

The Taos Truth Game

Earl Ganz

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Reviewed by Rebecca Stanfel

“Unless you explain in a preface who Myron Brinig was, readers will think you made him up,” Earl Ganz writes in the afterword of his novel, *The Taos Truth Game*. But although Ganz has woven a fictionalized account of Brinig’s life—what he calls “a story of what may have happened or could have happened”—Brinig did certainly exist, living to the venerable age of ninety-four and publishing twenty-one novels.

Ganz wrote *The Taos Truth Game* partly to resurrect Brinig from literary obscurity. Although once hailed by the *London Times* as one of the two best young writers in America (Thomas Wolfe was the other), all but one of Brinig’s prodigious oeuvre is out of print. Even though many of Brinig’s books became bestsellers, and one, *The Sisters*, was made into a 1938 hit movie starring Bette Davis and Errol Flynn, Brinig’s work is rarely included (or even mentioned) in the ubiquitous “best of” anthologies that should contain his work: Montana writers, Jewish writers, gay writers,

or some combination of these three. Within Montana literature, the attention paid to Brinig is primarily due to Earl Ganz. Ganz wrote the introduction to the reissue of Brinig’s novel, *Wide Open Town* (Farcountry Press, 1993), and Ganz’s essay on Brinig’s life and writing, “The Truth Game,” appeared in *Writing Montana: Literature Under the Big Sky* (Montana Center for the Book, 1996).

Perhaps Brinig is overlooked precisely because he eludes classification. Though raised in Butte, Montana, during the hardscrabble mining town’s heyday, Brinig was hardly a prototypical Westerner. His family were observant Jews, and his father a successful merchant. In fact, his first novel, *Singermann*, was one of the earliest novels about the immigrant Jewish experience written in English (and a source of inspiration for Henry Roth’s seminal *Call It Sleep*). But Brinig was eager to leave behind the strictures of his family, religion, and hometown, to write his way out of Butte, as his fictional character explains to a friend in *The Taos Truth Game*. (91) Although Brinig has recently received some attention as a gay writer, here too, even the long shadow of *Brokeback Mountain* isn’t enough to propel him to posthumous fame. Brinig slips between categories, perhaps because he sought to write not as a westerner, not as Jew, not as a homosexual, but as a mainstream—and bestselling—American.

But *The Taos Truth Game* is much more than a

fictionalized biography—or epistemological pinning down—of Brinig. Instead, the book is as multifaceted as its subject. Part romance, part voyeuristic insiders' view of catty salon society, part humorous exposé of the lives of the rich and talented, and part mournful glance at the process of dissolving into obscurity, the novel makes Brinig and the world he inhabits come alive. The narrative begins in 1933, when a young Brinig arrives in Taos, New Mexico, on his way from New York to Los Angeles. Already famous for two novels, which are still regarded as his best work: *Singermann* (the 1929 semi-autobiographical story of his Orthodox Jewish family in Butte, Montana) and *Wide Open Town* (a 1931 novel about labor unrest in Butte's mines), Brinig doesn't plan to stay in the desert. But he is looking for an escape—from a failed relationship with a married man and a nearly indentured reliance on his publisher's advances.

Brinig quickly becomes involved with painter Cady Wells, the wealthy scion of an East Coast industrialist. Much of *The Taos Truth Game* explores Brinig's on-again, off-again relationship with Wells, a man so different from Brinig that the Butte native thinks of Wells as a "Martian." The gap between Brinig and Wells isn't about money or power, as much as Brinig's character would like to reduce it to that. Rather, Wells is comfortable with his identity as a gay man. "I've never denied who or what I am," Wells tells Brinig, early in their doomed affair. (33)

Brinig's sexuality, on the other hand, is ultimately a source of shame. Even his first erotic experience, as he tells Wells, is tainted with incestuous innuendos, and when he brings Wells to meet his mother in Butte, "[h]e was afraid to show his family what he was." (190) Self-loathing accompanies most of his sexual encounters. When awakening next to a man after a one-night stand, Brinig is filled with disgust, imagining "[a]nother man's sweat and pollution soiling his pores." (112) Throughout *The Taos Truth Game*—and indeed for his entire life—Brinig claimed to be "bisexual," not gay. He tells the same "lie" (as he calls it) several times in the novel: "It's part of the writer's job to experience everything. It helps my work too. Whenever I'm in a rut and can't get going, I have an affair with someone of a different sex from the one I've been with. It's like space travel." (290-291)

