



STONE BUTCH BUT NOT BLUE

Leslie Feinberg and Transgender Liberation

By Victoria A. Brownworth

The voice is deep and husky, like a man's. The voice is soft and insinuating, like a woman's. It is the same voice, and it belongs to Leslie Feinberg. Inherent in the dichotomies of her male/female voice is the story of Leslie Feinberg's life — a life lived in two worlds.

Feinberg — writer, historian, political activist — defines herself as a transgendered lesbian. It's a new label and a risky one. Outside of a handful of major queer centers like San Francisco and New York,

the definition may not even be understood, let alone accepted. But Feinberg, author of the painfully evocative new novel *Stone Butch Blues*, has an uncanny comprehension of the limits of — and possibilities for — acceptance.

"I'm trying to build a more inclusive movement," she says simply. That effort, Feinberg believes, includes speaking out about the range of sexualities and expressions of those sexualities that exist in our own queer community.

"I am a woman, I am a butch, I am

attracted by high-femme," Feinberg explains. "Does that mean who I am is defined solely by those aspects of me? [We] have such narrow definitions of who we are as a community. I want to see that broadened. I hear young people say [about role-defined lesbians and gay men] 'We don't do that anymore.' That means I don't exist — that means many of us don't exist. All of our understanding [as a community] of the relationship between sex and gender gets skewed if we're not in the room."

The "we" Feinberg refers to is the risky part of how she defines herself. For many in the queer community, "transgendered" is a new and somewhat scary concept. Lesbian separatists in some communities, particularly those on the West Coast, have been extremely resistant to transgendered and transsexual women and men. The controversies are nothing new to Feinberg, who writes eloquently about the conflict that has followed her throughout her life in *Stone Butch Blues*.

"There are many transgendered people out there," Feinberg states with quiet emphasis. "There is a huge and diverse gender variance in our society. And there is not enough inclusion."

Feinberg would like very much to change that. *Stone Butch Blues* is one step she has taken. A national tour with her slide/lecture on transgenderism throughout history is another.

"I'm taking the slide show around the country because there are so many people who don't know anything about what transgenderism is, what the history of transgendered people is," Feinberg says with intensity. "There has been gender variance throughout history. My argument is that there have always been transgendered women — I'm nothing new. And, being transgendered hasn't always been reviled."

As the author explains it, in many cultures — Feinberg cites native cultures as well as European-based ones — gender variance was actually a sign of the special nature of those individuals. *Stone Butch Blues* opens with the heroine Jess, being cared for by Native-American women. She is given a special ring by them; the ring becomes a talisman for her when she is older — an amulet to protect her against a culture in which her transgendered self is unacceptable.

Feinberg considers herself a "passing" woman, a biological female who "passes" for a man. "The second half of my slide show is about women's oppression and about passing women," she said. "There are about 90 slides."

She has been taking her slide show to a variety of venues across the country — some in community centers, others in bars. It is a broad-based history lesson for many who experience her impassioned lecture.

"I've spent 20 years talking about this stuff," she explains and notes that now people are listening to what she has to say ➡



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REFLECTIONS ON STONE BUTCH BLUES

by Diane Anderson

Years ago, when I began editing my first gay newspaper in New Orleans, I knew a lot about publishing and very little about the lesbian and gay community. My partner and I had come out only months before, in the white-boy ghetto of West Hollywood, and we still had a pretty limited view of the

community. Our publisher gave us free reign to choose the staff, with one exception: Ginger.

Ginger was a gossip columnist who already had a pretty big following. Ginger was also my first transgender acquaintance. I had certainly seen drag queens at the bars before, and a woman like me couldn't help but notice the butch women who gathered around the pool tables. But I met Ginger, a 60-year-old man-woman, in the middle of a spring afternoon, in a busy office suite towering above the downtown riverfront development.

Ginger had long, dirty blond hair, pulled back in a pink, Marilyn Monroe-style chiffon scarf. She wore a tight, mint-colored tank top and matching capri pants. Her exposed toes were thick and calloused, and her toe nails curled under in a way that always made me think of medieval gargoyles. Still, they were painted a dusty rose and they had been delicately framed by a loose pair of stringy, sling-back sandals.

