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The Gay & Lesbian Review

WORLDWIDE

March–April 2014

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Camp and Anti-Camp
in the 21st Century

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Out Comes Dracula

CLARE WALL
Drag Kings from
Homer to modern times

MICHAEL J. MURPHY
Harry Chess: 1st gay comic hero

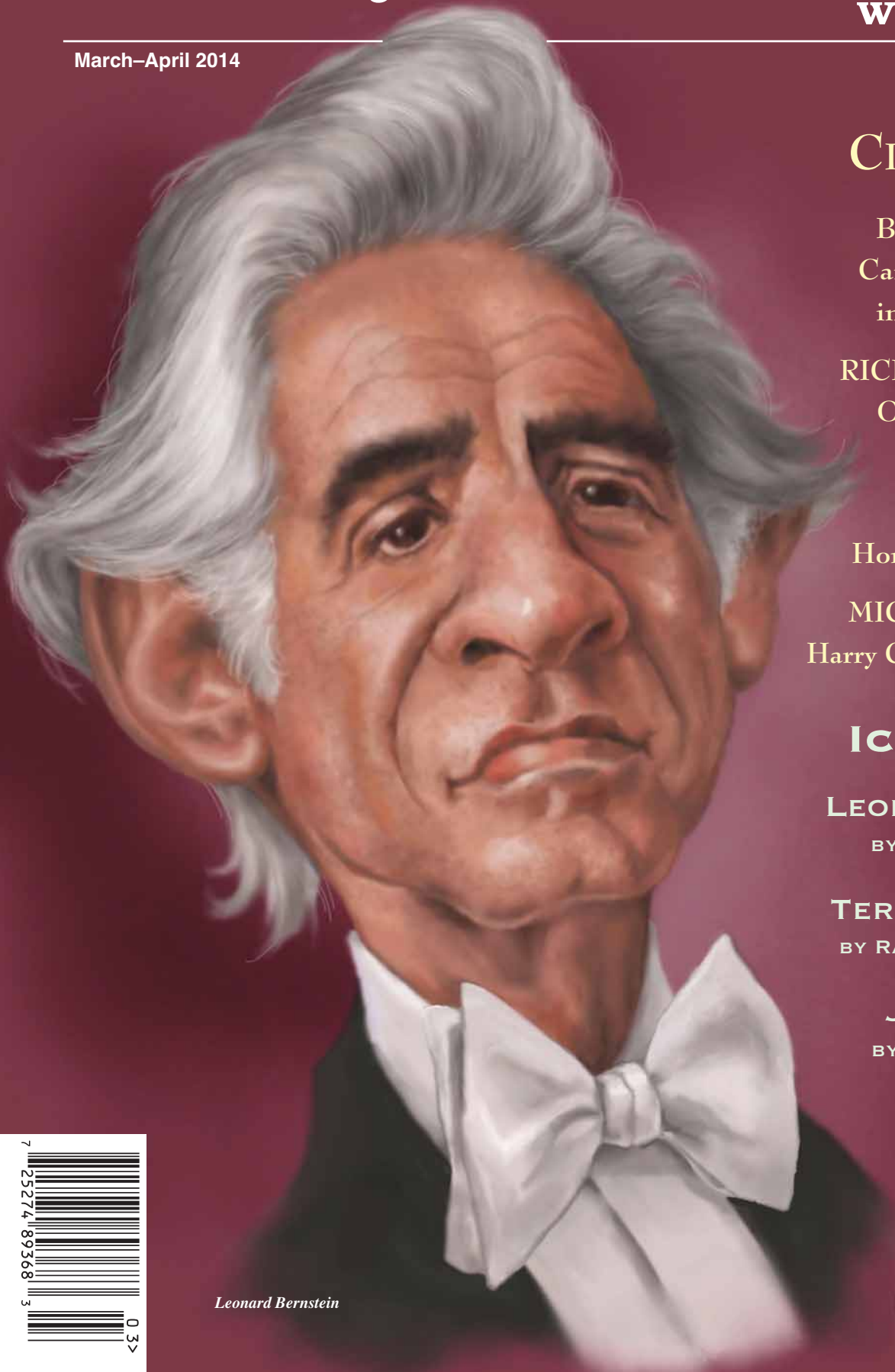
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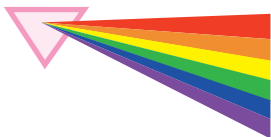
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One Hundred and Eighth: Campiana

CAMP is a vague-ish term whose meaning has been debated over the years even as its cultural manifestations have shifted periodically. The first mainstream treatment of the phenomenon was Susan Sontag's classic 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp," which clearly linked it to the (then) underground homosexual subculture and recognized camp as a private language with which this minority could communicate. It was a matter of hiding in plain sight in that expressions of camp were typically available to a mainstream audience but contained winking references or styles that only certain viewers or readers were likely to pick up on.

