men's groups, and flew below the heterosexual radar like the gay men's groups, but their publications were purely their own, sending out presentations of their lesbian selves to the community the way they wanted to.

The publications did everything necessary to stay afloat. The authors and editors knew their work was crucial for the morale of the community, so they wanted to continue sending out newsletters as long as possible. They asked for donations and began charging for the newsletters once they were popular, but more than just money was needed. The publications required a lot of material if they were going to churn out one edition a month. The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian rights organization in the United States, originated in San Francisco, California in 1955. Their publication, *The Ladder*, debuted a year later in 1956, and was the first lesbian newsletter to be distributed across the United States. *Vice Versa*, the first lesbian newsletter ever, was published by Lisa Ben in 1947 and 1948, but it was only circulated locally to where Ben

³ J.D. Doyle, "Correspondence With Lisa Ben," Queer Music Heritage. Accessed May 1, 2024. <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa1b.html>.

⁴ Catherine Halley, "ONE: The First Gay Magazine in the United States," *JSTOR Daily*, July 15, 2020. <https://daily.jstor.org/one-the-first-gay-magazine-in-the-united-states/>.

worked, Los Angeles, California. Both of these publications practically begged their readers to contribute, whether it be stories, poems, book reviews, questions, or just ideas for the editors to write about. *Vice Versa* volume one number one, told readers that this was their magazine and they should contribute whatever they'd like to read about. The editor, Lisa Ben, then asked in every edition after, for people to send in material, even asking, "how do you know you can't write if you haven't tried?"⁵ *The Ladder* had many more pages in each edition and ran for a longer time, but that was because they had a much larger audience from sending their publication across the country. The editors often placed a small section towards the end saying that people should contribute because it was a magazine by lesbians for lesbians.

The lesbian authors wrote under pseudonyms to protect themselves, their publishers, and the people reading. Some lesbian pulps were even published under male names because it was considered shameful a woman could ever write such erotic and homosexual content. Authors for *The Ladder* all wrote under pseudonyms in the beginning, some would later switch to their real names as the newsletter continued. One pseudonym already mentioned was Lisa Ben, which is a personified version of the word "lesbian." The real Lisa Ben was Edythe Eyde, a woman who moved to Los Angeles to get away from her parents and find other women who liked women.⁶ Eyde was told to "look busy" in her office even when she finished her work at RKO Studios, so this was the perfect opportunity for her to write the magazine.⁷ She could not use her real name for fear of being fired or her parents finding out, but publishing this newsletter was an exciting project for her. Another piece studied for this project was an informational lesbian pulp titled *We Walk Alone*, written by Ann Aldrich, which was the pseudonym for Marijane Meaker. Meaker wrote as Ann Aldrich for her lesbian pulps, as Vin Packer for her thriller novels, and as M. E.

⁵ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, August 1947, 1.

⁶ "Vice Versa at RKO Studios | One Archives," n.d. <https://one.usc.edu/story/vice-versa-rko-studios>.

⁷ Ibid.

Kerr for her young adult novels.⁸ *The Price of Salt*, a fictional lesbian pulp written by Patricia Highsmith under the pseudonym Claire Morgan debuted in 1952. Highsmith had already written one novel, *Strangers on a Train*, that featured homosexual love, so to avoid being labeled as a “lesbian author” she published the second book under a pseudonym.⁹ It was not until 1991 that Highsmith published *The Price of Salt* under her own name. Pseudonyms were used by all editors, authors, and contributors of *The Ladder*, *Vice Versa*, *We Walk Alone*, and *The Price of Salt*, allowing for these necessary lesbian narratives to reach the community even if others opposed their publication.

