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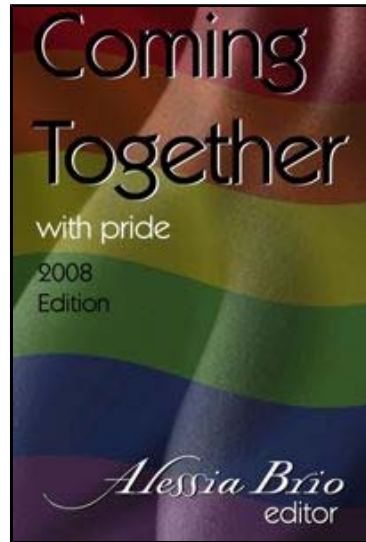
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## Coming Together: Alessia Brio, Erotic Anthologies & Sexuality

by Anastasia Mavromatis

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In the last five to seven years, charity anthologies have gone the same way of charity calendars, gaining in popularity, to serve many charities. From Hurricane Katrina to War Child, Breast cancer to AIDS, charity anthologies tend to focus on certain genres, inviting writers to take part to raise social awareness and funds. Initially doubted by large publishers, charity anthologies like *Girls Night In* (1 and 2), *Gentleman by Invitation*, *Big Night Out* and *Kids Night In*, have raised substantial amounts for charities such as **War Child**. **New Beginnings**, spearheaded by UK literary agent Jonny Geller in conjunction with Bloomsbury, gathered the world's noted fiction writers to provide their first chapters, to raise money for the ACEH Tsunami.



Anthologies may not be bread and butter for large print publishers, and some literary critics may take a negative view, but the fact remains: anthologies do enable new writers to step out. The first steps to publication are rarely paved in gold. That being said, anthologies do enable new writers to step out in style and possibly reach a wider audience.

What about erotica and its place within the mainstream anthology market?

Erotica discusses many themes that are prevalent within society: love, attraction, uncertainty, infatuation, passion, lust and futility, scratch the surface. **Bethanne Kelly Patrick's article in *Publisher's Weekly*** (*Publisher's Weekly* July 2007) traces the evolution of erotica, from secret 'pillow book' to artsy mainstream package.

For those of us online, who have traversed online erotic fiction as writers or readers, we are familiar with the editor of a collection of erotic anthologies for various charities. Alessia Brio's upcoming anthology, **Coming Together: With Pride**, will focus on raising funds for international AIDS charity **AVERT**. It's my pleasure to introduce new readers to Alessia Brio, and shower her with questions about this upcoming volume and her *Coming Together* series.

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**Q:** Firstly, I'd like to welcome you to *Lucrezia Magazine*, and tell you that it's a pleasure to highlight this upcoming anthology. You have published numerous anthologies in the *Coming Together* series, and have stated (in other interviews) that it is a labor of love. What was the germinating seed or starting point for this series? What made you decide: Right, I'm doing this.

**Alessia:** Thanks. It's an honor and a pleasure to have *Coming Together* highlighted in *Lucrezia Magazine*!

Since its inception, there have been several "Right, I'm doing this" points along *Coming Together's* path. First, in early 2005, was the communal decision to pull our work together and publish it. The genesis group was all, at that time, amateur. Some aspired to professional publication. Others, self included, had a rather cavalier attitude about it. When the project took on a charitable focus, the enthusiasm seemed to grow exponentially. The altruistic took precedence over the egotistic, in a manner of speaking, and everyone "came together" seamlessly. All decisions were made as a group, from contents to cover art. While I was a focal point for collating the



work into publishable manuscripts, I was not its editor per se.

The next such point was more personal. After we self-published the first three volumes (v1, v2, and the Special Hurricane Relief Edition), the collective energy behind the project seemed to wane. I and a few of the other participants tried to revive it, but for one reason or another, it'd lost its oomph. The next volume we published (v3) was very difficult to assemble. The workload fell to just a few dedicated individuals. A beloved colleague's untimely death brought new energy as we pulled together a collection of her work (Special Memorial Edition: Colleen Thomas) to benefit a hospice selected by her partner, but it wasn't sustained. That's when I decided to assume the mantle of editor and forge ahead. It was a bloodless coup. \*wink\* In other words, no one raised a fuss.



