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a review of contemporary gay and lesbian literature

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## A/K/A Novelist

*an interview with Ruthann Robson*  
by Victoria A. Brownworth

The adjective most commonly used to describe Ruthann Robson is smart, usually modified by "very" or "extremely." The author of seven books and numerous stories and articles, Robson's writing persona has a dual edge. Some know her as one of the nation's leading legal theorists, whose texts, among them **Lesbian (Out)Law** and **Gay Men, Lesbians, and the Law**, are used in law schools in the U.S. and abroad. Others are more familiar with her as one of our leading fiction writers, winner of the Ferro-Grumley Award for Fiction, Lammy finalist and, most recently, nominee for the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.



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# A/K/A Novelist

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Lest easy comparisons come to mind, Robson is no Scott Turow or John Grisham (too smart, way too much integrity). Nevertheless, her fiction reflects her fascination with the law and with the relationships it creates. Though occasionally Robson's fictional characters are lawyers, as was the protagonist in *Another Mother*, more often Robson presents characters who have in some way become entangled in the vagaries of the law. The two main characters in her new novel, *A/K/A* (soon to be released from St. Martin's Press) have become enmeshed in just such a way. *A/K/A* deals with this dynamic in the style of a taut psychological thriller in which legal and other identities create dangerous complexities in the lives of the lesbian characters.

How these concepts intersect—what is legal, what isn't, what is the law, what isn't—provides the warp and weft of *A/K/A* and Robson's other fiction, making it definingly different from other lesbian fiction.

"*A/K/A* is about identity, but it's not about sexual identity," explained Robson in a recent interview. "The main characters are lesbians and know they are lesbians. but everything else about them is uncertain. One character is a lesbian escort. Some of her clients may be lesbians, others aren't. She is also a law student trying to get out of the escort business by becoming educated. She grew up in foster care. The other character is a soap opera actor. She's played the same character on the same soap for most of her adult life, so she is very strongly identified with that character. The two women meet, are attracted to each other and most of the book is

about how they are going to get together."

Not the standard lesbian love story, what makes *A/K/A* a psychological thriller, says Robson, has to do with crime and the law. "Will the escort be found out before she finishes law school? Will the soap opera actress' problematic relationship with her lover and their child be resolved?"

Because Robson is an attorney, she has been asked repeatedly if she is the

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characters in her books—not just lawyer or lesbian mother, but also soap opera actress and lesbian escort.

"It's sort of interesting that everyone always asks that question," she notes wryly. "After four books [of fiction] I would think it would be clear, they can't all be me."

A post-modernist theorist as well, Robson writes (and thinks) about the role of fiction in our writing, reading and political lives and how books get

defined. "Your current book is always compared to your last," Robson says. "Some people didn't like *Cecile* because it was too nice, people didn't like *Another Mother* because it wasn't nice enough. It will be interesting to see what people say about *A/K/A*."

She continues, "Serious fiction is two things—the writing evokes something, you enjoy the language, you aren't just reading to get from a to b. It has ideas in it. Most fiction you get

to the end, you close the book. It doesn't make you think about larger issues, or reflect back on your own life. It doesn't resonate."

Writing serious, lesbian-identified fiction in the 90s is no easy task, as various lesbian novelists have consistently argued.

Robson agrees. "Novels are very difficult to write," she admits. "They require huge investments of time. And there is a publishing judgement or prejudice that lesbian novels don't sell. It hasn't impacted on me [as much as on some other writers]. You write to be published but you also write for yourself. That doesn't mean that getting published isn't important, but what needs to happen to survive as a writer is you have to separate being a writer from being an author just for your own sanity. Keeping the joy in the writing can be difficult."

The issue of who gets published and how concerns Robson, who thinks that lesbians may change their novels just to get published. "I think that it's more important to be writing than to be publishing in that it is more important write what you want to be writing. Marketing and publishing say you should be able to explain [every book] in a sentence under ten words. That seems very reductive," she says. "Books that can be accurately explained in ten words aren't what I want to write, aren't what I want to read. If I've read the ten words, why read the book?"

