

Judy Grahn: Poetry Taking On the Patriarchy

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JUDY GRAHN is a trailblazing lesbian-feminist poet, activist, and mythographer. The author of fourteen books of poetry and prose, she is credited with fueling the GLBT, feminist, and women's spirituality movements internationally.

Grahn walked the first picket line of the White House for gay rights in 1965 and co-founded the Women's Press Collective in the Bay Area in 1969. A founding member of the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Movement, she has received numerous honors throughout her career, including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, an American Book Award, and a Founding Foremothers Spirituality Award. She received the Publishing Triangle Lifetime Achievement Award in Letters in 1997. Since then, Triangle Publishers has bestowed an annual Judy Grahn Nonfiction Award in her honor.

Earlier this year, I conducted a Zoom interview with Judy Grahn on the occasion of the republication of her 1984 classic *The Highest Apple*. This interview was originally aired on May 7, 2024, on the Vermont-based cable-access show *All Things LGBTQ*. The following is a short excerpt. The longer, more wide-ranging conversation is available under "Series" at orcamedia.net, on YouTube, and elsewhere.

AC: One reason we're here today is to celebrate the reissue of one of your earlier critical works, *The Highest Apple*. Allow me to read a short description from the back cover: "Grahn situates poetry by Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, Paula Gunn Allen, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Olga Broumas as central to lesbian culture and more radically as central to society as a whole. This new edition of *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* includes Grahn's in-depth analysis of poetic work by her friend and comrade, Pat Parker." Let me start by asking you about the significance of the title.

JG: *The Highest Apple* is from one of Sappho's poems, where she explains that there's a highest apple that the shepherds can't reach. It's unlike the purple flower, the hyacinth, which is trampled under the shepherd's sandal on the ground. The apple pickers cannot get to the highest apple. I was gripped by this because of the fact that our movement—and I wrote this almost fifteen years after we started our movement—was a separatist movement. We separated from everybody. We separated from all kinds of other movements that we'd been in-



volved with, people who wanted us to stay and continue to work with them. We didn't do that. We were a little country unto ourselves in a certain way. So, the idea that there was an apple on a tree that no one could reach, and that it was unto itself, was very gripping for me, especially as I was reading these poets and they were talking about islands and continents. There seemed to be a commonality of expression of what it meant to be woman-centered in a patriarchy.

AC: How did you come to revise and republish *The Highest Apple* now?

JG: Well, it had been out of print. It went out of print about four years after it was published. So, I forgot about it. I thought, "Oh, well, maybe it wasn't very well written." And then Julie Enszer, who's just a magnificent, prime mover, editor, writer, and poet, approached me and said: "I want to redo this book. Would you go along with that, and would you work with these younger editors?" So she's the one who got eight younger people to do their commentaries, the editorial suggestions, the new introduction and afterword, and so on, and then she set up a Zoom video panel of us reading the work and talking about it. So, I was not going to say "No" to that offer. It was spectacular! It took some time. One motive was that I had left my dear friend and comrade, Pat Parker, out of the book. I had done that because I had a truncated view of spirituality.

AC: How did you happen to choose these ten poets? It's really a broad array.

JG: First of all, I knew them. We were in community together. I lived with Paula Gunn Allen. I was living with her at the time I wrote *The Highest Apple*. That was in the 1980s. In the '70s, my close poetry comrades were Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich. We traveled to each

other's houses, traveled back and forth between the coasts, as Audre and Adrienne were in New York, while Pat and I were in the Bay Area. But there was a lot of back and forth. Pat stayed with Audre, I stayed with Audre, Audre stayed with me. Audre went to visit Pat early on when Pat was still living in San Francisco. There were moments when we overlapped in other ways, read together, and mused about each other's work. And we wrote about each other's work. Obviously, I wrote about their work. This was my chance to do that in *The Highest Apple*.

Among other questions, I was interested in their relationship with Sappho, because they all had read her, and I was interested in their answers to the question: "How do you become a woman-centered woman in a patriarchy?" They did it through their companionship that they had with other women, and not only lesbian relationships.

AC: Who's your audience now, would you say?

JG: Well, I gave a reading of *The Highest Apple* in New York at the New York City Public Library. Somewhere between 150 and 180 people showed up. Most of them were fifty and younger, I would say. There were trans men, there were trans women, there were straight men. There was somebody who was twenty and had been taught my work in high school when she was sixteen. There were a few gray-haired dykes who wanted to tell me: "We were the Lexington dykes. Do you remember anything about us?" So we had an exchange.

So, it was mixed and very heartening. I think probably spurred to some extent, maybe to a great extent, by Julie Enszer's wisdom in calling these younger voices in and having them comment, having them say: "What does this book mean to you now? Where is the value in it? Where would you say that I didn't measure up?"

AC: Do you have a response to the respondents?

JG: Oh, well, I have great admiration for them reaching out to do this and taking the time to write their thoughtful responses. It's so heartening to see that for them, it seems as if there is this knit-together tradition, that there is a way that this work speaks not only to the people that traditionally I thought of as lesbian, but speaks more generally to a broadening of that category and to people who would say they're not lesbian.

Anne Charles co-hosts the cable-access show *All Things LGBTQ* from Montpelier, VT.