

CALL HER LESBIAN: JULIA PENELOPE

Merril Mushroom

If we continue to live our lives as though we have all the time in the world, there will be no revolution. If we are serious about altering and restructuring the patterns of our lives, the only time we have is now. If we aren't willing to take hold of the present, we will not be able to change the future.

—Julia Penelope,
"Come the Revolution, We'll All Be Dead!" (1974)

Julia Penelope (Stanley), June 19, 1941- January 19, 2013
a fat, white, working class, butch lesbian separatist who
lived her revolution

When I was coming out as a teenaged dyke in 1958 in South Florida, my friends all said that I must meet "Penny" (as Julia Penelope was known then). Penny is so brilliant, my friends said. Penny is so sensitive. Penny is wild, and Penny is wonderful. Penny has great parties at her house where we young dykelings could play spin-the-bottle and other kissing games, because her mother *knew*, and it was ok, and sometimes even she would play. But, most of all, Penny is notorious for bringing out girls right and left, for having countless notches on her bedpost, so I also was warned to watch out for Penny.

Soon I met Penny, and indeed she was all that had been said about her. Sure enough, I became one of those girls. Penny brought me out well, carefully schooling me in the rules, roles, and lingo of the gay subculture. She taught me how to camp and carry on and how to keep myself as safe as possible during a time when one could be involuntarily incarcerated in a mental hospital or thrown in jail for the crime of being gay. We loved one another deeply.

Although our relationship as teenaged sweethearts didn't last and even though we often were separated by time and distance, we maintained communication and cherished our connection of the heart, mind, and soul for over half a century.



Penny, 1961.

Dade County had a huge population of “gay guys and gay girls” back then. We teenagers easily obtained phony proof-of-age to get into the many gay bars, although we weren’t invited to the private parties of the adults—too dangerous for them. There even was a gay beach, which we enjoyed, even though it was raided routinely by the police. The Onyx Room was one of the famous Miami Beach clubs with a drag show and an adjoining lesbian dance bar. Every Monday night, the Onyx had a talent show, where local drag queens performed, displaying their talent or lack of talent. Penny and I complained to our friend Connie about the shows always being only men. We said that it was about time some women

got up there, too. "I suppose that will have to be us!" announced Penny, who never was shy about instigating. So we formed our drag butch rock & roll, lip-syncing group, "The Tongueston Trio," invaded the drag queen scene, and were an immediate hit.

In the fall of 1958, Penny—who, as a young, fat, working class butch dyke, was an "obvious" lesbian—enrolled at Florida State University. The following year, the Charlie Johns investigations to purge the universities of homosexuals hit full force.

(James T. Sears reports in great depth about the Johns Investigations—and about Julia—in his book *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948–1968* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Julia also is interviewed about the Johns Investigations on the video *Behind Closed Doors: The Dark Legacy of the Johns Committee*, produced by Allyson Beutke and Scott Litvack at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, 2000.) The Dean of Women summoned Penny to her office and informed Penny that she could not remain at the university because of her reported lesbianism, even though the women in the dorm where she lived had signed a statement that she never had approached any of them. Since she was a brilliant student, the dean permitted Penny to transfer to the University of Miami instead of kicking her out of school, although, of course, she could not live in the dorms with other young women. Penny got an apartment off campus, immersed herself in her studies, and became involved with the campus thespians. One night, after a very long rehearsal at her apartment, she let a couple of gay boys crash at her place for the night. The next day, a neighbor reported her, and she was kicked out of school *for having men in her room!*

She moved to New York City where she worked very hard, lived frugally, and put herself through school at City College of New York (CCNY). I had moved there too, and our friendship continued. I repaid her having brought me out into gay life by bringing her out into psychedelia. In those days, when LSD was legal, we used the substance carefully and in a very structured fashion. When we told

Julia about it over a macrobiotic dinner at *The Cauldron* in the East Village, she said, "I have a brilliant mind, and this is the very experience I want." She proceeded to have many such, and these experiences were very significant for her.

