

**1962-72: ALMA ROUTSONG;
Writing and Publishing *Patience & Sarah*
"I felt I had found my people."**



from Jonathan Katz, **GAY AMERICAN HISTORY**

According to Alma Routsong, author (under the pen name Isabel Miller) of the Lesbian novel *Patience and Sarah*, her book was not written with any conscious political aim. Yet her work clearly captures and expresses, in fictional form, that Lesbian-feminist consciousness developing in America in the 1960's. Although its author's intention was simply to write the love story of two women, her work is important in that Lesbian literary-political tradition - - the Lesbian defense in fictional form. As such, the writing of *Patience and Sarah* constituted an act of Lesbian resistance. The following interview makes clear how Routsong's experience as a woman and Lesbian was central in shaping the consciousness expressed in her book - - and in inspiring its conception, writing, and publication.

Alma Routsong's novel, which she first published herself under the title *A Place for Us* (1967), relates the story of Patience White and Sarah Dowling, detailing the development of their love against the background of a hostile, puritanical, New England farm community in 1816. The two women alternately narrate their own story, as each experiences it. Their words have a naive simplicity, belying the sophisticated wisdom of their thought. The language of the novel is the perfect verbal equivalent of those "primitive" paintings of which, in the book, Patience White is the creator. The novel has a lovely unity of style and content, but quite apart from its literary quality (always a matter of subjective judgment), *Patience and Sarah* - - inspired as it was by two women who actually lived and farmed together in Greene County, New York, about 1820 - - suggests how knowledge of American Lesbian history may serve the culture of a people in search of its past.

Although reliable generalizations are elusive at this early stage of research, it appears that fiction by Lesbians has played a special role in the resistance to that oppression denying Lesbians existence altogether, or presenting only the most negative image of women-loving women. The Gay male and Lesbian resistance differ in that the

Lesbian defense more often took the form of literature (the novel, short story, or poetry). Thus, while Radclyffe Hall's and Alma Routsong's novels vary totally in viewpoint, they both may be seen as contributions to a literary-political genre - - the Lesbian fiction-defense. Given the special import of Lesbian literature, it is no accident that the major early work in Lesbian studies is Jeannette H. Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956). First published privately by Foster, this bibliographical-historical survey was itself a pioneering, invaluable contribution to the American Lesbian resistance. Other bibliographies of Lesbian-relevant literature by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Barbara Grier (Gene Damon, pseud.) point to an early appreciation among Lesbians of the importance of fictional sources for the study of women-loving women.

On January 20, 1975, Alma Routsong spoke with the present author about the genesis of *Patience and Sarah*.

J.K.: Can you describe how you came to write this novel?

A.R.: My lover and I were touring New York State and were visiting the folk art museum at Cooperstown. I was wandering through it, not really concentrating on anything, when my lover said: "Psst, psst!" and called me back, pointing to this picture of a marimaid by Mary Ann Willson. There was a card beside it that said Miss Willson and her "farmerette" companion lived and worked together in Greenville Town, Greene County, New York, circa 1820. Then we went into the next room - - a small library - - and found a book by Lippman and Winchester, called "*Primitive Painters in America*," with a short piece about Mary Ann Willson. It said that she and Miss Brundage had a "romantic attachment." I was absolutely taken by it. I didn't want to travel any more. I didn't want to see Harriet Tubman's bed. I wanted to go home and research Willson and Brundage, find out all about them, write a book about them. I spent about a year going to the library, trying to find out about them. I looked up all the Willsons and all the Brundages in the Forty-second Street genealogical library. It's a great library, but it didn't have anything about them.

J.K.: Did you also research that time period?

A.R.: I read everything I could find. It was very frustrating. I tried to read some of the fiction of the time, too - - James Fenimore Cooper. God, he was awful!

J.K.: Did you read any personal narratives of women?

A.R.: I couldn't find any that included erotic relations with other women. When I was keeping a diary, before I came out, I didn't say anything about that subject either. I was afraid.

J.K.: To even write about Lesbian feelings in your personal diary?

