

Comparative Literature 561  
LESBIAN FICTION

Professor Bonnie Zimmerman  
AH 3175  
594-5749

Office Hours: Mon. 1:00-2:00  
Wed. 10:45-11:45  
Wed. 3:00-4:00

What does it mean to be "lesbian"? What is a lesbian identity, consciousness, aesthetic, or text? Is there a specific lesbian content or narrative strategy that crosses national and historic boundaries? Are these terms even meaningful, especially in the so-called post-feminist, post-lesbian, queer nineties?

This course will investigate these and other questions through selected twentieth century novels, short stories, and fictionalized autobiographies representing a variety of national literatures and identities. The premise of the course is that lesbian identities in this century have been continually constructed in the face of erasure, silence, and invisibility, and deconstructed in recognition of the complexities of modern social life. To the extent that lesbian literature, as a genre, is predicated in some way upon lesbian identity, then it too undergoes these forces of construction and deconstruction.

The purpose of this seminar, then, is to investigate some meanings for the terms lesbianism, lesbian identity, and lesbian literature, and to explore the implications of these meanings for lesbian critical theory, politics, and community-building.

Required Texts

Radclyffe Hall	The Well of Loneliness
Audre Lorde	Zami
Joan Nestle	Women on Women
Margaret Reynolds	The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories
Verena Stefan	Shedding
Jeanette Winterson	Written on the Body
Monique Wittig	The Lesbian Body

Xeroxed packet of stories and articles

All materials available at K-B Books

## Course Outline

- Aug 30 Introduction to Course
- Sept 6 Criticism and Theory
- Farwell The Lesbian Narrative (X)
  - Castle A Polemical Introduction (X)
  - Gomez Imagine a Lesbian ... A Black Lesbian ... (X)
  - Fuss The Question of Identity Politics (X)
  - Griggers Lesbian Bodies in the Age of PostMechanical Reproduction (X)
  - Anzaldua To(o) Queer the Writer (X)
- Sept 13 No class
- Sept 20 Short stories: early 20th century
- Jewett Martha's Lady (R)
  - Cather Tommy, the Unsentimental (N)
  - Vivien Prince Charming (R)
  - Stein Miss Furr and Miss Skeene (R)
  - Barnes from The Ladies Almanack (R)
  - Colette Nuits Blanches (R)
- Sept 27 The Well of Loneliness
- Oct 4 Short stories: mid-century
- Strachey from Olivia (R)
  - Bannon from I Am a Woman (R)
  - Nestle Esther's Story (R)
  - Mushroom How to Engage in Courting Rituals (R)
  - Gomez Don't Explain (R or N)
  - Lynch The Swashbuckler (N)
- Oct 11 Zami
- Oct 18 Shedding
- Oct 25 Short stories: lesbian feminist
- Arnold from The Cook and the Carpenter (N)
  - Russ When it Changed (N)
  - Harris from Lover (N)
  - Sapphire Eat (N)
  - Brossard These Our Mothers (R)
  - Livia 5 1/2 Charlotte Mews (R)
- Nov 1 The Lesbian Body
- Nov 8 Written on the Body

Nov 15 Short stories: international

Dayioglu Like Donkeys Who've Had a Good Feed (X)  
Rika-Heke Maori Admire Fat Vulva (X)  
Rodriguez Throw It to the River (X)  
Peri Rossi The Witness  
Roffiel from Amora (X)  
Obejas We Came All the Way from Cuba ... ? (X)

Nov 22 Short stories: contemporary United States

Brant A Long Story (N)  
Wells Aqua (N)  
Newman A Letter to Harvey Milk (N)  
Gamez from The Gloria Stories (N)  
Schulman The Penis Story (N)  
Allison A Lesbian Appetite (N or R)

Nov 29 Presentations on selected novels

Dec 6 Presentations on selected novels

### Course Requirements

1. Regular attendance and active participation in class discussions: 10% of your final grade.
2. Presentation and discussion questions on assigned readings. Each student will be responsible for preparing one class session: 100% of your final grade.
3. Short (3-4 page) paper exploring your own understanding of the terms "lesbian," "lesbian identity," and "lesbian literature." This paper should draw from and comment on the questions and theoretical readings, but should primarily express your own views. It will also serve as a writing sample. Due September 20: 20% of your final grade.
4. Take-home essay examination on assigned readings. You will receive a set of questions from which to choose on November 1; your 5-7 page essay is due November 15: 30% of your final grade.
5. Analytical paper and in-class presentation on one supplementary novel (see attached list). Your paper (5-7 pages) should evaluate the questions and concepts explored throughout the course in relation to your selected novel. In other words, you will answer two broad questions: in what way is this a "lesbian" novel? and, how does this work expand or transform y(our) understanding of lesbianism? Due no later than December 12: 30% of your final grade.

GRADUATE STUDENTS: Your final paper should be 10-12 pages, and incorporate secondary research as well as the primary text. Your total work for the course will be evaluated according to standards appropriate to graduate students.

Selected supplementary novels (for presentations)

- Calderon, Sara Levi                    *The Two Mujeres* (Mexico)  
Romantic novel about upper-class Mexican-Jewish lesbians.
- Te Awekotuku, Ngahua                *Tahuri* (New Zealand)  
Linked short stories about a Maori girl's coming of age.
- Cixous, Helene                        *The Book of Promethea* (France)  
Very postmodern, experimental novel illustrating some of cixous' theories of women's writing.
- Duffy, Maureen                        *The Microcos* (United Kingdom)  
Classic novel about lesbian life in England during the 50s.
- Haslund, Ebba                         *Nothing Happened* (Norway)  
Published in 1948; understated novel of lesbian (?) love.
- Marchessault, Jovette                *Lesbian Triptych* (Québec)  
Experimental, semi-autobiographical fiction about growing up Catholic in Québec.
- Blais, Marie-Claire                    *The Angel of Solitude* (Québec)  
Recent stream-of-consciousness novel by Canada's premier lesbian writer; about the attempt to create lesbian community.
- Molloy, Sylvia                         *Certificate of Absence* (Argentina)  
Postmodern novel about writing, identity, and love between women.
- Larsen, Nella                         *Passing* (United States)  
Published in 1929; about a deep friendship between two women of the black bourgeoisie.
- Njau, Rebeka                         *Ripples in the Pool* (Kenya)  
Not primarily about relationships between women, but contains a possible lesbian sub-plot rare in African literature.
- Maraini, Dacia                         *Letters to Marina* (Italy)  
Novel in letters recounting a love affair between two women.
- Brossard, Nicole                      *Mauve Desert* (Quebec)  
Three interlinked stories in a complex, experimental fiction.
- Tusquets, Esther                      *The Same Sea as Every Summer* (Spain)  
Erotic stream-of-consciousness novel about love among the bourgeoisie.
- Min, Anchee                         *Red Azalea* (China)  
Autobiography about life in post-revolutionary China.
- Jolley, Elizabeth                      *The Well* (Australia)  
Portrait of an "eccentric, affectionate relationship" between two women. Is it lesbian?
- Mahyere, Eveline                      *I Will Not Serve* (France)  
Fifties novel about schoolgirl passions and the bohemian world of Paris.
- Warner, Sylvia Townsend              *Summer Will Show* (England)  
First published in 1936; historical novel set in revolutionary Paris of 1848.