In 1966 she went to Austin to pursue a doctorate in linguistics. She dropped the use of the diminutive "Penny" and took back her given first name "Julia." In 1968 she took a teaching position at the University of Georgia in Athens, where she opened a women's bookstore, *The Hobbit Habit*, managed by her mother who had moved to Athens. The bookstore sponsored a lesbian softball team, *The Hairy Hobbits*, and Julia went about organizing the Athens lesbians. In 1973, the women's committee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), with the help of a substantial grant, put on a "women's conference" that was extremely heteropatriarchal and exclusive. Julia and her cohorts approached these women with their grievances and suggestions for improving the accessibility and inclusion of this conference, and when the AAUP women refused to cooperate, Julia organized an alternative conference which convened on the same day as—and across the street from—the AAUP conference. The conference Julia organized was by, about, and for all women, especially lesbians, which the AAUP conference was not. [Editor's note: Merril Mushroom wrote more about this conference in "The Great Conference Capers and the Beginning of *Sinister Wisdom*" in *Sinister Wisdom* 70: 30th Anniversary Celebration, 10-12.]

Also, in 1973, academics organized the Gay Academics Union. During their first conference in New York City, the lesbians were, as Julia wrote in a letter to me, "off in a little room that the gay men had thoughtfully set aside for us to meet in." So, of course, the following year, Julia volunteered to work on the conference committee—the only woman to do so. She fomented, agitated, blustered, and insisted; as a result of her work, the women's caucus ended up with all the power, and there were many separate-space activities for the lesbians.

Women, especially lesbians, were always at the forefront of Julia's life, work, and attention. She was adamant in her support of separatism and the need for women to create our own space and find our own power. In her 1974 paper "Come the Revolution, We'll All Be Dead," she writes, "We cannot continue to inhabit a civilization in which the very design reminds us daily that it is man-made, for men ..." She continues, "But a feminist, at some level, cannot accept power from men. To accept power from men is to feed right back into the female dependency/male control

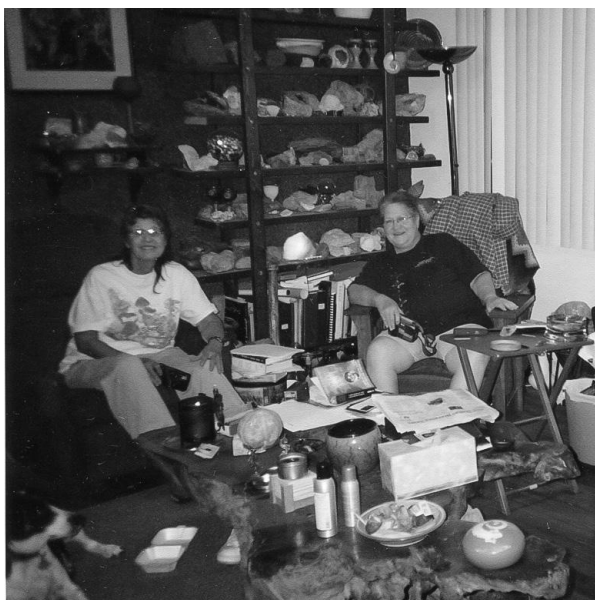


Julia as Robin Hood, 2nd from right,
Halloween 1965-ish.

power structure; it negates the basic premise of feminism." Julia concludes, "In fact, the creation of our own power is the only realistic solution to the paradox of feminism."

In 1974 Julia resigned her position at the University of Georgia and brought a lawsuit against them over inequitable salaries of women in her department. She moved to Tennessee to participate

in a rural collective attempt where she was known by the locals as "Doctor Stanley," said with some reverence. Once, a good ol' boy, who Julia did not like, came to the house and bothered her. Her big dog, Pooh, cornered the fellow against the wall, and when he asked Julia to call off the dog, she responded with, "I have a rifle, too." When the collective did not work out, she went to teach at universities in South Dakota, then Lincoln, Nebraska where she organized the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians.



Julia, right, at home in Lubbock, TX with Merrill, left, surrounded by rocks.

Everywhere she went, Julia motivated, organized, supported, empowered, and energized lesbians. She was an amazing theorist who practiced what she taught. She was insatiably curious, clear and precise in her communications, and could be brutally honest when she thought that was necessary. She was brilliant and articulate, angry, generous, vulnerable, and entertaining. Julia was fiercely loyal as a friend, but she could set some people on edge. She had no patience for nonsense, and she used her anger both

as a shield and as a weapon. Some lesbians disliked Julia because of the way she was and what she believed, especially those who never bothered to engage her but formed their opinions based on superficial encounters or reports from others.

