



Sisterhood
Julie R. Enszer

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Reader's Guide

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**Poet, Writer, and Scholar Christopher Hennessy
Talks with Julie R. Enszer about *Sisterhood***

Christopher Hennessy: Tell me about putting together *Sisterhood*. What was on your mind?

Julie R. Enszer: Like many poets, I work intuitively, so it is difficult to say what was on my mind while writing the poems of *Sisterhood*. After the book was assembled, I asked a dear friend and colleague for feedback on the collection. She helped me to articulate the central questions that the book asks. Those questions are: first, what does it mean to live in a family that is broken and a world of brokenness and take responsibility, however partial, for that brokenness? Second, how can I believe in sisterhood in an imperfect, broken world? So these are the two questions that I think were on my mind while writing the poems of *Sisterhood*, though I could not have articulated them so clearly until after I compiled the collection.

Now, after having lived with these poems for many years, I find that they are poems that continue to delight and surprise me; they are poems that fulfill an earlier ambition of mine. Many of these poems are poems that were in my MFA thesis, which I completed in 2008 at the University of Maryland. When I applied to MFA programs in creative writing, I knew that I wanted to write poems about the death of my sister, but I did not include that content and my desire to tackle that content in my personal statement. The idea of writing these poems, even in 2005 and 2006, ten years after my sister died, was frightening to me still. So when the poems that make up the “Sisterhood” series in the book started coming, they were both exciting and scary; they were the poems that I wanted to write, but they were poems that frightened me.

CH: Cars figure prominently in *Sisterhood*. Was that conscious?

JRE: Absolutely not! As I mentioned, part of this manuscript comes from my MFA thesis. At the defense, a member of my committee noted that there were a lot of car poems, but I was completely unaware of that while writing. Although I was not aware of it and did not even realize it until the committee member commented on it, it is an aspect of the manuscript that makes sense. I was born in Detroit, Michigan, and I was raised in Saginaw, Michigan. After college, I lived in Detroit for ten years. The Motor City looms large in my consciousness from the first thirty years of my life. My history in Michigan made me pay attention to cars. I am deeply interested in the ways that things are produced and in how industry shapes the daily lives of people. These sorts of concerns are the broad concerns that I am aware of and talk about, but, clearly, there is a subconscious level of thinking about cars that made its way into the poems of *Sisterhood*.

CH: Talk about the formal elements of *Sisterhood*.

JRE: One of my favorite poets is Marilyn Hacker. I read her collection *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986) when I was first coming out as a lesbian in 1988. I was entranced by her work with sonnets and villanelles. When I started writing poetry more seriously, I wanted to fashion myself in the mode of Marilyn Hacker. My first collection, *Handmade Love*, contains more gestures of formalism than *Sisterhood*, though some of the formal gestures are still present in *Sisterhood*. There are a few poems, like “Resisting Sibilliance” that are in measured quatrains, and “In Dreams” is a villanelle, but mostly I think of this book as informed by the sonnet but not contained by the structure of the sonnet. To be completely honest, I fear that I lack the discipline necessary to create formal poems, but I love and admire them very much. I read formal poets, both poets working today and poets of yore, and I love them; so like cars, formalism infuses my consciousness.

CH: The book cover is so engaging. I'd love to hear about it.

JRE: With pleasure! L.A. “Happy” Hyder is a phenomenal lesbian photographer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. I’ve known Happy for a number of years. The good folks at Sibling Rivalry Press and I were talking and thinking about what to use as a cover image. I’m terrible at this game of envisioning cover images. For all of my publishing activities, I try to work with really smart visual people since I am not a visual person. Bryan Borland, Seth Pennington, and I were swapping images on email and nothing really floated my boat. Then I hit upon emailing Happy. I sent her a copy of the manuscript for *Sisterhood* and asked if she had an image that might work. She read the manuscript and replied that she had some images from Budapest that might work. The second I saw the image of the three women, holding hands, at night, walking down a street with all of those cars (!), I knew that this image would work for the collection. Happy, like the member of my committee, recognized how important cars were, and she recognized the importance of evoking intimacy between women and of portraying women in the world. All of these are themes that *Sisterhood* grapples with in individual poems. Finally, I must say that Happy is a working photographer, which means she lives and supports herself through her fine art photography. You can see her work at her website, <http://www.lahyderphotography.com/>. Check out her work and think about purchasing her work; it is vitally important that we support working lesbian artists.

CH: What key influences do you see in your work?

JRE: There are many influences, of course. I feel as though part of the work of a poet is to be a sponge absorbing all of the good and bad things the world has to offer. My teachers, of course, have been influential; I list and thank them all in the book. I have mentioned Marilyn Hacker already; her work, from her earliest collection, *Presentation Piece*, to the most recent collection, *Names*, is deeply meaningful to me. The other day, I pulled out my volumes of Sharon Olds’s poetry and recognized her influence in the poems of *Sisterhood*. I like to think that I read deeply and eclectically, though clearly I have a bias for poetry by women. I am a huge fan of Adrienne Rich, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Elizabeth Bishop, Emma Lazarus, Robin Becker, Cheryl Clarke, Genevieve Taggard, Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Christina Rossetti, Maxine Kumin, Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, Judy Grahn, Elsa Gidlow, and Alicia Ostriker. There is so much good poetry in the world! I feel like I will continue to read for the rest of my life and still not discover it all.

