Fried Green Tomatoes
Excuse me, did we see the same movie?

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In a culture that tends to line up for movies starring muscle bound men named Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, FRIED GREEN TOMATOES has turned out to be the little movie that could. The movie grossed $25.4 million by its second month of release, not had for a film that cost $11 million to produce (Fox). Critics have praised FRIED GREEN TOMATOES' sepia colored depiction of life in the rural south, and surprisingly in a town that favors babes, bangs and blood, the film copped an award from the Writer's Guild for best screenplay based on material from another medium (Weinraub C21).

Based on Fanny Flagg's novel Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe the film is a story within a story of Southern female friendship and love. The movie opens when Evelyn Couch, an unhappy housewife, meets tip with Ninny Threadgoode, a resident of a nursing home. Ninny begins telling the story of Idgie and Ruth, two Depression-era women who love each other, raise a child together, befriend African Americans and run the Whistle Stop Cafe. Not your typical blockbuster.

But the film managed to attract mainstream audiences despite the absence of testosterone-driven action. The National Review's movie critic called FRIED GREEN TOMATOES "a modest American film that can be enjoyed by adults and children, natives and foreigners, feminists and male chauvinists, Southerners and even Yankees who never so much as saw let alone ate, less than a rubicund tomato" (45).

Ironically, for someone who sees the world in terms of black and white, the reviewer left out two fairly conspicuous pairs — African Americans and whites, and straights and gays. Maybe that's because rather than dealing with race and relationships honestly, the film attempts to appeal to whites' attitudes about blacks and to straight peoples' attitudes about same sex partnerships.

As for the racial issue, Flagg said when she adapted the book for film, she intended to show a "different side of the South, because most literature and film about the South are either about poor white trash or faded Southern aristocracy" (Keough E3).

Obviously, she was only interested in correcting the negative stereotypes of whites, for the film carries out Hollywood's tradition of depicting blacks as good Negroes, loyal, devoted and harmless (Roffman and Simpson 15).

Correcting the erroneous stereotypes of Southerners wasn't Flagg's only intention though; she also planned to show the affection that existed between blacks and whites. "People don't realize how much love there was — and still is between the races," she added, remembering her grandmother's stories about how blacks and whites pulled together during the Depression (Clendenin 14). But the film fails at this attempt as well. The Black perspective of these friendships is missing, although not surprisingly so. As William Alexander Percy, a Mississippi planter, wrote in his 1941 autobiography, Lanterns on the Levee,
It is true in the South that whites and blacks live side by side, exchange affection liberally, and believe they have an innate and miraculous understanding of one another. But the sober fact is we understand one another not at all” (Goldfield 4).

What Percy is describing is the result of racial etiquette that produced a “stage Negro [which] inured whites to the suffering of Southern Blacks” (4).

Although whites were able to express their familiarity with Blacks, Blacks were required to refer to Whites as “sir” or “maam,” positioning themselves in a humble manner that "would make a white comfortable in believing that this deferential mien was not only right, but the way things ought to be” (3).

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES recreates this comfort zone. Blacks are deferential to whites, but we never find out the reasons why. The two main African American characters, Big George and Sipsey, are clearly devoted to Idgie, their boss — Big George to doglike proportions. As Ninny says, “He watched over [Idgie] night and day.” At first it seems as though he is mute; in several scenes, he stands passively waiting for Idgie. It's not until she's grown and running the Cafe that he finally speaks. When Idgie is challenged by a Klan member for serving Blacks outside her restaurant, Big George utters his first words, “You gonna get yourself in a whole heap of trouble.” We never learn how this threat affects him; we never learn how he feels about barbecuing all those ribs his friends and family can't even go inside to eat; his only concern is what will happen to Idgie.

Sipsey's response to this same incident is to smile and say, “Grady won't sit next to a colored child, but he eats eggs that shoot out of a chicken's ass.” As with Big George, we never know how Sipsey feels about frying all those eggs for someone she knows is racist. The film would have us believe she thinks it's funny.

Later, when the Klan captures Big George and beats him brutally with a whip, he gets his second line in the movie. Idgie runs to his aid and Big George mumbles, “Don't, Miss Idgie. You gon get yourself in a whole heap of trouble.” One gets the feeling that either Big George suffers from echolalia, or he exists, as Ninny said, purely to watch over Idgie.

