



Teacher's Pet

More by Regina Marler

Regina Marler

Avant-Garde Égalité

Jane DeLynn's autobiographical novel *In Thrall* tended to minimize her part in the development of modern art, but a new book recounts a same-sex affair between a teenager and her closeted English teacher in the early 1960s, a time when exposure could be more traumatic than exploitation.

November 6, 2025 issue

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February 12, 2026 issue

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Reviewed:

July 24, 2025 issue

In Thrall

The Cuttlefish's Play by Jane DeLynn, with an introduction by John Richard Powers's *Playground* does for oceans what his 2018 novel *The Overstory* did for trees: it implores us to open ourselves to the ingenuity of life beyond the human.

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Jane DeLynn; illustration by John Brooks

In an interview with Taylor Lewandowski in *Bomb* magazine last year, Jane DeLynn described her autobiographical novel *In Thrall* as “almost historical now.” Originally published in 1982 and recently reissued, it is based on DeLynn’s high school affair with her closeted English teacher in early 1960s Manhattan. The book can be seen as the first in a trilogy about sex and transgression, along with two of DeLynn’s later novels, *Don Juan in the Village* (1990) and *Leash* (2002). The evolution of gay rights across this period alters the assumptions of each book so markedly that they might be set in different centuries rather than different decades. But the trilogy’s underlying subject—the relentless self-consciousness of DeLynn’s first-person narrators—never wavers. Each is a lesbian Prufrock, preparing her face to meet the faces that she meets.

Lynn, the sixteen-year-old main character of *In Thrall*, may not be the only student at her single-sex Upper East Side public school with a crush on the charismatic Miss Maxfeld,



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but she feels confused and anxious, convinced that she alone harbors a secret abnormality. Is she a “lezbo”? This fear preoccupies her more than the faculty assessments stacking up in her Personality File and imperiling her route to Radcliffe, her dream college: “Obnoxious.” “Ill-mannered.” “Impolite.” “*Curses.*”

Anyone who has worked with adolescents will recognize the delight and exasperation that Lynn sparks in Miss Maxfeld. In one instance, Lynn hijacks an essay assignment on tragic heroes in Greek literature to redirect the topic to herself: “I am a tragic hero,” she begins, “because of my tragic flaw—an excess of intelligence that dooms me to unhappiness.” Only her cleverness comes naturally to her; she studies others and tries to reproduce their gestures, their manners, while also trying to appear as original and fascinating as she feels. She moons about after class, hoping to be noticed—but not exactly as herself:

I had a terribly strong desire to follow Miss Maxfeld into her office and tell her that deep down I was not the snotty short Jew I appeared to be, but someone tall, and blond, and Episcopalian.

DeLynn’s comic sensibility pervades much of her work, but it is tempered in this novel, the better to convey the quicksilver emotions of youth. Only in the family scenes—boisterous, inspired set pieces reminiscent of Philip Roth’s early fiction—does DeLynn give a hint of what a menace (and a pitch-perfect mimic) she might have been herself at Lynn’s age. An only child, Lynn bears the brunt of her parents’ anxieties. Her messiness, her moodiness, and her smart mouth are the bane of their existence, although Melva, Lynn’s mother, also finds time for a running critique of her husband’s unmarried sister, Lou, who spends her meager discretionary income on antiques and upholstery fabric rather than on updating her wardrobe. “You could at least have shortened the hem [of that dress] so you don’t look like an immigrant getting off the boat,” Melva tells her.

Aunt Lou provides a wealth of material for DeLynn: “They were fat, they were fresh, they were gorgeous pussy willows, real professional-florist pussy willows!” she kvells, recalling an outing with six-year-old Lynn in which she, Aunt Lou, somehow also gains a starring role.

“Oh, Lou,” you said, “pussy willows.”...You touched one of them. “Let me touch?” “Oh, yes, touch.” So you touched and I said, “Lynn, would you like it?” “Oh, Lou,” you said, “*oh, Lou.*” Even then you knew how good I was to you.