Safety of the readers was also a priority for the authors and editors. In *The Ladder* there are several sections throughout their editions that stress that recipient’s names are safe and packaging will be discreet. In volume one number one of *The Ladder* there is a segment about how people who join Daughters of Bilitis chapters have nothing to fear. They asked an attorney questions, and shared that DOB is a legally chartered non-profit organization in California, so the members shouldn’t have any issues with the law.¹⁰ *The Ladder* also ran articles on what to do if you get arrested, telling the reader to stay calm, have a lawyer on hand, and to memorize your rights.¹¹ In *We Walk Alone* there was advice on what clubs, movie theatres, restaurants, apartment complexes, and cities were safe to be outwardly homosexual.¹² There is a chapter about discretion, recommending the women to date men a few times a month to avoid raising suspicion that they were gay.¹³ In these chapters and articles the authors want to prepare the reader for the worst: the harassment and cruel laws that threaten their way of life. The authors also

⁸ Denyse Rodrigues, “Meaker, Marijane (Vin Packer, Ann Aldrich), The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection at Mount Saint Vincent University,” n.d., <https://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/835>.

⁹ “Patricia Highsmith and the Price of Salt – UNSUITABLE,” n.d., <https://sites.duke.edu/unsuitable/patricia-highsmith/>.

¹⁰ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, April 1957, 15.

¹¹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 2-3.

¹² Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2015).

¹³ Aldrich, *We Walk Alone*, pp. 77-84.

acknowledged that even though homosexuality was technically illegal, people needed to know how to resist, and understand that their existence as a homosexual human was not a crime. Everyone, readers and authors, knew it was a risk to be involved in homosexual culture both in person and in the media. But if they banded together to protect one another through education and sharing resources, the community would persist.

The lesbian pulps and newsletters also functioned as manuals for how to find other homosexuals. This included what cities and establishments to visit, but also what to look for when meeting new people. *We Walk Alone* was more a book informing people on lesbian practices than a fictional story, and it contained a slew of topics like: how women become lesbians, how to obey and work around the laws, what the party scene was like in cities, and how parents can support their lesbian daughters. Anyone who read this book would have learned something, whether they were lesbian or not. The book explained how women became lesbians out of fear, fear of pregnancy, men, submission, and penetration.¹⁴ In the chapter about stereotypes, Aldrich shared that butch women chose to live in bohemian areas of big cities because it was where they would be most accepted, and fem lesbians were a “caricature of womanness” so they were easier to spot.¹⁵ Aldrich did not intend for this information to sound rude, she simply wanted lesbians to be able to identify each other, and not have to second guess if a more masculine woman was lesbian or not- she was!

The Ladder encouraged their homosexual audience to meet in person by offering details of so many events and organizations. This newsletter added to the how-to-meet-gays rhetoric that began with social manuals. Because the publication was an offshoot of the Daughters of Bilitis, there were many segments about new DOB chapters opening in different cities, and what each

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

chapter was doing the next month. *The Ladder* shared information about studies on the homosexual community calling for participants, like one for a small group discussion for lesbian mothers to share their experiences.¹⁶ In October of 1957, *The Ladder* announced their inaugural research project which was to record case histories of lesbians.¹⁷ Participants were welcome to volunteer on a rolling basis, and they were interested in hearing from lesbians of all backgrounds. DOB sponsored panels, such as one titled “Are homosexuals a menace?”¹⁸ Panels were a great way to learn more in depth about the topics of their newsletter articles, but you don’t have to participate- just listen. DOB and their publication also advertised social opportunities to be with other homosexual people. There were DOB sponsored social events in every area where there was a chapter: parties, picnics, and bowling.¹⁹ The Daughters of Bilitis local chapters and their nationally circulated publication, *The Ladder*, provided their homosexual readers many opportunities to engage with the community in person, and make as many new gay friends as they pleased. *We Walk Alone* and *The Ladder* sharing ways to connect with other homosexuals in person show that the publications by lesbians in the 1940s and 50s wanted the community to focus and promote their queerness together.

What lesbians were interested in was very clear from the writings they published during this time period. The books and articles were written by lesbians, for lesbians, so the information, events, and stories that were chosen were the ones that lesbians wanted to read and share. Storytelling was integral for the lesbians of the 1940s and 50s. Poems, or “lesbian lyrics” as they were referred to in *The Ladder*, were notable parts of both lesbians newsletters. Poems were a way to process the events in an individual's life or in the wider culture, because you can

¹⁶ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, January, 1957, 4.

