

Nell Stark

by

DK Ward

At the heart of every gay & lesbian publishing company, you'll find its muscle. Naiad Press had Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker series. And who could ever hear the name Lee Lynch and not remember Old Dyke Tales or The Swashbuckler? Katherine V. Forrest intrigued and turned us on with her hip and sexy detective, Kate Delafield. Alyson Books brought masters of the genre Lesléa Newman and Michael Willhoite to our attention. Bold Strokes Books has its retired plastic surgeon, Radclyffe, entertaining a new generation of lesbian readers. Jane Fletcher is a very talented novelist who takes us out of our worlds and cements us in hers. ...and now we have Nell Stark.

I can tell right now Nell Stark will bring a new, youthful perception and artistic creativity to the genre. She'll be amongst the first names that come to mind when people ask me, "Who are your favorite writers?" After this interview, I hope she'll be among yours too.

Her first published story, Atropine, in [Lessons in Love: Erotic Interludes 3](#) will be released in May, quickly followed in July by Scars as part of [After Midnight: True Lesbian Erotic Confessions](#) published by [Cleis Press](#). Are you impressed yet? No? Well how about her story Us, accepted by [Bella Books](#) to be included in Wild Nights, another anthology? You want more, you say? You want a full novel? Sheesh, you people are hard to please! Okay, her novel, Running with the Wind has been accepted by [Bold Strokes Books](#) and is currently going through the editing process to ready it for publication in the spring of 2007. If you cannot wait to sample her writing, Ms. Stark also has a [Live Journal](#) where you can find some of her work posted on her [website](#). Now let me stop prattling on and get to what you really want, the interview. Enjoy.

Who is Nell Stark?

Nell Stark: Nell is, first and foremost, a maker. She is me when I'm creating fiction, and I think of her in many ways as an "aspect" of my essential self. It's remarkably helpful to have a "face" that you can put on and take off; when I'm writing an academic paper, going to class, or teaching, I'm not Nell. But when I'm

sitting at home in front of my computer and writing, or even when I'm daydreaming on my bike ride home – whenever I'm being predominately creative instead of "critical" (in an academic sense) – then I'm Nell.

Nell is a multi-tasker. She is intense and dynamic, and admires those qualities in others. She feels incredibly fortunate to have a partner who not only supports her work, but facilitates it. She loves beer and hates to sleep. Like her alter ego, she cares deeply about the written word – but in a different, more immediate and visceral way. Nell experiences life in neon colors. She craves pizza and drinks far too much Diet Dr. Pepper. She loves hanging out on the GCLS chat list. If she doesn't write and exercise every day, she feels "off." And more than anything, she is driven to create stories and characters that have power – that make people *feel* deeply.

You briefly touch on how great it was registering for the GCLS Convention as an *author*. Would you elaborate for us?

NS: I've been writing stories down since I could write at all, and ever since middle school, I've daydreamed about being published. When you dream about something your whole life and then it happens – when you realize that you *are* what you had always wanted to be – that's both incredibly exciting and very humbling. I've always been a writer, but only in the past few months have I been able to claim that I'm an *author*. I don't think I'll ever get used to it, either! Registering for the GCLS Convention was the first thing I did as an author, and it felt amazing. For days afterward, I'd go to the Convention site (www.gclscon.com) and look at my name under "Confirmed Authors in Attendance" and feel euphoric. And disbelieving. And so very, very lucky. I'm really looking forward to attending the Convention in early June!

For those that may not know, explain what GCLS is and how it's made an impact on you and your writing.

NS: The Golden Crown Literary Society is an association made up of publishers, readers, authors, and distributors of lesbian fiction, all of whom work together to promote the genre. The GCLS has an annual convention (in Atlanta for 2006), which features readings, author signings, panels on a wide variety of topics, a dance, etc. The keynote speaker this year is Ann Bannon!

In addition to the Convention, the GCLS also has an active Yahoo Group. It's an amazing place; I've learned a lot about both craft and publishing from being a member of that list. The group is very welcoming and supportive; not only have I had many a question answered there, but I've also made several friends and contacts by being a part of that list. Most of all, through my membership in the GCLS, I've come to understand lesbian authors, readers, publishers, and distributors as a *community*. Sure, there are competing houses, competing authors, competing distributors. Yes, publishing is a business. But on the other hand, that competition is exactly the point – it's what makes the community vibrant, healthy, growing. What impresses me about the GCLS is how everyone works together – how committed *everyone* is to the success of this genre.

You say you received *the call* that your manuscript had been accepted by Bold Strokes Books. Was it from Len Barot herself? If so, what was *that* like?

