

Karen X. Tulchinsky is something of a Renaissance woman in the literary world. Equally adept at crafting dramatic television moments (a heroic rescue on Global TV's *The Guard*) as she is at capturing naughty ones (she was also a story editor on *Kink*), Tulchinsky has carved a remarkable career that defies the boundaries of genres, mediums, and conventionality.

And, after editing a number of anthologies, publishing two books of gay fiction, and spending years as a role model in the queer community, Tulchinsky is finally achieving mainstream success with her thoughtful and heart-breaking novel, *The Five Books of Moses Lipinsky*, which has recently been awarded the Vancouver Public Library's *One Book One Vancouver 2008* prize. She's already written the screenplay adaptation to the father/son story, and is now working on her next novel, *The Shoemaker's Daughter*.

Tulchinsky and I sat down over wine and gin martinis to talk about the role judgment has played in her career, the nasty critics versus the nice ones, and why elderly Jewish woman just wish she'd grow out her hair.

AW: When I was selecting the material for this issue, I noticed a common theme—everything was about people's judgments of other people, and it got me thinking about why we judge. Do you feel you've ever been on the receiving end of judgment?

KXT: Of course. I would say both as a very obvious dyke I've probably been on the receiving end of judgment quite often. I tend these days to try not to take it on. There have been times when it's disturbed me terribly and I have taken it on, and it's upset me, but I guess I've learned to try not do that because we can't really stop other people from being judgmental. If I can just let it go, it's probably easier for me. And, to be honest, it's getting better all the time. And I try to stay out of rural environments where it's worse. (Laughs)

AW: So that's purely on the level of sexuality. As a woman and a woman in writing, have you been on the receiving end of judgment?

KXT: That's an interesting question. I never really think of it that way. Judgment...you mean like people judging me negatively?

AW: Even judging you positively. There's always an evaluation going on.

KXT: Yeah, I guess when you say judgment, I think about the negative connotations right away. I've really only had about one or two bad reviews, ever. And those are usually by people who are frustrated writers. Generally I've gotten positive responses to my writing. I guess it's a hard thing with family to get them to understand. Like, my parents—they would have preferred if I had a "real" job. Or, if I'd gone to law school or something like that. When I first started getting published, instead of gushing and being happy and understanding how difficult it is to get fiction published, they would say "how much are you getting paid?" and quite often it was very little, and I would have to educate them that it's very difficult to get published, especially when you're starting out and this is

actually a good thing. So, I've had some negative judgment from my family. It's just that word, judgment...

AW: It's a weird word, isn't it? I guess how it sprung up to me was that I was reading all of these stories where a lot of main characters were really critically evaluating their surroundings and the people in their lives. And, what struck me the most was these people who seemed to be really critical were just really lonely, in a very profound way.

KXT: That's probably true. I mean, the happier you are, the less you have to judge others, right?

AW: I myself probably judge people even if I don't mean to. Do you find little judgments creeping up on yourself?

KXT: I suppose...well, yeah, sure. I mean, I'm a terrible snob about the suburbs for example. I'm very judgmental of people who drive Hummers, or Ford Explorers, or big pick-up trucks that are clean. Like if someone's obviously a landscaper or a carpenter and they need a truck, but if someone has a briefcase in the back of their pick-up truck, I feel judgment about that. Or Republicans. Or people who are racist or homophobic.

AW: Those are situations that are very hot button and hard to not have some judgment around.

KXT: Yeah. And George W. Bush and just about everything he's done. Steven Harper as well. So, yeah, I guess I'm judgmental.

AW: To go back to what you said before about the negative criticisms you've had about your work being from frustrated writers, I think every writer has moments of pure frustration or writers who set them off a little bit. Sometimes I read something and I wonder how is it that readers love this writer's work?

KXT: Well, I've done a lot of editing, and I don't know if I'd use the word judgment so much as constructively critical. For sure if I read a book and I can see where it needed one more re-write, for example, I might notice that.

AW: Are there some writers in particular you identify with and really enjoy?