Sipsey does her share of watching over this family too; in fact, she is the true heroine of this film. She risks her life to save Ruth's baby from the evil ex-husband, Frank Bennett, when he comes to kidnap the child. Then, in spite of being injured, she manages to kill him. But for all her heroism, the next time we see her in the restaurant, she is shuffling across the floor in loose shoes, a grin on her face, obviously happy to be at the service of these white folks.

Surely, Blacks did behave this way in the 1930s. As African American author Ernest J. Games wrote, "We had all done the same thing sometime or another; we had all seen our brother, sister, mama, daddy insulted once and didn't do a thing about it" (4).

However, confusing this sort of behavior with "real affection" as do the producers of FRIED GREEN TOMATOES, is to deny the horrors of being Black in the South during this period. From 1889 to 1930 there were 3,798 reported lynchings in the United States, most of which occurred in the South (Commission on Interracial Cooperation 7). Even though white individuals may have had great affection for their black employees, the atmosphere was not conducive to genuine reciprocity. As Richard Wright wrote in Black Boy,

"The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly...Indeed the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew” (7).

By denying the complexity of Black-White relationships, the producers of FRIED GREEN TOMATOES have maintained the Southern white tradition noted by writer James Baldwin,
The film's appeal to straight audiences' attitudes towards same-sex relationships is more complicated and more ambiguous though, (or this is the same FRIED GREEN TOMATOES that won the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Media Award for "outstanding depiction of lesbians in a film" (Arar FlY 20:D5). And, as Sheila Kuehl, the actress who presented the award said, "If you don't believe us, read the book" (Arar).

The nature of Idgie and Ruth's relationship has been questioned by nearly every person who reviewed the movie whether they read the book or not. Are Idgie and Ruth lesbian or not? Lee Lynch, a disgruntled columnist from the Washington Blade, a gay newspaper, wrote,

"Don't even ask me what I thought about the film FRIED GREEN TOMATOES which demonstrated the most adept straddling of antithetical worlds I've ever seen. Yes, the lesbianism could have plucked at those queer little heartstrings, but my non-Gay acquaintances assure me that you didn't have to see it, wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to" (47).

Lee Lynch's assertion that "you didn't have to see it, wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to" has some credence. Some critics, writing for mainstream (read "straight") presses, tended to see Idgie and Ruth's relationship as more heterosexual than did their gay colleagues. Ryan Murphy, of the Miami Herald called Idgie and Ruth "two sassy pre-World War II heroines who loved, fought and defended their land like modern day Scarlett O'Haras" (FTV 11:13).

Other critics referred to the two as "best friends" (Jacobs). When critics did wonder about the characters' sexuality, they tended to frame their musings with heterocentric language, like Amy Dawes, movie critic for Variety. She described the relationship as a "stalwart friendship between the two young femmes, isolated in a world of ham-handed bigoted menfolk...It's annoying that the pic skates over the question of sexuality" (63).

Or they tried to have it both ways, like Janet Maslin of the New York Times, who while invoking a suspicion of something sexual reduces the women's love affair to a simple friendship.

"The film so ignores Idgie's attraction to Ruth that it would seem tepid without Ms. Masterson's furious honesty. Thanks to her, Idgie's sullenness over Ruth's marriage and her subsequent defense of Ruth against a violent husband give the two women's friendship all the depth it needs" (C3).

Roger Ebert went a little berserk in his assessment of the relationship, calling Idgie a lesbian and saying that it's fairly clear the two are a couple. But, he adds strangely at the end of this assertion, "We are never quite sure how clear that is to Ruth" (D8).

Maslin's insinuation that the attraction was only going from butch Idgie to femme Ruth, and Ebert's curious notion that Idgie and Ruth could be a couple while Ruth remained unaware of Idgie's lesbianism, typifies the response of most straight reviewers. As researcher Christine Hohmlund noted in her study of films with lesbian characters, "For most observers, the assumption of heterosexuality is so strong that the femme is easily seen as just another woman's friend. But for those who know where, when and how to look, the femme's sexual preference is as unmistakable as her gender" (148).

The sexual preference of both characters tended to be "unmistakable" to critics writing in alternative (read gay and lesbian periodicals and newspapers. These critics were more likely to be piqued because the lesbianism was obviously camouflage to pass into the mainstream. Anne Lewis, of the Washington Blade, saw more than a pouty tomboy when she looked at Idgie.
"Anyone still upset that they ditched the 'lesbian stuff' can take solace in Mary Stuart Masterson's awesome handling of the role of Idgie. [She] plays Idgie to the full butch hilt — work boots, swagger, slicked back hair, the whole nine yards. Lesbians can recognize a dyke character anywhere" (45).