Born in 1946 in New York, DeLynn attended Hunter College High School, which was an all-girls school until 1974 and clearly the model for the competitive girls’ public high school in *In Thrall*. At Barnard, DeLynn studied English and philosophy. Elizabeth Hardwick was one of her teachers and later helped introduce her to publishers. She earned an MFA in 1970 from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (fellow students included the poet Alice Notley). On her return to New York, DeLynn wrote libretti for two operas by Roger Tréfousse: *Hoosick Falls* (1974), described by its composer as an “absurdist musical farce which plays with ideas of gender identity,” and *The Monkey Opera* (1982), a work for children in which four monkeys cavort onstage with typewriters, eventually producing Hamlet’s soliloquy. She was a founder of *Fiction* magazine and active in the downtown scene in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in connection with the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church, where she gave what Bernadette Mayer called “a virtuoso performance as ‘Wally,’ the older brother of the penis,” in *Patriarchy* (1980), a play coproduced by Eileen Myles and Barbara McKay.¹

Set in Berkeley, DeLynn’s first novel, *Some Do* (1978), lampoons the lefty politics of the late 1960s, managing to skewer not only men (of any persuasion) but the entire spectrum of the women’s movement. The book was marketed as an edgier follow-up to feminist best sellers like Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977), but DeLynn had knives out for everyone. Along with political satire, *Some Do* offers an adroit, if jaded, analysis of interpersonal power dynamics. Its characters assess their likely effect on those around them moment to moment, calibrating their behavior so as not to turn off others beyond the hope of seducing them. We can catch a glimmer of Lynn taking shape here, especially in Bettina, a needy, self-conscious escapee from a midwestern marriage whose obsession with the beautiful, emotionally distant Kirsh—the reluctant center of a friend group Bettina infiltrates—is all-consuming. Though she tries to fit in at a women’s consciousness raising session, Bettina’s “head felt like a glass telephone: everyone could see the copper wires, the bells, the metal gears” and know that she was not thinking about the

struggle for equality but only about Kirsh. Whenever the two women are alone together, Bettina becomes “her most hyper, dazing Kirsh into submission by a flow of language as energetic as it was mindless.”

Both *Some Do* and DeLynn's later novel *Real Estate* (1988) are verbally exuberant ensemble pieces—novels of bad manners and contemporary mores. *Real Estate* also offers a cynical, prescient portrait of the New York art scene, increasingly flush with cash and conceptual posturing in the late 1980s. Some of the novel's most memorable chapters are written from the point of view of a wealthy family's pet dog, forced (among other trials) to contend with new leash laws in Central Park.

The scope of *In Thrall* is smaller, allowing for close observation of Lynn and her unfolding awareness of a wider world that is both terrifying and attractive. An invitation to join Miss Maxfeld at her apartment for tea brings a turning point in more ways than one. Beneath Lynn's wisecracking, she is as wonderstruck as if she'd arrived there from another planet. Miss Maxfeld's bohemian space looks nothing like Lynn's parents' Upper West Side apartment, with its wall-to-wall carpeting and drapes. Her teacher's framed art posters, vintage *objets*, wooden OED stand, and rug over bare floor read as “apparent poverty” to Lynn and signal a reversal of values as disorienting as the sexual boundaries soon to be crossed. O brave new world, that hath such bookshelves in it.

Although Miss Maxfeld takes pride in her cultural attainments—she touchingly tries to introduce Lynn to classical music and modern writers like Gertrude Stein—her life is hedged in with loneliness and fear of discovery. At thirty-seven, she has had only a few romances—three of them with students, including Lynn. A gay bar would have offered her a chance to meet other lesbians, but sexual preference would have been their only trait in common, she tells Lynn, adding, “The Jewish culture is not a bar culture.”²

To understand herself, Lynn seeks out the writings of sexologists and is horrified to read that lesbians possess manly, elongated clitorises.³ “I used to be a tomboy,” Lynn muses in an unsent love letter to her teacher, “and my voice sounds husky to me.” If her literary tastes had not been so highbrow—she loves E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* and reads everything Miss Maxfeld lends her—she might have

discovered the lesbian pulp novels available at any corner Rexall in the 1950s and 1960s, a golden age of girl-on-girl smut yielding potboilers like *Dormitory Women* (1954), *Strange Nurse* (1962), and (my favorite) *The Evil Friendship* (1958), based on the 1954 Parker–Hulme matricide.⁴ These books typically ended badly and were often homophobic—in part to avoid postal censorship under the Comstock Act—but their gay readers at least felt less alone. For this reason, the poet Joan Larkin called the pulps “survival literature.” “Probably there is only one person who is homosexual in one place at one time,” Lynn worries, “and that one person (I am afraid) is me.”

