

# Queer Books Bloom in Spain

**Madrid.** Rainbow flags mark the spots – cafés, bars, restaurants, saunas, specialty shops – where gay and lesbian customers are catered to in Chueca, the city’s queer enclave. Right in the heart of the neighborhood, on the narrow and bustling Hortaleza Street, is Berkana, Spain’s first gay and lesbian bookstore. Founded 11 years ago by lesbian activist Mili Hernández, Berkana also houses a café and gift shop and is a community gathering spot. But the billboard attraction, plain and simple, is books. Romance novels, biographies, comics, children’s stories, literature, poetry, essays – all of them queer and in Spanish – are stacked wall-to-wall and mounted on display tables throughout the store. At Berkana, customers cruise each other, books are launched, queer culture is celebrated, and everyone walks out with a book or two in hand. ■ It took perseverance, six years of losses, and dealing with the remnants of social repression before the bookstore could claim its current success. “If I had known Spanish reality better, I probably wouldn’t have opened the store,” says Hernández. She knew women’s bookstores in London and in the United States, where she lived for 12 years before returning to her native country. But Spain

## How to Buy Spanish Books in the U.S.

With rare exceptions, bookstores in the United States do not carry queer titles in Spanish, because they believe there is no market for them. In most cases, though, they can be special-ordered through a local bookstore or an online bookseller.

Several U.S. distributors do carry lesbian and gay titles from Spain, including those published by Egales and Laertes. But they report low sales. "No one is buying them because they don't know they're here," says Ron Hanby from Bookazine, a distributor in the Northeast. And even in the United States, translations outsell titles originally published in Spanish.

Bookstores and libraries in the United States can order some titles directly from Alamo, (800) 671-5767, [alamosquare@alamosquarredist.com](mailto:alamosquare@alamosquarredist.com), or Bookazine, (401) 273-1238, [rhanby@bookazine.com](mailto:rhanby@bookazine.com). Others can be ordered from Puvill, [www.puvill.com](http://www.puvill.com).

Online purchases are also possible. Note that prices are posted in euros and shipping fees for the United States have to be determined. Check out Berkana's online bookstore at [www.libreriaberkana.com](http://www.libreriaberkana.com). Another online bookseller is [www.tulibro.com](http://www.tulibro.com). To get more listings, reviews and descriptions of more Spanish queer titles, see the homepages for the Barcelona bookstores *Cómplices* (<http://personal.iddeo.es/complices>) and Antinous Books ([www.antinouslibros.com](http://www.antinouslibros.com)). Also see the pages for Egales ([www.editorial.egales.com](http://www.editorial.egales.com)) and Laertes ([www.laertes.es/pa/Rey.htm](http://www.laertes.es/pa/Rey.htm)).

Thanks to Lawrence Schimel for sharing literary contacts in Spain.

— *tatiana de la tierra*

was marked for 36 years by oppressive social mores imposed by the Franco dictatorship. The transition to democracy in the late 1970s spawned a booming late-night gay party scene, but it was decades before lesbians and gay men came out of the closet in the daytime.

Walking into a gay bookstore in broad daylight was a bold, potentially risky move for those who weren't out. "Ten years ago, society wasn't so open about sexuality," says Connie Dagas, co-owner, with Helle Bruun, of *Cómplices*, Spain's second gay and lesbian bookstore, 300 miles away in Barcelona. Located on a picturesque street in the Gothic Quarter, *Cómplices* opened a year after Berkana. Though smaller, the space is packed with merchandise and loyal customers.

Back then, both bookstores faced a dilemma — a lack of queer books in Spanish. Together, between the three owners, they came up with a plan to tackle the problem and founded Egales, the country's first independent lesbian and gay press. Egales now has more than 70 books to its name, half of them written by lesbians, and half by gay men. "We take great care with our titles," says Dagas. "We choose everything carefully, from the cover to the contents."

"But we pay a price," says Hernández, explaining that some bookshops hesitate to carry queer books. Some authors won't publish with them for fear of being labeled gay. And the press hasn't been taken seriously by the mainstream media. "Spain has changed," says Bruun, "but the country still has a long way to go."

Yet the queer Spanish book industry is in bloom. Gay bookstores are in business throughout the country, typically, they are stocked with a greater number of books by gay men. In addition to *Cómplices*, Barcelona boasts the bookshop and café Antinous. Browsing the shelves there, one can see the products of queer publishers such as La Tempestad, Odisea, Llabert Palmart, Laertes' Rey de Bastos, Egales, and imprints from mainstream publishers. These, together with queer titles that are sporadically published in South America and Mexico, provide a decent selection for the Spanish-speaking public. The good news for readers in the United States is that much of what is published in Spain is available here too, if you know where to look.