KXT: Identify with, hmm. That's the hardest question ever. I don't have enough time to read, for one thing. There are a lot of writers' whose work I enjoy. Marge Pearson's one of my heroes for sure. Sara Shullman. This is the question that stumps me the most. I'm working on a television show right now and I have no time to read.

AW: And, you've been branching out so much. How are you juggling those different sides of your writing brain?

KXT: It's fun to have different mediums. I'm certainly learning to be sparer in my writing from working in television and screenwriting, because you have to pare everything down much smaller than you can in a novel. So it's teaching me a lot about dialogue, action, and being succinct. Novel writing, the joy of that is you're totally in charge and just do what you want, and you can be very verbose. And, when you work in television and film it's a very collaborative experience and a lot of what you write is ruled by budget. For example, in a novel you can have an elephant fall through a ceiling anytime you want. You can have war scenes. In Canadian television and film, the budget is so low you can't even have more than three people in a room at one time. And, when you work in television and film, there are a lot of peoples' points of views that have to be put into it, and a lot of them are not particularly writers or creative—they're producers. But they still get their voice heard, and they may not have the right answer, but you still have to listen to them.

AW: Going back a little bit—you talked a little bit about being judged on sexuality. You have a pretty high profile in the lesbian and gay community, but you've branched out with this book (*The Five Books of Moses Lipinsky*) that has exploded with mainstream audiences. What has that experience been like?

KXT: Remarkably different. My first two novels were set in the gay community and the Jewish community and they were seen as 'gay' books, I guess, and they certainly have much more of an audience within the queer community. *Five Books* has two gay characters, but it's pretty much a mainstream book and has quite a different audience. I've done a ton of readings in senior citizen's homes for example, which has been kind of fun. And, I've always intended to write this book, it's been brewing for a long time. The original seeds of the book are stories from my grandfather, so it's also a very personal story. And, I guess the two gay characters kind of creped in, I didn't mean for them to be there, actually.

And, it's interesting: one of the criticisms I got for the book was from a feminist magazine. I was criticized for not having many female characters in the book, and fair enough, but it's a father son story. My grandfather was a Jewish Russian immigrant who landed in Toronto and raised a family, and when I started creating the fictional family, I thought they'd have two sons and two daughters, but there's something organic that happens when you start to write, but when I started to figure out who this family was, they just had four sons. And there's some personal stuff—some of the feelings in it are my relationship with my father, so the characters are actually boys, but a lot of them are infused with my experience. And I was trying to be true to the times, so the women are as strong as possible, but it's the 1930s and 40s.

AW: It's impossible to please everyone.

KXT: I'll tell you a funny story. I did a reading a very large Jewish seniors' home in Toronto, and my mother actually came with me. Afterwards we were invited to join them for tea and cookies, and I sat at this table with a bunch of women and two men, and the men were really cool with me, joking around, but there were a couple of women at the

table who were very disturbed by my butch appearance, I guess, and one of them said “why is your hair so short? You have such a pretty face!” And then the woman beside her said, “Why are you wearing a man’s shirt?” (Laughs)

AW: Maybe I’m wrong, but moments like that feel like they’re just trying to understand.

KXT: And, I don’t think they understood that I’m a lesbian. I think they just thought I had a bad haircut and was wearing my brother’s clothes or something.

AW: Do you have any projects on the horizon?

KXT: Yes, I have a screenplay of *Moses Lipinsky* and I’m out there shopping it around to producers, and I’m also working on another novel. The feminists who were mad at me for writing a father/son story will be happy, because it’s a sister story. It starts in 1941 and it’s called *The Shoemaker’s Daughter* and is set in a small town in Russia. The Nazis have just marched in and two Jewish girls who are teenagers witness their entire family being murdered by the Nazis, and they escape and end up joining the Russian Resistance Movement as partisan fighters, doing small acts of sabotage like blowing up train tracks and things like that. So these two girls end up surviving the war in this way, only to be separated at the end for 30 years.