

Felicity Mason/Anne Cumming
A Brief Biography and Interview
 by Jennie Skerl

Introduction

Felicity Anne Mason, who wrote under the pen name of Anne Cumming, makes brief appearances in the biographies of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs as an informant and background figure. She was an occasional part of the post-WWII bohemian scene in Tangier, Morocco, and was a friend of both Gysin and Burroughs when they lived in Paris and London. Her own base was Rome, where she worked in the film industry. Later in life, when she was in her sixties and seventies, she published her sexual memoirs. Mason's life and writing are relatively unknown because she has been overshadowed by her more famous friends, and her memoirs were published well before the current popularity of life writing. It seems appropriate, therefore, to introduce my interview with Mason with a biographical essay to inform readers about this unusual woman.

Biography of Felicity Mason/Anne Cumming

Felicity Anne Cumming was born into an upper-class English family in 1917. She spent her early childhood in South Africa, where her father was a landowner. When her parents divorced, she and her mother lived on the French Riviera where Mrs. Cumming socialized amongst a glamorous set that included Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Cumming was educated at a boarding school in Kent and a Swiss finishing school. When she was presented at court in 1935, she was considered one of the most beautiful debutantes of that year. She studied dance in Paris and drama in London. In 1938, Cumming married Henry Lyon Young, a relative of the Queen Mother, whom she met at Michael Chekhov's drama school at Dartington Hall. They were married for ten years and had two daughters. During the war, the Lyon Youngs lived in New York City, following Chekhov, who moved to the U.S. to teach the Stanislavski method to American actors. When war broke out, the couple was recruited by British Intelligence in New York and eventually sent back to London by convoy during the war. Felicity Lyon Young worked at decoding ciphers and messages between the British and American governments.

In 1948, Felicity divorced Henry Lyon Young and married Richard Mason, author of *The World of Suzie Wong*, a best-selling novel which was also the basis for a successful play and film. There were no children from this ten-year marriage. In the early 1950's, Felicity Mason worked in London as an interpreter for visiting VIPs. She and her husband moved to Rome in the fifties, where she first taught English, before pursuing a career in Italian cinema as an English dialogue coach and public relations manager, sometimes playing bit parts. After her second divorce, Felicity Mason continued to use her name from her second marriage, but published her sexual memoirs under the name of Anne Cumming. She no doubt chose to do so to avoid embarrassing her family

and friends, who are also given pseudonyms in the memoirs. During and after her marriage to Mason, Felicity embarked on a life of liberated sex with numerous lovers, some single encounters and some long-term affairs—most notably with set designer Beni Montresor. Her quest for sexual pleasure with many partners was sometimes combined with adventurous travel in North Africa and the Middle East. Her unconventional sex life took place in the context of maintaining a family life with children and ex-husbands and a gregarious social life that included English and Italian aristocrats, theater and movie people, and bohemian artists such as Brion Gysin and William Burroughs.

Mason met Gysin in Morocco in 1953. Upon their first encounter, they found that they came from similar backgrounds, had had similar experiences, and knew many of the same people. Both were born in the same part of England, went to English boarding schools, lived in New York during the war, had been involved in the theater there, and worked for intelligence. Both worked in the arts, and Mason enjoyed friendships with bohemian artists and gay men whose attitudes towards sexuality were similar to her own. Mason and Gysin declared themselves to be brother and sister. They often introduced each other in this manner, and remained friends throughout their lives—unusual for Gysin, a declared misogynist. Mason knew Gysin's friends and lovers in Morocco, and later in Paris during the Beat Hotel period, and then in London when Gysin was collaborating with William Burroughs and Antony Balch, whom she also came to know well. From the 1950s on, Rome was Mason's home base, and Gysin visited her when he had exhibitions there. She admired his painting and helped to catalog his work towards his end of his life. When Gysin died in Paris in 1986, Mason made the funeral arrangements; she also organized a ceremony to disperse his ashes at the Caves of Hercules in Tangier, Morocco.

Mason was one of Gysin's intimates and a resource for biographers and critics. She described Gysin (as "Max") in her memoir, *The Love Quest*, which also includes a description of Burroughs when he was living at the Beat Hotel. She contributed a reminiscence of Gysin and Burroughs, entitled "Here To Come", to *The Final Academy* (1982), a collection edited by Genesis P-Orridge and devoted to Burroughs, Gysin, and their influence. Mason is cited several times in John Geiger's biography of Gysin, *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin* (2005).

In later life, Mason became known in her own right as the author of two sexual memoirs: *The Love Habit* and *The Love Quest*, both published under the name of Anne Cumming. The two books together chronicle twenty-five years of sexual adventures from 1952 to 1976. *The Love Habit*, written first and published in 1978, covers the years 1966 to 1976; *The Love Quest*, published in 1991, begins in 1952 and ends in 1966 at the point where *The Love Habit* begins. *The Love Quest* is the more interesting book, not least because it describes her relationships with her husbands, Gysin (as "Max"), Burroughs, and Montresor (as "Rudi"). The book also narrates Mason's travel adventures in North Africa and the Middle East, during the 1950s, where independent