Sontag's essay is revisited and updated here by Bruce LaBruce, who sees the phenom as having fractured by now into several strains, all united by a commitment to style over substance, performances unconstrained by reality or good taste. What's more, he regards camp as the currently dominant style in popular culture, however diluted, having moved in on the ironic sensibility of the 1990s and early 2000s.

There arose in the same year as Sontag's essay a comic strip called *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.*, surely an instance of camp by any definition. In this case, the pitch was to an expressly gay readership (of *Drum* magazine), but it did something quite interesting by presenting a parody of the TV series *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and other "buddy" shows, implying that there was something a little "campy," if you will,

about the relationship between the two male stars.

Back to the kind of camp that winks at its gay audience: another example would be the vampire as a literary and filmic personage. Richard S. Primuth argues here that the treatment of vampires—whether as arch-villains (*Dracula*), as disguised traitors, or as misunderstood rogues—tracks closely with the image of homosexuals over more than a century, serving as a metaphor for GLBT people and other outsiders.

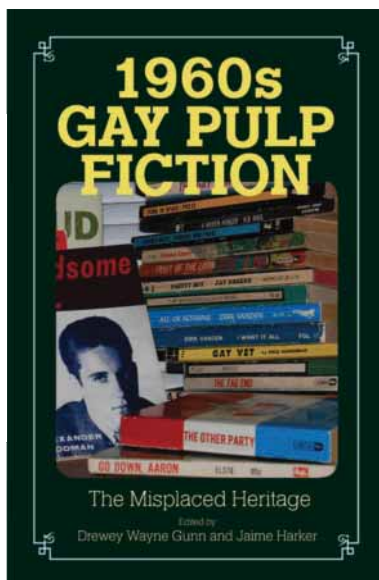
The phenomenon of female cross-dressing proves a curious case, as it is male-to-female cross-dressing that's undoubtedly the classic expression of camp. Clare Wall points out that "drag kings" have been around since the ancient world, both as literary figures and in real life. While straight society has typically had no trouble recognizing female cross-dressers for what they are—Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for it—what they fail to see is that it typically signifies a lesbian sexual orientation.

I would also include Elton John under the camp rubric, not so much for his music as for his onstage persona. Be it remembered that from the start of his career in the 1960s until 1988, Elton was not officially out as gay. Hippiedom provided a cover for those crazy outfits and giant glasses, but surely these styles were signals of another kind directed at those in the know. I have avoided using the phrase "camping it up" thus far, but Elton's antics in the 70s and 80s would certainly qualify.

RICHARD SCHNEIDER JR.

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Mandela Eulogies Ignored His GLBT Activism

JAMES PATTERSON

IN THE EARLY MORNING of December 11, my taxi sped down Massachusetts Avenue from Dupont Circle to Washington National Cathedral, a route popularly known as Embassy Row, I saw visual evidence the world mourned for South African President Nelson Mandela. Virtually every embassy had its flag at half mast in honor of the late leader, who had died December 5.

As a gay man, I expected to hear a speaker at the memorial service praise Mandela for his groundbreaking accomplishments on GLBT rights in South Africa, such as his constitutional ban on discrimination against gays and his support for legalizing same-sex marriage, and, after his presidency, his AIDS activism fueled by his eldest son's death from the disease. These were significant achievements for an African leader in the 1990s on an issue that wasn't popular anywhere on the continent. Not one of the main fourteen speakers at the memorial was sufficiently impressed by these accomplishments as to mention them in their eulogy, though there were multiple opportunities.

During his fifteen-minute tribute, Vice President Joe Biden had several such opportunities. When he spoke of Mandela having "a vision of a new South Africa," he could have said an inclusionary vision for GLBT South Africans. When he remarked that Mandela, after release from prison, displayed a loyalty to all his people, including blacks, Indians, and whites, it was the perfect moment for him to mention gay rights. When he spoke of South Africa's transition to democracy, this was a chance for him to mention that Mandela presided over the enactment of a new constitution for South Africa that expressly recognized GLBT equality and protection from discrimination.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry, a lifelong gay rights supporter, could have spoken eloquently about Mandela's gay rights advocacy in South Africa. Instead, Kerry did not speak. He was called away from his front row seat many times to confer with State colleagues, perhaps on Iran negotiations.