CH: What are you working on now?

JRE: I am in the thick of organizing, editing, and refining a third collection of poems that explores fidelity and infidelity, with particular attention to recent developments for civil marriage for gay and lesbian people. Though when I pulled out that collection to work on it in earnest, a new set of poems began coming to me: poems written in the voices of Lilith’s demons. I’ve been waking each morning with a new demonic poem about Lilith, which is delightful and a bit disturbing. I assume that the two themes—fidelity and Lilith’s demons—are not connected, but who knows!



Christopher Hennessy is the author of *Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013) and *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) and a collection of poems, *Love-In-Idleness* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Press, 2011) which was a finalist for the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. He is the associate editor for *The Gay & Lesbian Review-Worldwide* and lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

Discussion Questions for Reading Groups

- The title of the collection, *Sisterhood*, has many different meanings. What meanings of sisterhood do the poems explore?
- Many of the poems derive meaning from difficult situations, including death. How does that happen within the poems?
- Generations, particularly generational tensions and transitions, are at the heart of the collection, particularly in poems like “Black Stockings” and “After the Revolution.” What do the poems suggest about these generational tensions and transitions?
- Race and religion are both important themes for Enszer. Where do you see race and religion entering the poems in unexpected or surprising ways?
- The narrative and the lyrical are intertwined in this collection. Select a narrative moment in a poem and a lyrical moment in a poem to compare and contrast. How do these traditions work together in *Sisterhood*?
- There are few poems in *Sisterhood* that are in traditional form (sonnet, villanelle, pantoum, etc.), but Enszer describes the poems as “informed” by formalism. Where do you see traces of formalism in *Sisterhood*?
- Enszer worked as a gay and lesbian activist for over a decade; this experience influences poems like “The Former Prime Minister,” “After the Revolution,” “Black Stockings,” and “Durio Zibethinus.” Is *Sisterhood* political poetry? What does political mean in relationship to poetry?
- Is *Sisterhood* feminist poetry? How do these poems embrace feminism? How do these poems challenge feminism? What does feminism mean for you today?

Books that Influenced the Author

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About the Author



Julie R. Enszer, PhD, is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland. She is writing a history of lesbian-feminist presses from 1969 until 2000. She is the author of *Sisterhood* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013) and *Handmade Love* (New York: A Midsummer Night's Press, 2010). She is editor of *Milk & Honey: A Celebration of Jewish Lesbian Poetry* (New York: A Midsummer Night's Press, 2011); *Milk & Honey* was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Poetry. She has her MFA and PhD from the University of Maryland. She is the curator of the Lesbian Poetry Archive (www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org), the editor of *Sinister*

Wisdom, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal, and a regular book reviewer for the *Lambda Book Report* and *Calyx*. You can read more of her work at www.JulieREnszer.com.

Other Projects of Julie R. Enszer



The [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) (www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) is an electronic resource for the digital preservation of lesbian poetry and its ephemera. The [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) is a site of public scholarship with data and information about lesbian print culture for scholars, poets, and general readers.

Throughout the twentieth century, lesbians, primarily lesbians outside of academic locations, initiated, published, printed, distributed, and read lesbian print culture through a variety of public channels. The [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) uses a contemporary technology platform to continue the vital work of compiling, analyzing, and disseminating lesbian writing. The [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) consists of four primary components: **Archive**, **ebooks**, **Exhibits**, and **Bibliographies**.

The [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) expands the public consideration of lesbian print culture. Averaging over 500 unique visitors a month with over 1,500 page views, the [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) is a public, scholarly forum where lesbian print culture is accessible and available. A digital humanities project, the [Lesbian Poetry Archive](http://www.LesbianPoetryArchive.org) nurtures the intellectual work of preserving, analyzing, and evaluating lesbian print culture, lesbian literary history, and lesbian literature so that each may continue and grow.

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom: a multicultural lesbian literary & art journal publishes three issues each year. Publishing since 1976, *Sinister Wisdom* works to create a multicultural, multi-class lesbian space. *Sinister Wisdom* seeks to open, consider, and advance the exploration of lesbian community issues. *Sinister Wisdom* recognizes the power of language to reflect our diverse experiences and to enhance our ability to develop critical judgment as lesbians evaluating our community and our world.

Sinister Wisdom, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that publishes the journal and provides outreach and educational programs in support of building vibrant lesbian communities. *Sinister Wisdom* provides free subscriptions to women in prison and mental institutions; currently *Sinister Wisdom* mails about fifteen percent (15%) of each issue of the journal to women in prison and mental institutions. *Sinister Wisdom* offers reduced-price subscriptions for lesbians with limited/fixed incomes.