Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence
Their moving true stories of courage, struggle and love.

Nancy Manahan & Rosemary Keefe Curb
“Lesbian nuns I know are going to dance! In convents this book will go around like hotcakes, just the way The Hite Report did. Everybody read it. Lesbian nuns will be more self-conscious about this book. They’re also going to be listening for the response from other members of the community and praying to God it’s okay.

The book will also be an occasion for confronting a lot of pain. Lesbian sisters who are not out in their communities (and I don’t know anybody who is out) will have to listen to homophobic reactions. But it will be a catalyst. All hell’s going to break loose. Religious communities are going to have to discuss the book. They’re going to have to respond to the reality, and they’ve never had to do that.”

Sister Sara, 1958–present
Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence

edited by
Rosemary Keefe Curb & Nancy Manahan
Rosemary Keefe Curb, 1963
(Photograph by Jerry Keefe, father)
What Is a Lesbian Nun?

Rosemary Keefe Curb
(Sister Mary Geralda, O.P., 1958–1965)*

My mother warned me not to do this book: “Why bother? Everyone thinks convents are full of Lesbians. Don’t you know you’re committing professional suicide? And why hurt those nice people in the Catholic Church? They just might decide to fight back.” Let me introduce these silence-shattering stories by responding to my mother and to anyone with similar questions about why we bothered, who we are, how we worked, and just what effect I imagine this book will have.

Is this a dangerous book? I think so, but not in the way my mother suspects. My mother worries that I will be hurt—professionally and perhaps physically. She doesn’t want her daughter to be one breaking centuries of silence. I think fears like hers perpetuate the silence that keeps the closet locked, whereas telling the truth about our lives can set us free.

If our culture defines normality in terms of male experience and values only women who relate to men, both nuns and Lesbians tend to be ridiculed or dismissed as irrelevant to the strides of history. Perceiving the whole female sex as servile and dependent bolsters the faith of our fathers. The very existence of autonomous communities of women threatens patriarchal arrogance. And a collection of autobiographical stories from Lesbian nuns not only violates patriarchal taboo, it is unimaginable in our polarized society.

Ironically groups of nuns or Lesbians are often mistaken for one another today, since we often travel in female packs oblivious to male attention or needs. Eschewing the cosmetics and costumes of the commercially promoted feminine mystique, both nuns and Lesbians are emotionally inaccessible to male coercion. Time and energy which heterosexual women devote to catering to men can be focused on

* Dates indicate years in the convent.
private or communal projects. Despite similarities, a male-defined culture which moralizes about “sins of the flesh” and the pollution and evil of women’s carnal desires sees both nuns and Lesbians as “unnatural” but at opposite poles on a scale of female virtue.

We use the term *Lesbian nun* both for Lesbians still in religious communities as well as for those who left several decades ago. We use the word *nun* in its popular sense, meaning all women who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in religious communities, even though the Roman Catholic Church considers only those who take solemn vows and live completely cloistered lives as *nuns* and other women in religious life as *sisters*. The word *Lesbian* reveals our primary spiritual and political commitment to loving women as well as our sexual orientation, but not necessarily our sexual activity.

How does one become a Lesbian nun? Let me introduce myself. From age eight in Chicago, when I first heard God’s call to the religious life, I trudged off daily to the seven o’clock Mass. I was the most devoutly religious member of my family. On the snowiest mornings, my mother’s hot Cream of Wheat lures only strengthened my will to resist the temptations of the flesh.

Three months after high school graduation, I entered the Dominican Sisters. I was tossing aside the vanities of the world in the form of a promising acting career. Neither my hard-won Actors Equity card nor my flirtation with fantasy stardom diverted me from my religious vocation. Through every opening night and curtain call, I knew where I was really going. I planned to stay hidden from the world through a long life of prayer and service and to be buried in the cemetery at the Motherhouse.