Dr. Mary Frances Beery, a longtime apartheid opponent and frequent demonstrator at the South African embassy in Washington in the 1980s, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, was the first speaker to draw loud applause from the audience. She called on leaders to remember others wrongly incarcerated like Mandela, but made no mention from her work on behalf of GLBT issues.

Conspicuously missing from the service was former Washington DC delegate Walter Fauntroy who was also frequently arrested for demonstrating against apartheid at the South African embassy in the 1980s. Fauntroy is now a DC minister who rails against GLBT equality. At least we can be grateful that this divisive figure wasn't present.

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, South Africa's Ambassador to the U.S., also made no mention of GLBT issues. Rasool's biography on the embassy web site states: "His social and political involvement has consistently been faith-driven." The bio makes no mention of any work on gay issues in South Africa, but does state he's active in the Islamic Movement. An im-

pressive speaker, Rasool credited Mandela with making his country "non-racist, non-sexist." Concluding, he said the world is still on "a long walk to freedom and it is not over." This is a sentiment the global GLBT community would share.

In private conversations with the diplomatic corps, I heard the situation for GLBT South Africans on the streets of the major cities was "nothing to brag about at present." I also heard that leaders of the African National Congress objected to any mention of Mandela's gay rights advocacy. The ANC has certainly strayed from its 1990s views on this and other issues.

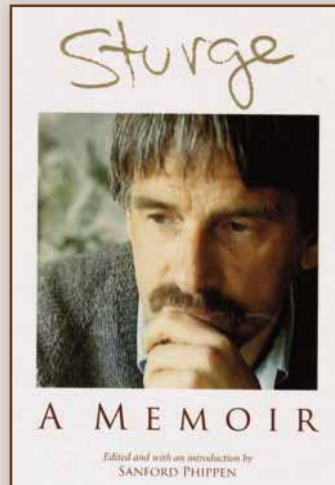
While Mary Menell Zients spoke for the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, USA, there was no spokesperson for 46664, Mandela's AIDS charity named for his prison number. At his 90th birthday party in London's Hyde Park in 2008, attended by more than 46,000 admirers, proceeds went to 46664.

Why no mention of Mandela's AIDS and GLBT activism as president of South Africa and beyond? In 2008, he told his crowd, "Where there is poverty and sickness including AIDS, where human beings are being oppressed, there is more work to be done." He concluded by saying, "It is in your hands now." He was right about that, but it's also in our hands to remember Mandela's courage and leadership on GLBT issues and to keep his spirit alive in the fight for equality.

James Patterson is a contributing writer for Bay Area Reporter.

Sturge: A Memoir

Edited with an introduction by Sanford Phippen



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Correspondence

Update: Cherry Grove Theater Lives!

To the Editor:

My essay “America’s First Gay Town” introduced a historic Cherry Grove, New York, to your readers in the Nov.-Dec. issue. The essay concluded with a reference to the listing of Cherry Grove’s “Community House and Theater” on the *National Register of Historic Places* by the U.S. Department of the Interior on June 4, 2013.

On December 11, 2013, Governor Mario Cuomo announced New York State’s “Regional Economic Development Council Awards,” which included the Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc. community house as a recipient of a \$335,000 matching grant. The award to restore the building will be administered by the NYS Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Office.

Receiving this award completes a “Cinderella” story of sorts. The association, prompted by a question from its legal counsel—“Are you historic?”—embarked on a twelve-month project. It was advised to lobby state and federal elected officials and to research and apply for historic recognition. The goal: to raise awareness of Cherry Grove’s importance in the pre-Stonewall era to GLBT people and to the nation’s history, and to become eligible for government grant assistance to preserve its community house. Cherry Grove’s profile was elevated from that of a locally known GLBT resort to a nationally-recognized GLBT historic site in the National Parks System’s *Fire Island National Seashore*.

I want to thank *GLR* for its coverage. Your magazine’s cover, masthead and essay were forwarded to panelists in Al-

bany, New York, to coincide with the grant application review period. *GLR*’s standing as a journal with a “worldwide” readership provided more evidence of Cherry Grove’s historic significance beyond its regional GLBT audience. *GLR* contributed greatly to an unimagined “happy ending” to the present-day Cherry Grove story.

Carl Luss, New York City

MyTense Moment with May Sarton

To the Editor:

Reading Dolores Klaich’s generous, astute tribute to May Sarton and Sarton’s rude response [Nov.-Dec. 2013] reminded me of my own awkward encounter with Ms. Sarton. She had come to the Bay Area for poetry readings. The three I attended were jam-packed, a sea of white-haired women.