A.R.: Yes. When I finally found a woman to have an affair with - - my first love affair - - I couldn't resist writing about her, but I always burned what I wrote. So I'm not surprised if other women didn't keep very good records. Romaine Brooks' diary doesn't have any erotic detail at all, and her relationships are never specified.

Before *Patience and Sarah*, I had started several books about myself and my friends, but I became overwhelmed with the guilt and couldn't finish them. This historic situation I could project into; it was ideal for the hang up I had about not tattling. Once I accepted that the book would have to be fictional, it went along fairly well.

It was really wonderful to be writing Gay love scenes, and about Gay people. I loved it. In the book, *Patience and Sarah* stop in New York City on their way up the Hudson. They stay in a boarding house for the first night. In my own experience, when my lover and I left town

together, we were so exhausted the first night that we didn't make love. So I thought Patience and Sarah shouldn't make love; it wouldn't be realistic. But part of me said, "Yes, they do make love." Another part said, "Well, they might be overheard." Then I realized: new lovers aren't noisy. So I wrote a love scene.

I felt that I was really using myself in my work for the first time - - not disguising, which I had always done before, trying to find heterosexual equivalents.

J.K.: Will you describe the publishing history of *Patience and Sarah*?

A.R.: I finished the manuscript in 1967. I really knew it was good, and I thought that anyone would be happy to publish it. I sent it to my former agent, who was then an editor at Doubleday, and she sent it back to me in a week. I began to get a clue that it was going to be a little more difficult to get published than I had thought. I sent the manuscript to five or six publishers, and they all kept it a long time; I got good readings from top editors, and they rejected it. I don't think they had any moral objections to the subject. They just didn't think the book would sell. It was just a matter of business.

My lover supported me while I was researching and writing the book. She really believed in me, and I'm still moved by that. We're not together any more, but I firmly believe that without her - - not only the economics part, but just the fact that she never lost faith in the novel as a valuable thing to be doing - - I wouldn't have been able to write it. Even when it became clear that the book wasn't going to get published, at least probably not in my lifetime, I still believed in it. I thought maybe the time just hadn't come, and that my heirs would have to publish it. A writer can put a manuscript away for five hundred years if necessary. Anyway, I got a job and gave up trying to peddle the book.

J.K.: You had been peddling it yourself?

A.R.: Yes. My agent at the time wouldn't handle it. I think the novel's very threatening to straight women, and closet Gay women. If they say they like it, people will think they're Gay. Then my mother died, and I went home for her funeral. My brother had owed me five hundred dollars for twenty years. I thought he was never going to pay me, and I was never going to mention it to him. In our family, one doesn't mention money - - I think that's one reason we don't have any. On the day of my mother's funeral, my brother gave me a check. It was an awkward amount, not enough to change my life with. So I just put it in the bank. A few months later I was on the Staten Island ferry, and it came to me in a marvelous blinding flash that I could publish my book with that money. I also had a little income tax refund. It cost me \$850 to have a thousand copies offset. My lover and I designed and drew the cover. I typed the text and took the job to a printer who specialized in small runs. It was really fun.

We thought we could advertise and sell them by mail. But we learned a sad thing: a Lesbian won't put her name on a piece of paper and mail it to a stranger. We put an ad in the *New York Review of Books*. We got one order - - from a man. That ad cost \$50, and we got \$2.25 out of it. That obviously wasn't the right approach, so I wrote a letter to the New York Daughters of Bilitis and asked them if I could come and talk to them about the book. After I contacted DOB, Kay Tobin called me up and wanted to know about the book. She said, "When does the man come in?" I said, "There isn't any man." She said, "There's always a man in Lesbian books who takes the lover away." I said, "Not in this one."

J.K.: What made you think of going to DOB?