Ginger in person was a lot like her column — brash, catty, campy, with a vernacular that I couldn't understand. In Ginger's presence, everyone became *girl* or *girlfriend*. She called everyone by a different name, talked in some kind of drag code, and generally left me feeling like I was listening to a conversation in a language I didn't understand.

Language seemed to be my biggest problem with Ginger. Transvestite. Transsexual. Transgender. Drag queen. Man. Woman. I had the words to label Ginger, but I didn't know how to *define* what Ginger was. I was too embarrassed to ask Ginger of her myriad younger lovers, and none of my friends had any idea how to define Ginger. So, I studied about MTF and FTM transsexuality, cross-dressing, transvestites. But the studies were clinical and didn't make much sense to me. I ended up always using uncomfortable pronouns (she or he or whatever) and spending very little time with Ginger.

Last week, I got a book to review: *Stone Butch Blues*, by Leslie Feinberg. Feinberg authored a booklet a while back called *Transgender Liberation — A Movement Whose Time Has Come*. The booklet, put out by a political organization in New York, documents the stories behind the women, from prehistoric days to present, who have passed as men by choice or for survival.

Feinberg has been talking about these women hidden from history in her travelling slide show presentation, *In Our Own Voice*. Using famous examples like Joan of Arc, she talks of the difficulties transgender women faced, especially those of eleventh century Europe. King Henry VI of England wrote, "It is sufficiently notorious and well-known that for some time past a woman leaving off the dress of the feminine sex, a thing contrary to divine law and abominable before God, and forbidden by all laws, wore clothing and armor such as worn by men." In April 1431, Joan of Arc was burned alive at the stake for "resuming men's dress."

Feinberg's stories about early pioneering female reverends and female *passing* soldiers are not without personal interest to her. Feinberg passed as a man for four years in Buffalo, New York.

"It is profoundly personal to me," she says of her purpose to inform communities about gender oppression. "There have been moments in my life that I have been surrounded by bashers who said, 'Are you a guy or what?' I was afraid in those moments that I wouldn't be able to explain my whole life."

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with a totally new interest. She believes that there is "a groundswell for inclusivity, an interest in differences. Now I am talking to an audience with a willing ear. I think that it is time for many of us in our community to respect and admit our differences."

That is a relatively new phenomenon for Feinberg and women like her, however. And it is a phenomenon that doesn't necessarily extend beyond the cities that are meccas for queers. As Feinberg herself says about the way history evolves in her novel, changes come more slowly outside of the big cities where there is more room for diversity. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg's character, Jess, eventually is forced out of the mid-sized city of Buffalo and goes to New York. Her friend, Ruth, has been forced out of another small town into New York — and Jess and Ruth are not alone.

"Change comes much more slowly to small towns and cities," admits Feinberg. "It took a long time for the effects of Stonewall to reach the small regional gay bars and the women and men in them."

But Stonewall, often the litmus of the lesbian and gay liberation movement, is not the beginning of that movement as Feinberg tells it in her novel or as she sees it through her own history. "It was drag queens and butch women who were the real movers and shakers out there," she says of the men and women who flaunted convention enough to get arrested well before the Stonewall riots. Feinberg was one of those women. So is her heroine, Jess.

"I think femme/butch has always been presented as an erotic continuum, however I really think of femmes and butches in terms of gender expression," Feinberg says. She also thinks of these women as the beginning of an important movement toward acceptance of non-heterosexual gender roles. It is a theme that runs through her novel and through some of the newer lesbian histories, like *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis, lesbians who dressed in the highly stylized butch/femme attire of working-class bar dykes, were not merely flouting established conventions, they were starting a whole new liberation movement in which single women lived and worked on their own, outside of families and mar-

riage. Lesbians of this era were the first women to "play" on their own, without men, as well.

These women — the real women of Feinberg's early years and of her novel — were femmes, butches and the transgendered.

"I am not a man, and I am not a transsexual," Feinberg tells her audiences at her slide lecture. "I am a woman. But I 'pass' as a man."

Feinberg wants to challenge the estab-

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lished perceptions, even within the queer community itself, about what sexual orientation and gender identification mean. They are not, she stresses, synonymous. "I am a lesbian, that is my sexual orientation," she said. "But I am transgendered, that is my gender identification — how I dress, how I look."