¹⁷ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 6.

¹⁸ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 3.

¹⁹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 6.

write with metaphors that have a deeper meaning. By using specific slang or phrases, the feelings explained in these poems could not be deciphered by anyone except a lesbian. One example was the poem *Disguise* by Audrey Kern featured in *The Ladder*.²⁰ This poem is about feeling like you have something to hide from everyone around you, so you have lost yourself. Another way to process things was writing fiction based on a true story. Changing the names of the characters but keeping the scenarios or descriptions the same was a way to tell people what you were going through without getting in trouble with your family or local community. Authors like Patricia Highsmith did this when writing *The Price of Salt*. This lesbian pulp was based on Highsmith's and her friend's real experiences, but the names needed to be changed so the people would not get harassed. Writing into these newsletters was a great way for lesbians to blow off steam from their lives, especially when they used pseudonyms so their stories were anonymous. Common topics for these poems and short stories were secrecy, feeling alone and isolated, and having to be discreet about their feelings for other women. These themes appearing so frequently in *The Ladder* and *Vice Versa*'s reader contribution sections show how the lesbians of the time needed an outlet for their feelings, and writing anonymously to share with their community was a great strategy.

In addition to the lesbian lyrics and short stories, the authors and readers had a lot of recommendations of queer media other readers should check out. People would write book reviews and submit them, sometimes praising and sometimes absolutely bashing the text. In *The Ladder* volume one number three the *Homosexuals Today Handbook* was recommended for being "very well written," and the editors suggested it be in everyone's personal library.²¹ *The Ladder* also had a segment called *Lesbiana* which began in volume one number six, where the

²⁰ Audrey Kern, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 13.

²¹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 5.

editors compiled a list of lesbian literature. The list for the first edition was made up of fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry. They gave summaries of the texts so that readers could decide if the suggestions were for them. Daughters of Bilitis had a library that was finally available at their San Francisco office in August of 1957.²² This library featured many of the books they reviewed and was open to anyone who wanted to borrow books or just have a comforting place to read. *Vice Versa* gave a lot of recommendations as well, the editor Lisa Ben wrote many of them, but when Laura Jean Ermayne began submitting content to the newsletter, the two of them teamed up to deliver recommendations and summaries. *Vice Versa*'s literature review section was called Bookworm's Burrow. The review that stood out the most was on *Trio* from volume one number four. The section begins with a summary, telling the reader this story is about a college professor who struggles with men's affection as she pursues a lesbian relationship with her assistant.²³ Then it's said that the plot moves too slow and does not capture the audience, and that the characterization of the lesbian is awful.²⁴ This negative review demonstrates that the lesbian authors and editors did not feel the need to praise every piece of gay media just because it was gay. The lesbian audience had standards for their media, and they were not willing to accept representation just for representation's sake. Some of the reviews serve to encourage the queer audience to check out more queer media, and others serve to remind readers that not all representation would be interesting or of high quality.

Every *Vice Versa* newsletter featured a "whatchama column" where the editor, Lisa Ben, would respond to letters that did not fit into the book review or editor's note sections. This column was crucial to learning what topics interested lesbians at the time, because it was the miscellaneous space of emotion and concern. One conversation that was featured in the column

²² Anonymous, *The Ladder*, August 1957, 5.

²³ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, September 1947, 2.

²⁴ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, September 1947, 3.

was if the slang terms used to refer to lesbians were lacking dignity or not.²⁵ Laurajeane Ermayne wrote in saying that “butch” and “fluff” were not ideal, but yet there was nothing else. Ermayne did not want to use words like “sapphist” or “uranian” because they felt those words were meant for literature.²⁶ Ermayne then suggested referring to butch women as “lescourts” because this was shorthand for lesbian escort, and referring to tomboy lesbians as “clyffe” after Radclyffe, to “honor the matron saint.”²⁷ In Ben’s response, she assured Ermayne that they are not the first lesbian to express discomfort with labels to the magazine, yet she still liked words like “butch” and “fluff” because they are straight to the point.²⁸ Ben agrees these words lack dignity, but it would take widespread education and unanimous support to just switch to new labels, so it’s worth it to just reclaim the terms. This discourse displays lesbians’ of the 1940s and 50s wish to control their own narrative, especially in the media. Lisa Ben was kind and understanding in her editor’s response, but if even a lesbian magazine editor won’t switch to new labels, the rest of the country was not going to any time soon. The readers and audience writing in wanted their image to be more than just weak vs masculine; they wanted to be seen as romantic: courting another woman, or a queer Christ figure like in *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall.

