Of course, in some of these films you don’t even get a glimpse of any actual nooky taking place, but the ‘lesbian’ character still swings. And yet, like so many other pathetic members of the sad and shadowy underworld of the invert, I’ve trundled off to see every single film with even a hint of a lesbian theme. Why do I keep fronting up to receive my punishment? I can only conclude that I’m hungry for images of my sexual reality on the screen. And I know I’m not alone. How else can we explain why so many sophisticated and cynical women gathered in excited groups all over the world to watch ‘the kiss’ on LA Law? One crummy kiss!

The Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and SBS television have provided some sustenance to the starving in recent years. But it’s the mainstream TV stations and movies that are going to reach the isolated adults and the majority of teenagers growing up with ‘those feelings’. These are the people who are searching for the language, images and ideas that can help them build a positive self-image and a comprehensive lifestyle.

Enough of the problem. Into this desert a few weeks ago came the BBC TV series Portrait of a Marriage (based on the book of the same name, by Nigel Nicolson).

One Sunday night I was driving home to Sydney through the Blue Mountains. The trucks were menacing and the road was wet, so my girlfriend and I pulled into a cheap motel to ‘revive and survive’. I turned on the telly and there were two women in bed, naked except for loose robes. They were looking at each other and smiling in a satisfied way. (I recognised the look, but I’d never seen it on the telly before.) Then the dark-haired woman (Vita Sackville-West, played by the lanky and magnificent Janet McTeer) pushed open the blonde’s (Violet Trefusis, played by the seductive and insistent Cathryn Harrison) robe with her toe, revealing her naked breast. I cried out to my girlfriend to come to the screen: “Something’s happening on the telly!”

A moment later Violet was lying on top of Vita, gazing into her eyes with a look of frank and urgent sexual hunger, pleading, “Mitya, please”. It was a tender and utterly convincing piece of acting.

The four episodes faithfully captured the real life experiences of two love-struck and self-indulgent aristocratic women in the 1920s—experiences described by Vita in a confessional manuscript that her son found after her death in a locked Gladstone bag. For the first time ever, I saw on screen the urgent passionate lovemaking, the experience of transcendental physical and emotional fulfilment, and the sense of glorious freedom and fun that I and so many other women have experienced with each other. I also saw the tragic savagery that can erupt under the terrible pressure exerted by family, friends and society.

I have always been annoyed by the common misconception that lesbian lovemaking is not ‘real sex’. As Vita put it in a letter to her husband Harold in December 1919, “I don’t think you realise, except in a tiny degree, what is going on. I don’t think you have taken the thing seriously. You can’t think that I’ve gone away from you and risked all that I have risked—your love, Mama’s love, Dada’s love and my own reputation—for a whim? Don’t you realise that only a very great force could have brought me to risk these things.”

In one of her countless letters, Violet wrote to Vita, “You could do anything with me...I don’t care if you were married six times over, or if you had fourteen children. I have more right to you than anyone on this earth.” It is this sense of living out a forbidden passion in extremis that is captured so uniquely by this TV series. If you missed it, don’t worry. Just ask any lesbian friend. We’ve all got it on video.

JULIE McCROSSIN has been known to masquerade as Dr Mary Hartman.

CHINA SHOP
Vita Bits

Given the opportunity to sound off about lesbian sex on the small and large screen, it would be easy enough to launch into a passionate but predictable tirade denouncing the bizarre cliches of films like The Killing of Sister George, where a fat, tweed-suit wearing ‘butch’ forces a thin, shortie-pyjama-wearing ‘femme’ to chew the stub of her cigar.

Alternatively, I could echo the rage expressed by gay and lesbian activists at the Academy Awards about the statistically odd propensity for violent psychosis among gay and lesbian film characters. Or I could take up a sizable chunk of this page with a list of all the films which end with the death, usually by suicide, of one of the lesbian characters.

Death seems a very high price to pay for the sight of two adult women gazing a little too meaningfully into each other’s eyes. Even if the director allows the viewer a limp fondle ‘upstairs outside’ (usually between two actresses with such inordinately long fingernails that you can hear a sharp intake of breath from all the other lesbians in the cinema) it seems a little tough to end the film with one of the gals going down in a hail of bullets (Another Way), getting crushed by a tree (The Fox) or swinging from a rope (The Loudest Whisper).