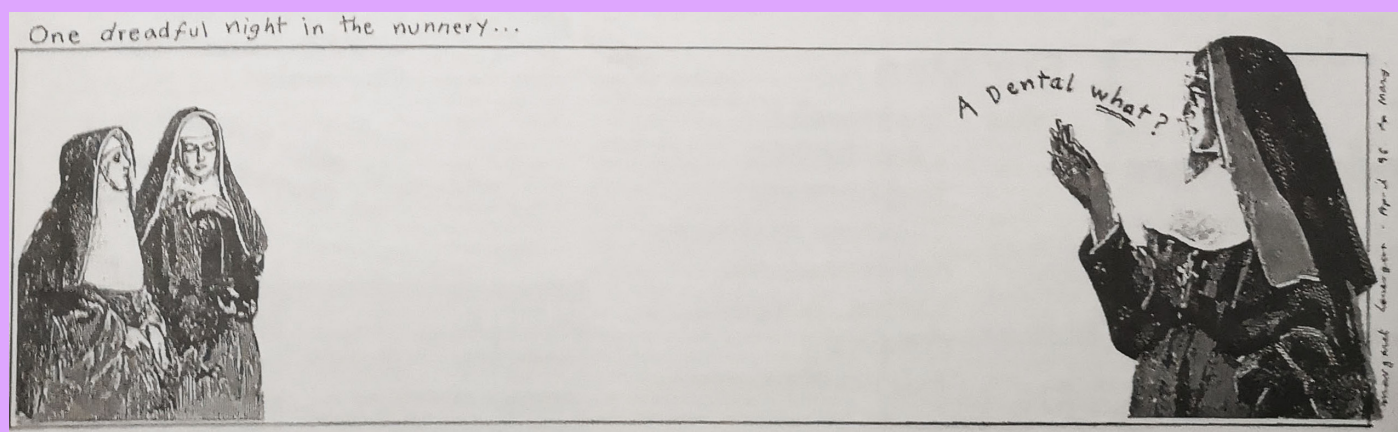


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Project Arts Centre, Dublin

Lesbian Nuns on the Late Late, 1985



One dreadful night in the nunnery by Margaret Lonergan. GCN, issue 73, May 1995
Courtesy of GCN magazine

Friday 13th September 1985 saw two milestones in Irish television broadcasting. The first was the scheduling change of the popular RTÉ chat show, the *Late Late Show* from a Saturday to a Friday night, perhaps a controversial change for some but not one which could match the controversy surrounding two of the guests that appeared on the show that night.

Two former American nuns, Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan had come to Ireland to promote their book, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. The book was a series of accounts from former and indeed, some still practising nuns. According to Suzy Byrne's recollection in her article *It All Happened...* from issue 77 of GCN magazine, September 1995, their appearance on the show prompted outrage. From petitions to protest vigils and even death threats made towards the show's presenter Gay Byrne, Christian lobbying groups came out in force. One complainant applied for an injunction to the high court which was overruled as RTÉ had not confirmed that the nuns would be appearing on the show. In another attempt to thwart the women's publicity tour, customs seized up to 1,500 copies of the book, claiming that it was obscene. The decision was later reversed and the copies were released.

In the aftermath of the interview, the general public appeared to have received the women favourably, as Carol Lannigan recounts in her article "*I was a Lesbian Nuns' Bodyguard*" (GCN, issue 77, September 1995). Throughout their stay in Dublin that weekend, they were approached by many for photographs, autographs and words of support. The book garnered mixed reviews but is commonly acknowledged to have had a positive impact on the acceptance of the lesbian community internationally. For the *Late Late Show*, however, it was another 8 years before they attempted to tackle the issue of lesbianism again.

It all happened . . .

Ten years ago this month, Ireland was rivetted by the lesbian nuns who appeared on the Late Late Show
Suzy Byrne recalls the drama

Do you remember where you were on Friday September 13, 1985? It was two days before my 15th birthday, I had just received my Inter results and I was at home getting ready to watch the *Late Late Show*, when my mother said, "We're not watching it tonight, it's not suitable". My mother didn't know then that I was a budding dyke, I wasn't even sure, but I did know that there was to be fireworks on the telly that night because for the previous week there had been nothing but the word 'lesbian' splashed across the Irish print media. Apart from being the first time that the *Late Late Show* was broadcast on a Friday night, it was also the night the phenomenon of the lesbian nun was to become a part of Irish broadcasting folklore.

Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan were to appear on the first *Late Late Show* of the season. Both from the USA, they were in Ireland to promote their book, *Breaking Silence*, which was originally published by a small Florida feminist press and later published in the UK and Ireland. *Breaking Silence* was a book detailing the experiences of lesbian nuns, some still behind the convent walls and others who had left. The women who had edited the book were both ex-nuns, and their trip to Dublin was originally intended to be a part of a promotion tour just like any other. What actually happened was a major shock to

group of hacks stood around waiting to find out where the press conference would actually take place. Meanwhile, RTE were refusing to confirm if the women were actually booked to appear on the *Late Late Show*.