Lesbian literary interests expanded past newsletters with lesbian pulps. But many pulps were written by men and were focused on men’s happiness, so lesbians longed for pulps that had the lesbian as the heroine rather than the deviant. Enter: *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, originally published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan was a lesbian pulp novel released in 1952. The novel tells the story of Therese, a young woman working in a department store during the holiday season who falls in love with an older woman, Carol, who comes in to buy a present

²⁵ Laurajeane Ermayne, *Vice Versa*, November 1947, 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, November 1947, 10.

for her daughter. The two hit it off immediately, and begin spending every second together. They face many issues that were all too familiar for the lesbians of this time: husbands, divorce, having children, having their homosexual activities being tracked. The novel was written from a blend of a few true stories in Highsmith's life. Carol was based on a real woman Highsmith had swooned over while working at a department store, Carol's divorce and struggle for custody of her child was based on Highsmith's lesbian friend's marriage.²⁹ This beautiful story hit close to home, representing all lesbians who read it. Even if they had not experienced this exact scenario, they all felt threatened by men or had their homosexual existence questioned at some point. However, *The Price of Salt* features a lesbian-approved happy ending, where Carol and Therese reconnect. Many lesbian pulps written at this time had a heterosexual resolution, where the promiscuous homosexual woman ends up with a man and apologizes for her mistakes. While this was technically lesbian representation, and the lesbians did read these pulps, *The Price of Salt* was valued by the queer community so much more due to its lesbian-affirming ending. In *The Ladder*, one review stated that the ending is different, and this will create a new genre in pulps, long sought-after by the homosexual community.³⁰ The existence of this book and how widely it was read demonstrates how lesbians wanted to see happy endings for themselves in their media, not just a few chapters of a woman "going rogue" against her true heterosexuality.

A large portion of the media in American lesbian culture in the 1940s and 50s interacted with each other, which is another way the lesbian authors expressed the themes they wanted to see in lesbian writings. Some authors and editors worked for multiple newsletters, so they took what they learned to improve a new publication. Lisa Ben, the editor and creator of *Vice Versa*, went on to work for *The Ladder* after she was fired from her job at RKO studios and could no

²⁹ Patricia Highsmith, *Price of Salt*, (Courier Dover Publications, 2015).

³⁰ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 11.

longer produce her own magazine.³¹ *The Ladder* had recommended *Vice Versa* in previous editions of their newsletter, so DOB and the newsletter's editors knew *Vice Versa* was a reputable publication, and they could trust the work Lisa Ben put out.³² *The Ladder* also published great summaries with positive reviews for books like *The Well of Loneliness* and *The Price of Salt* that came out relatively recently compared to the publication of the newsletter.³³ They also published summaries and reviews of older books with lesbian themes like *Carmilla* by Sheridan le Fanu that debuted in 1872.³⁴ This book is about a sad young woman named Laura who falls in love with Carmilla, who is later revealed to be a lesbian vampire. This book is praised by *The Ladder* editors who share that lesbianism has always been around, and even discuss the popular metaphor of monsters representing homosexuality. By hiring editors from other appreciated lesbian magazines and writing reviews of any and all lesbian literature so people can learn what all was available, *The Ladder* positioned itself inside of lesbian culture, sharing whatever they could to as many people as possible.

