

Where the Boys Were

By STACEY D'ERASMO Published: November 19, 2006

Ah, for the days when the Big White Guy Writers roamed the streets of Manhattan, swooping down on comely maidens in the Cedar Tavern and carrying them off to their lairs for a bit of ravishing in between reciting lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." When Styron, Mailer and James Jones fought it out — sometimes literally — for the title of heavyweight novelist champ; when Brando and Dean ruled Hollywood with their inchoate masculine agony; when women had basically two choices: good girl or bad. The good girls got the wedding ring, the kids and the house. The bad girls got everything else. Alice Denham, who was a smart, pretty, rebellious college student in 1951, never doubted which kind of girl she wanted to be. As soon as she could, she headed straight for New York City, where she eked out a living as a model and pinup girl. But the boho life was her real vocation. She immediately befriended James Baldwin (at the San Remo), Jack Kerouac and James Dean, who became an occasional lover of Denham's. (He liked to nuzzle, and smelled like vanilla.)

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Peter Basch/Cardoza Publishing Alice Denham in 1962. "Sex," she writes, "was my great adventure."

SLEEPING WITH BAD BOYS A Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties.

By Alice Denham. Illustrated. 304 pp. Book Republic Press/Cardoza Publishing. Paper, \$14.95.

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Denham says she also — exuberantly, single-mindedly and passionately — slept with and/or dated James Jones (who had an abnormally small penis, according to "Sleeping With Bad Boys," but excelled in other ways); Anatole Broyard (who seems to have flagged at the crucial moment); the novelist David Markson ("stud lover boy"); the sculptor and future actor Gardner McKay; Hugh Hefner, on the occasion of Denham's being Miss July of 1956 (he was "a good ride, a steady canter," though somewhat cold); Evan Connell (good in bed, she writes, but not talkative out of it); Ad Reinhardt (no sex reported; they went to hear Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot); Philip Roth ("on fire"); Nelson Algren (upset about his great love, Simone de Beauvoir; slept on the sofa); Joseph Heller (married, hot kisser); William Gaddis ("a fine centerpiece"); and the editor who bought her first novel, Bob Amussen ("somber"). Norman Mailer was a friend; it was at his legendary parties that she met many literary lights. When she became pregnant in 1959, Mailer offered to lend her \$100 for the abortion.

"Sex," Denham writes, "was my great adventure." Though she had quite a bit of it, with all sorts of men, the male literary stars of the day were her exaltation. At any party — and this is a memoir of many glamorous artsy parties — Denham went straight to the most famous male writer there, and attempted to bed him. She was the kind of

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person one might call phallographic: she turned to the light of male power — the only type of light she seemed capable of sensing, for better and for worse. She was also an aspiring novelist, posing in clothes and apart from them during the day so that she could work all night on a book, “My Darling From the Lions,” that was eventually published in 1967.

Wry, gossipy, apparently possessed of an extraordinary memory and nobody’s fool (“What these hotsy male writers knew about love was nada”), Denham nevertheless emerges as a somewhat poignant figure. A feminist critique of her position in those years weaves through the book — what happened to women who liked sex, the incredible arrogance of the male lit stars, the hypocrisy of the age — but the younger Denham, the eager black-clad artiste and adventurer, seems heartbreakingly credulous. When James Jones went to her apartment with a bottle of liquor and a bouquet of compliments on her first published short story (about a woman who accepts money for sex), did she truly believe they were outlaw writers together? Did she still believe it a few hours later? When Playboy reprinted that same short story in the issue for which she was the centerfold, did she honestly think the magazine was interested in her literary skills? Sadder still — the story/centerfold combo was her idea (though three book editors from major houses did write her after it came out).

“Sleeping With Bad Boys” is a memoir that tells the history of an illusion only half-relinquished. Even now, Denham puts a brave face, a solid topspin, on her role in that vanished floating world, but it is no insult to her or her talents to observe that she had already been assigned a job, and it wasn’t as a writer. The worst moment by far, in a book that is meant to be honest but rollicking, comes when Denham, having labored for years on her first book, can’t get any of the titans she slept or partied with for years to blurb her. Not Heller, of the fervent adulterous kissing; not Gaddis, with the fine centerpiece; not Mailer, so quick to offer the abortion money. “Why had I thought I was one of the gang?” she laments, though two pages later she counts herself lucky to have been there “when literature mattered ... when I knew all those grand, evil, macho literary guys.” But did any of them, one wonders, know her?

*Stacey D’Erasmus’s most recent novel is “A Seahorse Year.”*

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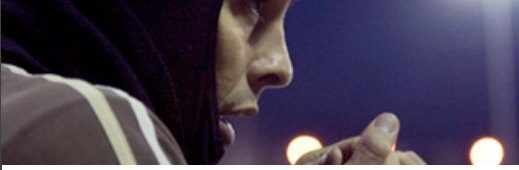
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