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Preface

In the autumn of 1994, at the Supreme Court of British Columbia, a huge melodrama was unfolding. Vancouver's lesbian and gay bookstore was finally able – after a struggle that had already taken eight years – to set on record the abuses it had met at the hands of the clumsy and foolish would-be censors of Canada Customs. The books we imported from American publishers were routinely scrutinized by Customs officials as part of their dull-minded, perpetual witch-hunt for traces of what they themselves declared to be obscene. For Canadians who read, write, and sell books, the entire situation was obscene.

Testifying on behalf of the bookstore that year, Jane Rule said, in part:

Now there are quite a number of people in Canada who do know that *The Young in One Another's Arms* won the Canadian Authors' Association Award for the best novel of 1978. There are a great many more people in Canada who know that *The Young in One Another's Arms* was detained by Customs. And that is what I have to carry. I have to carry a reputation created by this charge from which I have no way of defending myself. . . . And I bitterly resent the attempt to marginalize, trivialize and even criminalize what I have to say because I happen to be a lesbian, I happen to be a novelist, I happen to have bookstores and publishers who are dedicated to producing my work. The assumption is, therefore, that there must be something pornographic because of my sexual orientation, and I think that is a shocking way to deal with my community.

These words, spoken in Rule's calm, precise tone in that hushed courtroom, with her uncommon mix of confidence and defiance, came to represent the condensed message that the bookstore would take to the Supreme Court of Canada in 2000, and into the new millennium as the court battles continued. Somehow Rule had managed to sum it all up: We are a community, and *we will not budge* – not to bigots, not to Canada Customs, not to anyone.

We are delighted and privileged to launch the Little Sister's Classics series with such an exceptional piece of literature. *The Young in One Another's Arms* is a complex and highly focused novel about the kinds of community that Rule spoke about that day in court. The book speaks to how we are as individuals, with all of our disparate backgrounds and causes, and how, when we come together, we are stronger as a community than on our own. This is a novel that speaks to the goodness of human relations without being giddily optimistic. We are all players on this delicate stage, and we are all responsible for our actions. And we are all, at the end of the day, "minorities" in one form or another.

As if the opportunity to present this beautiful novel in a new light were not enough, we take further joy in presenting an introduction by Katherine V. Forrest, a Canadian-born American writer introducing an American-born Canadian writer's book. Thanks to the diligent work of the archivists at the University of British Columbia (notably, Christopher Hives), this new edition of Rule's book features a complement of book reviews, manuscript details, and critical analysis.

We are very proud to be able to now part the curtains on this novel and this series. Our debt is to all who have come before us in this, our community.

Mark Macdonald, 2005

Introduction

KATHERINE V. FORREST

Like the best work of our best writers, Jane Rule's novels and short stories and essays remain germane to our contemporary lives and to the lives of the people we know. They portray nothing less than the intricacies of our existence, the profundities of birth and death, the complex internal contractions that inhabit all of us, the essential fluidity of our sexuality and identity – in short, the marvelous inventions so many of us who live on the margins have made of our lives.

Jane Rule's publishing history began four decades ago when her groundbreaking first novel, *Desert of the Heart* (1964), was initially published in England; it remains a world-wide classic of lesbian literature. It has now been sixteen years since she gave us her final novel, *After the Fire* (1989). In any one of the seven novels she published, the reader will find a writer concerned at some level with the workings of family and community, and an illumination of the realms of possibility open to those who no longer conveniently fit within the conventional, prosaic expectations of society. Her books explore life in transition, the connections all-too-human characters attempt and sometimes succeed in devising for themselves.

Today, Jane Rule stands tall as a visionary who held steadfast to a conviction considered iconoclastic by some contemporary lesbian critics and readers. As a minority community, it is we who have grown toward the themes freshly relevant to us in books that seem only burnished by time. Surely no recent development in our community of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people exceeds in importance our redefinition and reconfiguration of family, the

creation of our own communities that Jane Rule was writing about all those years ago.

