

COWRIE

With Cowrie, fat dyke author Cathie Dunsford has written a sensual, complex first novel of a fat dyke. Cowrie is tightly woven, textured with colors, tastes and smells. Though short in length, the journey of Cowrie is dense in tension and discovery. Cathie Dunsford evokes the spirit of Hawai'i through rich imagery of the islands, its Goddesses Pele and Laukiamanmuikahiki, turtle woman, along with the constant struggle of identity and the fight against current imperialism. It is an intimate book about the transformation of Cowrie, a fat dyke who travels from her New Zealand home to Punalu'u, Hawai'i to meet her extended family and trace the history of her grandfather. This difficult journey explores the tensions of kinship, cross-cultural identity, and the relationship between the sacred, the erotic, and the land.

The language in Cowrie is very descriptive and erotic. Preparing food, sharing food, eating are all important elements in the book. Food is both sacred and necessary, daily. This element of food creates a foundation for the cultural and spiritual ties to the land and ocean—fish, fruits, nuts, and flowers. The characters in Cowrie eat often and abundantly. Dunsford explores the complexity of this relationship within the current context of the land and waters of Hawai'i being poisoned and fishing waters being taken over by the U.S. government for military (weapons testing) and space programs.

Cowrie's characters are fat, round bellied, sensual, glorious, unapologetic. The issue of fat is woven through out the book in a way that honors and celebrates fat and the characters' traditional Hawai'ian culture—fat tension/phobia is presented as being modern, colonial, racist, and imperialist in its origin. Even the ancient rock drawings, Ki'i pohaku, that help Cowrie in her exploration and knowledge (they also are illustrated throughout the book) contribute to the richness of fat imagery:

"Cowrie is pleased to find some female figures that describe large body shapes rather than just the stick figures of modern anorexia. Some look as if they are about to burst into flight, soar off the rocks and into space."

The legend of one of the figures, Laukiamanmuikahiki, turtle woman, accompanies Cowrie on her journey, present

in Cowrie's dreams and nightmares. Her developing relationship with turtle woman provides Cowrie with clues to her identity and self-power along with an understanding of the forces of creativity and destruction. Discovering turtle woman is the tension and complication that pulls the reader into Cowrie in an intimate way.

Cowrie is the only dyke character in the book. She is a sexual, sensual, queer, funny, fat, complex character. (How many other characters can you name that can claim the same?) She has explicit erotic fantasies and a strong attraction for her friend and relative Koana. The sexual tension and friendship between the two women is realistic. Koana is both sexually attracted to and sensual with

Cowrie but is not ready to deal with the effect homophobia would have on her family life and children. Her rejection is painful; the anger and alienation that Cowrie feels adds to the tension of having multiple cultural identities, yet she finds a resolution to her difficult journey with the help of Laukiamanmuikahiki, turtle woman.

Cowrie is definitely worth the read, so go bug your local bookstore. Books with fat dyke characters are hard to come by and Cowrie is a

welcome addition to that too-short list!

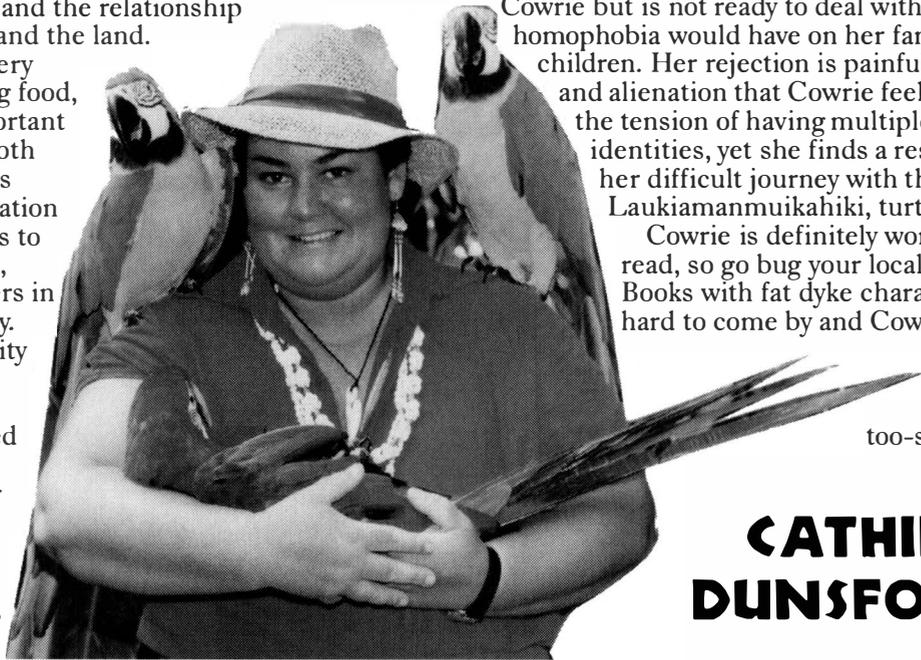


Photo by Pele Aloha, Hawai'i

CATHIE DUNSFORD

*Author Cathie Dunsford currently lives in New Zealand where she teaches Creative Writing and Publishing. Other works include a bi-lingual poetry collection, Survivors: Uberlebende, and her most recent anthology, Me and Marilyn Monroe. Cowrie is published by Spinifex, 1994. For more information contact Michele Karlsberg (718-351-9599).**

We want to hear what you think! Read any great books lately? Seen any good movies or porn? Got any hot fat dyke musicians, artists, performers, celebrities, brats, circus geeks, fashion items or new toys that you want to rave about? Produced any work or upcoming events that you'd like to have reviewed? Have any aliens or fat girl superhero sightings to report?

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