


tic arrangement. This began to stifle Highsmith's creative juices. In her diary she wrote: "One day I shall take you by the throat and tear the windpipe and arteries out, though I go to hell for it." Bradford asserts that Highsmith would channel these murderous thoughts into the characters and plots of her novels.

Her longest relationship was with an unnamed married woman, an affair that lasted twelve years. Bradford calls her Caroline. Caroline's husband knew about the nature of his wife's relationship with Highsmith and was willing to accommodate it, which seems to have made it *less* satisfying for Highsmith, planting the seeds for its ruin.

Bradford uses these and other affairs and surrounding events, either real or imagined, along with Highsmith's notebooks and

diaries to show how she channeled all the unbalanced characteristics of herself into her novels and characters. Take Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* or Tom Ripley, loaded as they are with fantasies of murder, stalking, violence, and switched identities. These connections make up the majority of *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires*, which includes detailed summaries of Highsmith's novels with assertions on how they relate back to her relationships. The problem here, of course, is that these associations are based on assumptions that may or may not be correct, a problem that's compounded by Highsmith's mixing of fact and fiction in her diaries. We are left to our devices to decide if there's anything to admire about Highsmith other than the impressive, and genuinely disturbing, body of work she left behind. 

A YA Novel that Gave Girls Ideas

BEST KNOWN for her novel *Harriet the Spy* (1964), Louise Fitzhugh (1928–1974) was a lesbian writer who worked at a time when LGBT people were stereotyped as criminals and corrupters of youth. For this reason, she had to maintain a low profile to get her work published, especially because she wrote novels for children and young adults.

A new biography by Leslie Brody, *Sometimes You Have to Lie*, is an exploration of Fitzhugh's life in its social and historical context. One of Brody's projects is to reveal the central conflicts in the life and fiction of her subject, who struggled with truth and falsehood, coming out versus staying in the closet, committing to work versus relationships, and other either/or dualities that arose in the course of her short life.

Born in Memphis in 1928, her family was wealthy and eccentric. She had an uncle who lived in his parent's attic and whose primary occupation appeared to be spending time with paper dolls. Her father, Millsaps Fitzhugh, was a lawyer, and her mother, Mary Louise Perkins, was a former ballet teacher. They went through a horrible divorce in which her father retained custody of Louise, who was told that her mother had died. Years later, she discovered that this was a lie and that her mother was very much alive. This discovery formed the psychological backdrop for her relentless pursuit of truth, whatever the cost.

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Louise was pressured to become a proper "Southern belle" who would find an eligible young man of similar social status to marry. Louise tried fitting in but discovered early on that she was attracted to women. Since this was happening in the Jim Crow South of the 1940s, one can imagine the challenges for a nonconforming woman who refused to abide by accepted feminine roles and rules.

She left home and attended Bard College in upstate New

IRENE JAVORS

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO LIE
The Life and Times of
Louise Fitzhugh, Renegade
Author of *Harriet the Spy*

by Leslie Brody

Seal Press. 335 pages, \$30.

York, and also took lessons at the Art Students League in New York City, as she aspired to be a painter. While at Bard, she studied writing with the gay poet James Merrill, with whom she remained lifelong friends. In the City she found her way to Greenwich Village, where she attended gatherings with other lesbian artists and writers, including the pulp fiction writer, Marijane Meaker (aka M. E. Kerr, among other pennames), photographer Gina Jack-

son, and playwright Lorraine Hansberry. In 1961, she collaborated with Sandra Scoppettone on the story *Suzuki Beane*, a spoof of the children's book *Eloise*. During this time, she came into her own, went to gay bars, and swore off dresses, instead donning trousers and her signature cape.

Brody discusses the creative conflicts and difficulties that Fitzhugh encountered throughout her career. She wanted to be recognized as a painter, but did not find validation in this pursuit. This was a time when male artists were center stage and there was little room for women, much less lesbian, artists. She did not take her writing as seriously as her art and was conflicted, at times quite lost, about her creative work. She suffered from bouts of depression and resorted to drugs and drinking.

After many fits and starts, she managed to write the children's novel, *Harriet the Spy* (1964). The story revolves around Harriet, eleven years old, who lives in Manhattan's Upper East Side and aspires to be a writer. She's encouraged in her efforts by her nanny, "Ole Golly." Harriet has a notebook in which she writes her perceptions of people and places in her neighborhood. She avoids doing "girlie things," wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and carrying a flashlight and sneakers. She has two friends who are also nonconforming: Janie wants to be a scientist, and Sport takes care of his writer father and wants to be a CPA.