Gay critics were also more likely to, as Holmlund put it, to "know where, when and how to look" for erotic tension. Where Janet Maslin saw "sullenness," Diane Thihault, of Xtra, a gay and lesbian paper based in Toronto, saw seduction:

"While Masterson is not overtly lesbian, a strong lesbian undercurrent is suggested by the loving glances that [she] throws at Parker and by their affectionate embraces" (19). And in heated contrast to Roger Ebert's contention that Ruth may not he aware of Idgie's lesbianism, Rosemary Curb offers this observation.

"One juicy memorable scene has the blooming butch knocking herself out to please her filmy sundressed lady love by stealing honey from a swarming hive. Slowly, she reaches her long hare arm into the hollow of a buzzing tree and withdraws a honey dripping comb. Bees retreat as Idgie carefully drops the comb into a glass jar and presents it to Ruth with bashful bravado. As Ruth sucks honey from the dripping comb, few lesbian viewers can miss the symbolism" (4).

The inability of straight audiences to recognize the sexuality that appears so obvious to gay audiences is not new. Nor is Hollywood's attempt to mainstream films taken from sources with homosexual implications. In 1936, when Samuel Goldwyn came up with the idea to film Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel, The Well of Loneliness, a producer told him he couldn't cause the main character was a lesbian. "So what?" Goldwyn said, "We'll make her an American." Goldwyn's response more or less established a paradigm for dealing with lesbianism on-screen — to simply act as if it doesn't exist, and if it does exist to wipe it out. Goldwyn adapted Lillian Hellman's play, The Children's Hour, to film, retitling it THESE THREE. In his adaptation, he changed the story of two teachers accused of lesbianism by a vindictive child to an

"adulterous heterosexual triangle in which one teacher is accused of being in love with her best friend's fiancé" (Russo 62).

Although the change in situation did not change the theme of the story — that lies are destructive — it served to distance it from the original source. Censors forbade any mention of the fact that the movie, THESE THREE was in any way related to The Children's Hour (Russo 63).

Before the film was made, Hellman tried to get Goldwyn to help her persuade the Motion Picture Production Code to lift the ban on lesbianism if the subject could be "treated tastefully." According to Goldwyn's biographer, the response was,

"Lesbianism on screen? Whoever heard of such of a thing? And how could it possibly be done tastefully" (Russo 63).

Apparently filmmakers had no idea. When lesbianism did appear on screen covertly, as it did in such 50s films as YOUNG MAN WITH A HORN, ALL ABOUT EVE, and CAGED, the women were played as mannish, perverted and predatory. More often though, lesbianism was not even remotely depicted. As with THESE THREE, characters in films adapted from sources containing overt lesbianism were simply rewritten to be heterosexual. THE BAD SEED and DIABOLIQUE both replaced lesbian characters with heterosexual ones.

Only one 50s film dealt outright with lesbianism and that was OLIVIA, a French film scripted by Colette. Ironically, when OLIVIA was distributed in the United States, its name was changed to THE PIT OF LONLINESS, a name chosen because of its similarity to The Well of Loneliness. The movie posters hyped the film as being the

"offbeat story of a strange relationship...condemned by the world...acknowledged only in fanciful dreams...discussed only in whispers" (Russo 103).

In the 60s film lesbians were either killed off by suicide, cured or asexual. Then,
despite the loosening of the Code to allow the depiction of "homosexuality and other sexual aberrations handled with care and restraint" (Hartinger 28), the 70s saw a return to replacing gay characters with straight ones. Studios were still nervous about portraying homosexuals onscreen. When producer Kenny Friedman test-screened his disco film THANK GOD IT'S FRIDAY, he studied the audience's response to one gay male couple dancing in a crowd of heterosexuals. He found that

"the gays got it, the straights never saw a thing. Which is exactly what he wanted; he found that general audiences are unwilling to see gays and he made it easier for them. Had there been negative reaction to the scene, it would have been dropped" (Russo 226).