## In Translation

While Spanish books are rarely translated into English, translations from English to Spanish are big in Spain, and the queer market is no exception. Many of Spain's biggest-selling queer authors are from the United States, and translated titles usually outsell Spanish authors. In fact, Egales' first lesbian title was Claire McNab's *Under the Southern Cross* (*En otras palabras*), and one of their most recent releases is Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (*Unas bollos de cuidado*). While queer publishing in the United States is varied and voluminous, Spain's queer cultural production is comparatively low. "We have an inferiority complex here," says Hernández. "We think that what is from overseas is better."

Better or not, there are quite a few authors available in Spanish who were originally published in English. Think Audre Lorde, Patricia Highsmith, Pat Califia, Virginia Woolf, Sarah Schulman, Emma Donoghue, Radclyffe Hall, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Rita Mae Brown, Gertrude Stein, Katherine V. Forrest, Wendy Caster, Camille Paglia, Adrienne Rich, Sarah Waters, Linda Hill, Caro Clarke, Marianne K. Martin, Ann O'Leary, Sheila Jeffreys, Sapphire and more. Egales' best-selling translated lesbian novel is Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front Runner* (*El corredor de fondo*).

Chicana lesbian author Sheila Ortiz Taylor was one of the first to be translated. *Faultline* was originally published by Naiad Press in 1982; it was published as *Terremoto* in 1991 by Madrid's feminist bookstore press, Horas y Horas. "I was very pleased to be translated into Spanish because it felt like a return somehow, a circling back to my origins, though it was a return to the Spanish part and not the Mexican part," says the author, who is faculty at Florida State University's English Department.

## Spanish-Language Lesbian Writers

Spanish lesbians have their sexual identity reflected in translated books, but what about books by Spanish-language authors? These started to trickle onto the scene in the early '90s. One of the first lesbian love stories, still in print, is *Cris & Cris* by María Felicitas Jaime, an Argentine-born writer who resides in Madrid and who has since published *Pasiones* and, most recently, the erotic short story collection *Cenicienta en Chueca* (*Cinderella in Chueca*).

There have been many novelties since. One significant book is *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (*Beatriz and the Celestial Bodies*), which was written by Lucía Etxebarria, a prolific, risqué young writer from Madrid who does not identify as a lesbian. Originally published in 1998 and now in its fourth edition, the book won a literary award and brought lesbian themes to a crossover audience. Another novelty is *Primeras caricias* (*First Caresses*). Edited by Beatriz Gimeno from

Madrid, this is an anthology of first-person accounts of women's first sexual experiences with other women *La silla Turca (The Turkish Saddle)*, a novel by Carmen Diaz, a Cuban lesbian who lives in Miami, tells the story of a lesbian in Cuba who flees to the United States during the Mariel Boatlift *Otras voces (Other Voices)* is the country's first anthology of lesbian writers.

Lola Van Guardia is the creator of a dyke drama trilogy from Egales that features a world of women who befriend and seduce each other In the first novel, *Con pedigree (With Pedigree)*, the action centers around Gay Night, a woman-owned bar where militant lesbians are bathed in lavender neon lights and the air is thick with cigarette smoke, hashish and the scent of horny women As with the subsequent *Plumas de doble filo (Double-Edged Feathers)* and *La mansión de las tribadas (The Lesbian Mansion)*, the novel is rife with quirky characters and sexy cliffhangers

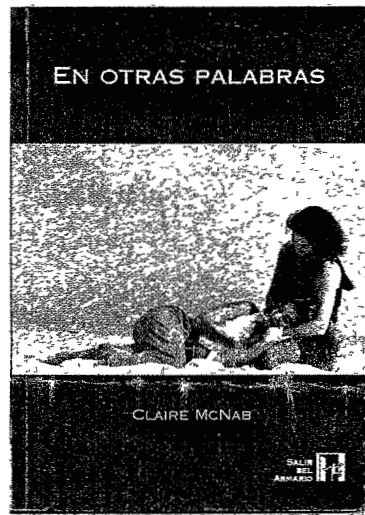
But unlike the barhopping city slickers in her novels, the author lives in a small town outside of Barcelona and is in bed most nights by 11 p.m. In fact, the author is not Lola Van Guardia after all, but Isabel Franc, who used the pseudonym for six years, at her publisher's request, to create an aura of intrigue "The trilogy wasn't planned," she explains But the success of that first novel led to the next two She was a regular customer at Complices and had already published the irreverent erotic novel *Entre todas las mujeres (Among All the Women)*. She accepted Egales' invitation to write in her signature

humorous and ironic style In 2003 she came out as herself and plans to publish under her true name