women travelers were rare. She journeyed on her own to remote places, avoided first-class hotels and colonial society, struck up friendships and sampled lovers among the locals. This volume also gives some explanation for her sexual activity: her second husband lost his ardor for her and encouraged her to find lovers, and her subsequent long-term relationship with Montresor was disrupted by his decision to commit to another man. Mason decided that pursuing temporary liaisons that she could control was preferable to a monogamous relationship concluding in indifference or abandonment. All this is conveyed in Mason's version of the very English "stiff upper lip", in that she accepts rejection philosophically, maintains lifelong friendships with ex-husbands and ex-lovers, pursues a career in the Italian film industry, and builds a sociable single life. Similarly, Mason's description of travel to remote or dangerous destinations, and her potentially risky sexual encounters with strangers, are conveyed with the sangfroid of the intrepid explorer (traditionally male). The unstated purpose of the book is to show that a woman of her age and class and era could be as independent, adventurous, and sexually promiscuous as a man. (Mason practiced an ethic of sexual liberation before the sixties with the insouciance of the much later *Sex and the City* television series.) *The Love Habit* is a year-by-year chronicle of Mason's sex life with younger men in the decade of her fifties, with the stated goal of showing that women over fifty are still attractive and can have active sex lives with young men. These later adventures occur in the context of her cinema work and family life in Rome, Paris, and London. Although both memoirs are devoted to narrating sexual activity with many men, the style cannot be called pornographic in that there are no detailed graphic descriptions, and the tone of general equanimity does not invite titillation. Moreover, Mason reiterates many times that the only sex that she enjoys is heterosexual vaginal or oral sex with one man at a time (with a few exceptions which are dismissed as such, and as being not particularly exciting), and her general attitude is one of pursuit of mutual pleasure in the spirit of good, clean fun. Hedonism is tempered by a matter-of-fact tone and an emphasis on "normal" sex. Concerns about contraception or sexually transmitted diseases are conspicuously absent from her narratives. Furthermore, the strict chronological structure and plain straightforward style have a dulling effect. The only parallel with pornography is that each book concludes with encounters that could be seen as classic erotic climaxes, but, typically, Mason deflates these episodes. The penultimate chapter of *The Love Quest* describes Mason's attendance at an orgy in Paris, which she finds humorless, lacking in spontaneity, and consequently boring. There is titillation in this episode, not because of group sex, but because a well-known French statesman is present with his wife (not identified in the book). The last chapter describes a passionate affair with a "dangerous" man, a gangster who verges on physically threatening—but who ultimately proves not to be a sadist and who dies in a gun battle with the police, conveniently removing himself from Mason's life. *The Love Habit* concludes with Mason in a film role having sex with a much younger black man on the movie set in which simulated

sex for the movie becomes real as the cameras roll. This scene is deflated by Mason's bemused, passive acceptance of the unexpected transition.

The memoirs are not accompanied by any particular psychological or philosophical insights. Occasional generalizations about men or sex or nationalities consist of the usual common-places or stereotypes. Nor does Mason engage in polemics about sexual freedom, feminism, or sexual politics. No one every questions or opposes her sexual activity. Friends—both male and female—assure her that her promiscuity is a normal and harmless expression of her vivacious personality. There are mild pleas from her adult daughters to settle down and act her age, which she rejects by referring to the sexual liberation of the sixties as justification for her behavior. This defense is rather flimsy since Mason's sexual odyssey began well before the cultural revolution of the sixties when she herself was already middle-aged. Rather, she seems to be in the tradition of the free-spirited upper-class Englishwoman whose secure social status, education, and manners enabled an unconventional lifestyle within a conventional façade. In her obituaries, her daughters described her as an eccentric, placing her in that traditional English stereotype. Publication of her memoirs gave Mason some notoriety in England (the *News of the World* called her "the randy granny"), and in her later years she seemed to enjoy engaging in exhibitionism. Whereas the 1978 memoir displays a picture of the middle-aged, broadly smiling Mason in a turtleneck and scarf; the 1991 memoir, in contrast, has a picture of her on the back cover in pearls and fur, a deep décolletage implying nothing under the fur, and a Mona Lisa smile. Even more striking is the photo spread across the inside front and back covers: Mason reclines bare-breasted in the same fur and jewels with a seductive expression and looking much younger than she did in 1978. In 1992, she posed topless for the *Sunday Sport* under the title "Stunnagran!" In 1993, a few months before she died, she appeared on TV in a Valentine's Day nude chat show to make the point that older people are sexual beings. Felicity Mason was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986. She gave up sex but did not speak publicly about having AIDS until just before her death in August 1993. Obituaries in British newspapers were published under her pen name of Anne Cumming.

Interview with Felicity Mason by Jennie Skerl

The interview with Felicity Mason took place by telephone on June 17, 1985. Mason was in New York City. A gallery was exhibiting some paintings by Brion Gysin at that time, and she was cataloging some of his work. She agreed to be interviewed about Brion Gysin as part of my research on writers and artists in Tangier after World War II. Earlier that summer, I had traveled to Tangier to interview Paul Bowles. I had also corresponded with Gysin in 1985 and conducted a mail interview with him (published in *Brion Gysin: Who Runs May Read*, edited by Theo Green, Oakland, CA: Inkblot, 2000). In 1985, there was no biography of Gysin, and it was difficult to see his paintings as they were almost entirely in private hands. In fact, Gysin's first retrospective

was shown at the New Museum in New York in 2010. (My review of John Geiger's biography of Gysin and the exhibit at the New Museum was published in *The Beat Review* (vol. 4, issue, 4, December 2010.) In 1985, I was only vaguely aware that Mason had written about her sexual experiences under a pen name and had not read the 1978 memoir. Although this interview took place over twenty years ago, it remains of interest because of the portrait of Gysin by one of his closest friends and the details about Mason herself and her experiential study of sexuality.

