



BOOKS»

LESBIAN LOVE AND ACTIVISM

Pioneering American journalist **Anne-Christine d'Adesky** looks back on turbulent times.



ANNE-CHRISTINE D'ADESKY

WHAT DID THE WORD 'LESBIAN' MEAN TO YOUR GENERATION AND HOW DO YOU RELATE TO TODAY'S QUEER MOVEMENT?

The Pox Lover very much reflects my own engagement with gay men and the broader AIDS activism subculture that developed in the 1990s. The AIDS movement brought lesbians in close, compassionate working contact with gay men; and trans AIDS activists, like intersex activists, also began gaining a voice during that time. The word 'queer' reflects an unapologetic cultural stance, reclaiming a word long used as a slur. That very much happened as a result of the ongoing lesbian-feminist and gay movement, but also from the direct action protests of ACT UP that led to Queer Nation, and to other in-your-face groups like Fierce Pussy, a lesbian arts collective some friends created in the '90s to celebrate with graphic wit the emerging pro-sex, take-no-prisoners lesbian sensibility that women were expressing. The '90s was the decade of the Clit Club in New York, of lesbian strippers and sex workers coming out more publicly in their health and AIDS advocacy, and in their solidarity with gay men and transwomen whose sexuality was being criminalized in the AIDS culture wars.

For me, the word I worked to reclaim was 'dyke.' That was the word a lot of lesbians still felt uncomfortable using; still carried the stereotype of the angry, humorless lesbian. I found myself drawn to 'dyke' because it required me to really embrace a social outsider identity—and reframe it for our own LGBTQ movement—for younger generation women. I find that 'butch' and 'dyke' are words that are disappearing, while 'lesbian' is still used broadly and often interchangeably by my generation of peers. ... But I think for individuals, it's great to allow self-identification and to be aware that everyone comes into this journey into their sexuality and into a gender movement at different stages.

WHAT CONTRIBUTION DID LESBIAN ACTIVISTS MAKE TO THE GAY RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND FIGHTING AIDS?

Lesbians got close to gay men and transfolks because of the common enemy of homophobia that was so rampant as the underbelly of the government response to a then-new disease, AIDS. Lesbians were and remain at the very forefront of the AIDS battle, and at every level, and to a remarkable, still unappreciated degree: as frontline activists, strategists, policy makers, program directors, service providers, and caregivers. But also as feminists and as women who brought a deep, historic understanding of the body and the fight for reproductive rights to gay men, who brought an awareness of class and race and male privilege and white supremacy to the ACT UP and other AIDS and LGBTQ movement debates. Lesbians and cis-women in ACT UP, and trans women fought hard with public officials but also their own gay male colleagues to demand, as feminists, attention to the needs of lesbians around HIV/AIDS; to women drug users; to sex workers. It was women and lesbians—who have always worked intersectionally—who made the connections, demanded the outreach, connected across social justice movements with immigrant, labor, gender, prison, anti-racist groups. The global AIDS movement succeeded—often after bitter debate—because activists worked to find common cause, to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable in communities, and that is very much a legacy of queer women who are front-and-center feminists, too. I would add that lesbian activism I participated in still remained very white; ACT UP was a very white, very urban activist coalition. The Lesbian Avengers, a group I co-founded with four friends, also went through hard debates around race and class. These issues remain very critical now, as I look to the frontline battles we face, around immigration, refugees,