



## Jay, Karla (b. 1947)

by Linda Rapp

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As a young woman, Karla Jay took an active role in the glbtq rights movement. She has gone on to become a prolific author and editor and a Distinguished Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Pace University in New York City.

In her memoir, *Tales of the Lavender Menace* (2000), Jay wrote, "I used to tell people that my jeans were by Levi, but my childhood was by Dickens."

The stress in the household was primarily due to the serious depression of her mother, Rhoda Berlin, who also suffered from delusions and hallucinations and made a number of unsuccessful attempts at suicide. Jay's father, Abraham Berlin, part owner of a company that supplied lumber for building bins to transport cargo on freighters, made it a point to work as much as possible to avoid the uncomfortable situation at home.

When the Berlins' younger child was born on February 22, 1947 in New York City, her father consulted a list of freighters that had recently docked and suggested naming the infant after the *Karla Dane*. His wife felt that Jayne would be a better middle name and prevailed in the choice. Jay adopted a new surname later in life.

As a child, Jay was a tomboy, much to the distress of her mother, who kept buying her Barbie and Ginny dolls despite her daughter's complete lack of interest in them. "She saw this child she wanted to have," Jay later stated. "This child was not me."

Jay enjoyed sports and showed good ability at them, although her extreme myopia caused her to be somewhat clumsy. A more serious consequence of her undiagnosed vision problem was that when she started school, she was put into a class for slow learners, where she languished for four years.

Once the severity of her nearsightedness was discovered, she was moved into a regular class. She was far behind her schoolmates--only learning to read in the fourth grade--but quickly caught up and became captivated by the world of books.

From the ages of five to twelve, Jay went off to summer camp, where she had crushes on her counselors. "It was my first awareness that I was gay," she declared later.

Looking back, she suspects that most of her teen-aged counselors were lesbians. "I knew I was different as a little kid, but when I saw these counselors, I knew I was like them in some fundamental way," she recalled, but, at the time, "I had no words for it."

Jay had been attending public schools, but when a neighbor boy was stabbed at the junior high school, her parents enrolled her at the private Berkeley Institute, not only for her safety but also because they understood the importance of providing their child with a better education than they had had.

Jay excelled at the Berkeley Institute, earning praise for her writing ability, her expertise in French, and her mastery of mathematics. She was also among the school's best athletes.

At the all-girl Berkeley Institute, intimate friendships between students were fairly common. This atmosphere helped Jay to view homosexual attraction as natural, but, when two classmates got into trouble for excessive displays of affection, she also learned that there were distinct limits to public tolerance.

Jay's academic achievements earned her a Regents Scholarship that allowed her to attend the all-women Barnard College, where she enrolled as a French major in 1964.

At Barnard, Jay "felt a boyfriend was a necessity" after hearing at freshman orientation that two students had been expelled after a male student from neighboring Columbia University first used binoculars to spy on them making love in a dorm room and then reported them. Jay found a boyfriend at a dance early in her first year and dated him throughout college. She later stated that she was "convinced, in retrospect, that [the man] was gay and that they were using each other as cover."

Jay began exploring the lesbian bar scene, which offered women-loving women an opportunity to socialize, although one that came at a risk since there was always the possibility of police raids.

She found the venues somewhat seedy and was dismayed that she was inevitably asked by other patrons whether she was butch or femme, when she identified as neither and did not want to be forced to define herself in that way. On the whole, her trips to the bars were unrewarding: she felt so little sense of community with the women there that she sometimes wondered if she was indeed a lesbian.

During her time at college, Jay was opposed to the war in Vietnam and in favor of civil rights, but she did not participate in any demonstrations until late in her senior year. Left-wing students at Columbia seized a building to protest both the university's role in federally-funded weapons research and its displacement of low-income African-American residents of Harlem so that the school could put up new buildings. Jay joined in the occupation and was on the scene when the Tactical Police Force arrived to remove the students. She was not among the hundreds beaten or arrested, but seeing the response of the authorities radicalized her thinking.

Another response that she had seen--to her dismay--was that of male demonstrators to their female comrades. Jay declared herself "appalled by the behavior of the men," who insisted that women should be relegated to a secondary status and should conform to stereotypical gender roles by doing such tasks as making coffee. The combination of experiences during the protest spurred Jay to become an activist in the nascent feminist movement.

Jay earned her bachelor's degree in 1968 and continued her education as a part-time graduate student in comparative literature at New York University. She supported herself by working as an assistant editor at the David McKay Corporation. While there, she read the manuscript of a soon-to-be best-seller, David Reuben's *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask* (1971), and was shocked by its racism and homophobia. She voiced her concerns to the owners of the company, whom she found sympathetic. Reuben, however, insisted on retaining most of the offensive material.

In 1969 Jay joined the recently-founded feminist group Redstockings. The majority of the women were heterosexual, but when Jay came out during a consciousness-raising group session, she soon learned that "there were quite a number of lesbians in quite a number of closets in Redstockings."

Among the issues discussed by the Redstockings was that of names and identity. Many of the women changed their surnames to their mothers' birth names, but, given her difficult relationship with her own mother, Jay chose another course, adopting a new name based on her middle initial. She changed it legally in 1978.

