

Out/Write Memories

(From *Out/Write: The Speeches That Shaped LGBTQ Literary Culture*
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When I first went to Out/Write, the only writers' community I had experienced was the small group in my MFA program and I wasn't out, so hardly anyone knew who I really was.

But by the time I got to Out/Write, I wasn't just out, I was out in my writing, which broke new ground for weaving together serious Jewish and gay themes, along with exploring the legacy of the Holocaust on the Second Generation. Jewishness wasn't peripheral in my fiction, a doily on a side table. It was central.

I had been publishing those stories in the 80s and had the good fortune to work with Michael Denny at St. Martin's Press on my Lambda Literary Award-winning first collection *Dancing on Tisha B'Av*, which was published in 1990. I'd met gay writers and editors I admired like Edmund White, George Stambolian, and Christopher Bram. But none of that prepared me for Out/Write.

It was called a conference, but Out/Write was much more than that. It was a festival, a celebration, a street fair, an extravaganza, and I was thrilled to be there, to be with my people. Everywhere I turned I ran into writers whose books I had either read or wanted to read: Joe Keenan, Nisa Donnelly, Jewelle Gomez, Melvin Dixon, Dorothy Alison, Richard McCann, Michael Nava and many more.

Looking back, my experiences at Out/Write remind me of the first time I attended a queer Jewish conference. At Friday night's Welcoming Shabbat services in Toronto, when I looked around I experienced wholeness. As services began, the man standing in front of me dramatically flung one side of his large tallis over his shoulder as if it were a fur stole. I laughed and did the same. It felt great. And so did listening to the hermeneutical analysis by the woman rabbi of the Torah passage where the Hebrews had no more water after Miriam died.

Out/Write was like that: flashes of comedy and moments of insight following each other in a cascade. It was an inspiring way to start the 90s when I had no idea I would eventually end up publishing twenty-seven books in a dozen different genres; have my work translated into fifteen languages; become a regular book reviewer and even get my own radio show; be sent on international book tours; see my work widely anthologized; find my fiction analyzed by academics in print and at conferences; sell my literary papers to a major university; and have students read my fiction and essays in classrooms.

Maybe that last thing is what I'll have put on my tombstone down the road: He Became Homework.