Language — its limitations and its challenges — has created its own problems for Feinberg, both in her writing and as she takes her slide/lecture on the road. The conundrum over what defines "masculine" and "feminine" and how Feinberg presents both to her audiences has enraged some and confused others. "If a lesbian is wearing a dress, is it still a straight woman's attire?" she asks. "Some lesbians are accused of 'passing' for straight. But if a lesbian is wearing these clothes, how can they be said to be 'straight?' And if I am wearing a suit — and I am a woman — can that suit still be called a man's suit?" These questions are just part of Feinberg's challenge to the established order of the queer community. Her strong, calm presentation makes it hard to argue with her point of view. "I say that when we — butches, femmes, drag queens — wear the clothes we do and live with the gender identification that we do, we are taking the notion of 'privilege' — heterosexually defined gender privilege, and turning it on its head."

This is especially true of femme women, Feinberg believes, who are often left out of social history. "I didn't try to or even want to speak for femme women in

my book," she explains. "Femme women have certainly been important to me, to my life. They are very important in the life of Jess. And I think that they have made tremendous contributions to our community, to our struggles. But I am not a femme woman and I can't presume to speak for them. But I certainly understand that they have suffered their own pain."

That pain has often included being ignored by their own community while being ostracized from the straight community. "Passing" for straight is just as problematic in this society as passing for male, Feinberg said. "There is a special courage femme women have had to have. They have been up against the kind of anti-lesbian censure

butch women are up against while also having men treat them as if all they need is the proverbial good (fuck) and they would be straight. These women have been just as beaten down in their own ways as butch women have been." But it is the butch woman's story that is the focus of Feinberg's book, without a doubt. "Butches who have read *Stone Butch Blues* love it — it is, they say, about their own personal triumphs."

For the author, describing the triumphs in the midst of the incredible oppression of these women was essential. "This story is not a tragedy," she says earnestly. "Tragic things happen to Jess, but her life is not a tragedy."

One of the tragic elements, however, ironically comes with feminism. And what happened to Jess also happened to Feinberg, and to other butch and transgendered women of her era. "I was referred to as a male chauvinist pig who oppressed women," Feinberg says, sadness still in her voice at the memory. "It's mistaking form for content. Butch women are oppressed, too. Drag queens, who were also called oppressors of women, are oppressed. And the same people who oppress women through sexism oppress us the same way."

Feinberg's heroine, Jess, is confused by feminism and deeply hurt by it. Rather than offering her a safe place to be among the women she loves, it represents on more isolating force in her life, one more element to make her "stone," withdraw. Of the choice to make her heroine "stone," Feinberg says,

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"I wanted to show how some women reacted to what happened to them, from the pain they suffered. People who say they can't understand what it is to be stone aren't being honest. Any woman who has been raped knows what it is to be stone. We call it 'periods of healing' now — then we called it stone. Shame settles between your legs and leaves you bereft."

It is this sort of graceful eloquence that has helped to make Feinberg a voice for butches and for transgendered women. Clear about who and what she is, Feinberg makes no apologies but seems not to expect any from those who have hurt her, either. Straightforward as well as impassioned, she has on particular mission — inclusivity for transgendered women (and men) in the queer community.

"There is such a large transgendered population," she says emphatically. "There is such a wide range of sexuality and sexual expression out there. I am a woman, but I am also transgendered. I am a lesbian. So I have a foot in two communities. For me it's like have a foot in two rowboats — I can't go in one direction without the other."

Breaking the silence over transgendered women is one of Feinberg's goals — one she has certainly achieved with her novel and her slide show. "Our voices have been silenced as butches," she says quietly, "we have been made to feel such shame about who we are."

Shame is not part of Feinberg's life today. In a new relationship with award-winning poet Minnie Bruce Pratt, Feinberg is happy and content with the direction her life has taken, the point she has come to through all her struggles. She hopes her book and her works will help open a dialogue in the queer community about transgender issues and that it will break other butch women out of their closets. "I hope *Stone Butch Blues* helps the butches whose throats have been clenched for so long to find their voices, too. If we could talk about shame, we could build a language of pride."



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"I've spent my whole life growing up transgender in this society and being told the way I am was not natural. It was no accident for me to take this path and to take a look at the history of diverse cultures and help others understand the attitudes we face today," she said.