Moving forward, it was an easy decision to approach my primary publisher (**Phaze**) with a proposal to contract the Special Hurricane Relief Edition. Things just kind of snowballed from there. **Charles River Press** picked up the early volumes. Phaze has supported a host of submission calls for new editions. These days, while I still have a small cadre of the original group who are very helpful, I'm pretty much running the show. Coming Together has grown way beyond its original borders on the **Literotica Authors Hangout**. The next point on the "Right, I'm doing this" path involves incorporating and filing for tax exempt status with the IRS. That will open up a world of potential grants so that Coming Together can do more good for more people.



**Q:** HIV and AIDS have been part of our society for the last twenty-five years, and current research on vaccines has not produced any cure, so there has been a stronger focus on prevention. Some may say that erotic fiction may conflict with safe sex practices, due to absence of safe sex practices within most erotic stories. What would you say to this?

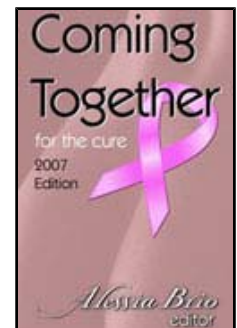
**Alessia:** Valid concerns, of course. Coming Together has, since its very first publication, included a statement which reads:

Please note that Coming Together contains works of fiction in which the characters may not practice safe sex. Readers are encouraged to act responsibly and to take appropriate precautions against both unwanted pregnancy and the transmission of disease. For resources and frank discussion about safe sex practices, please visit the **Coalition for Positive Sexuality**.

It's in each volume as well as on the **website** and **blog**.

Personally, while I understand that erotic fantasy often relies on spontaneity and a somewhat kamikaze approach to passion, I think the story and its characters dictate the use (or omission) of safe sex practices. My partner & I recently finished a two-book series featuring a very sexually promiscuous protagonist. She insisted on condom use -- always. I don't believe it detracted from the story at all. In fact, I think it's hotter as a result. On the flip side, I am currently working on an urban fantasy in which my protagonist has a devil-may-care attitude about her life. She will not be practicing safe sex in any sense of the word. It's true to character. When writing a character that some readers may find admirable and seek to emulate, things could get a little fuzzier. Conversely, with "stroke" (erotica that simply intends to sexually stimulate the reader), there is little in the way of character development or story arc. Safe sex practices are not a common occurrence. It's like reading porn instead of watching it, and it definitely has its place on the playground of our imaginations.

**Q:** It's an interesting point you mention, the absence of safe sex practices with erotica aimed at sexual titillation. I've found that it also features in character driven erotica, where the character's issues or questions tend to dominate, and how sexual encounters or sexual situations act to resolve a situation. Which prompts me to ask how you initially approached submissions for Coming Together: With Pride. There would naturally be many lesbian/homosexual relationships that are monogamous, where the safe sex issue wouldn't be a mandatory exercise, and although HIV/AIDS is the charity the anthology focuses on, there is also a secondary message behind this anthology, that of GLBT relationships being relationships like any other, which is a positive thing. Do you feel that even now, especially during the presidential race that people still have to fight for their basic right to have relationships the way they want, based on what the few conservative nominees have said or implied about same-sex relationships?



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**Alessia:** The approach to *With Pride*, as with every volume of *Coming Together*, has been to embrace all consenting adult relationships as equal and valid. The submission call for *With Pride* didn't specifically ask for GLBT content. I wouldn't condone that any more than I would send out a submission call restricted to one ethnic group. (The only volume with such an exclusive focus is the Special Memorial Edition I mentioned earlier, and that was because Colleen Thomas only wrote lesbian erotic fiction.) Although the title and cover art did attract a lot of GLBT submissions, there is heterosexual content as well. Sex is humanity's greatest equalizer, and its potential to unite is unbounded. I absolutely refuse to use it to divide – unlike some of those conservative nominees you referenced.



The waters get muddy when you speak of "basic rights" because all rights are arbitrary social/cultural constructs. Rights are bestowed by governments, some through democratic process. No matter how much we'd like to believe otherwise, there are no "God-given" rights. I mean, whose god gave them? It's rather arrogant to assume my deity of choice trumps everyone else's. That would be like someone saying that gay couple down the street was inferior because of their... Oh, wait. Nevermind.