JS: Perhaps you could begin by telling me about your background and Brion Gysin's background because you've said that there are similarities. I'm interested in Brion's family background because I haven't been able to find out much about that.

FM: Well, of course, you'll have to ask Brion about himself. Both our families were upper-middle class people. And during the war—the First World War—because of the zeppelins both our families decided to move just outside of London. London was being slightly bombed—of course, nothing like the Second World War. In the First World War, it was considered a little dangerous in London, so our families moved out to Berkshire. I was in Walton-on-Thames and Brion's family was in Taplow, the next village down on the Thames, less than an hour from London, now almost a suburb of London, then rather countrified, rather beautiful. I was born there and left there when the war was over, which was when I was two. So neither of us remembers that period at all. Obviously, this was a similar upper-middle-class life with servants, nice houses. I have been back to see the house where I was born. We had a charming Georgian house, a walled garden. I assume Brion's family was in similar type of circumstances. Later, we were both sent to expensive private schools. So, I am just presuming since I did not know his family then, that we came from the same kind of background and our parents lived the same kind of life.

JS: Was Brion a British citizen, then? I can't figure out his citizenship.

FM: Yes, he was British, born in England of a Canadian mother and a Swiss father. He was British because he was born in England, and his mother being Canadian was British. He had a British passport. The father didn't come back from the war, so he remained with his mother, a British subject. Canadians were British. His life might have been different had his father not died. He might have gone elsewhere and done other things. He was the child of a British mother who continued to live in England for a time and then I think she went to Canada. She sent Brion to one of the best English private schools, a Catholic school. His father must have been a good Catholic. I don't think that she was a very religious lady. He went to Downside. I also went to private schools. And then, when our schooling was over, the Second World War was omnipresent and we both, for different reasons, went to America, Brion I think in 1938 and I went in 1939.

I, by that time, was married. I was just 20. Brion worked in the New York theater with Irene Sharaff, a famous costume designer for the theater.

JS: Did he design costumes?

FM: Yes. He had, as a very young man, been in Paris for a time.

JS: Yes, I know about that. I intend to ask you more about Paris.

FM: Yes, well, after the Paris period, he came to New York working with Irene Sharaff. Then the war broke out and we both did war jobs. I went into the intelligence service. Brion for a time—a very short time—worked as a welder on battleships. Then he, too, went into the intelligence—the American intelligence. I was in British intelligence. By this time, he decided he would be an American and he joined the American armed forces which gave him American nationality. That is how he became an American citizen. During the war he learned Japanese and was an interpreter with Japanese prisoners. That was his war situation.

JS: What did you do?

FM: I worked for British intelligence in New York City until the Americans came into the war. We did a lot of intelligence for you because you were supposed to be neutral. I worked for the British Security Corporation which was just a front for British intelligence. At one time I worked in decoding ciphers and was decoding messages between Roosevelt and Churchill. After Pearl Harbor, you came into the war and that whole section was taken over by your intelligence service. Then I went back to England in the middle of the war—by convoy. That's my story. Brion went back to Europe immediately after the war, back to Paris where he had been before and eventually he got to Tangier.

JS: Yes, I understand he first met Paul Bowles and Jane Bowles in Paris.

FM: Yes, that's right. He went to Tangier, decided that he liked it, stayed on, did various things there, a lot of which he fictionalized in his book, *The Process*. And it was there that I first saw him—in Tangier.

JS: You said this was 1953?

FM: Yes. He was giving a show [of his paintings]. I went in and saw his paintings—one of which I'm looking at this minute—across the room in my sitting room.

JS: So what were you doing in Tangier?

FM: I went on a holiday. I knew people there, and they said this is an interesting art show and you are interested in art, go see it. And from there, I went up to Marrakech and I was

surprised to find Brion there. The show was over and he went up to Marrakech where he lived for a time and then went further up into the desert. But we were in Marrakech together, I guess for about a month during that period when we first met. And that was when we really got to know each other well and began to enjoy each other's company a great deal.

JS: When was this in 1953?

FN: March.

JS: So, have you spent a lot of time in Tangier?

FM: Yes. After that I met Brion again in Paris or Rome. I honestly can't remember the sequence of our friendship. He had shows in Rome twice when he was in his late thirties. I went to Paris at least twice a year. At that time, I used to travel between Rome and London great deal and I always passed through Paris, so I would always see him in Paris in the Beat Hotel period, which was when I met William Burroughs. And then Brion used to come to Italy and then we went off on a trip through Tunisia and Libya together—all this in the late fifties, early sixties. Then, of course, Brion lived for some time in Duke Street, St. James, in London in an apartment above William's apartment in the same building.

JS: Yes, when exactly was that?

