

## Literary Lions (Female) Roar

By Jonah Raskin

Ever since her days as a teen, Ali Liebegott has known she wanted to be a writer and be true, too, to her own self. "I'm queer in more ways than one," she tells me at Canessa Gallery in San Francisco's North Beach where writers and artists congregate, create, and agitate. Liebegott, 42, might pass for 22. She's wearing a Toronto Blue Jays cap, a white T-shirt and red sneakers. Her hair is a buzz cut. Emily Dickinson's likeness is tattooed on her arm along with the poet's words, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." A poster girl for queer writers and a creative writing teacher at Mills, the all-women's school, Liebegott is published by City Lights where Elaine Katzenberger sits in the editor's chair formerly occupied by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 94. Under her reign, City Lights – now in its 60th year – has published more books by and about women than ever before.

More American women write and publish than ever before and more women buy and read books than men. They belong to more salons, take more writing class, and go to more book events. But the narratives, women writers tell aren't always narratives of success and fame. Of course, success and fame are fickle no matter what one's sex, gender, and geographical co-ordinates. Still, many women writers say there's "gender profiling" in the book industry or the equivalent of the corporate world's glass ceiling.

Women feel they're filtered out of the industry before they can get a foot in the door, especially at major houses in New York. In a recent piece in *The Nation* entitled "My So-Called 'Post-Feminist' life in Arts and Letters," author Deborah Copaken Kogan slammed the New York literary patriarchy and offered to establish a prize to create "gender parity in the arts." There's bravado and there's also a genuine sense of literary injustice.

I've known women authors – Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, and Marge Piercy - since the Golden Age of women's liberation when Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan created magazines like *Ms* to provide space for marginalized voices. I've watched publishing doors open to women and close and open again. For decades, I've profiled female writers identified with California: Amy Tan, Joan Didion, and Anne Lamont, all of them published by major New York houses. I've also known dozens of self-published women writers. For the last forty years or so, I've lived in the Bay Area, where writers almost automatically adopt an adversarial stance toward New York, and

where there's a built-in sense of living on the margins of literary respectability. Female fiction writers – I'm talking here principally about novelists not poets – see themselves as doubly and even triply outcast. Some are too polite or too shy to voice their concerns. They're afraid roaring might offend Big Daddy and hurt their careers.

College educated, often college teachers, many the daughters of boomers and feminists, they turn to small, independent houses such as City Lights and Graywolf, and to online publishing and ebooks. Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins ignore them, but that doesn't stop them from writing about the everyday, ordinary things that happen to women, usually without waving feminist flags. They aren't asking men to lend a hand; they certainly haven't asked me for assistance, though over the last few months I've interviewed two-dozen women writers, editors, agents, reviewers, and publishers.

"Publishing books is like throwing darts," Katzenberger tells. "You don't know what's going to hit and what's going to miss." Changing metaphors she adds, "If you're going to succeed as a writer you have to win the equivalent of the Triple Crown in horse racing." City Lights has had major successes and some failures, too. North Beach, once the home of the Beats — the "boy gang" as Allen Ginsberg called it — has seen brighter literary days. Katzenberger suggests that Brooklyn might be America's newest literary destination. "You can't walk down a street there and not meet a writer," she says. But much the same might be said with equal veracity about Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco.

For years, Liebegott called Brooklyn home. She casts a backward glance at the borough in *Cha-Ching!* (2013), an autobiographical novel in the spirit of Kerouac's *On The Road* that belongs to City Lights "Sister Spit" series created by Michelle Tea who means to recognize under appreciated authors. The one other "Sister Spit" book so far is Beth Lisick's *Yokohama Threeway* (2013), a collection of vignettes drawn from her own life. The author of a New York Times best seller, *Everyone Into the Pool* (2005) Lisick, 42, lives in Brooklyn most of the time, though I met her in North Beach on a summer day.

She doesn't know anyone in Brooklyn, she says, except her husband and son, and she's no longer a slave to her car, as she was in Berkeley. With more time to write and travel, she and Liebegott perform on both coasts, as befitting their bi-coastal careers.

Like the Brooklyn literati, Bay Area authors come from everywhere. Jack Boulware, the co-founder with Jane Ganahl of

Litquake - the annual writers' festival – hails from Montana. The African American novelist, Ishmael Reed - raised in Buffalo and an Oakland resident - says he's "a writer in exile." He's not alone. Inundated by exiles from Buffalo, Brooklyn, Boston, and elsewhere San Francisco sees itself as a nurturing community that provides exiles with a platform and an audience. That's what Laura Cogan, the editor at *Zyzzyva*, tells me. A Northern California native, she studied literature at New York University then came home and joined the magazine's staff when Howard Junker ran the show. The magazine's latest issue highlights bi-coastal writers. "Going back and forth is how we live today," Cogan tells me.

Sandra Dijkstra, the Del-Mar-based agent who represents Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, sees the city from the outside. "I love the Bay Area," she tells me on a Friday afternoon from her weekend retreat in the mountains of Southern California. "To think that it's a literary utopia without jealousy, competition, backbiting and sabotage is unreal and fits in with the unreality of so much of California."