Also in 1969, Jay joined the Gay Liberation Front. Never a separatist, she was excited by the prospect of lesbians and gay men working together for equality. As it was, the women of the GLF, greatly outnumbered by the men, were often frustrated by the relatively little attention that the organization gave to their concerns. While gay men pointed out that they ran a considerably greater risk of being arrested or becoming victims of homophobic violence, lesbians contended that they were "doubly oppressed both as women and as homosexuals" and that they were marginalized in both feminist and gay rights organizations.

To improve the relationship of gay men and lesbians within the GLF, Jay introduced consciousness-raising groups. Some men complained that she was "imposing feminism" on the organization, but she persevered and considered the groups "a great success" because they were "especially useful for helping us women better understand some of the men" and because "some of the more vocal men also discovered that the silent men and women had interesting points to make. People still disagreed, but some became more understanding of others and more willing to make space for others to speak."

Jay also addressed specifically lesbian concerns and succeeded in persuading the leaders of the GLF to hold women-only dances to give lesbians a place to socialize that was safe and more salubrious than the few available bars.

A group of lesbians in the GLF formed the Women's Caucus. In addition to working within the organization, they sought inclusion for lesbians in the feminist movement. To that end, they organized a "zap"--an unexpected political action--at the opening of the second Congress to Unite Women in May 1970. Just as the program was beginning, one member of the Caucus doused the lights in the auditorium, allowing approximately thirty others time to take the stage. The protesters wore T-shirts with the slogan "Lavender Menace," a term that Betty Friedan, then president of the National Organization for Women, had used to describe lesbians.

The Lavender Menace women took control of the meeting and engaged in dialogue with the audience members, who, wrote Jay, showed an "unexpected openness" toward them. Nevertheless, gaining acceptance within the women's movement remained a problem for lesbians for years to come.

Some of the Lavender Menace demonstrators, including Jay and Rita Mae Brown, formed a new group, the Radicalesbians, for woman-identified women. The lesbian separatist stance that the organization adopted disturbed women like Jay who wanted to work together with gay men in the struggle for equal rights, however. The Radicalesbians' numbers quickly dwindled, and the group was short-lived.

After a brief sojourn in California, during which she was active in the Venice chapter of the GLF, Jay returned to New York, having been awarded a teaching assistantship in French at NYU in the fall of 1971.

Jay found a calling in education. She "would spend more than a decade working as a migrant laborer in the fields of academe, with part-time positions at several different universities" while pursuing post-graduate studies. She earned a master's degree in comparative literature in 1978 and a doctorate in 1984.

In 1975 Jay began teaching at Pace University, where she has risen to the status of Distinguished Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies. She has founded and taught numerous courses in Lesbian and Gay Studies, Women's Studies, literature, rhetoric, and creative writing, and has received honors including the university's Kenan Award for Excellence in Teaching (2000) and the Diversity Leadership Award (2004).

An author and editor, Jay has made significant contributions to the field of LGBTQ Studies. Her first book, *Out of the Closet: Voices of Gay Liberation* (1972), an anthology that she co-edited with Allen Young, remains in print and was included on *Publishers Triangle's* list of "the one hundred most important gay and lesbian books ever published." The two also collaborated on *After You're Out: Personal Experiences of Gay Men and Lesbian* (1975) and *Lavender Culture* (1978).

Jay's dissertation on the writers and lovers Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien, published in 1988 as *The Amazon and the Page*, was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award, as was *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions* (1990), which she co-edited with Joanne Glasgow. Jay won the award in the category of Lesbian Studies for *Dyke Life: From Growing Up to Growing Old* (1995).

Jay has also written articles for numerous publications, including *Ms. magazine*, the *Village Voice*, *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, and the *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*. Her fiction and satirical writings have been published in *Women of Mystery*, *Lesbian Self-Writing*, and *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*, among others.

Jay has served on the editorial or advisory boards of numerous glbtq and women's publications and also on the board of the Lambda Literary Foundation. Her work for equality has earned her many awards, including the Medal of Honor from the Veteran Feminists of America and the Michael Lynch Service Award from the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Modern Language Association. She has also been chosen as the Grand Marshal of the Stonewall Pride Parade on two occasions.

In recent years, Jay has been speaking out on behalf of people with disabilities. In early 2004 she lost her near vision due to a rare condition known as choroidal neovascularization. Several operations have brought no improvement.

To Jay, among the most distressing consequences was her inability to read the majority of printed matter. She discovered that very little glbtq material exists in the National Library Service's offerings of talking books and magazines on tape. She therefore called upon the Lambda Literary Foundation "to take on literary accessibility for the blind and visually impaired as one of its missions."

Jay has been frustrated by the frequent lack of accommodation in public areas, a common problem for people with invisible disabilities. "Being a lesbian has helped me in this regard," she stated. "I already know what it's like to be different in ways that others can't see."

Jay is the life partner of Karen F. Kerner, an emergency medicine physician and assistant clinical professor of medicine at Columbia. The couple officially registered as domestic partners on May 1, 1996 in New York City, where they reside.

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### **About the Author**

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