I went early to the first, at San Francisco State, and there outside the auditorium was Sarton, by herself. I introduced myself and said that I would soon read a paper about her on a Modern Language Association panel titled “Non-declared Lesbian Writers.” “But,” she said indignantly, “I’m a *declared* lesbian writer.” Oops. She must have been thinking of her 1965 novel *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, but I knew from reading the reviews that her coming out was so muted that it escaped reviewers’ notice.

Ten years after the poetry readings at which Sarton was such a star, she was back in San Francisco. I was able to interview her at the home of her gay male friends in Noe Valley. She seemed to be very interested in the gay movement and to see herself as part of it.

After Sarton died, a woman knocked on the door of Doris Grumbach in her coastal

village of Maine. “You,” declared the visitor emphatically, “are the new May Sarton.” Grumbach was aghast.

Margaret Criukshank, Corea, ME

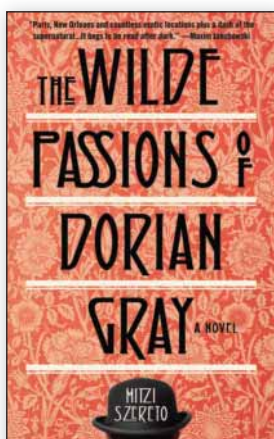
What Robert Craft Was to Stravinsky

To the Editor:

In his vulgar speculation about the sources of Robert Craft’s income [in a review of Craft’s book, *Stravinsky: Discoveries and Memories* in the Jan.-Feb. issue], Alfred Corn seems to have forgotten that Mr. Craft was, throughout his more than twenty years as a virtual member of the Stravinsky household, a busy conductor whose pioneering concerts and recordings of modern music (eight volumes of Schoenberg, the complete music of Webern) and older music (Gesualdo, Monteverdi, Schütz, Bach, Mozart) introduced many Americans (including Stravinsky) to rarely performed music that they might not have discovered otherwise.

This is in addition to his contributions to literature as the co-author of *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (1959) and five subsequent books of “conversations” on which Craft and Stravinsky collaborated up to the time of the composer’s death in 1971.

In his years with the Stravinskys, Craft also prepared the orchestras for the maestro’s concerts and recordings and shared conducting duties with Stravinsky, especially during the composer’s last years. But for Craft’s influence, Stravinsky almost certainly would not have written the masterpieces of his later years—*In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*, *Agon*, *Anticum Sacrum*, *Threni*, or *Abraham and Isaac*. If Craft benefited from the association with Stravinsky, the benefit was mutual.



THE WILDE PASSIONS OF DORIAN GRAY

By Mitzi Szereto

What if Dorian Gray faked his own death and went on to lead a secret life?

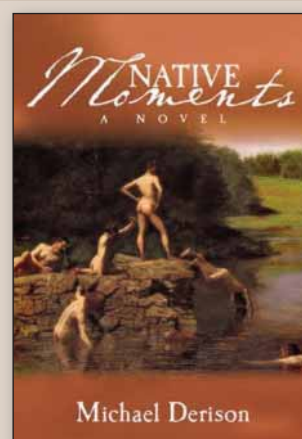
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To call Robert Craft Stravinsky's "amanuensis," as Mr. Corn does, is a gross misrepresentation, but to insinuate that he was a parasite is unspeakable.

Robert Bass, Galveston, TX

Overlooked Obituaries

To the Editor:

I much admire Martha Stone's remembrances of the year's deceased GLBT notables [Jan.-Feb. issue], and I realize it's impossible to include them all. But as someone who's also involved with this magazine, I'd like to add a few names that were not included.

Lou Reed deserves mention for his groundbreaking body of work and self-presentation that defied convention even in the glitter rock days. He may have died as a heterosexually married man, but I think until the day he died he would have insisted on eschewing labels, and he never backtracked on how he lived his life—or how it was perceived by the public.

Catherine Nicholson was a co-founder of *Sinister Wisdom*, an early lesbian feminist journal that has published continuously for 37 years and has published most of the prominent lesbian literary figures we know today.

Finally, Julia Penelope, one of the first publicly out lesbians, died in January 2013. She was an activist, a scholar, an author, and a philosopher. Julia's work could be serious or funny, personal or political. Her work was original and often cited and built upon by lesbians who came after her. For a great read and an introduction to her work, I recommend *Found Goddesses: Asphalta to Viscera*.

Diane Ellen Hamer, Melrose, Mass.

