

"This feeling of uniqueness is part of the pattern": Jane DeLynn's *In Thrall* by Ekaterina Ivanova

Originally published in 1982, and recently re-edited by Divided Publishing, Jane DeLynn's novel *In Thrall* follows the (tellingly named) 16-year-old Lynn as she grows up in New York, and dreams of escaping her mundane life to the prestigious Radcliffe College. In the meantime, she tries to prove to everyone around her that she is wise beyond her years, and engages in simultaneous sexual relationships with her boyfriend and her female English teacher. The novel is captivating, holding the reader in thrall to its outward treatment of queerness and adolescence, themes frequently surrounded by anxiety, awkwardness, or aversion.

Publishing Triangle goes as far as to call DeLynn's work "the best gay and lesbian novel of all time". Notably, the pre-Stonewall-riot setting does not deter Lynn from taking great pride in discussions of queer sex. Yet, despite her attraction to Miss Maxwell constituting a recurrent talking point, she still feels the need to keep their romance a secret from everyone but her girlfriends, as contrasted by her unstified forwardness about her relationship with her boyfriend. This is, of course, partly dictated by the age difference between the lovers—but perhaps also attests to DeLynn's attempt to communicate the struggle of queer self-identification: "I suppose this feeling of uniqueness is a pattern", she writes. No matter how knowledgeable Lynn believes herself to be, her inner monologue reveals that her understanding of what it means to be gay is nonetheless reliant on stereotypes. She believes "lezbos" always have crew cuts, and that any man interested in fashion must be gay.

Simultaneously, Lynn is eager to explore what being a lesbian means for her, which explains why she gravitates towards Miss Maxwell. Beyond her sexual attraction is a desire for information, and her older lover becomes the sensible, educated, voice of reason. She guides Lynn in her journey towards sexual self-discovery, while the other adults in her life, especially her parents, see sex as a taboo subject.

Still, as I read the book, I find myself increasingly frustrated with Lynn: she appears stubborn and self-absorbed; she calls herself a "tragic hero" because no one around her recognises her intelligence; many of the comments she makes about her friends make me angry. Finally, though, it occurs to me that part of the reason why I have such a strong reaction to Lynn's frank outspokenness is perhaps because I can see my past self in such a disposition. I, too, was sixteen not long ago and thought of myself as grown-up, unable to understand why no one else could see it. This is what allows us to empathise with Lynn, and see beyond her tough exterior into a much more uneasy sub-narrative of deflection, insecurity, and a desperate need to be understood. Testament to DeLynn's skills as a writer is our compulsion to continue reading, because, ultimately, it is this experience of growing up and discovering where you belong that lies at the heart of the narrative.

Lynn frequently conflates academic knowledge with emotional intelligence, which leads to her vulnerability. The fast-paced progression of her relationship with Miss Maxwell reveals the naivety of this assumption. For Lynn,

being involved with an older partner is a sign of maturity—of being ahead of her friends. Miss Maxwell may play an important role in developing Lynn's understanding of her sexuality, but, in a way, she also stands as Lynn's enemy. The first-person narration only emphasises the protagonist's deepening sense of being out of control: we witness first-hand her hesitation when Miss Maxwell nonchalantly initiates sex for the first time, and her shock when she kisses Lynn in public. The reader is to share Lynn's discomfort, and, as an external observer, become frustrated that they cannot protect her.

*In Thrall* is a unique insight into the mind of a teenager—and proof of DeLynn's uncompromising perceptiveness. Lynn reminds us of how complicated adolescence can be, and the processes of self-discovery we are all, in one way or another, subject to. That is why I believe this book to be just as relevant today as it was when it was published forty years ago.