I loved religious life and my sisters. Receiving the Dominican habit and my religious name was the purest happiness I have ever known. Although devoted to religious life, I had an emotionally consuming clandestine relationship with an older sister during my sixth and seventh years in the convent. I will not narrate my convent story here because I found fragments of it in almost every story in this collection.

I left the convent just before taking final vows because I found religious life emotionally stifling. Removing the many layers of the white wool habit and stiff medieval black veil for the flesh-baring clothes fashionable in the mid-Sixties, I felt I was defaulting on a promise made to God. I was conditioned in conformity and ignorant of my sexuality—even my simplest emotional needs. I have not returned to the Motherhouse at Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, since I left in August 1965, but I can still smell the wax shining along those silent
corridors, see the serpentine line of black veils in funeral processions to the cemetery, hear the faint click of our long rosaries as we made a middle inclination to chant the doxology “Gloria patri et filio-o-o” at the end of each psalm in the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. (Religious terms are defined in the Glossary.)

I was lucky to find a job teaching high school biology in rural northern Nebraska. I married an English professor teaching at a nearby college and had a daughter the following year. Four years later in Arkansas, I left my husband. Three years after that, in 1973, I declared myself a Lesbian.

During this past decade, while completing a doctorate in literature, beginning my career as a college English professor, speaking and publishing as an “out” Lesbian/feminist activist, and living as a single Lesbian mother with my daughter (who is graduating from high school in 1985), I have been wondering if choosing to live in a religious community of women twenty-five years ago stemmed from my then unknown Lesbianism. How many women of my generation became nuns because we were already Lesbians? I wanted to find my Lesbian sisters who had entered the convent, not only as a response to a call from God, but as a refuge from heterosexuality, Catholic marriage, and exhausting motherhood.

In June 1981, at the National Women’s Studies Association conference in Connecticut, Peg Cruikshank introduced me to Nancy Manahan. We both had autobiographical stories in *The Lesbian Path*, edited by Peg, who urged us to collaborate on editing a collection of stories from Lesbians who were nuns. In an effort to reconcile her religious past with her present radical feminism, Nancy had already begun to search for Lesbian ex-nuns. (Recent and historical studies are listed under Additional Readings.)

In October 1981, when Barbara Grier of Naiad Press invited Nancy and me to edit this collection, none of us knew how many potential contributors to such a book existed or how many would be willing to exhibit their lives in print. We sent out a call for stories to Lesbian/feminist/gay journals, newspapers, and newsletters; we distributed announcements at professional conferences and sent them to women’s bookstores to be posted. Letters and phone calls came pouring in almost immediately. Not having been active in the Catholic Church since about 1968, I was surprised to receive responses from present nuns, so we widened our scope to include the stories of Lesbians still in religious communities.
During the past two years Nancy and I have been in touch with several hundred Lesbian nuns and ex-nuns. We have arranged gatherings and panels at bookstores, conferences, and festivals and given interviews around the country. During Winter 1982–1983, Nancy took a leave-of-absence from her English teaching at Napa College to travel across the country with her partner Barbara Evans and visit the nuns and ex-nuns who had written to us about their lives. Without taking a leave I have been able to meet authors on the route of my professional trips for research and conferences.

Gradually I discovered many common threads in our stories and conversations. From a questionnaire which I designed in June 1983 I learned about family background and attitudes; consciousness of sexuality before, during, and after religious life; the evolution of spirituality and religious practice; recent work, lifestyle, and political commitments. Despite our colorful diversity, I doubt that the women who wrote to us represent a random sample of the Lesbian nun population: we are perhaps more articulate and courageous than our Sisters who are not yet ready to tell their stories to the world.

The women whose lives break silence in this book range in age from late twenties to mid-sixties. About half of the contributors cluster within an eight-year span from age thirty-eight to forty-five (precisely the ages of the editors). Those of us who left the convent spent an average of eight years in religious life—that is, from one to twenty-nine years. Present nuns have spent from seven to forty-five years in religious communities.