But for Franc, who was born in 1955 during the Franco era, writing is no laughing matter "My generation was robbed of words During the Franco years, everything was black and white No colors Everything was mediated by moral repression and guilt for what you say and think When your hands are tied, you want freedom from oppression I wanted to find words, to ask questions, to have a dialogue with the word"

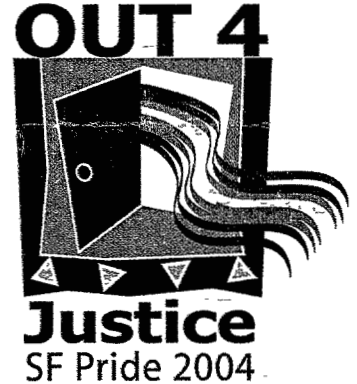
Another writer in Spain whose work is fueled in part by political landscape is Uruguayan-born Cristina Peri Rossi The recipient of numerous literary awards, Rossi has more than 30 books in print The erotic lesbian emphasis of her poetry collection *Evoché* and the references to Latin American fascism in *Indicios pánicos* (translated into English as *Panic Signs*) led to her exile in Spain in 1972. She lives in Barcelona

Highly literary, Rossi's writing is multifaceted It is concerned with exile, alienation, leftist politics and sexual fantasy It ranges from the nonfiction *Cuando fumar era un placer (When Smoking Was a Pleasure)*, to the poetic *Estado de exilio (State of Exile)* It makes statements about patriarchy, capitalism and religion But it's not all lesbian literature "My poetry is lesbian because in poetry I am talking about my feelings," she says "But when I construct novels I create an autonomous reality" While she has never been in the closet, she also



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hasn't been outspoken about her lesbianism "I believe in liberty," she says "And I believe that any type of rigid identity is neurotic"

Fearing repercussions, several key Spanish writers have yet to openly declare their lesbianism "It is their right to stay in the closet," says lesbian novelist Olga Guirao "I understand and respect it, but I don't participate. I am a lesbian and I write with all parts of myself In a perfect world, your sexuality wouldn't matter Being out is a way to combat homophobia"

Published by mainstream Spanish presses, Guirao's literary success began in 1992 with *Mi querido Sebastián* (*My Dear Sebastián*), a prized novel about a homosexual relationship within the context of the Franco era Her latest is *Carta con diez años de retraso* (*A Letter 10 Years Late*), an epistolary novel based on e-mail correspondence between two friends who fall for the same woman She presents complex scenarios in her writings and explores gender, love and war between the sexes in elegant prose

"Olga Guirao is Spain's Marguerite Yourcenar," says lesbian journalist Jennifer Quiles, who has interviewed many of Spain's queer luminaries for the Spanish media Quiles is author of the groundbreaking self-help book *Más que amigas* (*More Than Friends*) Published in 2002 and already in its second edition, the book educates lesbians and bisexuals about coming out and has reached a wide and grateful audience "Schools in Spain don't educate people about sexual identity," she says, and sexuality has not been systematically researched, so resources on the subject are few

Transsexual identity in Spain has been brought to the forefront by an over-the-top personality known as Miss Shangay Lily She is a postmodern feminist diva and the author of a trilogy of smart and spunky novels she calls *Trilogy of the Escape Deconstruction of the Homosexual Reality from a Neo-Feminist Perspective* The second book in the series

is *Machistófeles* (2002), an anti-patriarchal lesbian tale that uses innovative narrative techniques to turn gender on its head Miss Shangay Lily also hosts a weekly literary talk show on television and posts an online blog [www.shangaylily.com](http://www.shangaylily.com)

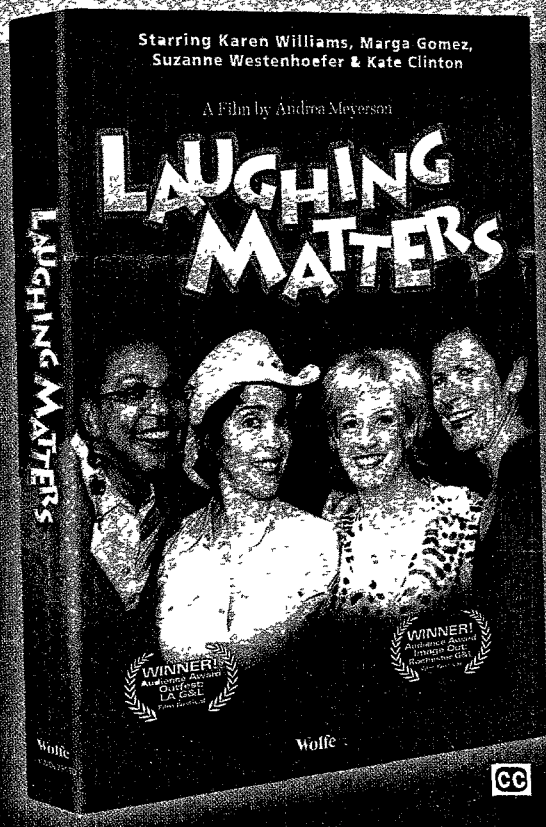
Also along the lines of daring gender-bending thought is Beatriz Preciado's *Manifiesto contra-sexual Prácticas subversivas de identidad sexual* (*Contra-Sexual Manifesto: Subversive Practices of Sexual Identity*) A philosopher and queer activist,