For many Bay Area women writers, however, the reality isn't jealousy and backbiting, but the fact that literary magazines publish far more male than female writers. Susan Steinberg, 46, keeps track of the gender imbalance. A professor at San Francisco State University and the author of *Spectacle* (2013), she says that she was shocked by the statistics. "The odds are against women writers," she says. "That's the reality we're up against and that's why San Francisco's supportive community is so necessary for survival." [Vida.web.org](http://Vida.web.org) provides the numbers. In 2011, for example, *The Atlantic* offered work by 91 females and 235 males. At *Harpers*, 42 females and 141 males. Books by men are reviewed more often, too.

Sadly, the literary sisters often don't know of, or remember, Alice Adams, Tillie Olsen, and Gina Berriault to mention a few nationally acclaimed Bay Area writers. They don't remember Molly Giles, 70, unable to find a publisher for a novel and a short story collection she's written, though she's published several works of fiction. Since the 1980s, she's worked with Amy Tan as an editor and as her "birthing coach" for the forthcoming novel, *The Valley of Amazement*. For the past 14 years, Giles has taught at the University of Arkansas where there's a lively writers' community. Her age, she tells me, might be a barrier that prevents her from finding a publisher.

Litquake's Jack Boulware thinks of San Francisco as a nurturing metropolis populated by budding writers — without the driving

ambitions inbred in Manhattan. In fact, San Francisco provides a nest for writers from Asia, the Middle East, Central America, and Eastern Europe, though national origin usually isn't the critical factor for creativity. Micheline Marcom, 45, an experimental fiction writer, doesn't flaunt her ethnic past. Born in Saudi Arabia to an American father and an Armenian-Lebanese mother, she lives in Berkeley, teaches at Mills, and shies away from literary dust-ups. The author of *A Brief History of Yes* (2013) and several unpublished books, she tells me, "I've had difficulty finding publishers, but why that is I'm not sure. I think it's complicated. When I publish a book, there's usually silence; I'd rather not complain. I go to my basement and go on writing."

Helene Wecker, 37, might be the newest and perhaps one of the youngest members of the local literary sisterhood. Career-wise, she followed a traditional literary trajectory: graduate school, networking, an agent, and a catchy line for her manuscript. Wecker's individual case suggests there's no gender profiling, but she's probably the exception that proves the rule. The author of *The Jinni and The Golem* (2013) - a HarperCollins book favorably reviewed in *The New York Times* - Wecker tells me she knew from the start that she wanted "to write a book that people would go into stores to buy." She met her agent at a mixer on the campus of Columbia University where she earned an MFA.

"It's easier to get published if you're in New York than on the West Coast," she tells me. Originally cast as a realistic love story, *The Jinni and The Golem* turned it into a fantastical tale in which Arab and Jewish mythologies clash and connect. Wecker pitched the novel in just eleven words: "A female golem and a male jinni meet in 1899 Manhattan." Bingo! In an email she explains, "I had better luck than my friends who said, for example, 'My book is a coming-of-age story, about a boy growing up in the Midwest.'"

She recently moved with her husband to the East Bay. Now, she thinks about alternatives to New York publishers, including self-publishing which she thinks is "more viable than it used to be." Wecker knows she could turn to San Francisco's McSweeney's, founded by Dave Eggers, and to *The Believer*, the magazine he created that's edited by Heidi Julavits, Andrew Leland and his wife, Vendela Vida.

In Berkeley, British-born Alison Mudditt, directs the University of California Press, one of the largest academic presses in the world. Elaine Petrocelli at Book Passage showcases women writers almost every day of the year. Joan Jasper spearheads the public library's

lecture series. Wendy Lesser provides space for fiction and non-fiction at *The Three Penny Review*, a cultural landmark since 1980, and Catherine Segurson publishes art, poetry, essays and stories in *Catamaran* that she launched in 2012. Jane Ciabattari, the longtime president of the National Book Critics Circle and perhaps the most ubiquitous book reviewer in America today, makes her home in the North Bay after decades in Manhattan. Dzanc Books has just republished, as an ebook, her collection of stories, *Stealing the Fire* (2013). She's stoked about West Coast innovations.

"Silicon Valley is a huge influence on publishing," Ciabattari explains in an email. "Authors here seem much more comfortable about ebooks and algorithms and they're more entrepreneurial than on the East Coast."

Face-to-face connections take place in the classroom, where women - Nina Schuyler, Noelle Oxenhandler, Maxine Chernoff, and others - teach creative writing. Schulyer, 50, the author of *The Translation* (2013), holds down a job at the University of San Francisco where, she says, 75% of the students in her classes are female. Born in Tacoma, Washington, she learned the craft of writing from Catherine Brady and Toni Mirosevich at San Francisco State University. With her husband and two sons, Schulyer lives in Fairfax. To get mentally fit she rides her bicycle 45 minutes a day and goes into nature. Moreover, she belongs to Word-of-Mouth-Bay Area, a supportive organization of 150 or so women writers. "In the Bay Area, there's less pressure to conform to social norms and more tolerance for experimentation," Schulyer tells me. "You can become someone or something other than who you were where you started from."