So when *Stone Butch Blues* came from Firebrand Books, I had read the interviews and seen clips of the show, and I was eager to learn something about gender identity, passing women, and a history of the transgender community. I also thought the book might give me some answers to questions I formed when I met Ginger three years ago.

What the book did, was so much more than that. Billed as a novel, *Stone Butch Blues* is clearly a thinly cloaked tale of Feinberg's life. The main character, Jess Goldberg, begins a young, working-class, Jewish butch from an eastern factory town, long before the Stonewall Rebellion. During the book, Jess metamorphosises from that girl, into a strong, self-supporting woman working the factories with others like herself. She talks of the cop busts that happened at the gay bars in the Buffalo tenderloin district every week: she and the others — stone butches, bulldaggers, working-girl femmes, drag queens — are beaten, bashed and raped outside their bar and in the jail cells the police take them to. Feinberg describes these regular busts with such candor, I know she has experienced them.

There wasn't a sound in the room. I didn't move. I almost got the feeling it could stay that way, all action frozen, but it didn't. Mulrone was fingering his crotch. "Suck my cock, bulldagger." Someone hit the side of my knee with a nightstick. My knees buckled more from fear than pain. Mulrone grabbed me by the collar and dragged me several feet away to a steel toilet. There was a piece of unflushed shit floating in the water. "Either eat me or eat my shit, bulldagger. It's up to you." I was too frightened to think or move.

While I was reading *Stone Butch Blues*, I was propelled by the story. Feinberg's writing is powerful and descriptive, especially for a first-time novelist, but the first person feel to the book is so compelling that I found myself reading the book overnight. I missed work, canceled appointments, and stayed up all night to read. When I finished, I cried for hours — soft uncontrollable sobs that I didn't even recognize as my own.

I'm a working-class, Native American/Chicano lipstick lesbian from a farm state. Feinberg (and her alter ego, Jess) is a working-class, Jewish, transgender butch from New York. She grew up before Stonewall. I was born during Stonewall. We are both journalists by trade.

But Feinberg's story is my story. It is every queer's story. She had to learn who she was. She had to survive and find love in an unwelcoming (at best) society. She left

behind family and lost those she called friends. She learned to survive in a world of codes and secrets, hiding who she was and forgetting who she even wanted to be in her herself world of turbulence.

In the story, Jess is confronted with the Women's Movement and alternately excluded from it. She's not a real lesbian, feminists said (and we all remember the arguments), because she co-opts men's dress and therefore values, like sexism. I know this feeling even 20 years after her — the feeling of being queer in a movement of gays and lesbians; an anti-assimilationist in a community of peacekeepers; a femme among the relics of the androgyny cult. Women like Feinberg are still left out of the feminist communities. It's women's history month and in the midst of my campus celebration there is no mention of transgender identity, butch/femme women, lesbians.

We thought we'd won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay. Then suddenly there were professors and doctors and lawyers coming out of the woodwork telling us that meetings should be run with Robert's Rules of Order. They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke. We were not hard to send away, we went quietly.

In the book, Jess takes male hormones to help her pass. She gets defined muscles, reduces her breasts, grows hair on her chin. Suddenly, she is exiled from her own sex. She is no longer a lesbian in women's eyes. She becomes something that she needs to be to survive physically, but spiritually she sees herself through the eyes of other women. One night she is walking and the woman in front of her walks hurriedly. As the woman speeds up and continues glancing back, Jess realizes that this woman is afraid of Jess the man, Jess the potential rapist. Jess has, at that point, crossed the border into a world she never wanted to call her own.

With *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg weaves a powerful and provocative story about living with the complexities of being queer in a world that demands simple explanations. She moves us into the realm of understanding transgender people, instead of just asking how to define them. Feinberg's story is the story of every old bar dyke that you see guarding the door on Saturday night; the one that scares and fascinates you; the one you never talk to, but always have questions for. Feinberg's story is the story of her people, our people, our history.

"For a long time our lives and our struggles have been refracted through other people's prisms," she said. "We've been defined by anthropologists and others who have put forward history. It's time to tell our own history and explain our own lives. What people will see are the faces of lives that have been rendered almost invisible by their oppression."



Diane Anderson, who lives in Idaho, is working on a book about gay youth.