Anyway... The closest we can come is the adoption of a set of rights that have the broadest possible scope & appeal -- such as the **United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. And in spite of such things, people are still persecuted for their differences rather than celebrated for their similarities. There's a whole steaming pile of lip service being dropped in the name of equality, and no one's shoveling fast enough to keep up with it. In *Coming Together's* little corner of the world, we're doing our damndest to actually practice what we preach.



**Q:** It has become a question of whose (God's) rights, and I personally feel that many political candidates are ignoring other issues around the world, using sexuality as a draw card because it works on the lowest common denominator: sensationalism. Most politicians refuse to acknowledge the importance of sexual health around the world, in that (for example) many western nation require healthy citizens from other countries for imports, manufacturing and so on, and they don't think ahead to discuss issues like how HIV/AIDS is affecting large continents, as well as the economic future of these continents, economies which will affect the stability of other larger economies that are reliant on trade, manufacturing and possibly primary (agriculture) industry in the current environmental climate. So, how frustrating do you find it, for example, to possibly experience discrimination due to erotic content and so on. I know, from experience, that there are many writers who won't own up to writing erotica. A recent article here in Australia (*New Woman Magazine*, 2007), discussing the rise of erotica as a market, had an interesting comment made by a representative of the Curtis Brown Literary Agency, who hinted of a project (as yet unnamed) being put together for a larger publisher, and that the contributors would be 'name' authors, or mainstream authors writing under pseudonyms, something that I see as a cop-out because there are plenty of writers who specialize in erotica, who are frank and open about their writings. You earlier mentioned adding a tax-exempt status for the books for the IRS, which would open the doors to grants enabling these anthologies (I'm guessing) to be marketed on a larger level. Once the tax-exempt status is done, what are the next steps. Which agencies/organizations would you approach/work with to make --what I think is a common wish for erotica writers – erotica an accepted medium? (That's not to say it's not accepted, but in light of larger literary agents using 'anonymous' big name writers to write sex, the view of sex/erotica being controversial, there is still a 'dirty' note attached to sex).

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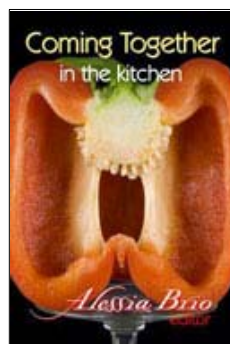


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**Alessia:** *Out and proud* applies to so much more than one's sexual orientation. In this case, it applies to the genre in which one writes. If a 'name' author doesn't have the balls to attach that pride to his/her erotic writing, that tells me a whole helluva lot. There is either: (a) cowardice, (b) lack of skill, or (c) both. Writing sex is NOT easy. It's not even easy to do poorly because of all the emotion and taboo and performance anxiety. Again, there's that potential to unite. Sex, like a lover's smile, is universally understood.

For the past two years, I've attended the **La Jolla Writers Conference** in San Diego. Fabulous conference, by the way. The presenters (all very successful authors and publishing professionals who donate their time on the 'pay it forward' principle) invariably express admiration when they learn what I write. **James Grippando**, a New York Times best-selling author, told me: "I wrote a sex scene once. My wife said I should never do it again." Another, **Steve Berry**, said that the two most difficult things to write are short stories and sex. He added that the ability to do both well at the same time is a rare talent. I agree - and not just because it strokes my ego.

I have published **non-erotic work**. The decision to do so under the name Alessia Brio was never a consideration. I'm proud of my work - all of it. If a person judges me based solely on the fact that I write sexually explicit material, then that's not really a person with whom I want to associate. One of my personal credos (tied for primacy with "Do unto others...") is the quote attributed to Gandhi: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." *Coming Together* is a big part of being that change. As far as *Coming Together's* future is concerned, I hope its incorporation and tax exempt status will enable wider distribution and (eventually) some independent publication. Any collections that fit within Phaze's submission guidelines will always have a home with that house, if wanted. However, I want to expand into poetry, audio, and even visual arts. In fact, I recently created a **MySpace** store from which to sell downloads of poetry and erotic stories recorded by their creators. I'm excited about that! While I fully expect some grant applications to be tossed aside once the erotic aspects are noticed, I'm confident that some open-minded review committee will see the value in the work and be willing to fund its expansion. Then, there will be absolutely no need to deal with literary agents or big publishing houses whose vision doesn't align with our core principles. We'll just make it happen ourselves - we'll be the change. After all, if you're not part of the solution...