A.R.: It was the only Lesbian organization I'd ever heard of. Ann Aldrich had mentioned it and made fun of it in her book *We Walk Alone*. Anyway, I went to DOB and gave a little talk, and that night they bought twenty-five copies. I began to see where the market was. I left fifteen more copies with them, and when I went back the next week, they had sold them and they gave me the money. It was intoxicating. It was marvelous. I felt I had found my people. I felt they were the ones I had written the book for, and that it was getting to them. It was much more gratifying to me than any of my other books. Even though I had published it myself, and I was

obviously a failure from the world's point of view, the fact that my people were reading my book and loving it, meant more to me than anything else that has ever happened in my life. I also wrote to Gene Damon, the editor of *The Ladder*, and she told her friends to read the book. People she had recommended me to were willing to send me their names. She vouched that I wasn't an FBI fink, or whatever. I think it's hard now to imagine how terrified people were about ordering that book. Then some of the Gay bookshops and feminist bookshops began ordering it. By the time it went out of print we were getting orders from universities for women's studies courses.

J.K.: You sold out a thousand copies?

A.R.: Yes, at \$2.25 a copy. That was a little high for a paperback then, but our unit cost was high. We didn't make any money on it. What happened next was that I went up to a feminist conference at Barnard College in the spring of 1971. Kate Millet spoke, and women were milling around at the edge of the stage afterward. I went up with my shopping bag full of books, and a woman bought one from me. I didn't know who she was, except that she was a friend of Charlotte Sheedy, who was then a free-lance manuscript scout. And that evening Charlotte Sheedy said to this woman who had bought my book, "Oh, if I only could find a good Lesbian novel. I think the time has come." And the woman said, "I bought one today up at Barnard." Charlotte Sheedy took the book to Dial without telling me. Dial rejected it. Then she took it to McGraw-Hill, and McGraw-Hill took it. She was right; the time had come. The hardback came out in 1972, and Fawcett brought out a paperback in 1973. In the fall I quit my job. I got a fair amount of money - - nothing fantastic, but enough to live on for about two and a half years. I had just lately had to go back again. So that's basically the publishing history. The book did fairly well commercially.

J.K.: I don't suppose it got any reviews when you published it yourself?

A.R.: No, just in a couple of Gay papers - - and they were negative.

J.K.: Negative?

A.R.: Haven't you noticed how hard it is to please Gay people? One bad review was in the newspaper *Gay*. A woman reviewer, Sorel David, thought the feminist consciousness was unrealistically high for that stage in history. She just wasn't caught up by the book. It didn't move her.

J.K.: And the other bad review in the Gay press?

A.R.: It was in the *Advocate*. I didn't read it. When the McGraw-Hill edition came out, the Johnson City, Texas, paper gave me a great review! The same in all kinds of places you wouldn't expect, like Sacramento and Grand Rapids. The New York Times also reviewed it favorably and the *Village Voice*. I didn't get any other particularly positive reaction from the East Coast. But all of what we consider middle America backward places gave me really enthusiastic reviews. I think men gave it the best reviews. They didn't have to worry - - nobody was going to think *they* were Lesbians!

J.K.: Can you talk a little more about the Lesbian reaction to *Patience and Sarah*?

A.R.: One of the first letters I got was from a woman who didn't sign her name. She said her lover was married, and that her lover's marriage and her own anger had destroyed them. She thanked me for reminding her what it was supposed to be about. That moved me very much. Even though she hadn't had the experience in the book, she knew that's what she had tried for. And I've been surprised, since *Patience and Sarah* are a monogamous couple, that a lot of commune people like it. There's supposed to be a Lesbian commune out in Portland, Oregon, that carries it around like a talisman. You wouldn't think they would identify with it, but they do. I got a letter from a married woman in the Midwest. She was longing, and lost, and forlorn, and was glad there was something to read about two women in love. She reminded me of myself. I used to read those Lesbian paperbacks - - every one I could get.

J.K.: The Lesbian-feminist consciousness in your book seems very personally felt. How did you come to have that feeling and those ideas by 1967?

A.R.: I was a self-taught feminist. I hadn't been in the movement at all, and I didn't realize that these were commonplace ideas. I had learned them in my gut, through my life, and I was rather surprised that a lot of other women had been learning them at the same time. But we hadn't begun talking to each other yet.

J.K.: Had you read of the feminist literature that was beginning to come out?