A Grittier Take on Rechy's Significance

To the Editor:

Regarding Mark Merlis' "mixed verdict" on the literary significance of John Rechy's *City of Night* [Jan.-Feb. issue], I respectfully disagree. Even the title, *City of Night*, captured our attention. He told a story many of us lived. And, he told it in the only way he was able to. We who prowled those dark streets at the time would not have read a highfalutin work by some polished writer whom we would suspect did not know what he was talking about. The reason he was read (twice in my case) was that he rang true. We recognized our own lives in the experiences and characters he described.

Who better to judge *City of Night* than

one of us sleazy sluts who were aficionados of the "baths after-hours"—not just after the bars closed, not after fold had had a very early breakfast, not even after the queens had finally arrived, "gotten theirs," and gone home. Rather, after all of that, when a half-dozen or so denizens stayed on in order to ravish some sweet, naïve young thing who had stuck around to see what would happen next?

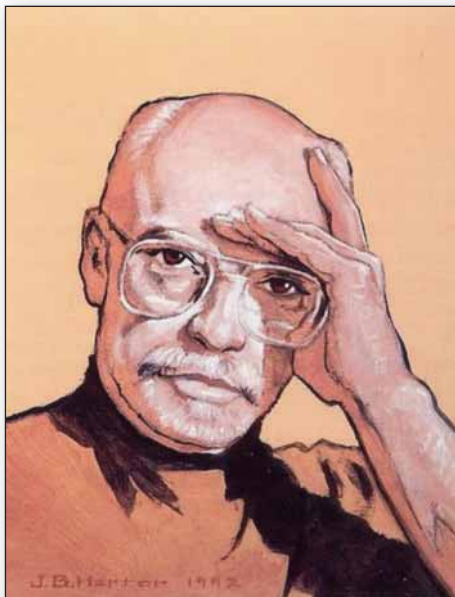
Another literary critic pontificated that "The Great American Novel was written by a long daisy chain of failed queers." I would include *City of Night* on the chain. For whatever grammatical flaws Rechy may have committed, he drew an honest portrait of our world. In my opinion, that picture is worth more than all of Shakespeare only because it is of "my world" rather than the Bard's.

John Kavanaugh, Detroit

Correction

An "Artist's Profile" on director Joshua Sanchez, who's interviewed about his movie *Four* (Jan.-Feb. 2014), stated incorrectly that the movie was based on Christopher Shinn's play *Dying City*. In fact, the film was based on Shinn's play by the same name, *Four*.

John Burton Harter Charitable Trust



John Burton Harter. *Self-Portrait*. 1992. Oil on panel. University of Buffalo — The State University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.

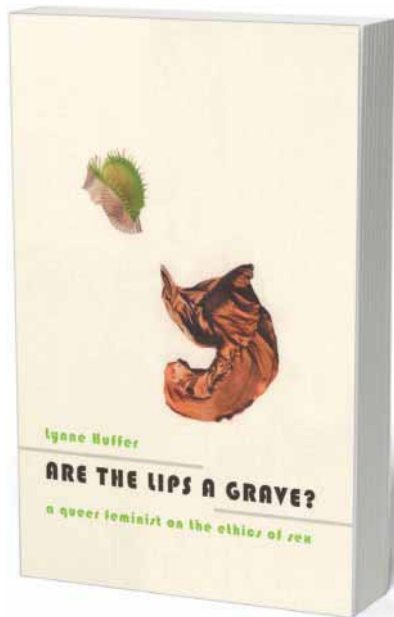


John Burton Harter. *Torso (Arms in Tension)*. 1979. Acrylic on board. University of Buffalo — The State University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.

John Burton Harter (1940-2002) is remembered for his powerful studies of the male figure, as well as his superb portraits and landscapes.

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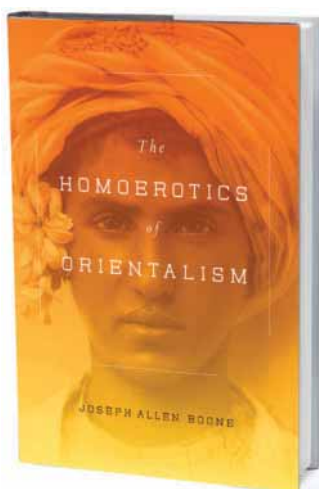
Are the Lips a Grave?

A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex

LYNNE HUFFER

“Against the persistent rumor that feminism and queer theory can never be friends, Lynne Huffer recovers a wide—and at times wild—range of shared political and critical lineages. Provocative, impassioned, and at times deeply personal, *Are the Lips a Grave?* is the first full-length defense of ‘queer feminism.’ It is about time!”