While some newsletters loved other publications, novels, and authors, some newsletters had great disdain for works of lesbian literature that they did not think was up to par. *Vice Versa* contained strong opinions in their "bookworm's burrow" but none of their takes were ever as controversial as *The Ladder*'s review of Ann Aldrich's *We Walk Alone*. The review begins by saying Ann Aldrich's good intentions were not enough to achieve balance and properly represent the lesbian community.³⁵ The author of the review, Del Martin, points out that Aldrich contradicts herself when she says lesbians are multifaceted and can not be categorized, but in

³¹ "Lisa Ben & Vice Versa," n.d., <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa.html>.

³² Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 5.

³³ For review of *The Well of Loneliness* check: Anonymous, *The Ladder*, March 1957, 12; For review of *The Price of Salt* check: Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 11.

³⁴ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, July 1957, 19.

³⁵ Del Martin, *The Ladder*, June 1957, 16.

other chapters places lesbians into stereotypes.³⁶ Martin finishes by saying that Aldrich's contribution is valid and accepted by the community but only because there is so little lesbian literature. Martin would prefer that next time Aldrich be more clear with her messages and ask lesbians about their lives herself rather than write about lesbians based on studies.³⁷ This review took Aldrich by surprise, and she responded by making fun of *The Ladder* in her books.³⁸ DOB did not back down though, and continued to write about how her book had shortcomings, even calling Aldrich's work self-hating.³⁹ This response to *We Walk Alone* causes historians today to wonder how the book got so popular if its contents was not approved by many lesbians, and further research is needed to discover if all of the book's claims were fully factual.

The authors and editors of the newsletters, pulps, and manuals collaborating and feuding demonstrates that the lesbian media at the time was widely known in the community. The publications knew about each other, and had very strong opinions on who was representing lesbians the best in the media they produced. All in all, the editions of the newsletters and the pulps and manuals all gave similar advice and had similar understandings. They each demonstrated that the stereotypes, slang, and cultural norms for lesbians were pretty universal for those who had access to these resources, likely white middle class lesbians. Even when the publications disagreed with each other, they attempted to remain civil for the good of the community, and they pushed that safety was the most important thing for the readers. The similarities between all of these publications shows that they had a similar mission of acknowledging the flaws in the lesbian culture, but still promoting the beautiful aspects and supporting themselves as good humans, authors, and lovers.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Del Martin, *The Ladder*, June 1957, 19.

³⁸ June Thomas, "Marijane Meaker: The Most Important Lesbian Writer You've Never Heard of," *Advocate.Com*, March 11, 2016,

<https://www.advocate.com/current-issue/2016/3/10/most-important-lesbian-writer-never-heard#toggle-gdpr>.

³⁹ Stephanie Foote, "Afterword," in *We Walk Alone* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2015), 180.

Vice Versa, *The Ladder*, *We Walk Alone*, and *The Price of Salt* were all published in the 1940s and 50s by American lesbian authors who hoped their writing would reach a wider lesbian audience and unite a community. Though events and norms differed from city to city, lesbian newsletters, pulps, and events run by the Daughters of Bilitis chapters kept the whole lesbian community connected across the country. Many of the connections between the lesbian community at the time had to be done on paper for fear of being caught and labeled as a lesbian. Writing into local newsletters like *Vice Versa*, or across-country publications like *The Ladder* provided an outlet for lesbian women to share their opinions, advice, sorrows, and successes with each other. All authors and editors covered in this paper wrote under a pseudonym, sometimes multiple, to further promote their own safety and the safety of the readers. Particularly writing under a male or gender neutral name really got rid of any suspicions because it was accepted when men wrote about promiscuous women like lesbians. The lesbians authors wrote about what they wanted to see in their media: happy endings for the lesbian couple, relationships without gender roles, acknowledgement that you are not alone, and messages to assure people they are not sinful for feeling homosexual attraction. They were therefore very opinionated on lesbian media that did not represent them properly, and wrote about it to share with the community to not support this piece of writing for being inaccurate or uncomfortable. These writings that promoted community, safety, and honesty made the representation of lesbians in the 1940s and 50s be very diverse: funny, fierce, protective, and powerful. These works of lesbian literature were set out to change the way lesbianism was viewed, for the better.

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