

JOAN NESTLE

b. May 12, 1940

Joan Nestle is an award-winning author of lesbian fiction and nonfiction. She is the cofounder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

“The freedom to be sexually expressive, the freedom to be different, is a freedom for all of us.”

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Nestle was born and raised in Queens, New York. Her father died before she was born. Nestle credits her mother with instilling in her “belief in a woman’s undeniable right to enjoy sex.”

In 1963, Nestle graduated from Queens College. She became active in the African-American civil rights movement, taking part in the Selma to Montgomery march and helping with voter registration in the Southern states.

After Nestle earned a master’s degree from New York University, she taught at Queens College. In the late 1960’s, she was active in the New York City gay and lesbian bar scene. The bars were run by organized crime and riddled with blackmail and extortion. After the Stonewall riots in 1969, she became a gay activist.

In 1973, Nestle helped launch the Gay Academic Union (GAU) to pursue gay liberation in academics. GAU members began to collect and preserve documents related to lesbian history. From this initiative, she helped found the Lesbian Herstory Archives in 1976.

Originally housed in the pantry of Nestle’s apartment, the Archives moved to its permanent home in Brooklyn. It is the oldest and largest lesbian collection in the world, housing more than 20,000 volumes, 12,000 photographs, and 200 special collections, among other artifacts and memorabilia. Since its inception, Nestle has played a vital role in amassing the collection and promoting it to the community.

In 1978, she began writing lesbian-themed fiction focused on the femme-butch relationship. She has won awards from the Lambda Literary Awards and the American Library Association. Her writings have been influential, and her anthology, “The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader” (1992), has become a staple in lesbian studies.

In 2002, Nestle’s life was made the subject of the documentary film “Hands on the Pulse.” She teaches at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, where she lives with her partner, Diane Otto.



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