Harriet gets into trouble when the other kids, including her friends Janie and Sport, get hold of her notebook and read what she wrote about them. She loses her friends and is horribly bullied, and doesn't understand what all the fury is about, as she was only speaking her truth. She becomes increasingly with-

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drawn. Her former nanny (Ole Golly) is summoned and offers this bit of advice: "Sometimes you have to lie." In time, Harriet makes amends, wins back her friends, and becomes editor of the class paper.

In many ways *Harriet The Spy* is reminiscent of other coming-of-age stories of the postwar era that deal with young people confronting the hypocrisy of the adult world. Examples would include Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye* (1951), Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Holden Caulfield, Frankie, and Scout are all attempting to discover where they belong in this world, and to understand what's lost when they succumb to its demands. Similarly, Harriet's life lesson is about how much truth can be told before one is exiled from the group. She's finding her way through this complicated challenge: how to remain true to herself while in harmony with others. The wisdom of Ole Golly was recognized long ago by Emily Dickin-




Louise Fitzhugh, ca. 1960.
Image via Twayne United Authors Series.

son (in Poem #1129): "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant."

In *Harriet the Spy*, Fitzhugh brilliantly portrayed the struggle we all face concerning maintaining our individuality while wanting to belong to a group. For Fitzhugh, this struggle played out within the context of truth and lies. Given her family's aversion to the truth, she learned early on to tread carefully with what is revealed and what is hidden. All this was compounded by her position as a woman and a lesbian during the repressive pre-feminist, pre-Stonewall years.

Brody has written a fascinating and insightful biography of a complex and fascinating personality who has inspired many living writers, including Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*). *Harriet the Spy* ranks #12 on the Fifty Best Children's Books list. A film

adaptation was made in 1996 and a TV version in 2010, and Apple TV is planning an animated version with Jane Lynch as Ole Golly. 

'You Are HERE'

IN THE WORLD according to Brontez Purnell, guys throw down half a handle of whiskey before ten in the morning, can't remember the last time they had fun having sex, and find the task of having to respond to stimuli to be "exhausting." It's a world of "jaded, judgmental borderline misanthropes" who end up fucking in "shit-scented public restrooms."

In the world according to Brontez Purnell, most guys are whores.

The narrator of these mostly first-person stories is an educated, slightly overweight Black man—an "uppity Black faggot"—with an affinity for, to put it delicately, undomesticated sex. More often than not, he just wants to "get fucked good." Excess is one of the dominant themes here—too many drugs (cocaine, THC, Percocet, benzos, acid, Xanax, "speed-laced bullshit from little baggies") chased down with "limitless fountains of vodka" and gallons of antibiotics. "Sober fun," the narrator says, "was damn near an oxymoron."

100 Boyfriends is the fourth book by Purnell, who is also a musician, dancer, filmmaker, and performance artist. Indeed, the book is as much a loud, hard-core performance piece as it is a collection of stories: part rant, part stand-up comic routine, part gross-out shtick, part bravura Gen-X aria.

The sexual relationships that Purnell catalogues are flam-

PHILIP GAMBONE

100 BOYFRIENDS

by Brontez Purnell
Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
180 pages, \$15.

boyantly, and often hilariously, detailed. In addition to garden variety hookups, he describes bathroom sex, "nasty whore sex," sex with a Satanist ("he had a box of condoms with inverted-pentagram insignia on them"), sex on the sidewalk, sex with a hooker, office sex, trash-and-burn style sex ("no guilt, no morals, no new boyfriends"). "The act in and of itself," he writes, "the

fucking part, quite honestly there are days where it can't be over fast enough. Like, you just want to cum already to say you did it." These disposable boyfriends are "like pieces of bubblegum you chew hours after the flavor leaves and that you accidentally swallow."

Purnell, a 2018 recipient of the Whiting Award for Fiction, was named one of the 32 Black Male Writers of Our Time by *The New York Times Magazine*. And, yes, he can write! He is a master of a variety of prose registers: sassy, lyrical, angry, raunchy, tender. And uproariously funny. Of one sexual encounter, he writes: "I had never witnessed a person's fake orgasm taking so much out of them." About another hookup with a self-absorbed guy, he asks: "Must I always have to bear witness to his soliloquy of love for dick?" About a third, Boyfriend #77, he says: "Sooner rather than later I was knocking back shots of him like a fucking prizefighter."

One of the many delights of *100 Boyfriends* is Purnell's ability to capture a character in a single sentence: "The man hadn't changed his make-out music since the nineties—it was all Cibo Matto tapes and other artifacts from his old hipsterdom that he carried around like duffel bags." In another story, he can't imag-

Philip Gambone, a frequent contributor to these pages, is the author of the recently published As Far As I Can Tell: Finding My Father in World War II (Rattling Good Yarns Press).