

## THE "INVISIBLES": Lesbian Women as Library Users

by Heike Seidel

**A**nimated by the articles of Kerstin Schroeder (1993) and Alisa J. Whitt (1993), I became further engaged with the topic of "lesbians and libraries." Is it the duty of libraries to supply media for homosexual women? What could libraries do, if need be, to improve collections, services and training for lesbian users and staff?

These questions became the starting point for several events during the first Women's Summer University in Munich and for the 10th Berlin Lesbian Week in July and October 1994 respectively. Lesbian library staff as well as lesbian library users participated in these events. This article summarizes the topics discussed in Munich and Berlin, suggests changes in libraries thought necessary by the meeting participants, and gives an update on activities initiated.

### *Do Libraries and Lesbians Need Each Other?*

Absolutely, yes!

Libraries have the opportunity and the duty to supply materials for all people in their communities. According to the Kinsey Report, homosexual women and men represent about 10% of the entire population. They can be found in all age groups, in all sectors of society, and they live everywhere - not just in the "metropolis." Lesbians and gays are often "invisible" in their communities because, for fear of verbal abuse, discrimination, and physical violence, they often set great store in not being recognizable as homosexuals. Therefore, they hardly announce their information needs to libraries.

Libraries can, and should, understand themselves, especially in our times, as "social motors" (Andersson and Skot-Hansen 1994). Library staff can choose to take part in discrimination against parts of the population or single user groups. In the extreme libraries purge collections and services of any reference to groups discriminated against, as happened, for example, in England in the 1980s when libraries cleared shelves of materials dealing with homosexuality (Schroeder 1993: 69 and Parkinson 1987: 93). But libraries can also see a social opportunity, if not a responsibility, to aid in the struggles of groups discriminated against by positively serving these groups with high quality library services.

Also, libraries have the opportunity to (re-)gain active women readers. Lesbian women, for instance, who discover that their local library can offer them (almost) nothing, might very well decide to use mail order book providers, and become a user group lost to libraries.

Of course, lesbians need libraries too!

Like all other social groups, lesbian women have widespread information and entertainment needs to which libraries should respond. The women interviewed by Whitt (1993) and Raaflaub (1991) listed a wide range of materials they would like to see in libraries: poetry, fiction with lesbian topics and/or lesbian protagonists, autobiographies, self-help literature for lesbian mothers, and information for lesbian employees. To summarize, one can say that lesbian women *also* but *not only* want to read about heterosexuals. Lesbian women want to find themselves and their situations in the materials to which they have access in libraries.

Almost all women describe the time of self-discovery of being lesbian and the experience of being recognized as lesbian by others (coming-out) as extremely difficult. During this time, information is mostly needed about the following topics:

- "How do I find out about and accept my sexual orientation?"
- "How do I tell my environment that I am a lesbian?"
- "How do I make contact with other lesbian women?"

While other individuals ask people (family members, friends, etc.) for advice and help, lesbians look for assistance in the privacy of libraries (Creelman 1990) - especially in rural areas where the only available source of information is in libraries.

Materials about lesbian specific topics should be up-to-date, realistic, and positive. Positive in this case means that the lesbian way of life is shown in a realistic way and is treated as a valid and valued lifestyle.

It is necessary to stress that libraries should provide and index appropriate media for young adults. Especially during puberty, many boys and girls find out about "being different" and are confused about it. They hesitate even more than adults to look for orientation and advice from other people (of authority), because they fear lack of understanding and rejection. They especially need the comparatively anonymous offers of information a library can supply. Such services should not be at all considered to implicate libraries in sexual development, because the

"seduction theory" is no longer accepted. Nobody is "made" lesbian or gay by others, or by the materials one might read.

Libraries should not only provide materials for lesbian women themselves. Materials should also be made available for people who are interested in lesbian life such as the parents, brothers and sisters of lesbian women, educators, colleagues, co-workers, etc. My mother, for example, found the advice book *Eine Liebe wie jede andere* (Grossman 1984) very helpful. But I am sure that she would not have borrowed the book if she had had to ask for it or had feared the reaction of the library staff when requesting it.

### *Problems and Possible Solutions*

Next we examine two points which lesbian women see as problems when using a library: collections and staff (see also Gough and Greenblatt 1992).

#### *Collections*

Concerning the collections of local libraries, lesbian women state that they:

- often do not offer material for lesbians and find material about homosexuality primarily of concern to gay men;
- often contain out-of-date material which shows lesbian love as something in need of medical treatment or as a passing phase in the life of an "actually" heterosexual woman;
- are badly cataloged and indexed with little consideration of appropriate access points, so that even intensive and well-informed use of the library catalog proves fruitless;
- seldom present holdings related to lesbians to the public in the form of new book displays, exhibits, bibliographies, programs, etc.

