

Lesbian writer's passages lack depth

by Kathy O'Brien

Jane Rule is as well-known for her lesbianism as she is for her writing.

Born in the United States, Rule has lived in B.C. for 30 years, writing novels, short stories and essays for over 20 of those years. Always outspoken about her sexual preference, characters are often lesbians in Rule's fiction, even in her first book, *Desert of the Heart*, which was written at a time when such subjects were neither fashionable nor acceptable.

Rule's latest collection of short stories, *Island Passages*, contains lesbians as well as heterosexual characters. In nearly all these stories Rule explores human relationships — relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, students and teachers, friends and lovers.

In the title story there is little dramatic action; Rule instead portrays with delicacy and sensitivity the relationship between two middle-aged women, Troy and Fidelity. The women, who come from different backgrounds but share a bond of grief, are thrown together for three days in a ship's cabin. After experiencing a mild antagonism toward each other, the two develop a deep friendship and love.

"The Real World" is also about love between two women. The love between Tess and Annie and the acceptance of it by Tess' mother and 80-year-old grandmother are the main aspects of this story.

Love, although never erotic love scenes, is a part of many of the stories. In "The Investment Years", Roger and Nancy's love and self-sacrifice bonds the married couple together and gives meaning to their lives.

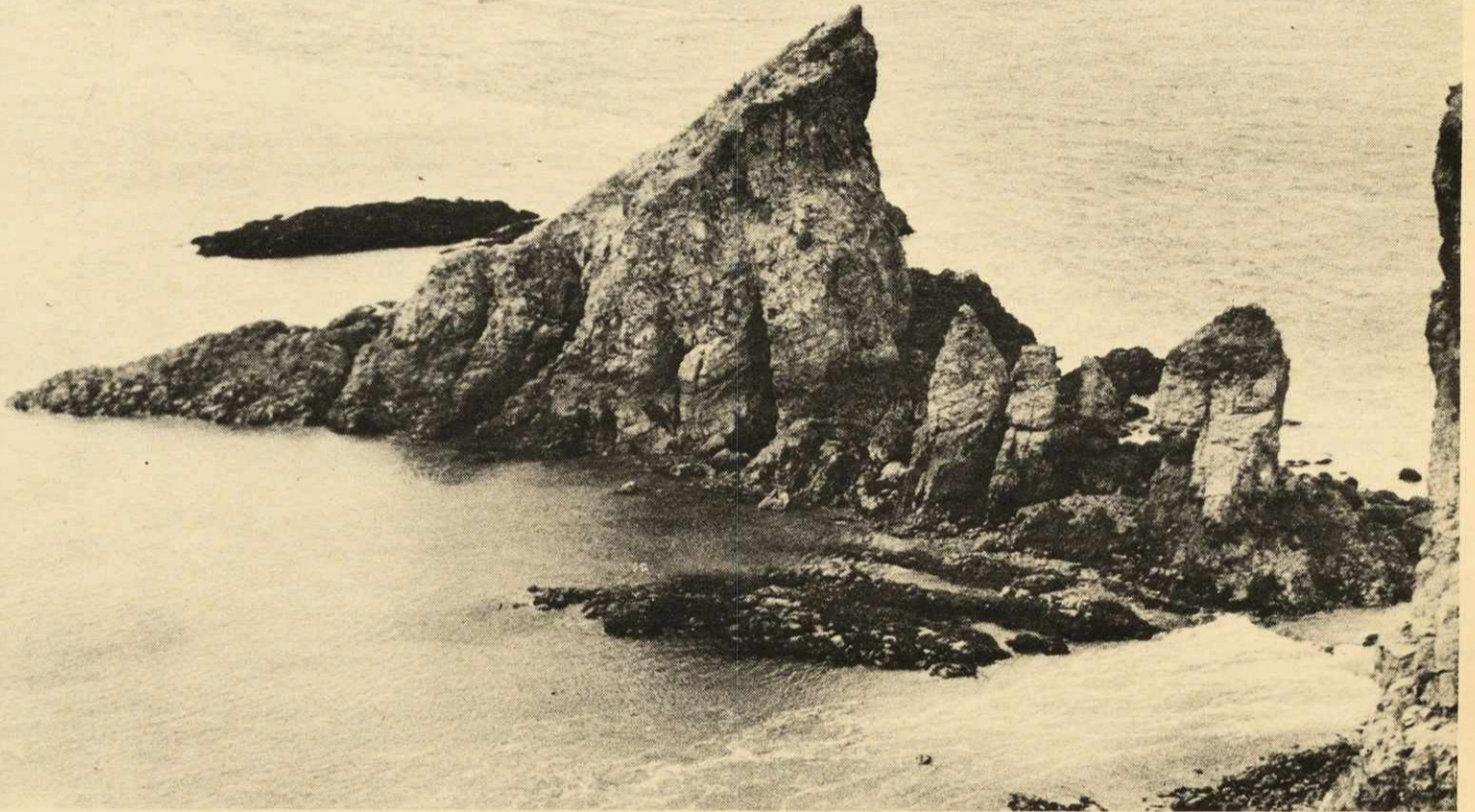
Not all the relationships in the stories have love at their core, however. Maria, the main character in "More Than Money," offers an interesting contrast to Roger and Nancy. While Roger and Nancy scrimp and save and deny themselves, Maria showers gifts on her family, giving love through material objects.

Rule ends "More Than Money" as well as "Blessed Are The Dead" with an ironic twist. "Such a satisfying death," — Martin, the hero of the latter story, exclaims of the death of an acquaintance, a friendless and despised "sinner." Although Martin thinks that his "friend" has gotten his rightful due by an early death, he finds he is unable to gloat over the event for very long.

Rule's subtle use of irony is one of the most noticeable traits in her writing. The whole of "His Nor Hers", the story of a couple in a decidedly loveless marriage, is written in an ironical, distanced manner.

The husband in "His Nor Hers" is a cool, irritable man who thinks that a wife should be a "quiet presence". The wife Gillian is a closet lesbian and ultimately as unlikable as her husband. After her divorce, it becomes apparent that she too thinks of her lovers as objects. No longer with a husband as an excuse, Gillian wonders how she will get rid of women she grows tired of. "Could there be a woman so remarkable to hold Gillian's interest for the rest of her life?"

The couple in "One Can of Soup at a Time" discusses the roles of husbands and wives. In fact, that is all the story is about. Even calling it a story is stretching it, for there is no character



Land's end. Photo by Russ Adams, Dal Photo

development — not even the names or a hint of physical description is given. There is little description of anything. Written almost entirely in dialogue, as if it were a scene from a play, the story only serves to illustrate an idea.

Generally short in length, many of the 21 stories lack complexity. There is a group of five related stories revolving around the characters Harry, Anna and their two children which are among the least inspiring of the lot. All centering around one theme or plot, the stories are all too neatly sewn up.

Rule does not spend much time describing physical details, and thus she does not conjure up much atmosphere. At heart Rule is a sparse and plain writer. In her best story, "Dulce," Rule allows herself some stylistic flourishes. Dulce, who has had relationships with several artists says of herself: "I have been muse, witch, preying lesbian. I have also been devouring mother, whore, Diana, spirit of Vancouver, daughter of the tides." Narrated in the first person there is less dialogue and more introspection in "Dulce". The story, which tends to ramble, could be even better if it were tightened up a bit.

Although Rule is a skillful writer most of the stories in *Island Passage* lack depth. Quiet stories without striking characters, the stories are generally nice but not spell-binding.

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