

Write for Your Rights

Author Nicola Griffith's fight for her residency. **By Catherine Plato**

Nicola Griffith is officially here “in the national interest,” according to the U.S. State Department—or at least that’s what her green card used to say. Griffith, who was born in Yorkshire, England, published her first novel, the sci-fi thriller *Ammonite*, in 1993, and is still enjoying life in the U.S. with her partner, writer Kelley Eskridge, thanks to its success.

Griffith first crossed the pond to attend a writers’ workshop at Michigan State University in 1988, a time when it was illegal for LGBT folks or anyone HIV-positive to enter the country. It was at Michigan State that she met Eskridge and fell “helplessly, hopelessly, unexpectedly, inconveniently in love.” When the workshop ended, Griffith returned to England, kept in touch with Eskridge, and came back to the U.S. a year later on a tourist visa. A hopeless romantic, Griffith soon sold her house and bade farewell to her family and friends in England, determined to make her relationship with her American sweetheart work.

“It was the start of a two-year nightmare,” she remembers. “I had no job, so I had to leave the country every six months and come back on a tourist visa. Then I managed to get the six-month tourist visa extended to one year, so [we] had a bit of a breather, time to figure stuff out and line up enough credit cards to start tackling the issue.” Without much money, the couple had little hope of hiring a good immigration lawyer. For Griffith to obtain a green card, she had three choices: invest major dollars in a business that could provide jobs for American citizens, marry a man or become famous and prove herself an “alien of exceptional ability,” whose citizenship would be considered by the State Department to be in the national interest.

“The first two were either materially impossible or morally repugnant, so I set my will to stun, and picked door number three,” explains Griffith. “I wrote a novel, *Ammonite*, that was published in eight countries, won national and international [awards], and started being taught at universities and colleges in the U.S., U.K. and elsewhere.” Though the case for exceptional ability now seemed fairly obvious, Griffith still had more hurdles to jump: *Ammonite* features lesbian characters and a planet where the male gender has been completely obliterated. Reviews that praised the novel also contained explicit references to Griffith’s own sexuality. Griffith’s new immigration lawyer warned her about revealing her orientation to the State Department; though George H. W. Bush had recently passed legislation lifting the ban on queer and HIV-positive people entering the country, her sexuality still had the potential to further complicate an already difficult request. Out since age 16, Griffith refused to go back in the closet, so she and her lawyer turned to the national interest waiver.

To secure her green card, Griffith would have to collect as many testimonials to her talent as possible, from acquaintances as well as prominent literary and political figures. “Begging is horrible and soul-scratching, whether it’s for food, money or favors,” says Griffith. “But I did it, and everyone I asked said yes. I got letters from professors all over the world ... from Allen Ginsburg, from Ursula Le Guin, from the governor of Georgia. It was quite humbling. I realized that people love to help. I’ve never forgotten that.” It worked, and Griffith—a self-proclaimed “right old dyke, who wrote science fiction stuffed

with lesbian sex”—was granted a green card, which ironically, was pink. Her case made new law and appeared in law journals: She was the first openly queer-identified person to receive a national interest waiver. *The Wall Street Journal* approached her for an interview. The story, which declared Griffith a kook and criticized the government’s poor judgment, landed on the *Journal’s* front page. “But,” boasts Griffith, “I can live with Kelley here for the rest of my life, and I didn’t have to lie about anything.”

Griffith went on to publish four more novels, beginning with *Slow River* in 1995. The next three—*The Blue Place* (1998), *Stay* (2002) and her most recent work, *Always* (2007)—feature her recurring protagonist: Aud Torvingen, a 6-foot-tall, fearless, sexy Norwegian lesbian sleuth, who is adored by readers and reviewers alike. Griffith says that Aud came to her in a dream 11 years ago. In the dream, a woman is sleeping naked on a carpet in her new, unfurnished apartment on an exceptionally hot night. She wakes up to find a man pointing a gun at her. Without hesitating or thinking, the woman rises and instantly breaks his neck with a flashlight lying next to her. “I woke up thinking, whoa,

what kind of person could do that?” says Griffith. “A few weeks later, I was in my local library and stumbled across a book about Norwegian architecture, which led me to a book of Norwegian history where I found mention of a ninth-century queen called Aud the Deepminded. My brain sat up and drooled. The woman in the dream was Norwegian, she was called Aud.”

In *Always*, Aud, still grieving the shooting death of her lover, Julia, travels with her friend Matthew Dornan from her home in Atlanta to investigate a case of real-estate fraud and also visit family in Seattle. Their vacation is disrupted by the sabotage of a TV pilot and the introduction of Victoria “Kick” Kuiper—a caterer and former stuntwoman who charms both Aud and Matthew. Interspersed with disturbing flashbacks of the self-defense class Aud taught back in Atlanta, *Always* lends added dimension and depth to one of the most alluring lesbian characters in contemporary literature. But, though Griffith’s prized protagonist is an attractive, short-haired, ass-kicking, ex-cop dyke, Griffith doesn’t like her work to be pigeonholed as explicitly lesbian. *Always* has enjoyed an especially warm mainstream reception compared to her earlier work. “As I’ve climbed the publishing prestige ladder, reviewers are beginning to forget to mention [sexuality]. That pleases me,” she says. “My novels are about women who grow and change and save the world and blow shit up, and the people they have sex with are mostly women. It makes as much sense to talk about my novels being lesbian novels as to say *The Da Vinci Code* is a straight novel.”

Griffith claims it is now time to begin her magnum opus. She’s not giving out many details, but fans can certainly expect it to be a bit of a departure from her past work. “All I’m prepared to say at this stage is that it’s set in the seventh century and it’s the novel I was born to write,” she says. “It makes me tremble with excitement.” And with a past like Griffith’s, that’s not an easy feat. ■