—Robyn Wiegman, Duke University



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BTW

Sweatin’ with Cong. Schock When Barney Frank came out as gay in his forties, he was relieved to discover that his constituents really didn’t care about the sex life of a middle-aged man, and the world moved on. The same cannot be said for a colleague of Frank’s in the U.S. House, the still serving Aaron Schock, an Illinois Republican who’s attracted *lots* of attention, not for coming out as gay, but for *not* doing so, persistent rumors notwithstanding. Also, if the shallow truth be told, for the fact that this is what he looks like at poolside:

But he also looks great in pressed plaid shirts or even in sweats, which he wears during (well-documented) workouts. Then, too, there was that shirtless photo on the cover of *Men’s Health*.



Against this backdrop, it turns out that Schock has one of the worst records on gay rights in Congress, so he’s been deemed fair game for “outing” by some journalists. And, inevitably, his denials have become the stuff of comedy. A twitter feed has opened up under @GayRepSchock called “I’m not gay, I’m FABULOUS.” A send-up at bentspud.com was titled, “Aaron Schock denies gay rumors, reveals engagement to Liza Minnelli.” Next thing you know, he’ll be launching a male-oriented fitness program and appearing shirtless to demonstrate its benefits! Oh, wait, he’s already doing that.

The End Is Near It takes a lot for the Family Research Council to get our attention these days, and they must know this, because their president, Tony Perkins, keeps escalating the level of hysteria. Recently he prophesied the end of humanity if homosexuality comes to be widely accepted. “The human race would be extinct within time if [homosexuality were] normal ... if it were not for physical relationship, intimacy between a man and a woman.” Sure, the link between heterosexuality and procreation is pretty well-established, but is Perkins seriously suggesting that it’s only the taboo against homosexuality that has kept procreation afloat through all these centuries, that without it people would naturally gravitate to their own sex—exclusively!—thereby ending the human race? There must be something missing here—and it is Satan. Once society lowers its guard and gives the temptation of Sodom free rein, argues Perkins, everyone will be fair game, and it’s only a matter of time before the Prince of Darkness turns everyone gay. Here one has to be a bit surprised that heterosexuality can’t mount a stronger defense. Finally, one wonders: is this a policy statement on Perkins’ part, or is it a *cri de coeur*?

The End Is Near 2 “Conservative Protestants Destroy Traditional Marriage,” blared a blog headline about a study on the well-established fact that evangelical Protestants have higher divorce rates on average than the general population. The study, published in the respected *American Journal of Sociology*, offered a county-by-county analysis of divorce rates across the U.S.A. and found that, not only do evangelical Protestants have persistently higher

rates of divorce, but this tendency spills over to *other* religious groups living in their proximity. The apparent paradox—given their emphasis on “traditional family values”—has puzzled sociologists. What the study found was that evangelicals tend to marry younger than do other groups, and this is highly correlated with the rate of divorce. Early marriage often means less educational attainment, reduced income, money troubles, and... there goes the marriage. The *AJS* article doesn’t offer a morality tale—but that doesn’t prevent us from doing so. The high divorce rate among conservative Christians is due to a prudish morality that condemns premarital sex and encourages early marriage. The dearth of real sex education, plus the lack of availability of contraception, leads to elevated levels of teenage pregnancy. Then doctrine steps in to limit a young woman’s options: abortion is officially off limits, while single parenthood is frowned upon. Marriage it is, then, but as a last resort, a way to avoid worse (because “immoral”) options. The very *insistence* upon marriage is what cheapens it and leads to divorce. That these are the folks who tend to condemn nontraditional marriages only adds irony to the paradox.

Another Surprised Father It has happened again: one of the most homophobic men in the world has a gay son. This time the lucky father is Robert Mugabe, dictator-president of Zimbabwe, who once opined that homosexuals “are worse than pigs.” It was his third son, Chipape Mugabe, an MBA student at Oxford, who came out in a radio interview in the UK, offering a thoughtful appraisal of gay rights in his home country. But the question remains, why *does* every rabid homophobe end up with a gay son (or so it seems)? Assuming it’s not karma or coincidence, here’s a theory: Once it was thought that gay boys were the result of a “weak or absent father”; now we know that typically it’s the gay boy who doesn’t bond with his father, preferring his mother’s world instead. At some point the father develops a deep revulsion toward this non-bonding son who refuses to take after the old man, this momma’s boy who, with the onset of adolescence, appears almost as a freak of nature. Nothing is ever said, the closet door remains shut, but the father internalizes this fear and loathing and converts it into an article of doctrine and policy, folding it into a broadly authoritarian ideology. And a homophobic monster is born.