Suggestions for improvement of this situation include: a critical examination of collections, regular weeding and updating; the physical consolidation of media for lesbians under an appropriate title; the use of category labels (lesbian, gay) as well as the "making visible" of lesbian topics in classification systems and subject heading lists. Global indexing under the terms "homosexuality" and "homosexual" is frequently rejected because these terms are usually applied to male homosexuality and, therefore, become too unspecific. Also the SWD (subject heading list) with entries under "lesbian," "lesbian - sub-head," and "lesbian love" should be improved.

It has also been suggested that new lesbian-specific acquisitions to the library be announced in local or regional lesbian publications.

#### *Staff*

Lesbians often look for interesting media in the library on their own. Only few dare to ask for help from library staff. Critical points are especially the areas of reference, circulation and inter-library loan.

Many lesbians fear subliminal or openly discriminatory behavior (remarks, gesticulation, miming) by library staff. Some explicit examples of this fear and behavior can be found in Whitt (1993), and are experienced by many German lesbians with whom I've spoken. Lesbians feel discriminated against when made "invisible" in library collections and catalogs and some fear that the library staff could make their knowledge of a women being lesbian publicly known. On the other hand, lesbian library staff fears that their "coming-out" at work could lead to problems with colleagues, supervisors and/or users.

From all this follows the need for libraries to adopt a liberal attitude towards lesbians and gays, and to train staff appropriately. To improve the general atmosphere a library could:

- make it clear that lesbian/gay staff is not discriminated against
- display information related to the lesbian/gay scene (calendars of events, journals, newspapers, etc.);
- organize exhibits with lesbian/gay topics (and not only on AIDS!)
- plan events with lesbian/gay speakers or writers dealing with lesbian/gay topics.

It should be one further duty to stress discretion among the library staff and reinforce commitment to the rights to privacy of library users.

There could be internal training, conducted, for instance, in cooperation with women's bookshops, AIDS organizations, associations of lesbians and gays to improve the understanding of homosexuality among library staff.

### *Update*

Discussions from the 1995 meetings in Munich and Berlin led to a November 1995 article in *Buch und Bibliothek* (Seidel 1995), one of the leading German library journals. A student of librarianship who read this article decided to write her diploma-thesis on lesbian and gay materials in public libraries (Warnke 1996). She visited four public libraries in the area of Nordrhein-Westfalen and found there were few materials on lesbian and gay issues. The librarians she interviewed were not well-informed about gay and lesbian material, but they stated they would purchase (more) lesbian/gay books, journals, videos, etc. if there were patrons asking for them. The only exception in Warnke's survey was the Stadbücherei Münster, which had at one time been asked for a bibliography of gay/lesbian holdings by a local lesbian and gay community center. This library contained a lot of new media in its collections, which was highly appreciated by the local gay and lesbian community.

So, we - lesbian and gay librarians and library users - should learn that we have to inform librarians (and keep them informed!) about "our" media, and we *have to ask* for all those materials we think the library should provide.

On another front, our initiative to improve the so-called ASB (Allgemeine Systematik für Bibliotheken - a classification scheme widely used in public libraries in the western states of Germany) was successful. The editorial board of the new edition decided to add "homosexual expressions" to the subject index and to include several scope notes.

In February 1997, lesbian librarians and archivists met at Wuppertal in Germany. The women decided to organize a (social) meeting at the Deutscher Bibliothekskongreß (the German version of the American Library Association's Annual Meeting) in May 1997 in Dortmund. At their third meeting, which took place in August in Hamburg the group members decided to establish a lesbian book award and to provide public libraries with a list of recommended lesbian related media. Fundraising has begun for both projects.

Brief reports on our "Lesbians & Libraries" meetings and activities were published in the library journals *Bibliotheksdienst*, *Buch und Bibliothek* and *Laurentius* as well as in lesbian media like the *Lespress* magazine. We received letters from lesbians (and gay men) interested in our group after each of these short articles.

A gay librarians' group is also being organized by a librarian who lives in Hamburg. One lesbian and one gay out of these groups attended the 1997 ALA Annual Conference at San Francisco. They were impressed by the several activities conducted by the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table's Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Task Force, they enjoyed meeting so many U.S. colleagues and joining the ALA contingent in San Francisco's annual Gay Pride Parade.

The next "Lesbian & Libraries" meeting is scheduled for March 14, 1998 at the Gay and Lesbian Center (called SCHULZ) at Cologne, one of the G/L/B "metropolises" in Germany. At the Cologne meeting we will discuss detailed plans concerning the recommended acquisition list for libraries and the book award. Furthermore we will keep working on improvements of the ASB indices as well as lesbian-related entries in subject headings lists.

*translated by Kerstin Schröder*

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Abstract/OtherAbstract: The social invisibility of aging lesbians is a major obstacle to the adaptation of residential services to their needs. After looking at the difficulties associated with aging among lesbians, this article examines social mechanisms that reproduce their invisibility. Findings are based on a qualitative analysis of two series of interviews, 10 with service providers in private residences for older people and 10 with aging lesbians.Â From MEDLINEÂ®/PubMedÂ®, a database of the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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