Julia worked hard to educate women about the immense power of language to explain, create, and manipulate. To name the world is to control the world, and men have reserved the act of naming for themselves. Julia encouraged us to take back that power of language by pointing out precisely how to understand the insidious truth behind linguistic patterns that we normally would accept without question.

She wrote extensively on the use of passive constructions—in political prose, news stories, and advertising—as ways of withholding information from us, as in:

- Employees were laid off (by whom?)
- The children were punished (by whom?)
- Records of the bank transactions were lost (by whom?)

Thanks to Julia, whenever I read or hear a statement made using the passive voice, I immediately question who did this, why, and why are they being protected?

Likewise, collective or abstract nouns can be used to avoid responsibility, as in:

The county denied the request for roads improvement. (Nonsense! A county is made of trees and rocks and houses and creeks and has no ability to act. Some *person* denied the request, and that *person* has a name, which should be made public.)

From Julia, I learned to pay extra attention to the use of the “get” passive, which not only hides the responsible party, it is an implied accusation, blaming the victim as it were, as in:

She got fired... got hurt... got lost... got broken...
(as if the action was somehow deserved or brought upon oneself.)

Julia published many, many papers on power, gender, linguistic constructs, oppression and dismissiveness, and, especially, lesbians.

She published more than thirteen books for, by, and about lesbians, beginning with *The Coming Out Stories* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980) which she coedited with Susan Wolfe. In 1989, Crossing Press reissued the anthology as *The Original Coming Out Stories*. This ground-breaking anthology, the first of its kind, started me on my own path as a lesbian writer. Julia's last book, *Flinging Wide the Eyed Universe: Poems by Julia Penelope*, was published in 1998.

By the early 1990s, Julia was increasingly unhappy with the direction the lesbian movement was taking. She was a separatist who saw the assimilation of L into GLBTQ as contributing once again to the invisibility of lesbians. She was angry about the commodification of lesbianism—mainstreaming us not only into a product but a product for the enjoyment of men.

Then, in the mid-1990s, I got a phone call from Julia. She was in tears, her voice so tight with hurt and rage she barely could speak. "I am finished with the lesbians," she choked. She went on to explain that while at a public reading of *Lesbian Culture*, a woman she knew suddenly stood up and, without warning, read a long, vitriolic, blaming, nasty statement condemning Julia's work as racist and exclusionary. "She never even bothered to speak with me personally before she read this," Julia said. "She never approached me with any of her concerns, even though her own story is in the anthology. She never gave me a chance to explain. I had no way to defend myself, and no one stood up for me." She sighed. "I am finished with the lesbian community. I'm dropping out." And she did.

Julia moved to Lubbock, TX where her dear friend Art had settled. When I asked her "Why Lubbock?," she responded that Lubbock didn't get earthquakes. Over the years, Julia had been an avid "rock hound" (rock collector.) The outside walls of her house were stacked to the windows with milk crates filled with several tons of assorted rocks and minerals from all over the country. Inside, shelves and tables were crowded with gemstones, artifacts, fossils, geodes, crystals, and carvings.

Julia worked from home via computer writing for dictionaries, encyclopedias, and anthologies, both academic and mainstream. When she shared with me some of her pieces, I could see that Julia had not changed in her activism—every bit of her carefully worded text consistently turned back to the importance of women, current and historical, lesbians wherever possible, appropriate to the context of whatever she was writing. When I commented on this, she smiled that Julia Penelope smile and said, “Mmmm hmmm!”

As on-line technology became more advanced, the type of research and writing Julia was doing was given over to the computer, and Julia had difficulty finding jobs. She supplemented her income by buying and selling antique glassware and other collectibles. Her health had been declining, and her financial situation deteriorated. Through financial assistance from the Heartfull Giving Fund, the love and support from her friends, and concern for her old dog Bitsy, she managed to stay alive and afloat until health complications, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and congestive heart failure got to be too much for her.

She died peacefully in her sleep at Lubbock Health Care Center. The lesbian community is poorer for her passing but richer for the work she left us.

Donations can be made in Julia Penelope's memory
to the Heartfull Giving Fund,
Woman, Earth, and Spirit, Inc.
PO Box 130
Serafina, NM, 87569. (www.WomanEarthandSpirit.org),

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For a complete bibliography of Julia Penelope, go to:
<http://www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/juliapenelope>