

The Leo Biga interview

Leo Biga Interviews Marilyn June Coffey

Comment about the Lit Fest focusing on women writers this time around

I'm delighted that Lit Fest is focusing on female writers this fall. What will it be like, a weekend with no phallic competition? A cornucopia of vaginally inspired words, no doubt.

Tell me about the expectations that attend the work of women writers

That old nursery rhyme -- "Sugar and spice and all things nice/That's what little girls are made of!" -- lingers. Not all women writers comply. Think Flannery O'Connor. Or Anais Nin. Or me. "Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails" do cross gender lines.

Do you consider yourself a woman writer?

Somehow, I never did consider myself a woman writer. Oh, I knew I was one, but I thought like a writer without gender attached. I read and modeled myself after writers like Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence, writers unafraid to depict sex. I knew I wasn't supposed to write about masturbation, but that was because the topic was taboo, not because I was female. Or had been taboo, until Philip Roth made monumental fun of it in his *Portnoy's Complaint*.

What happens when women authors upset those expectations?

Well, at least we're no longer hung or burnt at the stake or tied naked, arms and legs spread, under a noonday sun, to bake. Today's censors aim to silence us, primarily by banning books, long a favored activity. My novel, MARCELLA, is not on any library shelf in Harlan County where I was raised. "To protect your family," one librarian explained. Unnecessary. My family had already banned it.

I lived for 30 years in New York City without encountering negativity about my sexually addicted teenager, Marcella. But when I came back to my home state, Nebraska, I encountered plenty. Both libraries (Alma & Orleans) in my home county banned the book. I was asked to give a marathon reading of my novel in Orleans, but the idea outraged so many people that I cancelled the reading.

What's It like living in Omaha?

In Omaha, I don't experience outrage about my sexual novel and poetry. Here my readings are sometimes greeted with laughter and applause; at other times, I get the cold shoulder, the frozen face, the stiff closed lips. But I don't think my writing is "wrong." Just a bit ahead of its time, perhaps. For a woman.