NS: Now *that* was a morning! *vbg* April 13, 2006, 7:45 am – I will never, ever forget it. On the afternoon before, Radclyffe and I had actually scheduled that time to "discuss [my] manuscript," so I was very nervously awaiting her call. In fact, I was IMing with JD Glass, who was trying to take my mind off my nerves by telling me funny stories, *while* I waited for the phone to ring (thanks again, JD *g*). And then it did ring, and so I answered it, of course... and it was Rad. As I pressed the "talk" button, I was staring at all 5 bazillion of her books on my shelf, and then I was hearing her voice. Crazy! The whole thing is a little blurry, now – adrenaline will do that – but I have a feeling that I spoke with both Len Barot and Radclyffe *g*. We talked about the strengths and weaknesses of my manuscript, about the revising and editing process, about the contract, about BSB... and I paced the length of my tiny apartment, the whole time. I couldn't sit still. It was one of the most intense, most amazing conversations I've ever had!

Who or what inspires Nell Stark?

NS: I have a lot of inspiring influences that work in many different ways. Lisa is my muse and my reason – every piece of lesbian fiction that I create ultimately comes from the moment she told me that she was in love with me, back when we were in college. She inspires me daily with her love, her patience, her

commitment, and her excitement about my stories – not to mention her superb editing skills. They're *our* stories, really.

My close friend, beta-reader, and mother-figure Ruta is also one of the most incredible people I've ever met; she has believed in me when I didn't dare believe in myself, and her support and encouragement have been instrumental in my publishing success thus far.

Several authors are particularly inspiring to me – JRR Tolkien, for one. I read *Lord of the Rings* when I was eight – I don't really remember life without knowing that book. His characters and his world left a huge impression on me. I've always wanted to make people *feel* through the written word, the way he did. Interestingly enough, Tolkien also motivated my academic passion: Anglo-Saxon literature.

Radclyffe is another one of my literary heroes – I found her *Genesis* series back during my senior year of college when I was just coming out. I needed strength and conviction, and that's exactly what I found in Rad's stories of Marsh Black and Dana Scully. This past summer, when Lisa had an internship in New Mexico and we had to live apart for several months, I revisited *Genesis*... and then I noticed that Radclyffe had actually published several books. So, I bought *Safe Harbor*, loved it, and couldn't order the rest of the Provincetown Series fast enough. To be cliched (but honest *g*), the rest is history: Rad's books not only inspired me to write my own stories, but they also were my gateway to the world of lesbian fiction. I'll always be profoundly thankful to (and for) her!

Most recently, JD Glass and her books (because yes, world, I've read the sequel to *Punk Like Me*, and it's *awesome* *g*) have been major sources of creative inspiration. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to read her work at this point in my life; I'm currently experiencing a sort of paradigm shift in my creative process that was motivated by her fiction. Also, um, I sort of worship her three main characters. *g*

Other than that? Mountains. Music. The ocean. Chocolate. The wind. People who triumph over adversity – and well-written stories about those people. My friends from college. The night sky. And sex, of course. *g*

"They" say, "write what you know.", and I see you like sailing. Have you written about it or will your characters ever sail the high seas?

NS: They most certainly will! As a matter of fact, *Running With the Wind* is about women who sail boats. One reason for that is that besides being really fun, sailing is, to me, an apt metaphor for life. Sometimes the seas are smooth – sometimes they're rough. Sometimes you're fighting to make headway in the face of adversity, while at other times, you feel like you're being carried along in exactly the right direction. Occasionally, you feel like you're flying, while at other times, you're stuck in the mud. So, in RWtW, sailing isn't only a plot vehicle – it is also (I hope!) an epistemological framework – a way of thinking about the world.

Incidentally, yep, *Tomorrow's Promise* is one of my favorite books by Radclyffe. I'd love to take Lisa on a double sailing date with Tanner and Adrienne! Especially if we can all shuck off our shirts once we're out in the middle of the blue. *wink*

How did *Scars*, *Us*, and *Atropine* come about?

NS: Back in September – a short time after having joined Radclyffe's Yahoo Group – I read the call for submissions for *Lessons in Love: Erotic Interludes 3*. Although I hadn't written any original short fiction in quite some time (I was just coming off a brief love affair with "Buffy" fanfic), I decided to give it a try. The sailing season was winding up, and the premise for "Atropine" just *came* to me. I wrote it, showed it to a few friends, made some changes, sent it to Radclyffe, and was *completely astonished* when she told me that she wanted it for the anthology! I didn't walk on the ground for at least a week. *vbg*

"Us" was the next piece I sent in response to a call for submissions, and I actually adapted it from the senior thesis that I wrote in college as a creative writing major. I owe it all to Lisa, and that's all I'll say about it for the time being. *wink*

"Scars" was the byproduct of some late-night introspection. Relatively speaking, I have a lot of scars (I'm really a huge klutz *g*), and I'm quite proud of every one. To me, each scar is hieroglyphic in nature – it points to a story. Scars tell the history of their body's vulnerability, and in so doing, they have the potential to be particularly erotic. The short story explores this idea in greater detail.

What book(s) are you reading now?

