



Episode 806, Story 2: Diana

Tukufu Zuberi: Our next case investigates how this alleged first lesbian autobiography escaped censorship in the 1930's. The 1930's saw multiple restrictions against homosexuality in the United States. Public order rulings made it difficult for gay men and women to live their lives openly. Studios enforced bans against depictions of homosexuality in Hollywood. And the publishing world mostly depicted gays and lesbians as deviant or tragic characters. Some 70 years later, Randy Sell of New York City has come across an alleged autobiography that paints a very different picture of gay life in the immediate years before World War II. I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I'm eager to see what Randy has to show me.

Randy Sell: Hi, come on in. This is *Diana: A Strange Autobiography*.

Tukufu: Where did you get it from?

Randy: I got it from a used book store. I was writing a dissertation back in the early 90's and I was really interested in books about lesbian, gay, bi-sexual people.

Tukufu: Randy tells me that what caught his eye was that Diana had been released in 1939 – and it claimed to be an autobiography.

Randy: Back then it was very rare for a person to be saying that they're a lesbian. But here the publisher's note says, "This is an autobiography of a woman who tried to be normal. Although she has found it necessary to write under a pseudonym, she has fearlessly told the truth".

Tukufu: So what are your questions for me?

Randy: Who wrote the book? Is it an autobiography or just a novel?

Tukufu: All right. Let me go see what I can find out for you and get back to you.

Randy: Great.



Tukufu: The book also claims to be unprecedented. “The publishers wish it expressly understood that this is not a work of fiction. It is a true story. The first of its kind.” Early on the protagonist, Diana, at age 16, comes across a chapter on homosexuality in a medical text. That medical book describes homosexuality as abnormal, and she realizes society views her the same way. “I was then a pervert. Homosexual. I was subject to arrest. I was grotesque. Alienated. Unclean.” As the book continues, Diana tries to hide her homosexuality and enters into a heterosexual marriage, which fails. The character travels to Europe to study languages, becoming a French professor and eventually a writer. Along the way, she has several intimate relationships with women. “But Elizabeth had not brought me into the alcove for conversation, and the ease of her approach was startling.” I mean there’s a lot of passion. It is very revealing in terms of her realization that she is a lesbian. But there’s also an introduction, supposedly written by a Doctor Victor Robinson. It reads, in part: “That charming women should be lesbians is not a crime, it is simply a pity.” There are no clues as to the identity of the author, or whether this is indeed a true story. So basically all the listings I find about Diana Fredericks have to do with *Diana: A Strange Autobiography*. Diana was reprinted several times. But I find no other titles by the author, and a search for Diana’s publisher, Dial Press, reveals no further information about the author. Here we are in you know 1939 and it would have been rare for anybody, any homosexual, to write openly about their homosexuality. In the 30s to be “in the life” – as it was known – was to be viewed by the wider society as abnormal or afflicted. Many doctors claimed lesbianism was the result of a genetic defect. Lesbianism is seen as not only something that is deviant, but kind of like a disease that can be fixed. Heterosexual conventions were reinforced in Hollywood, where the studios’ self-enforced “Hays Code” banned the portrayal of homosexuality in movies.

Movie plays

Tukufu: But, subtle references to lesbianism did filter into the mainstream. In the 1930 film “Morocco”, Marlene Dietrich dresses like a man and kisses a woman... As does Greta Garbo’s Queen Christina in 1933...

Movie plays

Tukufu: But by the last reel, both women learn about true love from a man. Genuine representations of lesbian relationships in film or literature were few and far between. Now I’m



familiar with very powerful autobiographies. I mean, Frederick Douglas's is one of the most famous. And his book becomes an inspiration. Did *Diana* have a similar impact? I'm in San Francisco to talk with Lillian Faderman, Professor Emerita of English and creative writing at California State University, Fresno. We are meeting at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. So, have you read this book?