The charm of *In Thrall* is that DeLynn stays within the emotional world of her teenage protagonist and within the possibilities that Lynn could have imagined in the early 1960s. What kind of adulthood seemed to await her? Homosexuality was not only illegal but almost unmentionable, as Lynn discovers while trying to talk to her parents about Aunt Lou’s longtime fiancé, Rudolf, who has a conspicuous interest in interior decoration, and their own fashion-conscious male boarder. Even the term “gay” is unknown to Lynn, though she would have heard “deviant” and “sicko.” She could not have dreamed how many gay New Yorkers surrounded her, or that the homophile movement was well underway. (Daughters of Bilitis had been founded in 1955 and the Mattachine Society in 1950, both on the West Coast.) One kiss from Miss Maxfeld clears up the question of Lynn’s own sexuality, but not the dark clouds gathering over her future:

Though I was not surprised to be a lesbian, it did not seem possible I could be one, for surely God had intended me to be perfect. It could not be that in the one life I would lead on earth, I was to be permanently and irrevocably marred.

Paradoxically, Lynn’s physical desire for Miss Maxfeld fizzles out before they become lovers. She goes along with the sex out of awkwardness, and soon Lynn considers Miss Maxfeld “the only person [I] care about on earth.” But her distaste for her teacher’s body—Lynn refers to their encounters as “the Land of Undifferentiated Slime”—brings lasting consequences. For DeLynn the real-life affair helped establish a principle that recurs in her fiction: the mingling of pleasure with disgust. Some dissociation also lingers, some resistance to experiencing the moment, whether that moment is sexual or domestic. No established partner, for example, can hold the

promise of a stranger.

For many readers in the post–Me Too era, the obvious theme of *In Thrall* will be consent. The power imbalance implicit in the twenty-year age gap between the main characters, compounded by Miss Maxfeld's position of authority, will flatten much of the humor and pathos of Lynn's pursuit, as well as the historical context of Miss Maxfeld's opportunism.

Of the many twenty-first-century books about sexual manipulation and age-inappropriate relationships, at least three titled *Consent* have appeared in the last several years—most notably Vanessa Springora's 2020 account of her grooming and abuse by Gabriel Matzneff, a writer more than three times her age.⁵ Much of Matzneff's work celebrated his attraction to teenagers. For decades, this set him apart as daringly honest—didn't *every* man prefer schoolgirls?—and he enjoyed considerable support within the country that shelters Roman Polanski. Attitudes change, however, and the outcry in France in response to Springora's book led to the government finally establishing an age of sexual consent: fifteen. In Germany, the age of consent is just fourteen; in the UK, it is sixteen. Both countries raise this age if the adult is in “a position of trust” over the younger person. This distinction—versions of which can be found in the laws of many US states—seems to acknowledge outside influences on a young person's decision-making, including what used to be called seduction, that standby of the English novel since its beginnings in the work of Eliza Haywood and in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740).

In the *Bomb* interview, DeLynn casually refers to her teacher as a “predator,” but this view may have evolved with the times. Miss Maxfeld is treated sympathetically in *In Thrall* and in “The Secret Agent,” DeLynn's 1999 essay on coming out, in which she describes their encounters as “*relatively* consensual.” Had she written *In Thrall* in the past ten years, perhaps consent would have come into sharper focus, but perhaps not.