A.R.: No. I don't think I even read *The Feminine Mystique* until after writing *Patience and Sarah*. When I did read Friedan's book, I wrote her a fan letter. I wouldn't read her book when it first came out because I thought it was in favor of the feminine mystique! I didn't want to hear any more bullshit about how women are supposed to do this or that.

J.K.: What experience of yours had made you a feminist?

A.R.: Marriage! I was married to a man for fifteen years, and had children, and lived the straight life to the hilt - - I really lived the straight life. At first it didn't cross my mind that I might be considered an inferior creature. But when I began to realize that there was a certain kind of condescension toward me because I was a woman, I got madder and madder and madder. It was slow. I don't claim to be any great genius as a feminist; it took me a long time to catch on. A lot of things puzzled me. Maybe it's unrealistic that it doesn't take *Patience and Sarah* that long to catch on.

J.K.: Your book suggests a strong connection between Lesbianism and feminism. When did you first see that?

A.R.: They were unconsciously linked in my mind. I really didn't see a linkup until the movement, until later, after writing the book. I put the book together without being awfully conscious of a missionary motive. That's true, for instance, of the scene where *Patience* is teaching *Sarah* how to act like a lady, how not to hear anything, not to see anything, not to respond to anything, not to put her hands in her pockets, not to cross her legs, not to stride - - these million little (or huge, really) socially required inhibitions.

J.K.: Did you experience something like that - - being taught how to be a lady?

A.R.: Yes, but I didn't learn. Also I was in the Navy. When you're a woman wearing a Navy uniform, you are assumed not to be a lady, and all kinds of men think they have the right to make comments on your body, and announce whether they would like to fuck you. By putting on a Navy uniform, you have made a certain kind of statement about yourself in their minds. That made me indignant. I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't be able to walk along the street without that kind of harassment. Even if men considered it a compliment, it was still harassment. I wasn't free to move.

J.K.: Will you say more about being married, and discovering at a certain point that you were a Lesbian - - isn't that what happened?

A.R.: No, I had an inkling that I was a Lesbian before I got married - - I kept falling in love with my women friends. I had tried to act on it but hadn't had any success. I had gruffly and grouchy announced that I was attracted - - and been turned down. I became convinced that being Gay meant constant rejection, pain, and frustration. I considered it a disaster. I don't think I thought there was anything wrong with it, in itself, but it was not a good adaptation to the world. So this guy fell in love with me, and he was really a fine person, and I thought what a golden opportunity to become a part of life - - not to be this constant outsider. Not being and outsider made me happy for about four years. It was great to fit in and be more or less content, doing all the things everybody else did. When I finally woke up sexually, I could no longer be contented in a heterosexual relationship. It just wasn't a complete enough experience. It wasn't emotionally fulfilling. By then I had children, and I had all these commitments - - mortgages, and cars - - and I had written a novel, which was considered a sort of textbook of happy

heterosexuality. So I thought I had an image to maintain. That became absolutely meaningless to me later on, but for a while it seemed important.

J.K.: You published *Patience and Sarah* under the pen name "Isabel Miller." Did you use this pseudonym because of the Lesbian content?

A.R.: I used it because it was not the name I had used before. It happens that people who read *Patience and Sarah* immediately think they want to read my other books. Practically all my mail asks "Please tell me the name of your other books." Those books are not Gay. And they're not me any more. I'm not interested in them. They're out of print. By using a new name I wanted to start a new thing. Also, my children were very young then, and I didn't want to embarrass them. I picked this pen name because Miller was my mother's maiden name and Isabel is an anagram of Lesbia.

J.K.: I'd like to know more about the personal origins of the consciousness that comes through in *Patience and Sarah*. You must have had some really profound experience rebelling against the traditional female role.