Ward River Press had ordered 1,500 copies of the book to be shipped to the country in anticipation of increased sales. Customs officials seized these copies, alleging that they were obscene; this decision was reversed by officials in the Revenue Commissioner's office after a multitude of protests. It was also apparent that two weeks previously, 3,000 copies of the book had entered the country without any problem.

As the *Late Late Show* appearance drew nearer, the Christian fundamentalist lobby went into overdrive, with pickets and petitions and even an attempt to obtain an injunction from the High Court to stop transmission of the show. TCG O'Mahoney, Director of the Christian Communications Centre, told the High Court in an affidavit that if the women appeared on the show, RTE would be contravening Article 40 (6) 1 of the constitution.

This article states that organs of public opinion, while preserving their rightful liberty of expression, including the right to criticise the government, shall not be used to undermine public order or the morality or authority of the State.

show, and for churches to remain open during the show so that people could pray.

As for RTE's switchboard, well, it was fully lit for days. Gems from concerned parents included the

barbed with thousands of letters, many of them chain letter type operations organised by 'family values groups'. Connolly adds that after the interview was actually broadcast "the office got many letters from

out in the cold was Mrs Ann McInerney, (mother of five and wife of noted builder Ambrose McInerney); she proudly told anyone who would listen that she was educated by the Loretto Nuns in Kilkenny and the Friends of the Child of Jesus in Bruff. The interview with the "self confessed lesbians would offend the morals of the majority. I don't think that RTE should advertise and promote vice", she added.

On the show itself, which began at 9.20pm, the interview with the women did not take place until 11pm, with Gay Byrne giving a warning before the item that anyone who was sensitive or easily offended should switch off. Invited to appear on the show with the authors were Fr Raphael Gallagher, well-known for his work with lesbians and gay men, and Sr Maura Clune, a specialist in the field of ecumenics. Sister Clune told Gay Byrne on the show that she was amazed by the furore caused by the book. "It's almost as if the Irish people imagine that when people join a convent they leave their sexuality behind, when in fact they have to being their humanness with them", she added. Fr Gallagher said that the book had saddened but not shocked him and said that there was a need to reach out to the contributors.

After the show the women went home and everything seemed to return to normal. The book sold well even though it was trashed by many reviewers and it was 1993 before the *Late Late Show* broached the subject of lesbianism again. Little since has been heard of Curb and Manahan, who obviously just got on with their lives and got over the shock of being the talk of Ireland for a week.

Protests outside RTE
HOTEL REFUSES
Threats to
Gay over
lesbians
ROOM
TO NUNS
A "degradation"
'GET OUT'
NUNS
Seizure of book on
Lesbian nuns
Late Late 'op
'nuns' stc
attack

comment of Mrs Catriona Donnelly who said "Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act won't allow some of our own people to be interviewed on radio or television. Yet they allow air space to highlight filth and corruption." A boycott of products advertised during the transmission of the programme was called for by the Catholic Viewers and Listeners Association. "Shops which sell books which are offensive to Catholics should also be boycotted", declared an advertisement placed in morning newspapers.

What of Uncle Gaybo? I hear you cry. Well, he described the whole incident as "a bit of bother from the rent-a-ranters", this after being under Garda protection for days after death threats were made against him and his family. Adrian Cronin, then producer of the show, denied that the interview was a stunt to increase viewing figures. Well, it certainly did that, with a TAM (viewing) rating of 76, the highest ever for a programme in the last five years, the papal visit in 1979 being the highest previous Tam Topper. It is obvious that the churches must have been all locked up that Friday night, and those who could not find anywhere to pray decided to watch the 'perversion' instead.

Maura Connolly, special assistant on the show then and now, recalls that they were all surprised that the information about the appearance of the women on the show was leaked; usually information about guests on the show is kept highly confidential. After the leak the office was bom-

viewers, including nuns, who said that they had enjoyed the interview and were sympathetic towards both Curb and Manahan."

As the women were driven into RTE, they were greeted by over 80 protesters who were engaged in an orgy of hymn singing and rosary reciting. Statues of the Blessed Virgin were attached to roof racks and a Fianna Fáil TD was prominent in leading the proceedings. Local residents called the Gardaí to complain about the noise coming over the loudhailers and that it was distracting them from their evening's viewing. One of the henchwomen

What it said in the papers

"You'll get Aids from talking to those bitches."
Caller to Late Late Show Office

"It will have a terrible effect on vocations."
Mrs Elisabeth O'Hanlon, protester.

"These women are a minority group of American nuns and therefore have no real relevance in our lives here at this time ... I'm sure that there are people in the country at this moment who are convinced that our convents are just there for housing frustrated lesbians."
Mrs A O'Donnell in a letter to IT magazine.

