



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Linda Niemann's 'Boomer' tells of her colorful, if difficult, past.

1990 AUTHORS Railroad woman writes it down

By CHRIS WATSON
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THE ROAD leading to Linda Niemann's Aptos house is lined with trailers — trailers which announce Niemann's transient attitude to hearth and home.

Inside the white stucco house lounges Niemann's pet cat Boomer who just happens to sport the same name as Niemann's first novel.

"Boomer," the University of California's lead title for spring 1990, is Niemann's autobiographical account of eight years she spent working for the railroad. Currently, though, Niemann is enjoying the free time that many "rails" enjoy during off-season winter months. She is no longer a "boomer" — a rail worker who travels to places that are booming in order to work. For now, Niemann works out of local freightyards.

Although Niemann has been working for the railroad for the last ten years, she hasn't always lived such a physically demanding lifestyle. In 1967, when she began her studies at UC Santa Cruz, poetry was her line of work. (She admits she "sneaked" some of her poetry into the book). When she and her then-husband moved to Berkeley, Niemann began work on her doc-

toriture. Along with the tho her dissertation, the completion of her manuscript moved back to

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few younging around for a crowd a very party-time ward he was on a down-a div gotten a Ph.D. and fancy ltaneously. The terializ job never ma-Cruz geing around Santa Soon I w my neighbors. band, e flute in a street and spent sandwiches, dancing night in clubs room way. My living musician grippers, poets, ually the dealers. Grad- more drugs music and was living a few years I shack, my puntains in a dogs had oved out, my was a wreck my Chevy of myself as gh I thought such as it w the money, and none of om dealing. The time w worked."

Niemann found change and advertisement in an brakeman. a train

Although the billed by the publisher a biography,

Niemann wrote it primarily as a book about the railroad.

"All the journeys, the returns, the getting sober gave the book a dramatic shape," she said, "but it's really a story about railroading through the filter of autobiography."

Niemann begins the book with her first job as a brakeman at the Watsonville junction with its freight of fruits and vegetables. Niemann tells of the inside-out life of freight trains running at night, of hitting the bars at dawn.

Later she worked in the complex, criss-cross yards of Los Angeles, the petrochemical yards of Strang, Utah, the lonely but beautiful yards of Tucumcari, N.M., and all the junctions in between — Houston, Tucson, El Paso, Alamogordo.

Niemann worked hard during those years and more than a little of the work was because she was in such a male-dominated profession. But she didn't quit, even after the grueling first year ended.

"I don't quit stuff," she explained during an interview, "I keep going until I figure out a way to make it work. I'm an oppositional type ... just tell me I can't do something, and ..." Niemann trails off with thoughts of conquest to come.

While more radical feminists might be tempted to confront men about their macho attitudes toward women, Niemann prefers to accommodate them. "You can't really tell anybody anything. And besides," she added, "hostility interferes with getting to know each other."

IN "BOOMER," the life of a rail-roader is dramatically and picturesquely drawn.

Niemann writes of how "the unpredictability of trains created intense personal longing," explains how railroads mirror the state of the economy and confesses that "railroad work had made me aware of my dependence on other people."

On one page, she describes the beauty of an early morning run coasting down a grade only to profile, on the next page, the grimy, dirty side: "Wet from sweating in raingear and from water running down our arms as we held onto side ladders, feeling like deep sea divers as we tried to walk in boots encased in rubber overshoes caked with mud, gloves sopping wet, completely exhausted ..."

In the ten years since Niemann started work on the railroads, a lot of changes have occurred in the

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Author/ Men may be shocked

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business. She cites, especially, that crew size has dwindled from five to two, that technology continues to replace people, that the caboose has slowly been retired. And since 1979, the Watsonville yard hasn't hired anyone new. "I haven't gained any seniority!" she said, with a laugh.

In ten years, a lot of changes have occurred in her life, too. Foremost is Niemann's hard-won sobriety, the major sub-theme of her book. The first draft through, she didn't have enough courage to disclose those discouraging times.

"The chapter on hitting bottom was too awful. But I had to go back. Even then, I didn't write it as bad as it was."

Disclosure of her bi-sexuality was difficult, too. "The weight of internal censorship was there. These parts were hard."

Even after all that hard work, she readily admitted, "It's not as

honest as it could have been."

Niemann surmises that the sexual disclosures will shock a lot of male readers but that it's time for women to be totally honest about their lives.

"It's important to say everything. (It's) part of building a tradition ... women have so few traditions."

It's not surprising that, when asked if she feels good when she's writing, Niemann laughed out loud and answers, resoundingly, "No! It's hard work."

She continued, "I don't think there's any such thing as truth, but when you're writing, you're in the presence of it and you try to find what sounds true. It will be a mirror to you."

WHAT LIES in store for the woman who owns close to 20 pairs of boots, including a flashy fuschia pair?

Niemann wants to continue writ-

ing, of course, and hopes to finish some stories she culled from her two years on Amtrak passenger lines. She also wants to check out more of the Western landscapes that have captured her imagination since childhood. — perhaps spending time in Nevada for the wild mustang roundups, perhaps studying the politics of water in the west, perhaps concentrating on rivers of the West.

AT THE END of "Boomer," a river guide tells Niemann's alter-ego Gypsy, "... trails never end. When you come to the end of a trail, it means you've lost it somewhere."

Niemann might leave railroading for other interests, but her work will remain the same: to blend nature, literature and "what's under the trap-door of my psyche" into an integrated whole.