A.R.: Yes. I remember not being allowed to drive my father's car. In Michigan, you could get a driver's license when you were fourteen, and I just took it for granted that when I became fourteen I would get a driver's license, as my brother had. I got to fourteen and I couldn't have a driver's license. I couldn't believe it. I fought and yelled and screamed. I brought it up all the time; I didn't drop it. But my father wouldn't let me drive. I didn't learn to drive until I was nineteen and had left home. That still makes me indignant. It took me years to realize it was because I was a girl. By myself I pieced together all sorts of things like that as oppressions. I remember thinking I could be friends with men - - this was after I was married. But there's a social pressure for a woman not to have men friends. I was not interested in these men sexually, and I really resented the misunderstanding of my friendships. I don't know if that's a feminist issue or not. But the assumption that if you're a woman you can't have any relationships with men that aren't sexual is irritating, to say the least. All kinds of things pile up.

I went to a shrink when I was about thirty to see if he could cure me of being Gay. I hadn't yet had any Gay experience, but I longed for it, and thought, not that it was a bad thing, but that it was inconvenient for me to have these useless longings. I thought that if only I could be rid of them I could do what I was supposed to do more happily. I remember telling this shrink that I felt deprived as a writer; I felt that I had a talent not initially inferior to Mark Twain's, but I couldn't go up and down the Mississippi and couldn't do the things he had done to expand his life experiences and wisdom. I resented the limitations placed on my knowledge because I was a woman. I put that into *Patience and Sarah*. Once the parson finds out that the "Sam" he's been traveling with is Sarah, a female, he stops teaching her. She can see him ask himself, before everything he says, "Is this fitting or useful for a woman to know?" As a young woman I wanted to know about all kinds of things, and men in those days were very careful about what they let women know - - not intellectual things, but about real life, how things really happen. I didn't feel rid of that disadvantage till I got into a women's consciousness-raising group and realized that I was learning more about real human nature than I would ever find out on a Mississippi riverboat.

J.K.: Can you say more about your idea of the relationship between Lesbianism and feminism? It seems such an important aspect of *Patience and Sarah*.

A.R.: I feel that there's something about the male ego - - I hope this may be changing. If you're a woman and going into a relationship with a man, you've got to flatter him in a certain way by your own inferiority. That makes development of yourself difficult. While you love men, and need their love, need their approval, there are certain adaptations you have to make that are crippling to you. I was horrified to read that men are turned on by the peculiar unnaturalness of the walk of a woman in high heels. It excites them, it makes her butt move in a certain way,

and it makes her helpless - - she can't run - - he feels so solid beside her. There are all kinds of ways that women who love men cripple themselves like that.

I was attracted to a man a few years ago. I was appalled because my immediate thought was, "I've got to lose weight!" There were things I would have to do to make myself more attractive to him. Fortunately, I recovered immediately. But I was surprised at the working of my mind, and what you do if you want a man - - it's very different from what you do if you want a woman.

I thought my husband and I lived pretty much as equals, even though I was home with the children and he went out to work. My lover was angry that I didn't hate him, and she was determined to trap him into making a statement that would turn me off him. She was a good manipulator, and she managed to do it. She trapped him into saying that if he married again he did not want an intellectual woman: "A man likes to be one jump ahead of a woman." When I realized he had resented my not being one jump behind him our whole life together, it turned me off. So many good things that had happened between us were invalidated because he minded my not being inferior to him. It was a struggle for him to put up with our equality - - that came as a shock to me. I have not gotten over it. Yes, Lesbianism and feminism are tied together.

I've been hurt by women much more than by men. But even when I have a broken heart and am wiped out, there's something in me saying, "Well, at least it's over a woman - - at least she's worth it. At least I'm not feeding the male ego - - that God damn beast."

J.K.: Has your consciousness changed appreciably since writing *Patience and Sarah*? Is there anything you would say differently if you were writing the book in 1975?

A.R.: One of the things some people complain about in the novel is what seems to be role-playing: Sarah dressing like a man. I think that was necessary; I wouldn't change that. Sarah needs to have had the experience that enables her to chop down trees when she and Patience finally get out on their farm alone. One of the jokes in the book is that although Sarah dresses like a man she's not butch, she's not male-identified. Men's clothes are not male identification; they're *freedom*. Sarah's basic feeling comes out when she's with the parson, traveling as a boy; she gets into all these fights and she doesn't always lose, but she still doesn't like it. She realizes for the first time not only that she is a woman, but that she values womanliness more than manliness. She doesn't want to be in the kind of constant struggle and fighting and competition that men are in. The idea of Sarah going out into the world as a young man - - well, actually, it's a great archtypal idea. It's in Shakespeare. I think it's a recurrent fantasy of little girls.

