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Q+A

Susan Smith

Buffalo-based fiction writer Susan Smith recently published her third book, *Put Away Wet* (boldstrokesbooks.com), an erotic tale of a young butch's exploration of her sexuality. Smith, whose previous novels, including *Of Drag Kings and the Wheel of Fate* and *Burning Dreams*, addressed gender identity, is also a cofounder of HAG Theatre, the first all-lesbian theater company in the United States. She talks about young butches, older women and queer storytelling.



In your previous books, you've employed fluid gender identities, but in *Put Away Wet*, Joey self-identifies as butch. Tell me about this shift.

Female masculinity is one of my major themes, but I wanted to look at a different portion of it. Butch was also one of my coming-out stages—I began to assess the

idea that butch was a good thing, a thing with a history and an identity, or a place in the community that can be sexual, positive, respected and associated with noble and valid traits. This was something I wanted to explore in the book.

What interests you about the young butch-older woman dynamic in *Put Away Wet*?

I've had the great good fortune of being mentored by a number of profoundly intelligent, committed and passionate old-school femme women throughout my career, including Madeline D. Davis [longtime gay activist and founder of the Madeline Davis Buffalo Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Archives of Western N.Y.], and Margaret Smith, the founding director of the HAG



Theatre. Because they influenced me on so many levels, I wanted to send a bit of a love letter to that kind of relationship—for me, the emotional and pedagogical content of it reflects back to Sappho and ancient Athens, and I like that dynamic.

Where do you see yourself in the larger world of queer storytelling?

In my 20s, I found myself as a lesbian storyteller. I used my own voice a lot and acted with the HAG. As I get older, I see myself as more of a queer storyteller because I embrace more of the community, and I'm seeing where gender identity overlaps and intersects. I would love to be remembered as one of the people from Buffalo in the literature tradition. **[Alicia Eler]**

still figuring out who they are and what they want out of life. This is a classic girl-meets-girl romance with just enough twists to keep the breezy plot rolling along. JJ is a kind-hearted jock who writes poetry on the sly and falls hard for Kendal, the straight cheerleader she's tutoring in poetry. It's nice to think that poetry could be the link that bridges the straight and gay worlds, and here that idea is used to its full effect. The text includes some lines of Dickinson's poetry that, in the context of the story, are made to look like they've been written by JJ for Kendal. It's a gamble to conflate scribbled teen angst with the work of one of the best poets of all time, and it's passable in the plot only because the book is actually geared for a young-adult audience that possibly won't know the difference. Unfortunately, the cover design is lackluster, and may not draw in the teen readers it aims to reach. Still, it's a solid addition to LGBT young-adult lit, and will also be a pleasant beach read for the adult lesbian audience, who'll find they're rooting for this fictional couple on the cusp of a relationship destined for success. **(alphaworldpress.com) ■**

Page Turners



***A Girl Named Charlie Lester*
Carissa Halston
(Aforementioned
Productions)**

Charlie is a Goth teen trying to explore sex and love. Over time she matures—opening her own bookstore and exploring the wet, wild world of sleeping with women. Strong female bonds, witty dialogue and an acute sense of what it's like to be young today make *Charlie* a great read. **(aforementioned-productions.com)**
[Nina Lary]



***Dismantled*
Jennifer McMahon
(HarperCollins)**

From the *New York Times* best-selling lesbian author of *Island of Little Girls* comes this chilling novel about profoundly human post-college friends caught up in circumstances both of their making and way beyond their control. McMahon's latest is surely her best. It's gripping and scary in so many ways. **(harpercollins.com)**
[Diane Anderson-Minshall]



***So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*
Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore
(City Lights)**

This Lambda Literary Award finalist offers up a thrilling socio-politically transgressive, gender-bending queer novel about life in San Francisco. From bad sex to vegan restaurants to NPR and tweaking buddies, Sycamore's frenetic pace and unabashed solipsism is most refreshing. **(citylights.com)**
[DAM]



***Powder*
ed. Lisa Bowden
and Shannon Cain
(Kore Press)**

While soldier stories hold a hallowed space in media and literature, the voices of the women who serve are often subdued or drowned out altogether. Cain and Bowden make a great start toward remedying this in their collection of poetry and prose. This page-turner is an insider's look at what it's really like to be a servicewoman. **(korepress.org)**
[Andrea Millar]