**Q:** You're quite proactive, and this is something that is a great example for writers as well. In your opinion, how proactive do writers need to be with the current publishing climate, in terms of marketing themselves or approaching publishers and/or editors about work? I tend to take the view, for example, that every manuscript becomes a product once it's submitted to a publisher/editor/agent, and have found that there are cases where confidence can be so-so or tepid, and the times where I come across confident writers, I feel like I'm onto something fantastic, because they're comfortable about themselves. In the process of collecting stories for anthologies, how have you found it?

**Alessia:** I really don't think authors can be too proactive. I'm not advocating that they become rabid spammers or cloying sycophants. Taking pride in one's work, however, is empowering. Empowered, self-confident people are sexy, and since sexy sells, it's a good thing to be! In terms of anthology submissions, it varies wildly (just like sex). I've had very submissive authors who send in their work with a sheepish if-you-think-it's-worthy attitude. Some of it is truly exceptional. Others give the impression that they're stooping from their lofty perches to toss a crumb your way, and some of it is truly hideous. Overall, I've been both blessed and cursed by the quality of submissions to *Coming Together*. Decisions on what to keep and what to pass have been quite difficult. It's a nice problem to have, but I dislike having to turn away good work just because the volume reaches capacity. Expansion - via those grants I mentioned - should alleviate that problem *and* increase our proactivity.

**Q:** This question may be more a writing question, but it's been on my mind for a few days and it relates to titles. *Coming Together* does bring intimacy to mind. It's a great title. How do you arrive at a title, and does a title come first or later (no pun intended, but then again...why not? lol) ?

**Alessia:** Um, both. *Coming Together's* title was - aptly - a communal effort. I just tack on the theme-specific tags (With Pride, Under Fire, etc.) and develop the cover art. In my other work, the titles usually come right along with the



initial story idea. On rare occasions, I'll write first, then pull a phrase from the story to use as the title. I've made a couple poor decisions, and sales do reflect them. However, I think the book's blurb is more important than its title in terms of sales. That 150-word grabber is critical.



**Q:** The current selection in *Coming Together: With Pride*. Agonizing, lengthy, torturous? What has been the general feeling as you read through submissions. Tell us a little about the current authors that will be featured in *Coming Together: With Pride*.

**Alessia:** None of the above. The vast majority of the submissions received were quite publishable. I received over 310,000 words from 43 authors ranging in length from 1100 words to the 12K max. It was the most successful *Coming Together* submission call to date. I had considerable help evaluating the submissions from **James Buchanan**, who pitched the idea. (When you make a suggestion to an all-volunteer organization, you become one of its volunteers. It goes with the territory. \*grin\*) The *With Pride* team includes some well-known authors and some fresh, new voices. I can't wait for its release! Connie Sanchez-Garcia's story is heart-wrenching, and it's her very first publication (of many to come, I'm certain). Lisabet Sarai's work is edgy and compelling, as always. Heather Fowler's contribution would be right at home in any literary journal. Shanna Germain, who just won the Rauxa Prize for Erotic Poetry, has a story in this volume. And, of course, I'm thrilled that Rachel Kramer Bussel is writing the Introduction! They are just a few of the talented cast. It's both invigorating and humbling to be in such company.

**Q:** Going back to anthologies, and the submission process. It's interesting that you mention the variations. It's rare to receive the hoity-toity submission, but it doesn't happen. Editing, or even collecting work, does provide additional insight on how arduous it can be. Have you noticed differences within yourself prior to, and after working as an editor, in terms of noticing similar traits or the initial shyness that comes from submitting work? I still remember the very first time I submitted a story, and how nervous I was (I likened it to losing my virginity), not knowing what to write as an introduction, and feeling like I wanted to kick myself because I'd think, "I've written a five thousand word short story, and I can't write the introductory e-mail/letter to the editor!" I've gotten over that, but it didn't happen overnight. So how have you changed over this time, sitting on the other end of the spectrum (as well as working on your own projects). Do you approach things differently now, compared to the very first time.