J.K.: On what did you base the character of the parson?

A.R.: Well, I'd read about Parson Weems, who made up the cherry tree story about George Washington. He'd been unfrocked for making people laugh at prayer, and had written a book advocating some kind of birth control, which made him an outcast. I liked him, and I used him as a start for Parson Peel. I also projected a lot of myself into the parson; I'm more Parson Peel than anyone else in the book.

J.K.: In what ways?

A.R.: He always wants to know how people manage to live. Do they pray or sing or have a friend, or hope for heaven? How do they keep going? No matter how many times he hears the same story, he's interested. He goes off with a load of dirty laundry over his shoulder, and comes back with the laundry woman's life story. He sleeps late in the morning and writes at night. He sings hymns. He's bisexual, which I sort of am, I don't act on it because I've had to make a choice. If I have to choose, I choose women. I put a lot of myself into the parson. I made him elegant as a joke - - I'm not elegant - - I don't have a ruffled shirt, and two rows of buttons on my waistcoat.

Since I wrote *Patience and Sarah*, my idea of strict monogamy has changed a lot. I still think

monogamy was necessary for their time and situation. They had no Gay community at all. But I wouldn't be interested now in writing about monogamy. I think the problem today is to develop a kind of support community, to not be so exclusive, to help each other when we need it, to be there for each other.

I've also become more cynical since writing *Patience and Sarah*. A lot of women who had been hurt much more than I found the novel naive; I agree now, in a certain way. I think the book's true, but it's also naive. I've been around quite a lot since I wrote it, and I know better how difficult most relationships are. I didn't make *Patience and Sarah's* relationship difficult enough - I hinted at the difficulty, but I didn't make it as difficult as most really are.

J.K.: It seems to me that *Patience and Sarah* expresses a Lesbian and feminist consciousness characteristic of the particular time you were writing it. In artistic form it makes a statement much like the one other Lesbians were making in more directly political ways. Your book seems to fit into a Lesbian literary-political tradition. Although its viewpoint is entirely different, *The Well of Loneliness* is in the same tradition; it was a political act as well as an artistic one.

A.R.: I think Radclyffe Hall was anti-homosexual, though. I first read *The Well of Loneliness* when I was about seventeen. I was working in the library in my home town, and a woman came in who I now realize must have been a Lesbian. She wanted to know if we had *The Well of Loneliness*. I somehow sensed that was a book I should know about. We didn't have it. But I went out baby-sitting that night, and it was in that house, and I read it. I was very excited. The love scenes really turned me on. But I didn't like the characters. I didn't like the arrogance of the heroine, Stephen. I remember being offended, since it was obviously very autobiographical, at how Hall kept emphasizing what a terrific writer Stephen was. And that famous last section where she makes this piteous plea for the world to understand. I just didn't like it. Hall should have fit it in better. Hall has Stephen give up Mary so Mary can be saved by marrying Martin. At the end Stephen's in this wipe-out of grief; she might better have thought, "Maybe someday we won't have to feel that our love is such a bad thing that we have to send our lovers off." That last plea for pity just doesn't come out of the Stephen situation. It's just so rhetorical.

J.K.: I do see *Patience and Sarah* as a political as well as an artistic statement.

A.R.: The novel may incidentally be a political statement, but that wasn't what I had in mind. I was trying to motivate my characters - creating them was an artistic problem.

J.K.: How do you feel about yourself as a writer in relation to the liberation movements of Lesbians and Gay men?

A.R.: I don't want to write about anything else. I feel that, even though I've been rather unproductive. I really am a writer, and I really am a good writer. One of the things Gay people need is to have our artists pay attention to us, use us as their topic. It's disappointing when Gay people with big talent don't want to give it to us.

J.K.: I think that Gay people have a lot to tell about their surviving under difficult conditions. I hope that in your future writings you'll tell about that.

A.R.: I want to.