More than half of us entered the convent in our late teens between 1955 and 1965. During that period the population in American convents reached an all-time high of approximately 183,000. However, during the next two decades in the wake of Vatican II—the period during which almost all of the former nuns in this book left the convent—the population declined by one-third. We were then in our mid-twenties to late thirties.

Most of us are white and come from Irish, German, and Italian working-class families in the Northeast and Midwest and from large cities. Four of us are Black, and three are Hispanic. Three of us are Canadian.

Growing up, we generally perceived ourselves as different from our families and friends, as adventurous or athletic tomboys resisting feminine passivity. We remember being both fun-loving and guilt-ridden, religious and rebellious; feeling split or confused. Of her
adolescence, Jeanne Cordova writes: “Life was simple. I hung out in church and on the softball field.”

Although a few of us were converts, most of us grew up in Roman Catholic families. We remember daily family rosary, strict Lenten penances, holy pictures, statues, crucifixes, holy water fonts, Advent wreaths, and May altars in our homes. We remember our mothers suffering daily from rigid rules about birth control, divorce, and wifely subservience. The Church condoned only procreative sex in Catholic marriage. Contraception, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality, and sexual pleasure itself were considered sins against nature. We learned to split hairs in moral theology and to practice daily penances. Kevyn Lutton summarizes her religious upbringing: “Catholic Girl Martyr!”

We were abysmally ignorant of our sexuality. So thick was the blanket of homophobic silence that nuns and priests merely warned us about avoiding heterosexual occasions of sin and resisting impure thoughts. Only a handful of us knew we were Lesbians before entering religious life, but all of us intended to be celibate in the convent. About half of us had heard the words queer, homosexual, or Lesbian while growing up. Only now do we recognize that our devotion to our girlfriends and the nuns along with our discomfort on dates with boys was not, as we suspected at the time, an unmistakable sign of religious vocation, but a premonition of our late-blooming Lesbianism.

We entered religious life because we believed that God was calling us. Passionate attachments to nuns as intellectual, spiritual, and moral role models led many of us to choose religious life. Despite the frequent recruiting in Catholic schools and pulpit preaching that a religious vocation was a call to a higher life (an implied reserved seat at the head table of the heavenly banquet for all eternity), most of our families were not enthusiastic about our choice of religious life. Some were so horrified that they disowned us.

We were so eager to enter the convent that we counted the days until entrance. Some were permitted to enter an aspirancy during high school. We who were told to wait until we had finished high school or college felt frustrated by the delay. Several describe the experience of being refused acceptance or the soul-shattering fear of being sent home once we arrived. Some who were asked to leave, usually without any explanation, during the novitiate or before final profession, tried again and again to enter other religious communities.

Service to the needy constituted the work of our communities, but our convent occupations were far more diverse and challenging than
the jobs our mothers performed while we were growing up. Religious life offered us better education than most of our parents could provide. The majority of us entered the convent during or after high school. Only a dozen of us came with academic degrees. During our one to forty years in religious life we earned ten master’s degrees and twenty bachelor’s degrees. Half of us took college courses without earning a degree, although most of us who left religious life continued our formal education. Almost all of the authors in this book have at least one degree. More than twenty have master’s degrees, and twelve of us have doctorates.

In many ways religious life offered us a learning and growing beyond our parents’ aspirations for themselves or perhaps for us. In addition to formal education, degrees, and job experience, religious life enabled us to develop positive personality traits: greater self-knowledge, ability to lead and to take risks, greater sense of community and belonging, personal power, poise, independence, creativity, integration, finesse with authority.

Unfortunately we also developed the less desirable traits fostered by our religious rule and superiors: blind obedience, self-denial, discipline, custody of the senses, and perfect self-control. We became more solitary, ascetic, studious, mystical, scrupulous, and introspective, as well as angry, rebellious, revolutionary. A few felt scared, confused, lonely, guilt-ridden, or crazy. Women who remain in religious life are more likely to report having developed healthy traits. Many who stayed less than three years found the life personally disabling.

