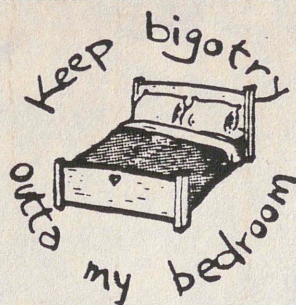


cludes the choice to be lesbian.

We endorse the statement of other organisations working with victims of rape, battering, child-rape and molestation in Aotearoa that the evidence points over-whelmingly to heterosexual males as the main offenders. Eighty-seven

percent of child-molesting men are known to the child.

Passing the Homosexual Law Reform Bill represents a strong affirmation that the community will not tolerate violence against lesbians, gay men, children and by implication, women." □



## BANNED GAY BOOKS

Censorship of lesbian books is alive and well.  
Jenny Rankine reports.

Lesbians and feminists take for granted the rows of lesbian books in women's bookshops, our freedom to read and buy (when we can afford them) the latest lesbian releases from overseas on sexuality, debates about pornography, relationships and aspects of lesbian lifestyles.

But this freedom is illusory. Despite improved awareness of lesbian rights, despite liberal distaste for censorship, imported lesbian and gay books are still being seized by customs and judged indecent by the Indecent Publications Tribunal.

Benton Ross, the country's largest importer of lesbian and gay books, has had about 34 books seized by customs since the middle of 1984. The first was *Flame*, a *Life on the Game*. This supposedly autobiographical novel about a gay male hustler is not explicit about sex. The Tribunal rules that it was "honest in its presentation although... it could give offence, therefore it is indecent in the hands of persons under the age of 18."

Then in August 1984 Benton Ross' first shipment of books from Alyson, an east coast American gay and lesbian publishing group, arrived at the Auckland docks. About 20 titles were seized and held. Fourteen were returned in dribs and drabs, but four were sent to the Tribunal. These were *Coming to Power*, writings and graphics on lesbian sadomasochism (S/M), edited by members of SAMOIS (A San Francisco lesbian feminist S/M group); *A Different Love*, a gay male romance by Clay Larkin; *I Once*

*Had a Master*, one man's journey through the S/M world, by John Preston; and *Coming Out Right*, a handbook for the gay male by Wes Muchmore and William Hanson.

In August this year, Benton Ross heard that all the books had been declared indecent. The Tribunal said about *Coming to Power* that "some of the stories are well written but many are crude and lacking in any redeeming features." The gay male books were indecent simply because they "glamorise homosexuality".

WRITINGS AND GRAPHICS ON LESBIAN S/M

### COMING TO POWER



Customs officers came to Benton Ross' warehouse and took all the copies of the books, but Helen Ross says they have decided to appeal the judgement to the High Court. This can take a year or more and is very expensive. They will appeal about *A Different Love* and *Coming Out Right*, because "it's harder to appeal about S/M books. Our philosophy," she says, "is that homosexual literature shouldn't be subjected to any

greater scrutiny than heterosexual literature, and shouldn't be discriminated against. We're not appealing for commercial reasons, because any of these books would only sell to a very limited market in New Zealand."

While this was happening, in February 1985, customs officers went through Benton Ross' first shipment from Naiad Press, an American lesbian publisher best known for its lesbian romances. Thirteen titles were seized, as well as *Lesbian Sex*, from Spinsters Ink. Two of them, *Yantras of Womanlove*, a book of photographs of women making love by Tee Corinne, and *Curious Wine*, a lesbian romance by Katherine Forrest, were sent to the Tribunal. The other 12 were returned. The Tribunal decided the books were not indecent, but its written decision is interesting: "The Controller (of Customs) submitted that although *Curious Wine* was a well written novel, the frequency of sexual activity was enough to warrant an age restriction... We feel that the (Customs) Department's concern may arise not so much with the content of the publication, ... but by the fact that the story concerns a lesbian relationship between two women, and the book has been published by what appears to be a group associated with women's interests."

About *Yantras of Womanlove*, the Tribunal said: "Al-

though some of the photographs are very frank, it does not appear to us that they are designed to cater to any prurient interest... On at least two previous occasions the Tribunal has held that an impressionistic or fantastic presentation of nudity could lessen the effect of a sexual display which in other modes of presentation could be indecent... The only difficulty we had with (*Yantras*) was whether or not an age restriction should be placed on it. The Controller (of Customs) urged us to do so on the ground that although there was an abstract presentation, the subject matter of women indulging in lesbian acts was still obvious... We do not think the book is likely to appeal to young readers because of the manner of presentation. The likelihood of corruption is small if no restriction is placed on it."

Obviously the indecency laws are male controlled and heterosexual — they assume that heterosexuality is the only norm and lesbian and gay sexuality is, in itself, perverted. This will continue to restrict our choice of imported books, and deny us access to books, like *Coming to Power*, that are controversial in the US lesbian communities.

Similar heterosexual censorship is happening in England, where eight directors and one staff member of London's Gay's the Word bookshop will stand trial next year for conspiring to import "indecent or obscene" material from Giovanni's Room, a Philadelphia-based distributor of gay books.

In April 1984, 15 customs officers raided the bookshop and carted off more lists. In other seizures the number of impounded books reached 3,000. The shop staff face two years in prison and fines for this "offence". Homosexuality and lesbianism are specifically mentioned in customs guidelines in England for determining materials that might be deemed pornographic. Literary observers see this trial as a landmark test case for literary censorship, and public feeling has been largely in favour of the bookshop.

Distributors and bookshops in New Zealand committed to lesbian and gay books may have to fight a similar battle for our right to decide for ourselves what is oppressive and liberating for us.

### LESBIAN SEX



JoAnn Loulan