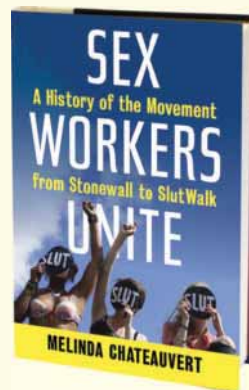
Kinky Caps And now, coming to you from Mobile, it’s the Prancing Elites! Down main street they sashayed, part of the Christmas parade in Semmes, Alabama, a town of 2,000 that wasn’t prepared



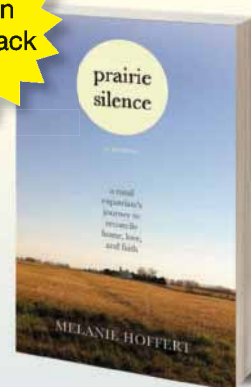
for the spectacle of a dance troupe of black drag queens in (Mrs.) Santa ensembles. Turns out the booking was an accident on the part of the organizing committee, the Friends of Semmes, who must have thought it was the local cheerleading squad’s annual entry. Onlookers were reported to be “outraged and appalled” by the drag queen spectacle, or

professed to be. Someone had the foresight to videotape the Elites, and the footage went viral on YouTube. So the townsfolk got their fifteen minutes; the Prancing Elites ended up booking some new gigs; and the Friends of Semmes were fired as next year’s parade organizer. Too much excitement!

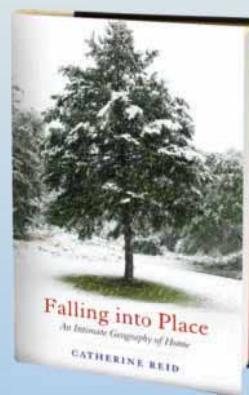
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Notes on Camp— and Anti-Camp

BRUCE LABRUCE

The content of this essay was first presented at the Camp/Anti-Camp Conference at the Hau Theater in Berlin in March 2012, curated by Susanne Sachsse and Marc Siegel. The presentation of the paper was itself intended to be somewhat camp, both in the outdated academic

style of the writing and in its mode of performance: The speaker wore black tails and glasses while writing lists of camp categories in chalk on a large blackboard. Whether or not the actual content of the paper was or is designed to be camp is entirely up to the reader to decide.

CLASSIC GAY CAMP:

Carmen Miranda
 Mae West
 Joan Crawford
 Bette Davis
What Ever Happened to Baby Jane
 Art Nouveau
 Art Deco
 The Catholic Church
 George Kuchar
 Franklyn Pangborn
 Edward Everett Horton
 Paul Lynde
 Charles Nelson Reilly
The Boys in the Band
The Killing of Sister George
 John Waters movies
 Divine
 Mario Montez
 Holly Woodlawn
 Candy Darling
 Jackie Curtis
 Liberace

BAD GAY CAMP:

Will & Grace
Queer Eye for the Straight Guy
 Misogynist Drag Queens
 Neil Patrick Harris
 Contemporary Broadway Musicals
 Certain Ken Russell Films (The Boy Friend)
 Perez Hilton
 Adam Lambert
 Liberace
 Beyoncé
 Lady Gaga

GOOD STRAIGHT CAMP:

Woody Allen's dramatic films (Interiors, September)
 Certain Robert Altman films (That Cold Day in the Park, Images, 3 Women)
 Certain John Cassavetes films (The Killing of a Chinese Bookie, Minnie and Moscovitz)

BAD STRAIGHT CAMP:

Stanley Tucci in The Devil Wears Prada
 and The Hunger Games
Twilight
Black Swan
 Il Divo
Star Wars
 Adam Sandler movies
 Che Guevara
 Damien Hirst
 Tim Burton movies (except Pee Wee's Big Adventure and Ed Wood)
 Arnold Schwarzenegger
 Jeff Koons
Tropic Thunder
 Benny Hill
 Beyoncé
 Lady Gaga
 Baz Luhrmann

HIGH CAMP:

Oscar Wilde
 Jean Cocteau

LOW CAMP:

Vaudeville
 Burlesque
 Bawdy humor
 Moms Mabley
 Sophie Tucker
 Bette Midler's bathhouse routines

ULTRA CAMP:

Mae West performing "Love Will Keep Us Together" in Sextet
 Elizabeth Taylor & Noel Coward in Boom!
Myra Breckenridge
Valley of the Dolls