Eager to enter religious life, most of us blissfully embraced our new family when we were safely behind the novitiate walls. The initial joy beyond belief of finding ourselves gathered into a family of loving and generous, beautiful and brilliant women often contributed to our first and major trial: constant struggle against particular friendship. Many of us mention discovering the taboo against p.f.’s, as we and our peers called them, by unwittingly violating it. Our superiors described particular friendships as exclusive intimacy with another sister, drawing us away from total dedication to God and community. Ideally we were expected to love all of our sisters equally and to show no preferences. As a safeguard we were advised to recreate in groups of three or more and with as many different sisters as possible. Although our superiors did not state that particular friendships left unchecked might become Lesbian love affairs, the official caveats were so cloaked with an aura of forbidden, dangerous, and vague evil that we feared them as serious violations of the religious rule and probable grounds for dismissal.
Despite the solemnity of the prohibitions, several stories relate the innocent exuberance of our particular attachments in aspirancy and novitiate nipped in the bud by watchful superiors. Our superiors and confessors, while preaching the prohibitions, often trivialized our consuming passions. Repression of our affectionate feelings and sexual desires led many of us to work ourselves to exhaustion while suffering through chronic debilitating illnesses and pains, which our superiors often called psychosomatic in an effort to deny their reality or our need for treatment or rest.

Falling in love with another sister, in some cases with the sister with whom we became sexual after months or years of repressing our desires, led many of us to leave religious life. Some sisters, after acknowledging Lesbian inclinations, have chosen to remain in religious life and forego sexual activity. Other present nuns whose particular friendships have evolved into loving relationships do not consider sexuality incompatible with the vow of chastity.

Those of us who left religious life five, ten, twenty years ago, after experiencing sexual intimacy behind convent walls, remember our lovers and our bruised or vibrant hearts as sharply as if it all happened yesterday. Not only was every experience unique, but some of us imagined ourselves the only sisters who had ever dared to traverse the chasm from consecrated virginity to passionate sexuality.

Leaving religious life was usually filled with anguish. The longer we had been in the convent and the more cloistered from worldly commerce, such as looking for a job, opening a bank account, finding a place to live, and buying clothes, the more difficult was our adjustment to secular life. To be no longer protected by convent walls and the religious habit, to be without material resources, to be alienated from our religious family and, in some cases, from the whole Catholic Church left most of us devastated with grief. If we left the convent more than ten years ago, we were probably shuffled out the back door in shame, after being instructed not to tell anyone about our leaving. If our sense of guilt in failing at our vocation to a higher life had also the stigma of the incurable sickness of homosexuality, then our emotional survival was indeed precarious.

Strangely enough, the question most often asked by strangers and friends on first learning about our convent past is “Why did you leave?” Many of us felt lonely, exhausted, unsuited for religious life, unable to resolve the conflict between our vow of chastity and sexual desire and/or activity. Before the changes prompted by Vatican II, which encouraged personal independence and creativity among
religious women, many of us left when religious life offered us no further growth. One former nun said, “I needed the unsafety of lay life.” When liberal theology and philosophy in the Sixties opened us to radical thinking, some of us left raging at the rigidity of Church hierarchy.

Those of us who were asked to leave found departure most excruciating. Our superiors usually did not explain why it had been decided that it was “God’s will” for us not to continue in religious life or who made such decisions. Official pronouncements reached us in the passive voice as *faits accomplis*. A few of us knew but most did not, whether the discovery or suspicion that we had particular friendships, lovers, or homosexual tendencies triggered our superiors’ decisions to abort us. We observed convent treatment of other suspected deviants: incarceration in mental hospitals, drug and electro-shock therapy, which eventually led some nuns to suicide. Nuns who sought or were coerced into psychotherapy or psychiatric care found it difficult to distinguish between depression and a dark night of the soul. Many of us resisted therapy. We felt embarrassed and outraged that our superiors considered us crazy, sick, deviant, unfit for religious life, or physically malingering.