NS: Ah, this is a loaded question. *g* In mid-August, I have to take a two-day essay exam, known as the Preliminary Exam, which will determine whether I'm allowed to continue in my doctoral program and begin work on my dissertation. The reading list for this exam is 135 texts long, and since I happen to work in medieval English literature, most of said texts are written in Old or Middle English. To make a long sob story short, *g* I'm obliged to give priority to those works this summer, as opposed to any relaxing reading that I'd like to do. I actually feel very lucky, in that studying for "prelims" will allow me to interact with literature that I love, and will also ensure that I'm very well prepared to dissertate and teach in my particular area - but on the other hand, I'm bummed that I won't have the chance to read many books for fun over the next few months.

If you were stranded on an island, what three items would you wish you had brought with you (no partners, sorry Lisa :))?

NS: First things first: a GPS personal locator beacon (since you didn't put a price tag on my items, Dev, I'll go with the \$700 ACR TerraFix 406 GPS I/O PLB *g*). Since I'm guaranteed to be found and rescued with that thing, I'll also take along the latest BSB releases and a case of Miller Lite. May as well enjoy myself before getting picked up! *g*

What can we expect from Nell Stark in the coming years? Is your second book already fired up in your head just waiting for release?

NS: I'm fortunate enough to be one of those people who has more story ideas than she knows what to do with. Ever since discovering lesbian fiction, I've felt a deluge of inspiration that at times is almost frightening in its intensity.

So, I have a lot of thoughts bouncing around my brain, but a few are more solid than the others. At this point, it's conceivable that there will be a sequel to *Running With the Wind*. It's also possible that I'll turn to a collaborative project after this manuscript is complete. On the other hand, I'm currently playing around in my head with a novel idea that (to be excessively vague) focuses in on what it means to believe in something – to have *faith*. In its current tentative incarnation, this idea explores questions of religion, genetics, politics, and ethics – and, of course, love between women. There may even be angels involved. *g*

You mentioned just before this interview that Bold Strokes Books had accepted your short story *Fire Woman* for their *Extreme Passions: Erotic Interludes 4* scheduled for released this October. Can you tell us a little about it?

NS: *Fire Woman* is a story about deep connection, longing, guilt, desire... and a volcano. *g* It's written from a POV outside my twenty-something comfort zone, which was difficult but rewarding. It has a companion piece within the anthology, and it may be part of a larger project - time will tell.

Tell us about this "awful fantasy novel" you wrote in high school.

NS: Oh, it's *so very bad*. *bg* I got the idea for the novel during the summer between eighth and ninth grade; it went through several permutations before I really began writing in earnest. I wrote most of it as a fifteen and sixteen-year old – and I was obsessed, thoroughly obsessed, with *kissing*. Yes, kissing. *g* At the time, I had not yet been kissed (that has since been remedied, whew!), and honestly feared that I would die an old maid. Also, I was (regrettably) quite straight – I simply didn't know any better. So, the novel featured a very beautiful, very badass sixteen-year-old girl with a mysterious parentage and incredible superpowers who met and fell in love with an eighteen-year-old boy who possessed similar (but not quite as badass) powers. They kissed a lot, and when

they weren't doing that, they were saving the world from the Evil Queen, Nefaria. Yes, very clever, I know. *g*

Tragically, Medeira (the heroine) died at the end of the novel. Yup, I killed off my main character. Mea maxima culpa! I can assure you, however, that the epilogue made it All Better.

If anyone wants to see this novel...you can't. Or, well, maybe I'll send it to you if you ask nicely and promise to laugh very hard. *wink*

Ten years from now, what would you like Nell Stark to be doing with her life?

NS: I will always write; I can't not. In a decade from this moment, I hope to have several novels in publication, and to be working hard on improving my craft in every way. Most of all, I hope that I'll be pushing my boundaries as I continue to grow as both an author and as a person.

In addition to writing, I'm also deeply committed to teaching English literature on either the college or high school level. Also, it's quite possible that Lisa and I will be raising a family by that time. At the very least, I'd love for us to own a small home in the White or Green mountains where we can have a few horses and several dogs and cats. Basically, your typical idyllic New England domestic scenario. *g*

I'd like to thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedule to sit down and answer these questions and I'll close this interview as I always do: Is there anything you'd like to leave us with? Quotes of inspiration? Things we may not know about Nell Stark?

NS: Hmm, let's see. Quote of inspiration: *Life is short. Play hard.* And Nike was a Greek goddess of victory before the shoe company totally co-opted that name and associated it with footgear. That makes me sad. *g*

Something you may not know: I was fortunate enough to live in Paris, France for 2.5 years – between the ages of 13 and 15. As a result, I had the chance to

"experience" Europe at a very young age, for which I'll always be profoundly grateful!

Also, I get my best creative inspiration while in the shower. Second best while running. Third best while pedaling furiously on my bike, which I like to ride to and from campus while listening to my iPod (don't worry, I wear a helmet!). *g*

And finally – I felt (and continue to feel) amazed and humbled by your wanting to interview me, Deven. Thanks so very much for the opportunity!