“The Affair with the Teacher still stands as an archetypal rite of passage into the Sapphic world,” Terry Castle wrote in “The Professor,” her 2010 memoir about her relationship with a powerful graduate school mentor. Castle is talking not about conversion, that right-wing bogey, but about mutual recognition. Girls who already know or suspect their same-

sex inclinations—as did DeLynn and her alter ego—can often fasten onto a female authority figure who “offers a kind of adult recognition and endorsement: a fleshly validation across time zones.” In his introduction to the reissue of *In Thrall*, Colm Tóibín draws a comparison to Patricia Highsmith’s lesbian classic, *The Price of Salt* (1952), which became the movie *Carol* (2015), in which a nineteen-year-old shop assistant falls for a wealthy, much older woman. For Gen Z, the archetypal same-sex age-gap dream couple would be Elio and Oliver in the 2017 film version of André Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name* (2007); the lovers are only seven years apart, but their gap in experience is profound.

Castle connects these intergenerational attractions to the closet. Teacher-student eros can serve a social function, a community welcome of sorts, “whenever same-sex love is illegal, unmentionable, or outright taboo.”⁶ DeLynn offers a pertinent observation in “The Secret Agent,” after recalling how, once they were romantically involved, her teacher confirmed the homosexuality of several other faculty members: “A breach of confidence, surely—but how else can knowledge be transmitted in societies that have no official history?”

Near the beginning of college, DeLynn’s parents found a letter from “Miss Maxfeld” and, mortified, consulted DeLynn’s psychotherapist, who told them it was an unrequited love on the teacher’s part; he urged DeLynn to say the same. Suspicions remained, and DeLynn was forbidden to see the older woman. “I’m paralyzed, an animal caught in headlights, and do as told,” DeLynn recalls. Over the next couple of years, DeLynn occasionally sought out trysts with “Miss Maxfeld,” the kind of hit-and-run encounters that can be read as sentimental or a little callous. (“When the urge to have sex with a woman—*any* woman—utterly overwhelms me, I call her up and go over.”) Frozen in time, the older woman remained a closeted pre-Stonewall lesbian, willing to trade silence for acceptance, even as the gay liberation movement gained momentum. For this reason, perhaps, the humor drops away in DeLynn’s nonfictional account of the relationship; she has lost respect for her former teacher.

“The affair was traumatic,” DeLynn concedes in “The Secret Agent.” What affected her so deeply was not being taken advantage of by a trusted elder but “the repressed quality of [‘Miss Maxfeld’s’] own sexual life and the agony about being

homosexual that got transmitted to me.” Her teacher’s shame proved to be contagious—greater, in the end, than the relief of DeLynn/Lynn learning she was not the only lesbian at school. “Certainly I would have been far better off sleeping with a friend my own age in high school or college,” DeLynn explains.

But as torturous and guilt-ridden and frightening (in terms of my future life) the relationship was, my shrink’s and my parents’ reaction—and our conspiring together in a gigantic lie [to pretend it never happened]—was far worse. I do not think I have ever gotten over the shock of the discovery. It is why, I am sure, I have written so extensively about my sexual life ever since—an attempt to excise by repetition a shame I am still unable to shake.

Why would exposure be more damaging than the exploitative relationship itself? At some point in every DeLynn novel, a character has difficulty holding eye contact or moving with ease through a gathering. “I have trouble with my facial expressions,” as Lynn puts it. For a young woman whose shame and anxiety lead her to patch together a false self—who cannot be sure who she really is or how to embody that person—a sudden blast of truth could only feel destructive. At the moment DeLynn and her parents had the chance to see one another clearly, they all chose the façade.

At fourteen, the narrator of Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982)—the first volume of White’s semiautobiographical trilogy about gay desire—dreams of a magnetic stranger who will climb the tree outside his bedroom window and pull him into a loving embrace. “After a while I realized I wouldn’t meet him till years later,” he recalls. In the meantime, he writes his imaginary lover a sonnet that begins,

“Because I loved you before I knew you...” The idea, I think, was that I’d never quarrel with him, nor ever rate his devotion cheap; I had had to wait too long. I’d waited so long I was almost angry, certainly vengeful.