Most of us have not been sexually involved with men. The men to whom a minority of us were attracted were often gentle, sensitive, intellectual, and nun-like. One former nun whose story appears here calls herself bisexual. Very few of us married, and few of us have children. Chris and Sheila are co-mothering a son conceived by artificial insemination. I am the only divorced single mother.

The ages at which we began identifying ourselves as Lesbian vary widely, from age ten to the late forties. On the average, we discovered ourselves as Lesbians in our thirties—usually only after we had several intimate relationships with women either in or out of the convent. The majority of contributors to this book are living with lovers in committed relationships of up to eighteen years’ duration.

As women struggling to change and save our world, most of us have been political activists. We have been active in the feminist or women’s liberation movement. Seven of us have been officers in the National Organization for Women at local and national levels. The current and a former Executive Director of the National Gay Task Force, Virginia Appuzo and Jean O’Leary, are ex-nuns. Lesbian former nuns have chaired numerous gay rights organizations, and written, edited, and published Lesbian journals. Many of us have been involved in peace and nuclear freeze efforts, and in civil rights or anti-racism
movements. We have participated in political parties, teachers’ unions, labor movements, shelters for battered women, efforts to end violence against women, women’s health centers, feminist press movements, Women’s Pentagon Action, environmental movements, credit unions, food cooperatives, prison rights, Students for a Democratic Society, women’s ordination, educational awareness of Central America, civil disobedience, and leftist, anarchist, Marxist, Communist, and socialist organizations.

In addition to donating our time and talents for causes we support, we also hold full-time jobs. Among us we have attorneys, social workers, college professors, elementary and secondary school teachers, owners of businesses, administrators, musicians, artists, writers, editors, psychologists, massage therapists, secretaries, nurses. We also have a photographer, actor, dancer, media producer, environmental engineer, word processor, publisher, graphics designer, cabinetmaker / draftsperson, chiropractor, woodworker, custodial supervisor, waitress, bakery worker, acupressurist, herbalist, and bird consultant. Several of us are currently at work on advanced degrees in graduate or law school.

Spirituality remains at the center of most of our lives.

Many of the former nuns lament the loss of a spiritual community of sisters, although most of us who have left the convent have also left the Church. Only five of us who are no longer nuns have remained active in the Catholic Church. Two of us are active in Judaism. Twelve of us now practice Wicca (witchcraft) as feminist spirituality. We are discovering pagan feminism through astrology, goddess imagery, tarot, dreamwork, I Ching, herbal healing, meditation, massage and body work. We are creating communal rituals for solstices, equinoxes, and full moons. Many of us are practicing meditation and psychic work in order to ground our solitary spirituality.

Editing the stories and interviews with Nancy Manahan, I have been amazed at our strength to survive patriarchal oppression, gender stereotyping, and pervasive homophobia. Reading these stories of my sisters has been both painful and cleansing. I have been choked by tears for myself and all of us as waves of our collective suffering sweep over me. At times in my present radical feminism I feel ashamed that I could ever have given myself wholly into the hands of the patriarchy. And yet even though the outer structure of religious life was the cloak of male dominance, the inner reality of convents is genuine sisterhood.

Just as coming out as a Lesbian to certain family members and friends requires courage, so does coming out as an ex-nun (or present
nun) to our Lesbian and feminist friends. Those who describe religious life as against nature recognize that developing habits of denying personal desires and spontaneous emotions requires constant struggle. Externally we practiced custody of the senses: we kept our eyes lowered and our hands folded under our scapulars. We learned to curtail exuberance and to walk up and down stairs at a slow measured pace. Internally we denied our impulses. We learned not to assert our own wishes, ideas, or opinions. On a deeper level we developed a belief that anything that came from ourselves was suspect and unworthy. Blind obedience was our highest goal. We were encouraged to remain childishly dependent, told that our superiors would make all decisions for us. Such habits of denial do not easily disappear when feminism ignites us.