FM: There was a small block of apartments where a great friend of ours, now dead, Antony Balch, lived. Antony was a great collector of Brion's work, too. And Brion I think now has those works that were Antony's. Antony bought a lot of things and was a great friend of William's and of Brion's. He also contributed to their financial help, actually. He found them apartments in this building where he lived. And they both lived there for a time, slightly subsidized by Antony.

JS: Do you know when that was?

FM: About the sixties.

JS: You've known all these people in different periods. I'm interested in hearing your memories of what the personalities were like and what Tangier was like.

FM: Did you read the piece I wrote in *The Final Academy* called "Here to Come"? I must find that and send it to you.

JS: No. Is it your memoir then?

FM: Sort of, about them both. The thing is that when one knows people well and they are just your friends, you don't look at them with the kind of eyes you wished you had later had you known they were going to become public figures or cult figures, and famous. So, to me, they were just friends and I've always had the tendency to like intellectual, interesting, and different types of people—eccentric—let's put it that

way. William I didn't know too well at the time because he was really heavily on drugs and just lying in a darkened room and not really going out and about very much. So I didn't meet William really until later properly until the Beat Hotel days and he had just kicked his habit and had taken the apomorphine cure and was at that time a very quiet, charming, "normal" person. William has always to me just been a very nice, bright, but quiet, introvert man. Now, I believe that in his early Tangier period—not the second Tangier period when he was living with Ian Sommerville and I met him again—I understand that in the early days William could be the life and soul of the party. He is still very witty in a rather sarcastic, ironic way, but with little asides out of the corner of his mouth—you know those quiet, little deadpan, toss away remarks that William makes. But there was a time when he was more extrovert and outgoing and a very funny man.

JS: In the fifties?

FM: Earlier, in the forties, during the war, I would say, and just after, maybe into the fifties. When the change came in his personality I don't know, obviously I should think [it was] drug related. But I really didn't see him or know him very particularly during that period. It wasn't until he, shall we say, calmed down and went through the apomorphine cure that I met him and then we went around together and ate quite a lot together. He was with Brion a great deal and Brion said he had written this absolutely fantastic manuscript that he, Brion, was helping to edit and get together and how difficult it was to do and that he thought was very publishable. He finally got it to Girodias and Girodias thought so, and, of course, as you know, it came out. [She is referring to the manuscript of *Naked Lunch*.]

JS: Did you see the manuscript at that time?

FM: No, I didn't actually see the manuscript. It was under William's bed in cardboard boxes in the Beat Hotel. That I was told, but I didn't actually see it. I very seldom went to William's room. I was always in Brion's room which was where all the social events took place and we all sat around on the bed. And Brion was designing his dreamachine and taking pictures and living with someone called Mohammed Larbi who was from Tangier and who, as far as I know, is back in Tangier.

JS: This brings up a question. I wanted to ask about Brion's involvement with drugs.

FM: Well, he's never been on heavy drugs, never ever—very against it—he's not averse to taking a little sniff of cocaine but his thing has always just been smoking pot which to him is just like smoking cigarettes or taking a drink.

JS: So did he do a lot of kif smoking in Tangier as does everyone else who lives there?

FM: Well, yes, it was just a way of life, just as people take an ordinary cigarette. It didn't seem to be, looking at it from the outside, that it was in any way changing their personalities or their lives. To me, it never seemed to put people into altered states. The only time I ever tried it had absolutely no effect on me, so I just didn't know why everybody was bothering.

JS: Well, you know, I noticed that. I was just in Morocco. I spent quite a bit of time in Paul Bowles apartment. He was smoking one kif cigarette after another, chain-smoking them, every evening the whole time I was there, and it had absolutely no noticeable effect on him that I could tell.

FM: That was entirely my impression then and now. It had absolutely no noticeable effect on people, but maybe they thought it did. That it was sort of auto-intoxicating if you see what I mean. But I've always felt it was just part of their lifestyle—all of that Morocco/Tangier set. Everybody did it, including the Arabs, just like passing around ordinary cigarettes—which was rather healthier for them than ordinary cigarettes have now turned out to be. The health hazard was not something we thought about in the forties, fifties, and sixties. It was just something you did and that was it. And they would say it heightened the effect of things and just relaxed them, just the way people who take a drink or two say it helps them. Which has never helped me, either—it just puts me to sleep. But if everybody's dancing naked on tables, well, I would dance naked on tables, without taking drugs or taking a drink. I'm turned on by the atmosphere, the people I'm with, not by anything else. It seems to me that's what they were doing, they were inducing a congenial atmosphere, like smoking a pipe of peace, like talking themselves into feeling a little different. But maybe many of them were low pressure people who needed something.

JS: They were more introverted.

FM: Yes, they were introverted types and they needed something to get going, let's put it that way. They were not easily turned on by life itself.

JS: This leads to talking about some of the attractions of Tangier—especially in the fifties—which seemed to be the height of the expatriate scene with a number of writers and artists.

FM: Yes. Let's face it, writers and artists in general are introvert people, they are not performers. They are introverts, and that is why they write. They express themselves in writing because they can't talk it out. People who are great raconteurs, great performers in life, are like actors, that is their art. They don't necessarily sit down and go through that laborious process of bringing it out on paper or on canvas.