Staying in the closet in the middle third of the twentieth century—even in the relative security of artistic colonies like Taos—did make a certain amount of sense. As Brinig mused, "No one would publish a book with a homosexual hero living a homosexual life. It was against the law. They'd sent Oscar Wilde to jail for it. For most people it was the same thing as making love to a sheep." (292) But Brinig keeps the closet door firmly shut, even when *Taos Truth Game* steps into the present in its foreword and afterword and Myron continues to deny his homosexuality with

an almost Biblical repetition, lacking only the crowing of roosters as a background. Whatever the cause of Brinig's repression, Ganz's novel obliquely suggests that it contributed to his literary decline. Like Brinig's life, *The Taos Truth Game* is curiously lacking a compelling narrative force. The book follows Brinig on the almost meandering and random path his life takes. Brinig overtly chooses very little; he drifts into Taos, and then drifts into another artistic community in Carmel, California, drifts back to Taos, and eventually lands in New York. By not owning up to who he is, Ganz suggests, Brinig is left with little but tired routines, like the recurring bisexual-space travel line and a shtick where he proclaims, "You just shook the hand that shook the hand of Teddy Roosevelt." The listlessness of the narrative can be tiring to read, but it works to convey a writer's energies dwindling in the face of avoiding himself and his past.

One thing that Brinig decidedly does not avoid, however, is celebrity. Soon after arriving in Taos, he becomes an integral part—and a recipient of patronage—of Mabel Dodge Luhan's salon. Luhan, who drew D. H. Lawrence to Taos in the twenties by giving him title to a ranch in exchange for a manuscript copy of *Sons and Lovers*, surrounded herself with writers and artists, many of whom make cameo appearances in *The Taos Truth Game*. Brinig encounters Frieda Lawrence (D. H. Lawrence's widow), poet Robinson

Jeffers and his possessive wife, Una, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Thomas Wolfe, and Thornton Wilder, among others. Many of these celebrity sightings are delightful, including a hilarious episode in which various claimants to Lawrence's legacy (including Luhan herself) connive to gain possession of the dead writer's cremated remains—although it turns out the great man's ashes might have inadvertently been dumped into (and consumed in) a pot of chili. Brinig finagles his way into the center of such situations, sipping scotch with Wolfe before breakfast, sitting with Una Jeffers after she has tried to commit suicide, and negotiating peace (or attempting to do so) between Luhan and her rivals for the Lawrence legacy.

However, the celebrity parade—and its inside look at the pettiness and cruelty of Luhan's salon—eventually get in the way of both Brinig and *The Taos Truth Game*. Several times throughout the novel, Brinig asks himself something to the effect of, "What am I doing with these people? Why am I playing these stupid games?" (III) Moreover, the abrupt gear shifting between Brinig's development as a character and his lurching among the rich and the famous, slows the novel's already leisurely pace. But perhaps this is Ganz's point, to reveal in the novel's very structure how Brinig runs from himself—and the truth about himself—to anyone or anything that will distract him.

Ironically, truth is at the centerpiece of Luhan's

salon. On his first evening with her in Taos, she introduces the “truth game,” a fancified version of the middle school slumber party horror, in which each person must tell the absolute “truth” to any question posed. A few weeks later, Brinig refines the game into a writing exercise, where for ten minutes everyone writes something “wittily and truthfully” about another person in the room. The passages are cutting and, in the case of those about Brinig, true. He is described by another writer as “[having] no form of his own to hold him up and has never bothered to get one from Heaven or make one for himself, being so busy writing books.” (59)

Brinig ends up playing the highest-stakes version of the truth game when he writes what is recognized by his friends as his best novel, *Florence Gresham*, a portrait of Mabel Dodge Luhan. He admits to another writer that even in his acclaimed novel *Singermann*, “I didn’t

do justice to the material.” (289) With *Florence Gresham*, though, he is able to write the truth (albeit of another), “to get inside Mabel.” (296) But since the novel exposes Luhan in ways that could lead to her downfall, Brinig doesn’t publish it. A jealous lover burns his copies years later, and the work is forever lost.

Even without the triumphant publication of *Florence Gresham*, Brinig was nevertheless an incredibly prolific and talented writer. Perhaps Ganz’s portrait, which uses Brinig’s unpublished memoirs for inspiration, will generate interest in a unique writer—one who was forged in the tumult of Butte, yet hated his childhood home; one who was gay, but spent a lifetime denying it; one who wrote novels with a machine-like precision, only to withhold publication of his best work to save a friend’s honor.