Lillian Faderman: I have. It was first published in 1939. It was reprinted in the 40's several times. In '46 and '47 was translated into French. It was published in English, in India in 1939 and then it was republished in a paperback, again in the early 1950's.

Tukufu: Lillian believes the popularity of the book lies in the way the author wrote about the subject.

Lillian: Diana Fredericks talks very openly about being lesbian. And there weren't many writers who were doing that in the 1920's and 1930's and certainly not earlier. I don't know another lesbian novel of the 20th century that's specifically lesbian that uses that term.

Tukufu: It's been said that this was the first autobiography by a lesbian. Is that true?

Lillian: There were other autobiographies. There was a 1930 autobiography by a woman who called herself Mary Casal who was called *The Stone Wall*, but it ends unhappily.

Tukufu: Lillian explains how literature of the 30's, 40's, and 50's presented lesbian life as tragedy.

Lillian: They invariably ended badly with either the suicide of the lesbian character or the conversion to heterosexuality. In *Diana* it's the first explicitly lesbian autobiography where the two women end up happily together.

Tukufu: What was the impact of *Diana* on the gay rights revolution?

Lillian: I think what happened in the 1960's and the 1970's was much more complex than a single encouraging book. I think it had a lot to do with the Civil Rights movements that preceded the gay revolution and preceded lesbian feminism. But what I can say is that for many years this was



personally so important to lesbians that all through the 1940's and the 1950's and into the 60's, it was a favorite book for so many of us because it was such an encouraging book.

Tukufu: Do you know anything about the author?

Lillian: No. I never questioned that it was an autobiography. I wanted to believe that it was true. But, I can remember speculation that this book was written by a medical doctor, and since there were so few medical doctors who were women in the 1930's the assumption was that it was a man. And I made an attempt to find out who Diana Fredericks was and came up with zilch. She was well hidden.

Tukufu: Julie Abrams is a professor of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender studies at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. She wrote the introduction to a 1995 reprint of the book. She suspects that Diana's efforts to hide her name may be a clue to her identity, or at least, her career. Julie believes Diana may have been a professional writer who did not want to risk her livelihood.

Julie Abrams: She clearly felt that if she published this book she would not be able to continue to publish other works.

Tukufu: The issue, Julie explains, was the Federal Comstock Censorship laws which made it illegal to send anything "obscene, lewd or lascivious" through the mail. What was an obscene book in the 1930's?

Julie: Well theoretically they were about sexually explicitness. What counted as sexually explicit in the 30's is not of course what we would think of as sexually explicit. But there was rhetorical concern that surrounded all of this discussion of obscenity was often the sort of fear that minors would be corrupted. The fear that young persons, some mythical young person would pick up this book and would get some idea about sexuality that they hadn't previously had before.

Tukufu: Julie shows me the best known lesbian novel of this period, a story about a woman ambulance driver in World War I.



Julie: In '28, Radclyffe Hall wrote *The Well of Loneliness*. That novel which is not sexually explicit at all in, even in the 30's sense really. The fact that it's about a lesbian makes it obscene, and the book was in fact banned in Britain. And they attempted to ban it in the United States and it caused a great uproar. *Diana* has an introduction from a doctor which lays out the seriousness of the subject and legitimizes it.

Tukufu: Claiming that it was an autobiography also made it less likely to be censored.

Julie: Because if it's true, then it has a kind of redeeming social value.

Tukufu: So who is Diana Fredericks?

Julie: We tried to find the publisher of the original book and there were no records. We didn't find any other records of anybody publishing under that name. We couldn't figure this out.