JS: That's true, writers are people who sit at home and write.

FM: People who are very extrovert and very social—on the whole don't need these other turn-ons. That is what I

have noticed and what I would have to say about all these people. Brion actually was rather different. He was always a great performer. He and I often said to each other in later years that we should have turned our talents as actors and performers to commercial use and not done other things; that is what we were really good at. Had there been TV when we were young, maybe we would have done. We were both involved in the theater in different ways. I started life as a stage designer, too, incidentally, then switched to other fields in the theater and cinema. Anyway, Brion was always different. He was very much the spokesman, he was the social orbit, he was the great host, it was always in his room or his apartment – wherever we were – where people would congregate. He gave great dinner parties even with very little money. Targuisti would do the cooking usually and Hamri, too. Brion has always been a social center point.

JS: I gathered that. I understand he is a real storyteller, a raconteur.

FM: Yes, he is extraordinary in that way. He doesn't fit into that pattern I was saying about the others who needed something outside of themselves to bring them out.

JS: That somewhat explains how he seems to be the man behind the scenes at all of those gatherings of people. It seems that he is someone who is always there and had a lot of influence on other people. He has become known to me secondarily in relation to other people and I'm only just now finding out about his own work.

FM: He was a great lateral influence on everybody because he was so verbal, because he was so cultured. He had extraordinary cultural knowledge. He was a walking encyclopedia on practically any subject—as is William, too, of course. He was a great host. Wherever he lived was always a center of everybody to drop in and congregate. So, of course, by his nature, by his presence, by the fact that he was a meeting point, he influenced everybody from that generation and the succeeding generation. Also, he was wonderfully handsome and elegant and dresses beautifully—and always has—in an interesting way. William has always had his same persona with his very good Peal shoes and his Lock hat and his very quiet middle-class three-piece suits—a very conservative way of dressing. William has always had that way of dressing.

JS: I'm curious about Brion's restaurant.

FM: Well, the restaurant was a part of Brion's life I never saw—because at that time I did not go to Tangier when he had that. The restaurant came about because Hamri took him up to Jajouka to see those musicians and Brion thought what a wonderful idea—to have a really good Moroccan restaurant with Moroccan music. So he found an old palace in the Casbah which is still there. I don't think anybody lives in it now. Anyway, he put it in order, he got it together, ran it beautifully. Everyone told me it was one of the great

restaurants in the world that they would remember all their lives. The music was beautifully handled, there were Moroccan dancing boys like a floor show, and the food was exquisite. Brion was the genial European host. And Hamri got together all the Moroccan side of it, found cooks, staff, personnel. And it was apparently a really great place. Then when nationalization came, they tried, naturally, to take away anything that somebody not Moroccan was doing. Businesses were to go to the Moroccan state, one. Number two, tourism stopped. Tangier was no longer a free port, so there was not so much reason for people to go to Tangier, which was a melting pot and clearing place for all kinds of nefarious dealings as well as business dealings. You know, it was a free port, no taxes. Lots of people went to live there to do business there, and it's so near Europe. So, suddenly, with all that, the precariousness of being a foreigner and running a business in Morocco was very difficult. It began losing money when it had been very successful before. Some people called Cook came forward and offered to loan Brion money to keep it running and put him back on his feet, and suddenly Brion discovered that they had, as it were, bought the restaurant. I can't remember the nefarious details. Of course, Brion sees things from his point of view. They obviously asked for some kind of guarantee in order to lend the money, or took it as a mortgage, you see. Suddenly, Brion found out that they owned the restaurant, not him, and at that point he pulled out and went to Paris forever, completely disenchanted with what had happened in Morocco and what had happened with his friends the Cooks.

JS: I wondered about the restaurant because it seems to me to be somewhat unusual for an artist to decide to open up a restaurant and go into business in that way.

FM: Well, I guess Brion needed money. He saw the potential, and he was living with Hamri who was very good at that kind of thing. Plus, as I said, Brion has always been the great host and a great meeting point. It was kind of a natural given his nature.

JS: Yes, that makes sense based on what you said about his personality.

FM: Yes, he was cashing in and making money at what he had been doing anyway—which was getting people together, being a social center. Anyway, back he goes to Paris, having lost the restaurant and leaving Hamri behind who could not get a passport to leave Morocco at that time. So, he ends up in Paris, rather disenchanted, without much money, and tried to get started all over again, which he did. And so begins the Beat Hotel period.

JS: So, you were visiting the Beat Hotel and meeting everybody there. It must have been quite a scene.

FM: Yes, it was quite a scene, but again, as I say, they were just my rather eccentric friends. It didn't occur to me then that they would all become famous—rather the contrary—some

of them O.D'd and dropped out. One thought they were not going to make it. One thought they were part of a subculture which was always going to be struggling, impoverished artists. Little did I think that they were going to become established figures.

JS: It seems that, in the sixties, when Brion was doing performance art and exhibiting, he must have been getting a lot of attention in Paris at that time.

FM: Yes, he was doing quite well. He never had enough money and he always lived from hand to mouth, but he was becoming a cult figure, no question about that. He had a couple of exhibitions in Rome at good galleries there. He was moving around, and we would link up whenever we could. Then came the London period. Again, he was much visited by everybody, did whatever work he could, and sold things as he went along. He's always been his own best salesman—which is how I came to acquire my collection like all his other friends. We loved what he was doing, and when we could afford it, we would buy something. That's what he lived on.