No book of hers more represents and validates this view than *The Young in One Another's Arms*. Recognized and celebrated in its own time with the award of Best Novel of the Year in 1978 by the Canadian Authors Association, it is a book that is achingly, wrenchingly relevant to our times: no reader can help but superimpose the social upheaval, the political climate, and the headlines of war from today's newspapers on many aspects of its story.

The plot shimmers in its deceptive simplicity like the surface of a lake. It is set in Vancouver, the main character fifty-year-old Ruth Wheeler, who owns and runs a boardinghouse. In a kind of novelistic montage, we are presented with an ensemble cast of ten other characters who occupy the stage in significant degree. Loss and renewal form one of the central themes, and the house is a primary symbol throughout. In one sense it represents attempted replacement – Ruth bought the house with the insurance payoff from an accident two years ago in which she lost her daughter Claire, as well as her right arm. Ruth's husband, Hal, is yet another loss, having long since walked out on her after he remarked, "You're not the sort of woman to live with." But Hal is not quite an amputation; he turns up from time to time, as much to reclaim his husbandly place with Ruth as to resume his filial duties toward his mother, Clara. We soon learn that the house too has turned out to be a loss – it is about to be demolished, the land it sits on expropriated for use as a bridge onramp.

Amid this bleak landscape and isolation, Ruth's view of the world is reductive – blunt simplicity and practicality: "For her," the narrator tells us, "there was never any way out of a fact." She has taken on various degrees of care and responsibility for, as she considerably understates it, "six boarders and an ailing mother-in-law." Her boarders are of course far more than her rendition of them, and indeed of her

perception of them; soon, they unfold themselves in ways that are disparate, intriguing, and unpredictable.

Clara Wheeler, the ailing mother-in-law, is closest by far to Ruth's heart, the depth of Ruth's feeling emerging in a powerful wonderment: "Did many women marry because they loved their mother-in-law?" The interdependence of Ruth and Clara, the choreography of their daily lives, their wordless understanding, and deep roots of emotional connection, exemplify a long-term lesbian relationship.

Willard Steele, mentally and emotionally stunted, a fourteen-year resident of the boardinghouse, is central to the narrative and turns out to be far less predictable than he seems. In a shocking turning point in the story, Ruth learns the true extent of his dependence on the routine that demarcates his life.

Other boarders are young men and women, misfits in their own idiosyncratic ways, and their interactions create turbulent undercurrents. Ruth has carefully not inquired about the history of any of her boarders, but knows full well that Tom Petross is an American military deserter, and that his job as a short order cook is beneath his abilities. Arthur, whose "military haircut has not had time to grow out," is another fugitive, the most recent arrival, who has taken sanctuary in the basement. Other boarders include Joanie Vaughn, a secretary dreaming and scheming to marry into wealth; Mavis Collingwood, who works on her PhD thesis in literature and has everyone reading Dickens; and Stewart Meadow, who plays the clarinet and passes much of the rest of his time stoned.

Gladys Ledger, a political firebrand and a teacher of handicapped children, is the contemporary cultural "twin" of Stewart – and the beating heart of this novel. Her generous, unselfconscious sensuality and largeness of spirit are a catalyst that draws Stewart, Arthur, Tom, and repressed lesbian Mavis into her orbit. As the story unfolds, she

affects these four in particular in far-reaching, life-changing ways. When she shifts away from Stewart to the needy, emotionally damaged Arthur, it is a fateful act and another turning point in the narrative.

Later in the story, another catalytic and energizing character turns up: Boyd Wonder, an African-American of mysterious origins, who scandalizes the group with his self-parody and denigrating self-stereotyping – his insistence on being called Boy. All of his ingratiating Stepinfetchit behavior is designed both to highlight and mockingly undercut racial prejudice – an iteration of the behavior of many gay people who adopt similar protective coloration.

Comparing this novel to the one that preceded it, *Against the Season* (1971), we can see connective thematic strands. *Against the Season* takes place in America, but in this story a character named Cole, similar to Arthur and Tom, is also a Vietnam war resister. Amelia and Beatrice, like Ruth Wheeler with her boardinghouse of social misfits, take in unwed mothers, who in those days certainly belonged to the groups considered outlaws and deserving of societal repudiation. *The Young in One Another's Arms* is clearly a continuation of the working out of the theme of family and connection.