Preciado originally published the book in French Her eye-opening manifesto is "a response to the invisibility of lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals," and deconstructs dildos, masturbation, homosexuality, intersexuality and queer theory

There are many more queer Spanish books and authors Since there are hardly any Spanish-language queer materials in the United States, Spain (as well as Latin America and Mexico) are logical sources for them "It's very important for there to be visibility and access to lesbian-related books in all languages," says Lizanne Deliz, a Puerto Rican lesbian who lives in Los Angeles "Everyone wants to see themselves validated and recognized" ■



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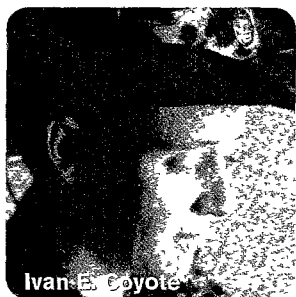


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## contributors



Ivan E. Coyote

"Some of my best friends are Americans," confesses **Ivan E. Coyote**, who believes that friends don't let friends leave their country unattended. Coyote, who was born and raised in the Yukon Territory and now resides in Vancouver, spent her formative teen years serving breakfast to American tourists on their way to Alaska and now cites neighborly concern as the impetus for her guest column (see page 71), devoted to what happens when Americans want to flee their "homeland security" Coyote, the author of *Close to Spiderman* and *One Man's Trash*, recently released her first CD, *You're a Nation*.

"From mad cow to factory farms, it's hard to eat meat these days — every time I bite into a burger, part of me wonders if I'll survive!" says **Shannon Laskey**, who inked the illustration for "Steakout" (see page 48). Laskey's whimsical style lends itself well to her mostly fashion and beauty clients. She also recently completed animations for a pilot for NBC Visit her online at [www.smalldogworkshop.com](http://www.smalldogworkshop.com).

**Silja J.A. Talvi** is a journalist and essayist with credits in over 75 publications, including *The Nation*, *In These Times* and *High Times*. Her work on social



Shannon Laskey

issues — with an emphasis on criminal justice, ethnicity and gender (see "On the Inside," page 44) — has garnered five Society of Professional Journalists regional awards Talvi was born in Helsinki, Finland, was raised in Hollywood, Calif., and is currently based in Seattle, where she is the staff writer for *ColorsNW Magazine*, a monthly devoted to Pacific Northwest communities of color. When she's not writing, snowboarding, or biking, dancing and a genuine obsession with lipstick occupy the rest of her waking hours.

"All I could remember about the time I went to Spain eons ago was visiting a women's bookstore in Madrid," says **tatiana de la tierra**, who has been collecting lesbian and woman-centered books in Spanish and by Latinas since the 1980s. "I was surprised to find that Libreria de Mujeres is still in existence, 15 years later. When I strolled in on a Sunday afternoon wearing a red wig, a fun thing Madrileños do around Christmas, I was touched that the fierce feminist owners remembered me." See her account of Spanish-language publishing on page 52 De la tierra is the author of a bilingual book of poetic prose, *For the Hard Ones*.



Tatiana de la tierra



Giselle Kovac

*A Lesbian Phenomenology* (Calaca Press, 2002), and the chapbook *Porcupine Love and Other Tales From My Papaya* (Chibcha Press, 2003).

"I knew I would love Tahiti the moment we arrived and the hotel bellman, barefoot and wearing only a sarong and flowers, gently said *ia ora na* — welcome," says **Giselle Kovac**, who was lucky enough to write a firsthand account of her Tahiti adventures (see page 22). Although it's true she was lured by French Polynesia's warm waters and pristine beaches, she says it was the Polynesians themselves who really captivated her "I was impressed by the great respect they have for one another and for the earth and sea. The vibe was blissfully infectious, though personally I am still working out my feelings for the sharks." Kovac writes, photographs and sculpts in Asheville, N.C., and is working on a series of figures called "Women With Balls," a tribute to women of courage.