JS: Then apparently he went back to Tangier around 1965 and stayed there again for quite a while pretty continuously.

FM: Yes, he had had this feeling that he did not want to go back to Tangier, that it was all over, that he had burnt his boats there, and Tangier was not the same. I said to Brion, that's ridiculous. Let us go for a holiday. It was I who insisted that he go back to Tangier and get over that sort of trauma which he had and visit old friends. So, one summer, we took off together. I picked him up in Paris, or perhaps London. We went to Tangier and took a little apartment together in the new part of Tangier, in the French part of Tangier, for the summer. And that was my summer holiday. And I then left Brion there. He decided to stay on. That's when he began to start living in Tangier again. In an apartment near the Atlas hotel which is where he hurt his foot.

JS: What happened to his foot?

FM: He was back living in Tangier with Targuisti very much in attendance. He was riding on the back of somebody's motorcycle when a car coming towards them veered into the motorcycle and mangled Brion's foot. He had to have a toe off and some surgical work. I was making a movie in Spain at the time (I was involved in cinema work), so when the movie was over I went over and spent a short holiday there to see how he was. That's when I saw him at that period. I think that was the period when William was also living there with Ian Sommerville. I saw very much more of all of them later in London—William, Brion, Ian. Ian was working on the finalization of the dreamachine with Brion at that time in London in the swinging sixties.

JS: You had said before that you had gone to Jajouka?

FM: Yes, I went up with Hamri. During that time that Brion

and I took an apartment together, Brion live with Targuisti and I lived, more or less, with Hamri.

Hamri took me for what he called our honeymoon up to Jajouka. So I was there just with Hamri which was a fascinating experience to go up there with somebody from Jajouka. I was up there for the Bou Jeloud ceremony.

JS: You were? When was this?

FM: In the sixties I guess—whatever that year was when Brion and I took the apartment together. I have some paintings in Rome that Brion did from our window then.

JS: Were you as impressed with this ritual as everybody seems to have been?

FM: Yes, I was. It's about the most interesting ethnic ritual I've ever seen apart from some tribal dances I saw in Kenya once. One's impressed because they're so different, so carefully evolved, and so strange. You feel as if you are really going back in time to see the primitive man, believing in strange gods. It's like being transplanted back thousands of years, watching the kind of worship that man did in pagan times before Jesus Christ.

JS: I did see a film of this with a long sequence showing Bou Jeloud.

FM: I was allowed to wander between the two groups—both the men and the women. I can't pinpoint the year, but it was the year that everyone was doing the twist.

JS: The early sixties.

FM: That's right. I was showing the ladies how to do the twist, and they were showing me how to dance what they were doing. What they were doing was not dissimilar from the twist. We were laughing over the fact that it was very similar. They said how do you dance in Europe? And I said we do have a lot of different dances but we also have one that is very like yours. And I can remember doing the twist and all laughing. I then I would go back to the men's group and see all that business with the Bou Jeloud. The women did not take part in that. They had their own part, but this was in another part of the same field on the hillside.

JS: This goes on for several days doesn't it?

FM: Yes, it does, but there is one main evening.

JS: This is one thing I want to devote a lot of space to in the book—that Brion discovered this group and took everyone up there and a whole mythology evolved.

FM: Brion himself had the cultural background and knowledge to appreciate it and realize it for what it was, which was really the rites of Pan.

JS: Yes. The connection with Lupercal is one that just pops right into your mind when you read a description of what goes on.

FM: Yes. It is Lupercalian. Yet some other person, some other tourist just passing through would have seen just some savage dances, would not have realized what was going on, would not have spoken enough Arabic to question people, and would not have had the inquiring mind to piece it all together. That is what Brion did. And he was living with Hamri who came from there and who could tell him what it was all about. It's as if you suddenly came from another world and you saw Christianity going on in the churches. If you were come from Mars you would wonder, what the hell is this? You would have to have somebody explain it to you. Brion was, as it were, from another world and had the person who could explain it to him. If you came from Mars and asked me what Christianity was all about, I'd have difficulty in telling you. It needs a reinterpretation. What I would tell the person from Mars about Christianity, they would have to reinterpret it the light of their background and their intellectual understanding. You can only explain things in terms of what you do know and what you are and where you come from. So, it was fortunate for us all that Brion was coming from a certain background and had the intelligence and the curiosity and the sensitivity to know what was going on. Otherwise, he would have just thought this was another local feast and passed on. But it certainly was a little more than that. It was rooted in a whole lot of other things. This was a kind of holy place where there had been this marabout where people brought mad people in the hopes that they would be cured. And they were left chained to this little temple, a shrine. So it had been a place of pilgrimage in Morocco for some time. It had all kinds of significance other than just a party once a year.

JS: The other thing I was wondering about was whether there were any other groups that interested Brion [i.e. the brotherhoods in Morocco].

FM: I don't know how interested Brion was in other groups although he certainly must have come into contact with them with his particular interests, must have studied them and known quite a lot about them. Plus it starts from his research into slavery because the Arabs were great slave traders. Brion's Fulbright was to write a book about slavery, which he did. That is what first opened up the Arab world to him.