Whereas all women under patriarchy find it difficult to assert ourselves against the docility and dependence we are taught to emulate as feminine, we who were trained in religious life find it particularly difficult to be strong and to take our power. My own healing fusion of my past as dutiful daughter of the Church with my present revolutionary fervor comes from reading these stories, meeting and corresponding with many of the authors. Yes, we do carry the scars and pain of old wounds, but we are visionaries who believe fiercely in the power of the spirit to heal and transform ourselves and the world.

I cannot predict how the silence broken by this book will affect religious communities. Some nuns may feel exposed or suspect. This book does not assert that all or even most nuns are Lesbians, nor does it condemn or condone sexual activity in convents. Rather it simply cracks open some crusty old prejudices to voice the truth that daughters and sisters have always resisted the rigidity of the fathers.
Nancy Manahan, 1967
“Breaking silence” has a double meaning. The first is the breaking of the historic silence about erotic love between women in religious life. This is the first book published on the subject. The second meaning is probably familiar only to those who have been in religious life. Before the radical changes in the Catholic Church prompted by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), silence was the rule of convent living, especially during the novitiate years. Nuns could speak only at specified times, usually in groups. We worked, studied, and ate in silence. Speaking at other times was a grave infraction of the rule. I remember confessing to my sisters and superiors at Chapter of Faults, “I broke silence five times.” All five were probably with Sister Johanna, my particular friend at the Maryknoll Missionary Sisters’ Novitiate near St. Louis.

I entered the convent after two years in college. Maryknoll required only one year of post-high school study or work, but I was not ready to leave the world after my first year. I was troubled by my growing skepticism of Catholic doctrine, including belief in a Christian God. Yet I felt called to a life of service. I had worked at a camp for ghetto children and had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Chicago. I felt appalled by my middle class rural Minnesota family’s big Buick, Fostoria crystal, and baby grand piano when so many were starving. My boyfriends struck a response in me like the flame of one paper match. Yet none of the leaping fires of my high school and college girlfriend crushes had developed into satisfying relationships; we were all trying to be heterosexual. I made the rational decision:

I could give myself most completely to a life of service by joining a missionary order. I hoped either that my atheism wouldn’t matter, or that once I devoted myself to studying the great mystics and doctors of the Church, I would see the light.
At the Maryknoll novitiate, I confessed my religious doubts to my postulant mistress, Sister Rita Anne. She suggested I talk to Johanna, an older postulant and an articulate convert to Catholicism. Johanna and I debated the creation story, original sin, indulgences, and papal infallibility. Perhaps I never saw the light because I didn’t want our meetings to end. I didn’t know I was in love with her. I only knew that the chapel vibrated when she walked in, and my stomach lurched when she knelt soundlessly behind me. I longed for her touch.

As assistant infirmarian, Johanna visited me when I was hospitalized for spastic colon and ulcer symptoms. In my misery, I held to the end of her long grey scapular for comfort. Even then, I was afraid that others would see us and KNOW. I knew that what I felt for her was wrong. Home from the hospital, I remember lying on my stomach after the Profound Silence bell, my pajama tops unbuttoned down the back, waiting for her. She came in silence, warmed the cream in her hands, and touched me. I hardly breathed through the whole backrub.

Several weeks into my second year at Maryknoll, I heard Robert McAfee Brown speak. I was in a room full of people working for social justice, and most of them weren’t nuns. That night I realized that I didn’t have to be in the convent to do good. During the fifty-minute drive back to the novitiate with my sisters, I held Johanna’s hand under her scapular and sobbed silently. I didn’t want to leave. I loved singing “Salve,” a hymn praising Mary, with a hundred women, celebrating the cosmos, as light streamed through the chapel windows. I loved cutting apples in the big kitchen while Sister Belinda next to me rolled out pie crust. I especially loved having time to meditate every morning, to read each afternoon, and to study in the evening.