In 1985, Steven Spielberg, director of THE COLOR PURPLE, was criticized for making it easy for general audiences not to see gays by turning down the sexual heat between the characters Celie and Shug. He changed a passionate sexual encounter to a few safe kisses. Whoopi Goldberg, who played Celie, said Spielberg told her,

"Middle America simply would not sit still for Celie on top and Shug on bottom, so we made it less explicit. This way we won't offend anyone" (Russo 280).

The Color Purple is very much like Fried Green Tomatoes in that neither hook mentions the word lesbian, although both are heavy on implication. The main character in The Color Purple, Celie, discovers her strength through a sexually explicit lesbian relationship. Idgie and Ruth, the main characters in Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe, are as in love with each other as two people can be. And the nature of their love isn't a secret in the book, even though it goes unnamed. When asked whether she intended a sexual link between the characters, Flagg was noncommittal.

"Well, I'm not really sure. Those were innocent times in that part of the world and I'm not sure people knew the word 'lesbian.' Maybe they didn't have a name for the girls, and maybe it doesn't matter" (LaBadie NIN 37:B1).

If it didn't matter whether the "love that dare not speak its name" in the book spoke its name in the movie, then why did director Jon Avnet and Flagg alter the story in a way that diminishes the obvious eroticism in the book? Whether inadvertently or not, they seem to be using what Holmlund referred to in her study of mainstream femme film as "specific strategies used to foster a diversity of audience responses:"

1. Making the female lead a femme, which allows both heterosexual and lesbian responses/identifications;
2. Focusing on the exchange of female looks that can be variously read as erotic (especially when the looking turns into a love scene) or "just friendly;"
3. Referring ambiguously and allusively to what may or may not be lesbianism and/or lesbian lifestyles (145).

The strategies begin early in the movie. Right away, Ruth is introduced as girlfriend to nine or ten year old Idgie's brother, Buddy, before he is killed by a train. One scene has the three walking across a clam, Ruth holding the child Idgie's hand. Given this scene alone, it's easy to imagine why audiences walk away feeling they've just watched a movie about best friends. Then, to further distance audiences from any thoughts of women loving women for themselves, years after Buddy's death, his mother invites Ruth back to help her deal with a still sullen Idgie. The movie wants us to believe that the women's relationship revolves around their mutual love of Buddy, and that given his loss, they may as well settle for each other.

In the book, however, Ruth and Idgie meet after Buddy's death and when they meet it's clear that they're in love with each other, not a ghost. As Ninny tells it,

"Everywhere that Ruth was, that's where Idgie would be. It was a mutual thing. They just took to each other, and you could hear them sittin' on the swing on the porch, gigglin' all night. Even Sipsey razzed her. She'd 'see Idgie by herself and say, 'That ol' love bug done hit
And, while the bee charmer scene in the movie is fairly erotic, except perhaps to viewers who "don't want to see it," it is undeniably erotic in the book. After Idgie performs her honey-gathering magic and hands the comb to Ruth, Ruth bursts into tears and Idgie starts begging for forgiveness.

"'I'm sorry Ruth, please don't be mad at me,' 'Mad?' Ruth put her arms around Idgie and said, 'Oh Idgie, I'm not mad at you. It's just that I don't know what I'd ever do if anything ever happened to you. I really don't'" (86).

The movie version of this incident more or less began and ended with looks between the women, but the novel goes a bit further. After the two enjoy a picnic lunch, Idgie lays her head in Ruth's lap, Ruth takes Idgie's hand and smiles down at her, whispering in Idgie's ear, "You're an old bee charmer, Idgie Threadgoode, that's what you are..." Idgie smiles back at her "happy as anyone who is in love in the summer can be" (87).

In the movie, Ruth casually mentions that she is going to marry Frank Bennett and Idgie's response is equally mundane. In the novel, however, Ruth agonizes over the choice she feels she has to make in spite of the fact that she is in love with Idgie:

"When Idgie had grinned at her and tried to hand her that jar of honey, all these feelings that she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was in that second in time that she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart...And now, a month later, it was because she loved her so much that she had to leave...She had no idea why she wanted to be with Idgie more than anyone else on this earth, but she did" (88).

Clearly, something was lost in the translation. Not only does the movie temper Ruth's obvious attraction to Idgie, except for the scene where Ruth sends Idgie the "whither thou goest passage" from the Bible, it all but leaves out Idgie's family's acceptance of hers and Ruth's relationship. In the book, when Ruth gives birth to Buddy Jr., Momma Threadgoode says, "Oh look, Idgie, he's got your hair" (192). And Poppa Threadgoode treats Idgie like a new father, telling her that "now that she was going to be responsible for Ruth and baby, she better figure out what she wanted to do, and gave her five hundred dollars to start a business with" (192).