JS: I'm really glad you said that because I keep trying to make a connection in my mind between his interest in slavery which he seemed to just drop once he had finished the book.

FM: Once he had written his book, he did just drop it. It was for him a limited subject, for which he wrote his Fulbright book. I know that Brion was still interested in slavery because there's a famous book about the East Coast of Africa. I've read it myself (can't remember the title). Both Brion and William were very interested in that man's account, an American or

English or French traveler who wrote about slave trading. And then the assassins in Iran.

JS: Yes, that's another one of his interests.

FM: Yes, that's another one of his interests, and they also were connected in some way with slavery.

JS: This is interesting that you're making those connections.

FM: His mind went off in tangents, starting with slavery, which brought him into the Moorish part of Spanish life and into the slave trade in general. His mind then went off in tangents into other things Arabic. The Moor became much more fascinating to him than slavery. That was only just one small facet of the merchant type of Arab. Brion then got much more into the Arabic and Koranic culture rather than their commercial dealings which is all that slavery is.

JS: That makes sense, that's very helpful.

FM: I'm glad [I helped]—inadvertently. But I never thought very much about these things myself. As I said before, you go along with friendships, you take an interest in what your friends are doing. Of course, by that time they've become such an intimate part of your life. You don't see them as the outside world would see them, nor do you always share in everything that they're doing. They're just there. Once somebody is completely rooted in your life as a friend or, in this case, really as a brother, you don't criticize any more, which means that you don't look at them in the same way anymore. I rather wish I could stand apart or had stood apart at various times and kept a diary and written about them.

JS: Yes, if only you had known and been keeping your diary back in 1953!

FM: Exactly. I wasn't even writing then myself. I was off on a completely different tangent, living a completely different life with completely different people, being married, bringing up children, and so forth. I was attracted to these people as friends and visited them whenever I could, but they were not part of my life. We weren't working together, we weren't living together. I was a visitor, a visitor from another planet, but a particularly interested visitor. A best friend who lives in another world, in another country, but who comes to visit you every so often and you take up just where you left off as if you had never been apart. But I wasn't there. I was always living literally in another country. I was living in Italy, and they were in Paris or Morocco.

JS: I'd like to ask you about their sexuality if you are willing to talk about that. Not in a gossipy sense, but it's something I have to deal with.

FM: I know what you mean. Of course you do. I would say that both William and Brion are very misogynistic. They really do not like women.

JS: Yes, I did want to ask about that.

FM: Physically, it was possible for them in their youth to go to bed with women as many men of that age group. [R1] Homosexuality was very closeted. You did try hard to follow the conservative norm and be interested in women. That was the thing to do at that period—the Scott Fitzgerald, Gatsby, 1920s bright young things period—which they followed—they came immediately after that. That [period—the 1920s] opened up promiscuity among heterosexuals—between the girls and the men. They all intermingled, and even homosexual young men found it possible in that psychological and social climate of sex at that period (and sex is in the mind) to sleep with women, although that was not their real taste. Even Oscar Wilde was married and had children. I think Oscar Wilde liked women. People like William and Brion never liked women. They were probably taken over by very bossy women—there's a certain type of fag hag type woman who likes homosexuals, who is a very dominating and manipulative woman, and who will take things by the horn and literally push them into bed. And I suspect that – well I knew Brion's friend who did or did not have his child. I didn't know William's wife, of course. She'd been shot before I met William. I would think they were both the new type of free-thinking, free love bohemian of the period, adventurous women who just took over men and that is how they got those two into bed. Otherwise, I really think they are basically completely homosexual, but in a very anti-airy fairy, effeminate kind of way. They hate people like transvestites, like Quentin Crisp, anybody who makes themselves look feminine they very much dislike.

JS: I'm glad you're telling me this. This is one question that I had. Of course, one of the reasons they were attracted to Tangier was because they could be more sexually free there, and I guess Moroccan culture did not have such a bias against homosexuality. But one thing I wondered about was that they were obviously part of a very bohemian world in the first place. And I thought that, in the world that they were living in, did they really feel so oppressed? Did they really have to hide it since they were living in very bohemian circles?

FM: Not in the circles in which they lived, but, of course, you do always rub up against other social groups, particularly if you are selling something, selling your art. Plus, you have parents, relatives, who can approve or disapprove. I think even today, even with gay liberation, there is still a backlash against homosexuality. So, I think it always exists, it does seem to threaten a lot of people still. Anyway, they were in the ancient line of Greek homosexuality, classic homosexuality—of the buddy-buddy system, of men as men, as manly men as friends, and women are of no account. Nothing to do with that effeminate subculture of homosexuality.

JS: I can see how Morocco would appeal.