Yet increasingly those ten word descriptors are the books that rise to the top of the publishing heap, which

makes the struggle to write something more complex ever harder. Robson notes that reviews often describe lesbian fiction as dealing with "everyday lesbian life or realistic lesbian life. That's what I feel like I'm doing and that's what I want to be doing, even though it may not be everyday to be an attorney, or moving across country or be a lesbian escort. You read a lot of novels in which people don't have jobs, where the worst thing that has happened to them is that they've broken up with their girlfriend. That may be everyday life to some people, but I don't think it's very interesting."

What interests Robson is work, writing, politics and, of course, the law. "At one time it was enough to write books that simply had a lesbian character," she explains. "Now I think it's important to write about how characters are involved in the political life around them—how they are engaged or not engaged, how characters are trying to lead ethically political lives in spite of their material and political circumstances. And with their own grasp of privilege vis a vis other people. How hard it is to get a job that both pays you something and is also not demeaning—or in the case of [the characters] in *A/K/A*, where you have to pretend to be someone else."

Her characters don't ever leap out and give a discourse on ethics, however, says Robson. "That is never articulated in the books—no one is saying 'Oh, I'm trying to lead an ethical life.' The reader has to get that."

Yet work and ethics are tremendously important in the lives of Robson's characters. "In mysteries work is background—people are police officers but rarely question what that means," she notes. "[whereas in Robson's novels] people do question their work and the meaning of it, the humanness of it."

In *Another Mother*, *A/K/A* and many of her short stories, Robson is always questioning the law, even though she's been a law professor for years and also spent many years as a poverty lawyer. Robson responds by telling a story. A friend at another law

school was teaching **Lesbian (Out)Law** and someone brought in a novel by Robson, showed it to the professor and said "Isn't this funny—this writer has the same name as the author of **Lesbian (Out)Law**." Robson notes, "It's hard for some people to imagine I can do both things."

And teaching law doesn't leave much time to write fiction, she admits. "I teach at a public interest law school," she says. "Teaching law and writing fiction are two different methods of accomplishing social change. I went into the law so that I could support myself and write fiction. I always wanted to do poverty law, I always thought it was a way of accomplishing social change and in fact it can be. Fiction offers a similar opportunity for social change because people are changed by what they read and they also are changed by what they write."

Robson is already at work on a new novel. She has also just completed **Sappho Goes to Law School**, a collection of essays on lesbian legal theory in which lesbians are the focus, to be published by Columbia University Press at the end of the year. Robson hopes the book will garner the same attention as **Lesbian (Out)Law**, which is used regularly in law school courses, as is **Gay Men, Lesbians, and the Law**, a book she wrote for the Chelsea House series, which she describes as "a primer on the law for teenagers."

Robson's work in legal theory and her fiction do reflect similar goals and ideas. "One of the things I am trying to say is don't look to the law for easy answers. You can't look to the law to change things for you. Like if same sex couple marry, that will not alter the law for lesbians and gay men in general," she maintains. "Basically the reformists are dominant right now, seeking to change the law in specific but narrow ways to benefit a narrow and specific group, which certainly won't include everyone. Not the transgendered or even the bisexual. So I think it's a narrow vision of social change not only in how it's accomplished, but in its ultimate goal."

Robson adds, "There are ways in which people simplify the law or confuse it with other things, like social change. The law and fiction are tools of social change—or could be—but aren't of themselves social change and are subject to very reactionary forces as well." And so, like the characters in *A/K/A*, she concludes, when it comes to the law "We have to be wary."

*Victoria A. Brownworth is a columnist for Curve and POZ magazines. Her most recent book of essays, Too Queer: Essays From a Radical Life, has been nominated for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary*

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