Against the Season and *The Young in One Another's Arms*, which were Jane's third and fourth novels, mark a distinct and permanent departure from the specific lesbian focus of her first two books, *Desert of the Heart* (1964) and *This Is Not For You* (1970). With *Against the Season* and *The Young in One Another's Arms*, she would begin to work with an ever-expanding fictional canvas, and if her lesbian and gay characters appear somewhat lesser, it is because they are portrayed in fuller context against the larger society and culture. Her fifth novel, *Contract with the World* (1980), set amid a segment of Canada's art world, is a particularly majestic work, powerfully written, richly textured, multi-faceted. The three-character novel *Memory Board* (1987) is,

I would argue (with prejudice), Jane Rule's finest and most mature work. *After the Fire* (1989), individually rewarding in its own right, seems an extension and augmentation of the brilliant delineation of character and long-term relationship first revealed in *Memory Board*.

Jane's portrayals of people breaking out of the isolation imposed on them by estrangement, and the complexities and confusions, the potential and the rewards involved in reaching out for human connection – these are among the great gifts of her work. *The Young in One Another's Arms* is by no means a utopian novel – Jane Rule is too wise and her perception too clear and grounded – but a sweetness inhabits the story, a hopefulness and the suggestion of sheer human potential as those in the small community revolving around Ruth, galvanized by the looming reality of losing its home, tentatively reach out to one another. When Clara's son drops in and asserts his filial sense of responsibility by moving his ill mother to a care facility in advance of the destruction of the boardinghouse, the emotional stakes ratchet up and the connections among the boarders, instead of fraying, develop and strengthen.

The arrival of Christmas – its meaning resisted in particular by Ruth who deadpans, "I don't keep birthdays of the dead" – provides a first tangible model of cooperation when Ruth's boarders elect to celebrate the day, and exercise an autonomy from Ruth that nevertheless carries her right along with it.

Emerging from beyond Ruth's matter-of-factness, beyond the bluntness only slightly leavened by drollness, lying barely under the surface of her every act, is the open wound of grief. Since the death of her daughter, Ruth's every choice has been in reaction to that inconceivable and cataclysmic loss.

Out of such a scenario and assortment of characters comes grace notes that echo in the mind well beyond the last pages of this

relatively slender novel. Among these notes are the closing chapters that provide a vivid and altogether charming view of Galiano Island in British Columbia where Jane Rule has spent much of her life amid its close-knit community.

Beyond the relevance of the timing, I trust the reissue of this remarkable novel will lead readers to seek out Jane Rule's other work, where further rewards await. There is splendor in her prose, passages that lift off the page, like this description of the surrounds of Vancouver: "... roads cut higher and higher into the wooded mountainside, great wounds with scabs of houses forming on either side."

Readers will find themselves in the company of a singular, arresting, provocative, challenging mind not at all lacking in humor. Best of all they will always find a clear-eyed compassion, exemplified by the moment when Ruth Wheeler gazes at her boarders and reflects: "Later she would let them know that they could be let go, were free, but just for this time she held them in her dark eyes, in her quiet heart, for herself."

I remember a time I met with Jane Rule and Helen Sonthoff in the desert town of Borrego Springs, California during one of their winter sojourns away from their home on Galiano Island. I believe I was editing *Memory Board* at the time, the novel that remains my lasting pride as an editor. For those who don't know Jane beyond her name and her work, she has for decades suffered from crippling arthritis; nevertheless, she is a tall, handsome, indomitable woman. The warm, dry desert air had so dramatically eased her chronic pain that I could not help but selfishly ask this expatriate, who had, after all, been born in Plainfield, New Jersey: "Jane, why not come back and live here – in this much healthier climate?" Her immediate, flat response: "Because I can't deal with the politics." Some writers don't match up to their written words: she does.

The books of Jane Rule are not only groundbreaking in their historical context, they hold some of the wisest, most eloquent and passionate writing in our literature. In the face of such *prima facie* evidence, Jane Rule should finally be given her full due and the judgment she deserves: she is one of our finest writers – surely the most significant lesbian writer of the twentieth century.