Tukufu: The Library of Congress copyright catalog in Washington D.C. has digitized all of their records from after 1977. But most older records can be searched using their 49 million indexed cards and 27,000 record books. Here it is. *Diana: A Strange Autobiography*. It says here, Diana Frederick's, pseudonym. The real name, Frances Rummell. Now Frances here is spelled F-R-A-N-C-I-S. That's a masculine spelling. I check online archives to see if there's any record of Francis Rummell. The name I'm getting the most hits on is Joseph Francis Rummell. I mean, but he's an archbishop in New Orleans. I don't think it's likely. I try a few different spellings and draw a blank. Let's try the feminine spelling. So let me just try to replace our "I" with an "E". And here's something. This newspaper mentions an article written by education expert, Frances Rummell. But in the book Diana is a French professor, not an education expert. Okay, now this is promising. "The status of women in the plays of Moliere", F. V. Rummell. This is her master's paper at the University of Missouri. And that's a kind of topic that we would expect our French professor to have written. This is pretty thin evidence, and I don't see anything else linking Frances Rummell to our groundbreaking book. It looks like she died in 1969. I need to find someone who knew Frances. Fortunately, I've found a niece, Jo Markwyn. It's not much of a lead, but I'll try. Yes, I'm trying to contact a Jo Markwyn? She has never heard of the book, but she agrees to read it. And she thinks she might have something for me. We arrange to meet at her home in Sonoma County, north of San Francisco. So how did you know Frances?



Jo Markwyn: She was my aunt; she was my father's sister.

Tukufu: And this is a picture of her?

Jo: Yes.

Tukufu: So what do you know about Francis?

Jo: She was a writer. Her field was education. She started out as a teacher, and taught French at Stevens College for a couple of years. Which is where she met my mother whom she introduced to my father.

Tukufu: So you should thank Frances for a whole bunch.

Jo: Oh, I do. I do.

Tukufu: Jo says Frances studied at the Sorbonne in France in 1931, and even smuggled a copy of *Ulysses* into the U.S. when she returned. Now what was she like?

Jo: She was a very bright woman. I think she enjoyed life. She was a big personality. She came into the room, you knew she was there. I was very fond of her.

Tukufu: Jo shows me some clippings from a family scrap book.

Jo: One of the things that was very interesting to me is that she met Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote about their meeting in her "My Day" column which I thought was very cool. "I saw a number of people in New York City yesterday afternoon. I was very much impressed by Miss Rummell a teacher from Missouri. She believes that discipline is one of the things which education should teach us and I am inclined to agree with her." And this was something I knew nothing about until I found the article. Apparently she spent the summer of 1939 in New York City.

Tukufu: 1939 is the year *Diana* was published. Jo says Frances was 32-years-old at the time.



Tukufu: Now, do you know if Frances was a lesbian?

Jo: Yes. I do know. And she was. My parents never said anything about it. But, observation told me when I got old enough, and I know of a couple of relationships she was in that were long term.

Tukufu: I show Jo the copyright card for Diana with Frances's name on it.

Jo: Oh that is really, that's exciting. I like documentary evidence. And that certainly makes it fairly persuasive.

Tukufu: Do you believe that *Diana* is the autobiography of your Aunt Frances? Then Jo shares something that sheds new light on Diana.

Jo: The general family background...

Tukufu: I can't wait to share this with Randy. You wanted to know who wrote *Diana: A Strange Autobiography*. It was written by a woman and her name was Frances Rummell.

Randy: Ah, wow. I mean it's exciting to hear that it was actually written by a woman, and that adds a lot of legitimacy to this book now.

Tukufu: Now Frances Rummell died in 1969. However we were able to talk to her niece.

Jo: The general family background is similar, but rather than having three brothers, she had two brothers and a younger sister. They were both teachers, and they were both writers. But I don't think it's an autobiography. I think it is a novel based upon her life.

Tukufu: Even though it's a novel, Jo thinks Diana was Frances's emotional autobiography, and that, like Diana, she found fulfillment as a lesbian, and would be thrilled to know her book has inspired so many. Francis Rummell's niece wanted you to have this scrapbook.



Randy: She's obviously a very beautiful woman. That's exciting, oh well, and there she is hunting. I hope every future copy of this book has a text written at the front that tells a little bit about the life of this author and gives her her credit.