In the book, even the gossip columnist gets in on acknowledging the alternative family. When Buddy Jr. gets injured, she writes, I am sorry to report that Idgie and Ruth's little boy lost his arm last week..." (107).

However, when pressed further about the character's sex and orientation by yet another reporter, Flagg emphatically denied writing lesbian characters.

"No, no, no. It's a story about love and friendship. The sexuality is unimportant. In the book, all the relationships are very close, and people can draw whatever conclusions they want. That's what you hope for when you write a hook. We are looking at them from 1991. [The 30s] was a totally different time period. There were very warm friendships between women" (Keough FTV 11:E4)

To a degree, Flagg may be right about warm friendships between women. According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, a researcher with the University of Pennsylvania, Idgie and Ruth's foremothers — 18th and 19th century women — commonly formed emotional ties with each other. These intense same-sex relationships were routinely accepted in U.S. society. They ranged from "supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women. It was a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance" (Smith-Rosenberg 2).
But our "conscious or unconscious" ignorance of loving friendships between women is nothing compared to the ignorance of lesbianism. Queen Victoria, the story goes, would not pass a law against lesbianism because she couldn't believe women would do such things (Daniell 225).

So Flagg's suggestion that people can draw whatever conclusions they want about the character's sexuality leads to some difficulties. While her attitude toward the women's relationship has a nineteenth century feel to it. At least in one interview she attributed the uncertainty of her characters' sexuality to the times: "Not sure people knew the word 'lesbian'" — most of America has a "twentieth century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love" (8). And given North America's discomfort with female sexuality, it's clear that mainstream audiences will choose to see Idgie and Ruth as heterosexual, especially since the lesbiasim implicit in the book becomes coded on the screen. Even Flagg seemed to become more and more uncomfortable with the subject as more and more reporters said the "L" word: "No, no, no. It's a story about love and friendship. The sexuality is unimportant" (Keough). In his defense of his treatment of the movie, Director Jon Avnet said,

"The sexuality had no interest for me. It is what it is or whatever you wanted to think it is. What I wanted to deal with was the intimacy. I wanted two women who loved each other. Women seem to he closer to each other than men. I'm talking about straight women as well as gay women, I think intimacy is the most frightening experience in our lifetime. Sexuality has so little to do with it" (Keough).

But why is it necessary to render women's sexuality invisible when dealing with intimacy? Adrienne Rich offers a clue to this in her discussion of women's sexuality in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Women like Idgie and Ruth who are woman-identified, not male-identified, "threaten family, religion, and state" (24) because they do not come under male control. And women who reject compulsory heterosexuality — lesbians — she argues, can only he perceived in two ways-as deviant or invisible.

Rich's definition of a lesbian is much broader than either Avnet's or Flagg's, both of whom seem to have bought into the patriarchal definition of a lesbian as a woman who "has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (51). They fail to see the connection between intimacy and sexuality and in doing so are unable to see or let us see the erotic nature of Idgie and Ruth's love for each other. They are guilty of rendering the lesbian invisible by using narrow definitions. As Rich wrote:

"[Because the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence...we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body...as an energy, not only diffuse, but, as Audre Lord has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional or psychic'" (53).

Rich's observation that "female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic" has affected all women, not just those who identify themselves as lesbian. Our culture's denial of female sexuality has led to the polarization of women — good girls, bad girls, lesbians and straights — with absolutely no shades of gray. Female sexuality takes on many shades and by bleaching it to make mainstream audiences comfortable, Flagg and Avnet have contributed to the invisibility of the lesbian. Perhaps if they had enlarged their definition of female sexuality, the film that GLAAD called "lesbian-positive" might have been "lesbian-positive" for everyone not just for those who know one when they see one.

The same could be said for the image of blacks in this film as well. By reducing
Sipsey and Big George to a "collection of stereotypical characteristics confirmed by public behavior" (Goldfield 5), the filmmakers have rendered the flesh and blood African American invisible. The characters exist only in relation to the whites in the film. The words of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man would serve both blacks and gays well as a response to this film:

"I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me" (5).

WORKS CITED