FM: There are as many different types of homosexuality in the homosexual field as in the heterosexual field. Some

people don't realize that. Sometimes people don't realize that there are homosexuals who hate anal sex, for instance, who will not partake in it at all. They will just jerk each other off or whatever. Whereas there are plenty of heterosexuals who enjoy anal sex. There are a lot of men who have tried to figure out my ass in the course of my lifetime who have been absolutely normal heterosexual men and who enjoy that and I know women who enjoy it. I never have. But anyway, there are so many different types of homosexuality. William and Brion have always been on that very male side, as very masculine looking, very straight looking, although they have both of them been very uninhibited in bed sexually and have done all the things which are considered to be passive or effeminate, shall we say, on the sexual side. But they have not tried to be surrogate women. What you do physically sexually has nothing to do with what you do psychologically sexually. I know bisexual men who are very effeminate, who like to adopt children and become mothers, but yet dress in a masculine way and have marriages, relationships, with women, and are quite masculine, but in bed would become very passive. I've even been in bed with two men and seen what goes on. I've been surprised to see a man who was absolutely masculine with me, and very dominating, suddenly turn into an absolutely passive partner to another man. And it was very interesting to me, psychologically rather than physically, to see what they do in bed. One can see it in porn movies. That's why I wasn't too surprised to see it in real life taking place in front of my eyes. I didn't think it was particularly disgusting or amazing. It's the psychological change-over that interested me, say, in a person like Jan Morris who is such a quiet, intellectual, and interesting person, not a flaming queen. I've taken a great interest in all this type of sexuality myself just out of curiosity value, not that I fall into any of those interests myself. In fact, I can't get aroused by anything except the most normal and boring sex. I have an intellectual interest in it all and studied it all. I took a friend to Casablanca to have the operation and I watched the transsexual operation.

JS: You did?

FM: Yes, and I went through the whole psychological thing and saw her turn from a perfectly normal boy into a woman, bit by bit—hormone injections, silicone implants, and then finally the operation. So, I have a wider understanding of that whole field.

JS: I didn't know that Casablanca was one of the places where sex change operations were done.

FM: Yes. It wasn't legal in any other country. Dr. [Georges] Burou did the first operations. That's where Jan Morris had her operation, lots of people, Christine Jorgensen, and others. Anyway, to get back to Brion and William's homosexuality, that is all of a completely different type. They just like men. Also another angle is that it is so much easier. Men like fucking without fuss. Women want romance. They want something built into it, they want something to lead up

to it, they want this and that, and biologically women need something different. Women do not want the quickie—on the whole they want something different, and women play hard to get, or, if they don't play hard to get, they want commitment. They're just not interested in promiscuous sex. Even those of us who have been very promiscuous at certain times in our lives, we've been searching for something else. We have not just been having fun in the baths, in sex clubs. We have been searching for something else.

JS: On the question of misogyny, obviously Brion has been friends with you and with other women. Do you mean just in sexual relationships?

FM: No, he really does not like the company of women. One or two women he has been friendly with, but mainly because they have sought him out, and, of course, he does like the feeling of being worshipped. But I would say that basically he did not particularly like being with women. And that whole group finds the presence of women maybe slightly irritating sometimes. Something different happens when they're just all there together than when they're in social situations where there are women there, too. But there are many homosexuals who are not like that, who love women, who like to be with women a great deal, who identify with women. But they did not belong to that group. They belonged to the group of the assassins, shall we say. Male sex that goes by itself, gets away from children and women and homes and chattel, although they do get dragged into it sometimes. And Brion does sometimes take quite an interest in old friends' children, but just from the distant point of a visiting uncle, who would ask a few polite questions and that's it.

JS: What about Paul and Jane Bowles—did you know them?

FM: No. On my first visit to Tangier, Jane was still out and about and living with another woman, an Arab woman, and Paul was there, too. I never really knew them, maybe met them at some gathering. I knew Paul later when I was Hamri's mistress. We went to Asilah where Hamri had a little house actually. We stayed there for a bit and saw Paul every day for two or three days. But we were just there for a long weekend. I have through the years met Paul occasionally.

JS: You said you were Hamri's mistress. Was he a bisexual?

FM: Hamri really much prefers women, always has. He's always had women and wives, and even when he was living with Brion, he had women. Brion had to accept that. But he was very highly sexed and was willing to swing both ways. But he really liked women and still does. And I think later he never went to bed with men again. I think possibly Brion was maybe the only man in his life, or one of the only men in his life. Hamri has been a great womanizer always.

JS: Another person I wanted to ask you about is William Burroughs's son. Did you know him?

FM: I met him once, but he was by that time living in Denver next to his machine. [William Burroughs, Jr. had had a liver transplant.] William was quite a good father and was very fond of his son and did keep in touch throughout his son's life, and he was very concerned with him and was very upset when he died. Brion never even met his son—if it was his son. He has had those types of homosexual relationships that a lot of homosexuals have when they age-surrogate son relationships with their boyfriends. And they will take an interest in them even when the physical side is over. Maybe the boys go on to marry somebody or live with somebody else, but they still act like surrogate fathers to them. There is a certain amount of that in Brion's life and in William's life also.

JS: Yes, his relationship with James Grauerholz.

FM: James is the son that William would like to have, although his relationship with his son was really quite good. It just wasn't all-present. — Is there anything else?

JS: No, this has been excellent! We've been talking for over an hour.

[R1]This seems to have something missing but I wasn't sure what – didn't want to change the sense inadvertently...

<https://ebsn.eu/scholarship/interviews/felicity-masonanne-cumming-a-brief-biography-and-interview-jennie-skerl/>