

# Author thanks audience for hearing her

By GAIL DeGEORGE

For Rita Mae Brown, a receptive audience is a rarity.

The gay feminist author found one at Oakland University when she spoke to a group of about 150 persons, only 15 of whom were men. The Oct. 8 lecture was sponsored by the Human Sexuality Committee of Residence Halls.

She thanked the university for inviting her, acknowledging the prejudice that sometimes prevents her from speaking. "I assume that if your consciousness isn't raised, it's at least tilted. This is not Women's Lib 101 or Gay Lib 102," she said.

Ms. Brown, author of "Ruby Fruit Jungle" and "Six of One," spoke about what she knows best: being a woman, a writer, and gay. She explored the meaning of success, how it applies to women and the women's movement — and what it is like growing up female in America.

Attacking the adjectives and commas that follow her name, she asked why Norman Mailer doesn't have "white, heterosexual, Jewish, male writer" tagged after his. "Only 10 percent of the people are mainstream America," she said, describing that group as white, male and former students of Ivy League schools. "What has passed as mainstream America is not any of us."

Born in Hanover, Pa., Ms. Brown was orphaned at an early age and adopted by a family that moved to Florida. She left home for New York City, living in poverty conditions and becoming a "vagabond of the revolution" in the early 1960s. She emphasized that her background was lower-class, "poor white trash."

"I didn't even know what a check was until I was 18," she recalls. "Ruby Fruit Jungle," the story of a girl growing up in America, parallels her life completely. "I cleaned it up so it could get published," she said.

Flippant remarks about being gay drew laughter from the audience. "I don't know how many of you are gay or straight, but those of you who are straight have my deepest sympathy." The laughter, she said, was a sign of progress. "Three years ago you wouldn't — and couldn't — laugh."

After bantering with audience members, she walked back to the podium and began the "serious" part of her appearance.

"Technically," said the 34-year-old author, "I am a success. I can pay my bills . . . I bought my mother a car. In America, this kind of material luxury is evidence of success." She admitted "there is a great deal of luck involved with any kind of success in art."

Success has always been defined within a patriarchal system, she said. "Basically, it means keeping up with the Joneses who can't keep up with themselves. This kind of goal has been held up to us as worthy of our life's work."

The women's movement "never defined what success was for a woman," said Ms. Brown, an early leader of it. "It was not because we (in the movement) were stupid, but because we were dealing with a crisis situation."

The movement exploded out of the downward mobility of the '60s, she said, when middle-class college students found it vogue to imitate the lower classes.

Once women left college they discovered that not getting a job was real," Ms. Brown said. "Middle-class women found it a shock — they really couldn't find jobs — and they found that poverty wasn't so attractive."

The only way the movement defined success was in a backhanded way, asking if women should work within the system or outside of it. "It was a stupid question," commented Ms. Brown with a touch of scorn in her voice. "Where



Rita Mae Brown, author of "Ruby Fruit Jungle" believes that only 10 percent of the population can

be truly described as "mainstream America." (Photo by Chris VanMeter)

was the alternative?

"Where are the women Supreme Court justices? Where are the women senators? We're in this system, but we're not of it . . . we're at the bottom."

"If we enter the economic and political process in relation to our numbers — 53 percent of the American population — things will change."

"I think the way decisions are made, the way goals of society are reached, will change. I'm not saying women are better than men, but women will bring an empathy, a sensitivity to human feelings to those decisions. Women have been taught to read between the lines because we've been doing it from birth. The oppressed always know more about how people feel than the oppressor."

"We will change things — a lot — and men are afraid of that."

She explored several myths about women and success, finishing with the "women fear success" myth. "It's true," she said mockingly. "It's human nature to fear the unknown."

Even women have difficulty accepting another woman's success. "Just because you are a feminist doesn't mean you don't hate women." The attitude seeps through our pores, she said, "because it is so ingrained in society."

"Even we cannot accept a woman who is a success," she told the audience. "We say she couldn't have made it there on merit."

"My definition of success is simple," the author continued, "and it is 'Finish what you start.' If you say you're going to build a table, and build it, that's a success."

Applying this to the women's movement, Ms. Brown said "We must enact the changes we want to see." Suggest-

tions for change run from creating a third political party to establishing a counter culture and an economic alternative for women. "You can no longer look for the answer, you must be the answer."

With that, she walked away from the podium and opened the discussion.

She sees feminism in the 1980s as a re-run of the 1920s, with the movement splitting and weakening over the Equal Rights Amendment, as the suffrage

movement split and died after women won the vote.

She emphasized she is not in favor of special interest groups, that she fears the division, isolation and political staleness they create within themselves and the system.

"It's the rest of our lives, folks. Anything you want to change is going to take the rest of your lives. We have to stop thinking about social change as a big burden — it's the only game in town."

She is working on another novel which should be finished by 1981 or spring 1982.

"I fall in love with the people in my books," she said. "For me, all books operate through the people in them."

When asked if she thinks attitudes toward gay people will change, she said "I have to believe people can change or I can't do the work I do."

## Junior Women meet

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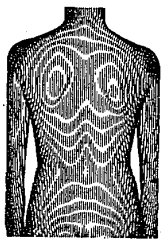
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