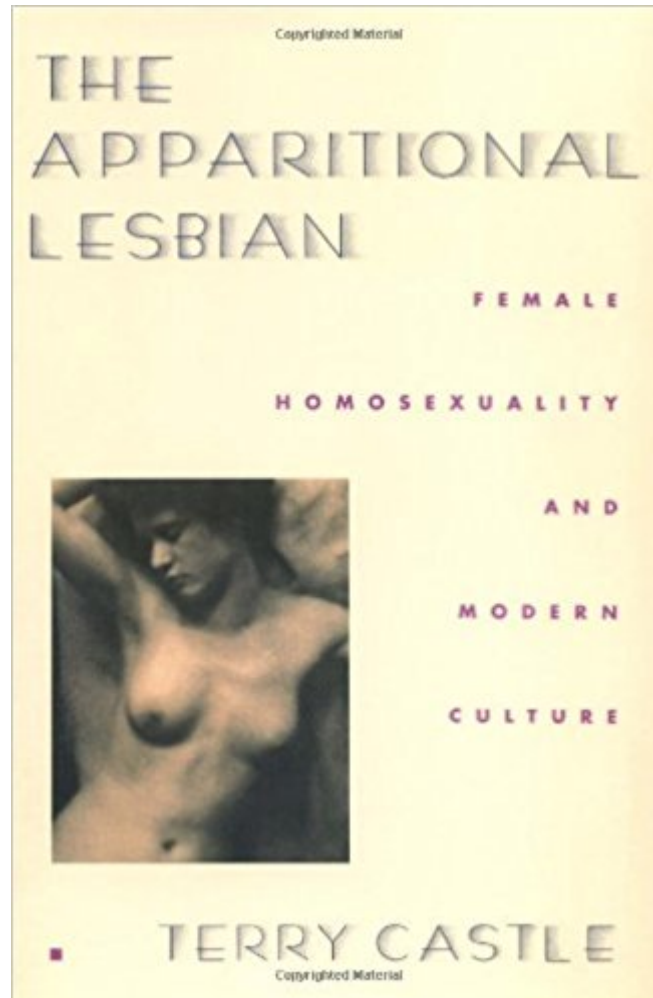




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# The Apparitional Lesbian



## Synopsis

In essays on literary images of lesbianism from Defoe and Diderot to Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, on the homosexual reputation of Marie Antoinette, on the lesbian writings of Anne Lister, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Janet Flanner, and on Henry James's *The Bostonians*, Castle shows how a lesbian presence can be identified in the literature, history, and culture of the past three centuries.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With the recent explosion in the number of gay and lesbian fiction titles, it should come as no surprise that next would follow a spate of similar studies from academia. Here is yet another. Castle (English, Stanford) decodes the ciphers of our culture to find the "apparitional lesbian" everywhere haunting our history, literature, and music. From essays on Marie Antoinette as the patron saint of lesbianism to the alluring "homovocality" of mezzo-soprano Brigitte Fassbaender, Castle describes how the dominant straight culture has portrayed the lesbian over the past 300 years. One might argue with some of her assumptions, for example, that lesbian desire only emerges in the absence of male bonding. Overall, however, Castle's acute observational powers present an insightful overview of early 20th-century lesbian fiction, and her incisive historical perspective presents a fascinating study of the haunted presence of the lesbian throughout Western literary history in general. Informative and thought-provoking, her book is highly recommended for academic libraries

and larger collections with interested lay readers.- Jeffery Ingram, Newport P.L., Ore. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Lively essays (some previously published in the Kenyon Review, etc.) on the representation of lesbians in literature and history. Readers acquainted with gay history will be on familiar ground here, since Castle (English/Stanford; the scholarly *Masquerade and Civilization*, 1986, etc.) includes the likes of Greta Garbo, *The Bostonians*, and *The Well of Loneliness* among her subjects. Her thesis is that lesbians have been "ghosted"--made into apparitions, visible but not quite present--throughout history, and she finds numerous examples of homosexual women being described as "spectral" or, like *The Well of Loneliness's* Stephen Gordon, as "earthbound spirits." Castle's "ghosting" looks suspiciously like a fancier wording for the well-explored phenomenon of "lesbian invisibility," but the author (who's openly gay) infuses new life into the concept by underlining various characters' feistiness and "gaiety" rather than their victimization. But Castle often reads too much between the lines: One would never guess that *The New Yorker's* Janet Flanner was a lesbian simply by studying her articles. Moreover, she sometimes misreads other historians or literary critics: Lillian Faderman's claim, for instance, that the 19th-century English *Ladies of Llangollen* lacked a "lesbian consciousness" somehow becomes a straw man that the author dubs the "no-sex-before-1900 school." But Castle's forte--the use of examples from her own life--underlines her points and makes her concluding chapter, "In Praise of Brigitte Fassbaender (*A Musical Emanation*)," her best, as she deftly mixes autobiographical revelation and literary theory while analyzing female fans of operatic divas, in a kind of lesbian equivalent of Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat*. Not groundbreaking, but Castle's blend of solid research and clear, accessible prose may win her an enthusiastic readership. (Thirty illustrations) -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a fabulous book full of sharp observations, mordant wit, and a crisp, almost epigrammatic style of writing. Terry Castle is a Virgil in the shadowy underworld world of the "now you see her now you don't" lesbian who flits like a revenant in and out of the world of art and fiction. She is a respected academic and a serious scholar of the hidden, disguised and all too often obfuscated presence of the lesbian in literature, as is amply attested in her monumental grand opus 'Lesbianism in Literature', a book with the rare quality of being just as difficult to pick up as to put down. Castle can make her reader's squirm with vicarious embarrassment and awkwardness.