Do the sisters belong to one tribe, or to rival clans of mandarins, luddites, techies, cowgirls and sexual outlaws? Yes and no! And, to paraphrase George Orwell's paramount question in *Animal Farm*, are some sisters more equal than others? "Not all writing by men or women in San Francisco is equally good," Jack Boulware tells me. "The point, however, is that people are excited about writing. They go to a reading. They hear an author. They say, 'I can do that.' And then they go home and write a novel." Still, even the egalitarian Boulware has his "A" list of writers - Nina Serrano, Mary Gaitskill, Anne Perry, Deliah Ephron (Nora's sister) and Jane Hirshfield - along with T.C. Boyle and Alan Weisman.

For Liebegott, who lives with her girlfriend, two cats, and a dog in a tiny apartment, and who works at a grocery to help pay the rent, queer writers are marginalized. As a scholar of Emily Dickinson's poetry, she knows that extraordinarily creative American writers

have long been unpublished and unrecognized. “Today, the publishing industry is afraid,” she tells me. “I think that much good work never sees the light of day because of sexism and racism.” Still, with Dickinson’s words - “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” - tattooed on her arm she can’t not hope.

Her “Spit Sister,” Beth Lisick, tried to sell *Yokahama Threeway* in New York. Editors wanted her to rewrite; she refused. “It’s important for me to do what I want to do, not what someone else has in mind for me,” she says. “I feel fortunate that I heard Ginsberg and Diane di Prima perform their work. They gave me permission to speak out and not feel constrained by the academy.”

Sherril Jaffe, 67, a retired creative writing teacher, lives in a spacious house in San Francisco’s Richmond District with views on nearly every floor. A native of L.A., and the author of ten books, including *Scars Make a Body More Beautiful*, *The Unexamined Wife* — and the co-author with her late husband of *One God Clapping* — she has written in the East, the West, at the MacDowell Writer’s Colony in New Hampshire, and almost everywhere she’s lived except Nebraska.

“Writing is a dangerous activity,” she tells me. Like Liebegott, who creates “psychic space,” Jaffe cultivates an “inner landscape” which is more nurturing, she says, than geography or the weather, especially in San Francisco where it’s “either earthquake or suicide weather much of the time.”

Originally published by Black Sparrow, the defunct avant-garde California publishing house, and by Kodansha, the prestigious Japanese house, Jaffe thinks of New York as provincial. “The idea of going to Manhattan to become a writer sounds like an old-fashioned romantic notion,” she tells me. “It’s said that if you make it in New York you can make it anywhere, but it’s also true that if you make it in Salinas or Bakersfield you can make it anywhere.”

Ashley Cardiff, 27, grew up in Sebastopol, an hour north of San Francisco. After classes at the junior college and Saint John’s, she moved to Brooklyn and found work in publishing. “Everyone told me that if I wanted to be a writer, I had to go to New York,” she tells me from her apartment not far from the setting for the hit HBO show “Girls.” Penguin has just published a collection of her personal essays, *Night Terrors: Sex, Dating, Puberty, and Other Alarming Things*, she pitched to editors, she tells me, as an “anti-sex book.” Cardiff describes herself as a “misanthrope.” Not surprisingly, she’s not planning to barnstorm her hometown. “New York spoils you

relentlessly," she says. "When you leave you miss everything about it."

Like Cardiff, Angie Chau, 39, grew up in the North Bay, and like Cardiff, she took classes at the junior college in Santa Rosa, though she was born in Vietnam and arrived in California at the age of three with her parents — "refugees," not immigrants, she says. After reading Hemingway's, *The Sun Also Rises*, she settled in Spain and wrote Hemingwayesque stories. It wasn't until she took June Jordan's UC Berkeley course, "Poetry for the People," that she realized she could write in her own voice and with her own style. "Jordan's class was literature as social activism and it had a big impact on me," she says. "As a part of the curriculum, I taught writing to prostitutes and drug addicts at Glide Memorial Church. Helping to empower them, I empowered myself." Her first book, *Quiet as they Come* — a collection of short stories — follows the lives of Vietnamese refugees in San Francisco.

Like Liebegott, Lisick, Marcom, Wecker and their literary sisters, Chau belongs to a generation of women who teach, write, raise families, flex their literary muscles, and trust in the force of the imagination. For all their cross-continental journeys and bi-coastal personae, they're rooted in the Bay Area. At the same time, like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, they're global and multi-cultural. To paraphrase Zyzzyva's Cogan, "moving about the globe is what we do now. It's here and it's now."

Living and writing in Berkeley, which she has come to love, Chau recently started a novel set in Vietnam. "I thought about moving there and decided not to," she says. "I need to be among friends with whom I can dialogue and rub up against. My fiction needs the kind of friction that only the Bay Area can provide. This place, with all its richness and diversity, is ripe now like no other place on the face of the earth."

Jonah Raskin, a regular contributor to RCR, is the author most recently of *Rock 'n' Roll Women: Portraits of a Generation* and *Storm City: Ten Prayerful Poems*.