But that night I knew I had to leave. Despite my efforts to believe in the Church, some stubborn part of me refused to swallow the doctrine. Unless I believed, I would always be an outsider, a pretender. My body was telling me in every way it knew how that it was not happy in the convent. And Maryknoll itself had not lived up to my ideal of “Sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come, follow me.” It did not occur to me that being in love with a woman was contributing to my decision.

I left two weeks later. Sister Johanna left six months later. We were lovers for seven years. I didn’t talk much about the convent with her or anyone else. It was too painful and too private. In leaving, I had cut off the spiritual dimension of my life. Like an amputated arm, the emptiness ached. But each time I yearned for that missing limb,
I would ask, “What do you want? The convent?” The answer was always, “No.”

Then in 1981, during bodywork therapy, I realized that my body held deep feelings about my life at Maryknoll and that in suppressing those feelings I was blocking powerful sexual and spiritual energy. I couldn’t speak about the convent to my therapist, my friends, or my lover. None of them had been in religious life. I needed other Lesbian ex-nuns. The search for those sisters was the beginning of the book you now hold in your hands. Since that time, I have reclaimed the spiritual dimension of my life. I can now speak about religious life with people who have not lived it. I no longer feel a sheet of iron, where my diaphragm should be, preventing me from taking a good deep breath. I have helped create a community I could not have imagined when I hugged Sister Johanna goodbye on the day I left Maryknoll: a community of Lesbian nuns and former nuns.

This book breaks a many-layered taboo: the first, an internal one. I was not the only nun unable to acknowledge that she was in love with another woman. We had no language with which to think about our feelings and actions. We had no name.

The second taboo is interpersonal. We did not speak to anyone, not even to our special friends or lovers, about what we were feeling and doing with each other. Our religious communities, too, were silent on the subject, except for vague warnings about the evils of “particular friendships.” Even today, most Lesbian nuns, including those who are celibate, dare not tell their religious communities.

These layers of silence rest upon a centuries-long historical silence. Even sources that discuss sexuality, pregnancy, leaving religious orders, and other forms of convent “deviance,” are silent on the subject of same-sex relationships. Boccacio, for example, satirizes only heterosexual licentiousness in Italian religious houses. Scipio de Ricci, a Roman Catholic bishop, investigated monastic corruption in the last half of the eighteenth century in a book entitled *Female Convents: Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed*. According to de Ricci, sexual activity between priests or monks and nuns was common, and many nuns were pregnant. But de Ricci does not mention sexual relationships between the nuns.2

In our own century, Eileen Power, author of *Medieval English Nunneries*, discusses the great problem of nuns’ lapses from chastity, but never hints that from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, some British nuns might have lapsed with each other.3 More recently,
Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, an ex-nun and sociologist, published a scholarly study of nuns who remained in and those who left three religious orders after Vatican II. Ebaugh never mentions Lesbians nor suggests that loving a woman might have contributed to any nun’s decision to leave or stay. Even a promising 1975 title like *A Nun in the Closet* is merely a mystery novel starring two nun sleuths among a cast of heterosexual characters.

However, a few historical clues have survived. Most of these were written by outsiders rather than by Lesbian nuns themselves. Just what evidence of our existence is there? The following fragments provide a sketchy survey of some uncommon nuns of the past.

An early hint of erotic love between women in religious life is in the fifth century when St. Augustine warned a community of nuns over whom his sister had been superior that the love which they bore to one another “ought not to be carnal, but spiritual,” and that “those things which are practiced by immodest women, even with other females … ought not to be done even by married women … much less by the widows or chaste virgins dedicated by a holy vow to be handmaids of Christ.”