Something of this angry and vengeful spirit also animates DeLynn’s *Don Juan in the Village*, a novel told as a series of quest narratives (more specifically, conquest narratives) in which an unnamed narrator approaching forty casts her line into a variety of lesbian bars and beyond, reeling in an

assortment of women more interesting—at least for a few hours—than her various “official” girlfriends, whom she can barely bother to describe. “My girlfriend often told me I was beautiful,” the narrator remarks, “but this only increased my contempt for her.” Contempt is the bitter note that cancels the self-deprecating humor in this book. The narrator scans the crowd at a lesbian bar, for example, and notes, “The women were pigs.” Her ideal is “someone stupid and unworthy—but with a heartbreaking, sexy beauty everyone would covet.” On the other hand, ugliness can be a turn-on for her, and she greedily soaks up the sexual attention of women she wouldn’t dream of dating.

When asked in a 1990 radio interview if, with *Don Juan in the Village*, she intended to write a politically incorrect account of the gay liberation movement, DeLynn replied that she was “trying to tell the truth just as deeply as I could tell it, wherever it led,” especially given the narrator’s many “apparent similarities” to her: “I mean, I like to irritate people, go against, if I’m around leftists, I’ll be a rightist, and so on.” This reflexive oppositionalism makes sense when we encounter it in the teenage Lynn of *In Thrall*; like the long bangs she lets hang over her eyes, it reads as a response to the alienation of high school. Brattiness ages poorly, though. In *Don Juan in the Village*, the combination of insecurity and arrogance the narrator carries with her begins to weigh down the adventures. We root for the girls who get away.

If we read the novel as autofiction, the narrator’s plunge into sapphic excess was surely balm to the “lonely years of desire” that DeLynn describes in “The Secret Agent”: a period of self-imposed celibacy with women while in college and graduate school. (The essay offers slightly different versions of some stories recounted in *Don Juan in the Village*.) Yet anxiety and self-consciousness weave through every encounter. During an S/M experience in an underground Los Angeles club, while several women cater to her needs, the narrator wonders “what kind of response” they expect from her: “Was there never a moment in my entire life when I could just relax?”

This is the problem DeLynn sets out to solve in *Leash*, an S/M novel that brings together two of her longtime preoccupations: the exhausting effort to maintain and represent a self, and the simple, loving relationship between dogs and their owners. Chris, a semi-successful but bored New York writer, launches an adulterous affair with an

unknown dominatrix (Chris—a pseudonym—is blindfolded throughout) that leads to the progressive surrender of the responsibilities, possessions, relationships, and status that come with adulthood and career achievement. (Readers of Pauline Réage's *Story of O* will recognize it as the urtext for *Leash*.) Eventually the dominatrix tires of Chris's enthusiastic submission and assigns her "a new role" and identity: leashed, on all fours, her limbs and fingers bound to prevent standing or grasping, a strap placed under her tongue, limiting speech. Soon, at the equivalent of a dog adoption event, Chris is offered the chance to make such alterations permanent and to abandon her human life in exchange for the restricted but certain life of a pet:

One thing only is required of you, and that is to do what your master commands.... For in this world there is no worry or anxiety or envy or despair. Why worry when one's wants are anticipated? How be anxious when there is no choice to be made?

It would be easy to miss the significance of a scene in *In Thrall* in which Lynn visits Central Park Zoo alone, feeling rejected by Miss Maxfeld. In the primate house, Lynn experiences a flash of awareness of animal consciousness—a realization that one of the gorillas is observing her as well. Guilt-stricken, she remembers her neglected childhood parakeet. It occurs to her that she feels "much closer to the gorilla" than to her family or the zoo guard.

In DeLynn's other novels, this animal association is explicitly canine. As early as *Some Do*, the sight of Kirsh makes Bettina want "to lick Kirsh's feet. She wanted to roll on her back on the floor and have Kirsh's feet tickle her tummy." That the Harlot's Progress of DeLynn's sex trilogy should end with a similar self-abnegation—the collar, the cage, the surrender—may be conceptually satisfying, but it is too dark for transcendence.

Regina Marler

Regina Marler is the author of *Bloomsbury Pie: The Making of the Bloomsbury Boom*. She is at work on a book about Janet Malcolm. (February 2026)

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