**Alessia:** I don't think I've ever experienced that type of nervousness as relates to my writing, although I didn't tell anyone I was sending in that very first submission -- just in case it was rejected. It wasn't. In fact, it went on to win an EPPIE Award for Best Erotica. If anything, editing the *Coming Together* anthologies has given me a greater appreciation for the entire process. I know now that rejections do not necessarily mean the writing is sub-standard. They usually just mean the work doesn't fit the current project for one reason or another. After screening the *With Pride* submissions for acceptable quality levels, I made selections with a focus on maintaining a balance of hetero- and homosexual stories, first- and third-person narratives, and tone. The ultimate erotic cocktail.

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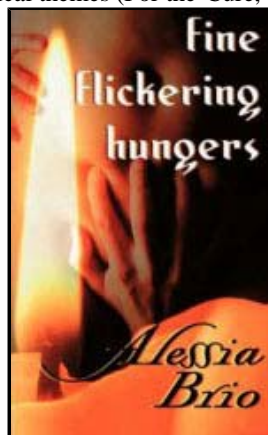
**Q:** The question to end all questions. Five years from now: What are your plans, and hopes for Coming Together, in terms of destination? There are no certainties in life, as anthological themes (For the Cure, With Pride, etc) suggest, but there is a plan or defined destination for work/projects. What's yours?

**Alessia:** Ideally, I would like to see Coming Together as a thriving non-profit business producing at least two anthologies each year. I want to embrace audio and visual arts as well. We can easily produce greeting cards, prints, and other merchandise. Art auctions are a very real possibility. While I would prefer it remain a 100% volunteer organization, I realize that may not be feasible. I need more help now, and that need is only going to increase as Coming Together grows. The more time and energy I pump into it, the less I have available for efforts to support myself. It's a paradox. Coming Together feeds my soul, but I need an income to feed my body.

On a personal level, I want my creative endeavors to generate enough income to eliminate the need for outside employment. That may take a couple years unless I hit the lottery. Health insurance is the biggest obstacle to that objective. I work much harder and am far more productive when I'm my own boss.

**Lucrezia Magazine:** Lucrezia Mag: Alessia it's been a pleasure to explore this series with you, to gain awareness of your plans and the steps taken to produce a noted series of anthologies which aim to address issues prevalent in society. We wish you the best everything, and we're sure we'll be hearing more about this project.

**Alessia:** Thank you! I've enjoyed it a great deal, and I appreciate the opportunity to talk at such length about a project so close to my heart!



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**Alessia Brio** is, first and foremost, an activist. No matter what's going on in her life, she'll find a way to organize those involved and inject an element of altruism. If she didn't have basic needs like food and shelter, she'd probably spend all her time volunteering for one cause or another. Even her nom de plume reflects her nature. Alessia is an Italian name derived from the Greek verb *alexin* meaning "to defend/protect" and Brio relates to the Italian musical term *con brio* meaning "with spirit/brilliance."

In addition to serving as Coming Together's editor, Alessia writes all colors and flavors of erotica, from heterosexual to ménage to same sex, and from twisted to humorous to deeply touching. (Sometimes, usually by accident, it even qualifies as romance.) Her work has earned her critical acclaim in the form of an EPPIE for Best Erotica (**fine flickering hungers**) and a Romantic Times Top Pick (**Coming Together: For the Cure**) in addition to a plethora of glowing online reviews.

Ms. Brio lives in the mountains near Pittsburgh, where she masquerades as a soccer mom. Her fetishes include SuDoku, rare steak, and stainless steel. She stands 5'8" tall in her bare feet (which is how she prefers to stand) and has a mop of unruly dark hair that is being conquered by grey, complementing the laugh lines around her mischievous eyes.

The Internet is both her office and her playground, and she can be found online at [alessiabrio.com](http://alessiabrio.com) in

addition to **MySpace** and a few other sites.

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