Another hint is in Medieval and Renaissance penitentials (books used by the clergy, which prescribed punishments for sins). They dealt at great length with homosexual acts between men and included provisions for lay women and nuns engaging in homosexual behavior. According to Anglican theologian Derrick Sherwin Bailey, the penitentials generally prescribed more severe punishments for religious than for lay offenders. Secular women who confessed to homosexual behavior were assigned a penance of three years, while nuns received seven years. Bailey mentions the Church councils at Paris in 1212 and at Rouen in 1214 which prohibited nuns from sleeping together. Founders of religious orders were also concerned about sleeping arrangements; their rules for convent living go into some detail about the matter.

In the sixteenth century, jurist Antonio Gomez records that two nuns were burned for using “material instruments.” Louis Crompton believes that the term refers to dildoes employed during lovemaking since using instruments for masturbation would not have incurred so severe a sentence.

Judith Brown has discovered what she believes is the first documented case of a Lesbian relationship between nuns. Her archival note, “Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of
Sister Benedetta Carlini,” describes the ecclesiastical investigation of a young abbess who made extraordinary mystical claims. The investigation revealed that she was having a sexual relationship with another nun. The trial transcripts contain explicit information about their lovemaking. Brown provides a historical context for the transcripts and a sensitive interpretation of them.9

A strange case in seventeenth-century Spain involved a woman who reportedly escaped from a convent, disguised herself as a man, and lived as an adventurer and soldier, for twenty years. According to her biographers, Catalina De Eranso was engaged to be married to women several times, although “fighting, one imagines, presented more delights to her than making love to young ladies or rich widows.”10

To save her neck after a bloody duel, Catalina revealed her sex and was returned to a Poor Clare convent. Upon her release two years later, she was greeted as a celebrity and, in an audience with the Pope, was granted permission to wear male attire for the rest of her life. When she died in 1650, she was buried in the Church “with ceremonies befitting a pious ecclesiastic.”11

A few hints of Lesbian experience may be found in the writings of nuns themselves. John Boswell has translated what he terms “the outstanding example of medieval lesbian literature,” written from one twelfth-century Bavarian nun to another. It begins, “To G., her singular rose/From A.—the bonds of precious love,” and continues, “When I recall the kisses you gave me/And how with tender words you caressed my little breasts/I want to die.” The poem goes on to urge the friend to come home quickly.12

A seventeenth century Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, known as “the Tenth Muse,” corresponded with the intellectuals and artists of her day, wrote feminist tracts, and composed love poems to women. Sor Juana entered religious life for the same reasons many of the contributors to Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence did: to escape marriage, to receive an education, and to live in a community of women.13

Biographies of founders of women’s religious orders may also provide clues to romantic friendships behind convent walls. For example, Frances Ward by Kathleen Healey depicts the intense relationship between Ward, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy in America, and Catherine McAuley, who founded the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland. Their letters and journals express the fierce love for each
other which fueled their work. Unlike earlier biographers, Healey deals with their devotion more openly, revealing, for example, that Frances was not called to Catherine’s deathbed because the nun in attendance was jealous of their intimacy.14

Whether such women ever had physical contact is not the issue. As Lillian Faderman states, “‘Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent.”15

Much less circumspect than biographies and autobiographies are the handful of articles, stories, and plays written in the 1980s which deal openly with Lesbian nuns and former nuns. (See Additional Reading.)

Mary Gilligan Wong, in her 1983 autobiography Nun: A Memoir, includes descriptions of two convent friendships, one frighteningly intense, and an account of a recent conversation with a gay priest.16 She admits her error at having assumed that there was very little incidence of homosexuality in the convent and that “those who had demonstrated such tendencies had been promptly asked to leave.” Wong concludes that she will probably never know the truth because “the emotion surrounding the whole issue, both inside and outside the convent, remains intense, and lesbian sisters, as long as the intensity persists, will undoubtedly continue to be very, very discreet.”17

We have been suffocated by discretion. But inside and outside the convent, we are finally telling our stories—in this book, in newsletters and journals, at conferences and workshops, and in small groups across the country. We are finding each other and acknowledging ourselves. After centuries of invisibility, we are at last breaking silence.

Notes
1. See the Glossary for religious and convent terms.