Elsewhere ('The Professor and other stories' and 'Boss ladies Watch Out') we are familiar with her total lack of sentimentality and take-no-prisoners honesty in exposing her zany and sometimes bizarre gaffes which frequently conjure an Egon Schiele image out of something that might have seemed to be a blander representation of human reality. But here we find the evocative and almost dreamy reminiscence of 'First Ed', the account of Castle's almost amphibious and yet tensely formative entry into the realm of her lesbian awareness. I loved it for its brilliant balancing act of self-revelation which was both touching and edgy. I could almost see the action unfolding and almost feel the echo of the world she lightly but strongly evoked, of the atmosphere of California in the 'sixties....The torchy tribute to Brigitte Fassbaender was brilliant, and sent me directly to 'Youtube' for a glimpse of the fascinating 'Prince' Orlofsky. I then immediately resorted to for Fassbaender's CD 'Winterreise' and her DVD 'Hansel and Gretel' Fassbaender was only the first of the many remarkable women selected by Castle as her literary subjects. Maureen Duffy was another one, but for me the gem of gems was Sylvia Townsend Warner. I can't adequately express the sense of mental stimulation and sheer joy afforded by this book. I felt as if I was being shown a previously dusty old world in a new and brilliant light - with the benefit of an insider's information to point out the significant details that are often missed by an unfocused awareness. I am sure I am not the only one who feels a deep disquiet and unease when encountering some of Henry James' female characters, but now that I recognise them as 'apparitional lesbians', I can see that that unease I had felt was something I had been channeling directly from James himself. One often feels the lesbian presence in a book or movie in the way one sees a moving shadow out of the corner of an eye, but other than Ms Castle, I have never before watched with fascination as the shadowy ectoplasm of a fictional lesbian came out so to speak, and stood framed in the light. Though these are not mentioned in the book, I am thinking now of Marian Halcomb in Wilkie Collins's 'Woman in White' and the clear ventriloquistic lesbian sensitivity evinced by Phillip in Daphne du Maurier's 'My Cousin Rachael'. Then we have Castle's wonderful take on Ann Lister a Lesbian Yorkshire-woman of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, now famously seen in the 2010 B.B.C production 'The secret Diaries of Miss Ann Lister'. Lister a 'Gold Bond Lesbian' cohabited with her partner, traveled widely, and before she died prematurely at the age of fifty of what might have been typhoid, managed to write 4,000,000 words worth of encrypted diary entries. I would compare my experience of reading this book to hearing music at a great distance and suddenly recognizing the song being sung. When I got to the end of this book I didn't want the delightfully polemical essays to stop. Thank goodness for 'Youtube', which made it possible to hold the thread and continue the journey in a different place. I read two books by Maureen Duffy, one of the writers mentioned by Castle: 'The

Microcosm' and 'Alchemy'. I also began a fruitful search for Janet Flanner's articles in the 'New-Yorker', and 'Darlinghissima', the compilation of Flanner's letters to her partner. Of the many good things that are to be said about this book, the most worthy, in my opinion, is that it makes one want to avidly continue the exploration into the almost inexhaustible subject of lesbians hidden in the shadows of art and literature. There are very few writers, (though Camille Paglia as a fellow polemicist springs immediately to mind), who can write as well as Terry Castle. She is brilliant, literate, scholarly, original, and as a lesbian she is writing about her own world: What more could one want! - And it follows that the opportunity of reading her work is not to be missed. If you want to read more of her writing and literary criticism, you can find it in her several contributions to 'The London Review of Books', - and if you want to see her painting and graphic art, you also can visit her blog.

Terry Castle writes with irreverence, responsibility, and respect for the role of lesbians in the arts. I should say the neglected role, because many of us had not ever heard of these writers and characters before. Read this, and then buy the books by the discussed authors in this text as I did, and you will be presently surprised. We need more research and writing like this in the world.

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