

'BASIC BULLSHIT': LESBIAN DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE LESBIAN AND GAY PRESS

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In 1992 the Sydney gay and lesbian newspaper *Capital Q* published a story about a group of lesbians who were protesting outside a cinema against the showing of the movie *Basic Instinct*. 'Basic Bullshit' screamed the headline—with a forthrightness that rarely accompanies the reporting of gay and lesbian protests in the mainstream press. The women's strategy was to give away the ending to arriving cinema patrons through banners proclaiming 'Catherine Did It' pointing to the guilt of the 'lesbian' character played by Sharon Stone. The demand, of course, was for more positive representations. As the reviewer who covered both the protest and the film commented: 'For decades Hollywood has been churning out movies that depict homosexual men and lesbians in very specific negative ways. Lesbians in particular get stereotyped as man-haters, bitches, murderers and psychopaths' (*Capital Q* 20). The reviewer also noted that protest against the film in the States may have been effective in so far as 'the writer of the film is now working on a thriller with a gay detective in the lead role'. Whilst the motivations of Hollywood in catching the gay trend may well be questionable, the rewriting of the detective genre to interrogate dominant ideologies about lesbian sexuality and identity has proved popular with lesbian readers with novels by authors such as the Australian Claire McNab, whose six novel 'Carol Ashton Mystery Series' will be the focus of this paper, Katherine V. Forrest, Mary Wings and others frequently topping best seller lists which are a regular feature of free gay and lesbian publications such as *Capital Q*, *Lesbians on the Loose*, the Melbourne and Sydney *Sun Observers*.

The success of this brand of popular genre fiction has, of course, also attracted a good deal of attention in academic theory. Gillian Whitlock in particular has recently engaged with lesbian feminist critics such as Pauline Dunker and Bonnie Zimmerman who suggest that adaptations of detective genre fiction implicate the protagonist, and with her the reader, in the phallogocentric perspective of the hard boiled detective, with all that character's generic propensities to rugged individualism, violence towards and sexual objectification of women. For Whitlock not only is it a mistake to assume that the consumer of popular culture is indiscriminating, the 'fun read'—less subtle in its narrative strategies than the experimental detective fiction of Finola Morehead, Barbara Wilson, or—to add a title not published at the time of Whitlock's essay, Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*—can nevertheless be interrogative in its manipulation of the genre.

Whitlock's work on the American author Katherine V. Forrest demonstrates how

epistemological questions related to lesbian identity and the coming out question are negotiated through Forrest's use of the conventions of the police procedural in which character is firmly constructed and known in relation to place. Working within the genre, Forrest bridges the gap between police station and lesbian bar. My own interest in Claire McNab, whose work is edited by Forrest, is less to do with issues of character and place in the 'police procedural' than with the negotiation of coming out through the generic conventions of the 'series': the way in which the continuing drama of the life of the central character in a narrative series—and the novels are quite explicitly packaged as a series—links the six novels together. Moreover, because I am interested in further exploring Whitlock's point that the serious 'cultural work' (97) done by these novels can be assessed not only through understanding how they work, but how they are interpreted by readers, I want to temper some applications of academic theory on narrativity, the closet and coming out, by touching on some reviews in the gay and lesbian press, to assess just what these issues might mean to the non specialist reader. Before doing this, however, it is necessary to stress that these reviews do not, of course, constitute an unproblematic insight into the mind of any homogenous—indeed homogenised—reader. They offer, merely, some insight into reading practices and interpretative ideologies inflected somewhat differently from academic discourse.

The major issue in community press readings of the McNab series is, indeed, 'coming out'. As the reviewer from *Lesbians on the Loose* neatly observes of the fourth novel *Cop Out*, 'Readers of the last Ashton novel will remember that Carol did indeed "cop out" of the coming out issue, choosing to stay in the closet for yet another action packed mystery' (19). Whilst the reviewer does not make the point specific—and reviews in such texts do not, it should be noted, strive for a high degree of analytical content—the implicit connection between the protagonists staying in the closet and the forthcoming production of yet another mystery seems to suggest that these—the closet, the mystery and the continuance of the series—are somehow inextricably entwined, and that this flirtation with, and resistance to, full disclosure—the cop out of the nearly out cop—may well be the thread of narrative pleasure which drives readers on to the next novel. Whilst the reader can track the whodunit aspect of the narrative—the murder mystery investigated in each novel—to a satisfying closure, there remains a teasing indeterminacy in the master narrative of the protagonist's personal life, in which full disclosure is never really made.