"The nuns will probably read the book, put it down and say nothing. Sexuality just doesn't exist in an

Irish convent."
Sister Benvenuta, leader of the Dominican Order at Sion Hill

It must be clear to everyone that this evil practice undermines society because if carried to its ultimate end it would wipe out society altogether; worse than any form of artificial birth control - the killer without a gun ... furthermore, it is not right that afflicted persons should be put on stage for the morbid viewing and 'entertainment' of others.

Gerard O Plunkett in a letter to the Irish Independent

If every lesbian in Dublin were to stop work many schools and hospitals would have to close down
Rosemary Curb at the launch of the book



Nancy Manahan & Rosemary Curb from the cover of *Breaking Silence*

both those in the broadcasting industry and those in the lesbian community.

Upon their arrival, Curb and Manahan were refused accommodation they had booked in Buswell's Hotel; they were also refused a room to hold a press conference in. The then owner of the hotel, Noel Duff, told the *Irish Independent* that his children were being educated by nuns and that he had "too high a regard for them. I don't want the book to be published and I don't want any part of this." Jury's Hotel later gave rooms to the women without ceremony. A journalist at the time remembers the buzz as a large

The proposed interview was glamorising sin according to Mr O'Mahoney, the sin notorious in Sodom and Gomorrah, and it was absolutely contrary to Article 40 (6) 1 of the constitution.

Mr Justice Barr told Mr O'Mahoney that RTE had in the past interviewed leading homosexuals and that in a democratic society within reasonable limits people are entitled to express their views. As RTE had not confirmed that the interview would take place, an injunction could not be granted.

Down but not defeated, O'Mahoney then called for a picket to be placed on RTE during the

It all happened... by Suzy Byrne. GCN, issue 77, September 1995
Courtesy of GCN magazine

“I was a Lesbian Nuns’ Bodyguard”

Carol Lannigan remembers the nuns

No, the lesbian nuns didn't go home after the show, they spent the weekend in Ireland and I was a Lesbian Nuns Bodyguard! I hardly saw the *Late Late Show*, as I went between RTE's hospitality suite and the clusters of protesters outside Montrose. Interrupting the hymn-singing, I asked one woman what exactly was troubling her. "It's terrible, there are seventeen year-old boys being led astray in the Hirschfeld Centre". "What about seventeen year-old girls?" I asked helpfully. "You!" she roared, above the strains of *Hail, Glorious Queen*, "You should know all about that!" Ah yes, those were the days ...

The following day I was scheduled to escort Rosemary and Nancy around town. As I entered Jury's to meet them, it dawned on me that I was now walking round with a beacon on my head screaming 'LESBIAN!' I wondered would I need to call on my martial arts skills and briefly considered the purchase of blonde wig and sunglasses. As we passed a coffee shop in Baggot Street I heard rapid footsteps behind us. A woman came up: "I saw yez, and I ..." Goddess, only 9.30 am and the first assault has started already. "... and I just wanted to say you were brilliant! Are you one, too? Fair play!"

September 14, 1985, and it was céad míle fáilte all the way for the

lesbian nuns. Folks dived out of bookshops demanding autographs, photographs and kisses. Shop assistants muttered their approval. In the *Bailey* a couple sent over pints and offered to bring the nuns sight-seeing to Wicklow. Not one negative comment all day! The only bum note was the persistent efforts of the media to discover – and publicise – the location of the women-only meeting with the nuns on the Sunday night.

Offers of hospitality continued to pour in, a guest house owner in Rathgar offered supper to the women and friends prior to the meeting at the Hirschfeld, and on the Sunday a lesbian cavalcade took to the Wicklow hills. At Glendalough, very appropriately, we encountered an outing of nuns. Little flickers of recognition developed into smiles and the sisters expressed interest in the book but believed that Reverend Mother wouldn't approve the purchase. None of us had a copy so we were unable to oblige, but the disparate sororities parted with encouraging words.

The papers had discovered and published the location and time of the women-only meeting at the Hirschfeld and I fully expected to see picketing statues parading up and down Fownes Street – it was, after all, the summer of the moving

statues, which had featured on the same *Late Late* – but no protesters turned up. More than 100 women packed into the Hirsch to hear the women speak. I can't recall the substance of the discussion but I do remember the intensity of feeling and positive political energy of that gathering.

Nancy and Rosemary left Ireland the next day but have returned on subsequent private visits and maintained links with women they met on that memorable first visit.

Lesbian Line Changes

Dublin Lesbian Line is moving premises from the National Council for Women in Ireland (formerly the Council for the Status of Women) to Carmichael House on North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7 in September. The council has provided a home for the line for a number of years and we would like them to know how much it has been appreciated.

Unfortunately, changing our premises means changing our telephone number. The new number will be active starting Thursday, September 21. As of now, Telecom has not given us the new number. If you ring the old number after September 18, you will get a recording with the new number. We look forward to hearing from you.

“I was a Lesbian Nuns’ Bodyguard” by Carol Lannigan. GCN, issue 77, September 1995
Courtesy of GCN magazine