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# Antinous in Minnesota

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CHARLES GREEN

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## The Troubleseeker

by Alan Lessik

Chelsea Station Editions. 268 pages, \$18.

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**T**HIS STUNNINGLY CREATIVE NOVEL combines history and mythology from several cultures to tell the story of Antinio, a gay Cuban man, as he searches for freedom and love in the face of oppression and disease. It is narrated by Hadrian, the brilliant emperor of ancient Roman whose male lover Antinous died by drowning at age nineteen, whereupon Hadrian made him a god and had statues of Antinous erected all over the Empire. Hadrian, now a disembodied demi-god with limited supernatural powers, takes an interest in Antinio, actively saving his life on several occasions. He also meets with several of the Greek gods and with the *orishas* of the Santería faith—who migrated to Cuba from Africa during the slave trade—learning about their role in human affairs. It is an unusual blend, but holds together throughout to tell a compelling story. There is a helpful character guide at the beginning.

Antinio's story begins in childhood, under the Castro regime. Skilled in languages, after an eventful stint in the military, he works as a translator in the Ministry of Culture, assisting visiting artists and performers. This job also helps him to meet many like-minded men, and he has a few passionate affairs. Unfortunately, due to Cuba's macho culture and the leadership's repressive stance on homosexuality, he must keep his feelings and relationships a secret, even from his family. This leads to powerful feelings of guilt and shame, enough to create a chorus of Lamenters, Shriekers, and a Siren, which torment him throughout his life. He also has a brief relationship with a woman, which leads to children; his relationship with them will come to haunt him.

After a botched attempt to escape to East Germany, Antinio finds another opportunity when the Cuban government allows homosexuals and other undesirables to leave via the Mariel Boatlift. This makes for an unusual scene, when Antinio, who has always presented himself as a "macho" type, must now adopt the stereotype of the effeminate gay man to the authorities to convince them that he's gay. He arrives in the U.S., ending up in Minnesota, where he struggles to adjust to an unfamiliar climate and culture. He begins to find community, work, and lovers, but he's hit hard by the AIDS crisis. Despite Hadrian's power, he cannot save Antinio. But he can tell his story.

A love of language infuses the novel. The characters' names are mostly derived from Greek mythology and language. Antinio's wife is Circe and his sons are named Icario and Polideuces. His best friend is Erato, the muse of love and erotic poetry. A bully is named Apolion, from the word for destroyer. Even the novel's title, according to Hadrian, comes from a translation of the hero Odysseus' name, which literally means "to be grieved

at." (The actual etymology of Odysseus is uncertain.) As a young man Antinio falls in love with the constructed international language Esperanto, and his job in the U.S. involves creating a computer program that can translate any language. Spanish is also scattered throughout the novel.

The gods and *orishas* play an unusual, sometimes troubling role in the story, helping to influence human affairs while generally staying away from individual people. Babalu Aye, responsible for disease and healing, is the creator of HIV, although he takes no responsibility for its effects. This reader could not help but remember certain religious figures who declared AIDS to be God's punishment for homosexuality. Not that the novel is suggesting that, but it's an uncomfortable association nonetheless. That said, with its accessible writing, a compelling central character, and a fascinating blend of languages and cultures, *The Troubleseeker* is a powerful first novel.

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# Whither Women's Spaces?

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ELIZABETH CATANESE

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## The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture

by Bonnie J. Morris

SUNY. 256 pages, \$22.95

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**I**N *THE DISAPPEARING L*, Bonnie J. Morris writes about a current cultural reality: the potential extinction of lesbian spaces that threatens to take 20th-century radical feminist history down with it. She asks the question: "How do we apply scholarly standards to radical history?" And her book can be read as a model for how to do just that. Morris weaves an artful quilt of scholarly research, primary source material, and personal anecdotes in an effort to preserve the history of quickly vanishing, uniquely lesbian-identified spaces.

In her introduction, Morris writes: "We are witnessing the almost flippant dismissal of recent, late 20th-century lesbian culture, particularly the loss of physical sites such as women's bookstores and women's music festivals and their material legacies (books, journals, albums, tapes, magazine interviews with artists)." *The Disappearing L* is itself a piece of material culture, created to preserve late 20th-century lesbian history while marking the ever-broadening circumference of its erasure.

Morris' passion is the women's (or "womyn's") music scene of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, and I found the chapters on this topic the most compelling. At the outset, she describes her thirty-year effort to record information and collect material from lesbian musicians, employees, and participants at these events. She writes fondly of her days as a young lesbian at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, where she took copious notes and felt an extraordinary camaraderie and acceptance. She includes excerpts from her journal documenting these experiences, which reveal a young voice that is beautiful and energetic.