Curiously enough this teasing indeterminacy is nowhere more apparent than the sixth and latest novel *Body Guard* in which Ashton has to live through the implications of an enforced outing at the end of novel five, *Off Key*. The reviewer in the *Melbourne Sun Observer* notes that in coming out in *Body Guard* Carol's problems are actually compounded by the confusion which her sexual identity causes for her professional life, and goes on to praise the novel for its realistic negotiation of such difficulties. Carol, assigned to a difficult case in which her lesbianism is likely to become an issue long for, as the novel puts it, 'A time when her sexual identity had been entirely separate from her professional life' (*Body Guard* 96-97). Having come out she has in fact simply come 'in'—entering a new space filled with obstacles.

In recent academic theory the question of what is implied by coming out has been usefully addressed by Judith Butler. Butler problematises the sometimes inferred utopian potentiality of coming out by suggesting that the act of disclosure is a process rather than an automatic entry into a boundless liberatory space:

To claim that this is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalisation of this 'I'....In the act which would disclose the full content of that 'I', a certain radical concealment is thereby produced. For it is always unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's

control, but also because its specificity can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence. What if anything can lesbians be said to share? And who will decide this question, and in the name of whom? If I claim to be a lesbian, I come out only to produce a new and different 'closet'. The 'you' to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. Indeed, the locus of opacity has simply shifted: before you did not know whether I am, but now you do not know what that means, which is to say that the copula is empty, that it cannot be substituted for with a set of descriptions. And perhaps that is a situation to be valued.

Conventionally one comes out of the closet...but into what? what unbounded spatiality? the room, the bar, the university, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, some new enclosure whose door, like Kafka's door, produces the expectation of fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives? Curiously, it is the figure of the closet that produces this expectation, and which guarantees its dissatisfaction. For being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out'. In this sense, outness can only produce a new opacity; and the closet produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come. Is this infinite postponement of the disclosure of 'gayness' produced by the very act of 'coming out', to be lamented? Or is this deferral of the signified *to be valued*, a site for the production of values, precisely because the term takes on a life that cannot be, can never be, permanently controlled? (16)

The problem associated with the phrase 'before you did not know what I am, but know you do not know what that means'—about speaking as a lesbian, and the control of the lesbian signifier is, in its most simple sense, evident in the charting of coming out in these novels. Her previous 'in' status had made Carol the subject of pressure for blackmail or manipulation in several novels. In the fifth novel, *Off Key*, the father of the murder victim uses it in an attempt to force Carol to hush up his closeted dead son's HIV positive status. Ashton's refusal to allow the investigation to be compromised proves the catalyst for reluctant disclosure to her police superiors. Ashton's decision bears a direct relation to the case under investigation—the murder victim's death is intimately related to a complex double life necessitated by his closeted homosexuality.

Off Key ends with an assertion that life for Ashton will be somewhat less complicated on both a professional and personal level: 'She was out now, to her own family and to her police family. She was no fool—there would be problems, serious ones. But it felt right. And good. Very good indeed' (201).

Carol's lesbianism is automatically problematic in novel six, *Body Guard*, when she is assigned to head the team guarding high profile American feminist celebrity author Marla Strickland. Strickland's target audience is middle Australian and middle American public—she doesn't want to be linked in their minds with someone who would be perceived as 'a man hating dyke'; 'the word feminist', Strickland comments, 'is enough of a burden to carry' (*Body Guard* 30). Carol herself is suspicious of her appointment to a case which she feels she has no particular qualifications to handle, suspecting that 'There's some hidden agenda here' (49). This seemingly tangential issue does, in fact, reveal who is plotting to kill Strickland—political factions in the extreme right. If, as critics such as D.A. Miller have suggested, the firmly nailed closet is epistemologically crucial in the detective and mystery genre, then here the open closet remains a site of intrigue.

When Ashton comes out of the closet, then, she comes into a new 'enclosure', to borrow Butler's useful phrase, whose boundaries are defined, perhaps predictably, by the conservative

political and religious right, but also by problems which the indeterminacy of the lesbian signifier causes within feminist politics through its interaction with the indeterminacy of the feminist signifier. Eve Sedgwick, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, has argued that 'the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth century culture as a whole are structured—indeed fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century' (1). Whilst some women in queer theory have criticised Sedgwick for her focus on male issues, little real attempt has been made to understand how this crisis of hetero/homo definition, with its frequent articulation of the dominant term over the subordinate through homosexual panic or homophobia, might relate to women. Clearly any attempt to understand a crisis of hetero/homo definition between women must take into account a third term, feminism, with all its complicating intersections with and differences from lesbianism. At the end of *Body Guard* another lesbian cop connotes that lesbian is a 'fascinating word' often used by the right as shorthand for 'abominable and unnatural' as well as 'excitingly sinful' and somehow inextricably entwined with another 'word' already marked as problematic in the text—feminist (189).

It is interesting that a piece of popular fiction takes us straight to the heart of a 'definitional crisis', which more serious feminist and/or lesbian literature often avoids, and that whilst various potential meanings of 'lesbian' are floated during the series as a whole—ranging from the psychologically perverse to the socially constructed—no absolute meaning is fixed or advocated. Whilst in many ways limited and even conservative in its mode of representation, and whilst equally in no way engaging overtly in the kind of gender transitivity or fluidity that we see in queer theory—McNab's writing does evince a certain fascination with the multiple shards of resonance and meaning which result from the performative enunciation of lesbian identity. Curiously, the refusal of a fixed signification of the word lesbian along with the exploration of its complex interrelation with feminism have not attracted any criticism in community press reviews which I have encountered.

Resistance to fixed meaning may well restore a certain control. Carol's discomfort arises from the fact that she was: 'Used to having a degree of control in most situations, this was one where she had no power to orchestrate events or even anticipate when her lesbianism might be a problem' (*Body Guard* 29). This lack of control spins over into her personal life. In earlier novels the coming out issue has been structured around pressure placed on Carol by her lover Sybil to lead a more open life. But outness does not, as one might assume, restore the relationship; it seems to destroy it. Moreover the closet becomes the location of Carol's next affair with the closeted TV anchor Madeline Shipley. Madeline's closet—discreetly located behind the television screen which beams her to sitting rooms around the country as Australia's most popular and charming current affairs host—provides the ideal structuring figure for the inside/outside dichotomy. This development can be related to Butler's point about the persistent figuration of coming out in oppositional terms—whilst Carol's inness in the previous novels was structured in a debate with Sybil's desire for outness, now Carol's outness is articulated in relation to the inness of her new lover: 'Have you considered your career? I'm out of the closet whether you like it or not. You aren't' (*Body Guard* 173).

That this new closet is crammed with potential for further narrative complications is suggested when Ashton is injured in the assassination attempt on Strickland on Madeline's program, and Madeline announces hysterically laughing, 'you're bleeding all over my set'—a moment of excess riddled with the *frisson* of future plays between containment and disclosure. The eternal return of the closet in Ashton's personal life can obviously be seen as a way of maintaining reader interest—but it does seem to have some consistency in terms of the development of a central character with an obsession about control. Carol is fascinated by the inside/outside dichotomy as an impetus for desire and a mechanism of control, knowing the

secret of Madeline's performance of desirable heterosexual femininity, recognising the power provided by the knowledge that 'for me, you're different' (*Body Guard* 77).

Can such playing with the closet, along with a certain refusal to fix meaning in the possible significations of lesbian identity, be seen as productive? Writing on Marilyn Hacker's sonnet sequence, *Love, Death and the Changing of the Season*, Annamarie Jagose likens Hacker's playing with closet—an oscillation with heterosexual and homosexual figurations of desire—to Freud's discussion of the fort/da game in which the little boy compensates for his great cultural achievement in allowing his mother to leave through throwing and pulling back a cotton reel, accompanied by the words fort and da—gone/there. As Jagose notes, with reference to Lacan's interpretation of Freud, such mastery is intimately related to the child's entry into language and the implications of this transformation for the articulation of desire—as Jagose notes:

with language's substitution of itself for the lost object, for the (m)other, language triangulates the dyadic relation between the desiring subject and the beloved object, estranging forever the bodies of the mother and the child and initiating the latter in an insatiable desire for their reunion....Like the cotton reel—indeed like language itself—the closet's concealments and revelations of the lesbian subject are substituted for the absent, desired object. (94-95)

Jagose calls upon Sedgwick's discussion of the figuration of the closet in the *Epistemology of the Closet*. In the heavily coded late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts with which Sedgwick deals, the closet—implicit yet opaque—becomes 'a defence against the open knowledge of its secret sexuality' (95). But in the seemingly open Hacker text its role in the text's metaphors can be seen as 'a defence for the loss of the object' (Jagose 95). Whilst playing with the closet as a defence against the loss of the object may well make sense in terms of some aspects of *Body Guard*, in particular the underlying emotional vulnerability which haunts the protagonist's insecurity in relationships, one wonders whether the text's flexing of the closet door, as well as refusal of a fixed lesbian identity—does not provide a defence for the loss of the closet itself. Such playing with the closet provides a certain control over the complex situation produced by its absence as protective structure; a compensation for the recognition that in the language of disclosure as in the language of desire there will always be something left over, left out, never quite expressed.

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