BAD ULTRA CAMP:

Liza Minnelli performing "Put A Ring On It" in Sex and the City 2

QUASI-CAMP:

Jerry Lewis' 60s movies (The Ladies' Man, The Patsy, The Big Mouth)
Midnight Cowboy
Looking For Mr. Goodbar
 Bertolucci's Luna
Cruising

SUBVERSIVE CAMP:

Rock Hudson / Doris Day movies
 Roddy McDowell's Tam Lin
 Brett Anderson of Suede
 Pee Wee Herman

REACTIONARY CAMP:

Tyler Perry
 Eddie Murphy
 Heavy Metal

LIBERAL CAMP:

Dr. Ruth
 Rev. Al Sharpton
 Shepard Fairey's Obama "Hope" poster

CONSERVATIVE CAMP:

Kirk Cameron
 Sarah Palin
 Newt Gingrich
 Mitt Romney
 Ann Coulter
 Fox News
The Iron Lady

INTENTIONAL CAMP:

The Shining
Casino Royale with Daniel Craig
Green Acres (TV Show)

UNINTENTIONAL CAMP:

Lost in Space (TV Show)
Eyes Wide Shut
J. Edgar
Valley of the Dolls
The Iron Lady

GOOD INTENTIONAL STRAIGHT CAMP:

Russ Meyer movies
Carry On movies

IN ORDER to gain a new perspective on camp, let us first re-examine some of the precepts of Susan Sontag's seminal if problematic essay "Notes on Camp," published in 1964. First and foremost, Sontag points out that camp is a sensibility and, more significantly, a variant of sophistication.

To start things off, and as a prime example of camp that perhaps fits outside of its "normal" definition, let us consider John Cassavetes' film masterpiece *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. The ultra-campy emcee of the strip joint that Ben Gazzara owns and operates in the film calls himself "Mr. Sophistication." The role is played by Meade Roberts, who wrote the screenplay for Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, which verges on good gay camp: Geraldine Page's mannered acting style, especially her performances in films like Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Woody Allen's *Interiors*, always errs on the side of camp. She also appears in Cassavetes' brilliant *Opening Night*, which, I would argue, can be classified as (good straight) camp. Stages and staged performances figure prominently in both films, a particular earmark of camp, but both works also contain Cassavetes' trademark improvisational, naturalistic, almost documentary style, a tendency that would seem to run against the high artifice and theatricality of classic camp. Therefore one could argue that Cassavetes' oeuvre generally embodies two essential qualities that paradoxically reaffirm and eschew camp, evincing a high sophistication of form that would tend to reinforce the former position.

SINCE SONTAG

The essence of camp, according to Sontag, is its love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration. She points to its esoteric nature, amounting to a private code or a secretly shared badge of identity. Further, she states that "to talk about camp is to therefore betray it," simultaneously reinforcing and rejecting her own deep connection to the camp sensibility. She goes on to say that "to name a sensibility ... requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion," a remarkable statement considering that her own article on camp can be considered both camp in itself (in its lofty, pretentious pronouncements) and a betrayal of it (in its sympathetic identification). Significantly, Sontag was a lesbian who had a long-term relationship with Annie Liebovitz, a purveyor, in her staged and artificial photography style, of camp, or, more accurately, bad lesbian camp. (Sontag also wrote a rather camp treatise on photography called *On Photography* (2001).) Sontag identifies camp as "a sensibility that converts the serious into the frivolous" (rendering her article another kind of betrayal by taking camp far too seriously), and as a matter of "taste" that "governs every free (as opposed to rote) human response." Camp, then, is an existential condition as much as a sensibility: an enormously serious and profound frivolity.

Sontag rightly points out that camp is a certain mode of aestheticism, which is not to say beauty, but a high degree of artifice and stylization. (One could easily argue that the con-

temporary abandonment of the aesthetic dimension in favor of Realpolitik and mundane, conventional social issues has been disastrous to the gay experience and its formerly highly developed camp sensibility.) But her most crucial betrayal of camp comes in her statement that camp is "neutral to content," and thereby "disengaged, depoliticized, or at least apolitical." This is where I most strongly disagree with Sontag's idea of camp. My perhaps idealized conception is that it is, or was, by its very nature political, subversive, even revolutionary, at least in its most pure and sophisticated manifestations.

Sontag's camp manifesto of camp was published fifty years ago, and it's clear that it is no longer adequate to lump together all styles and modes of camp. Distinctions must be made, and the evolution or devolution of the sensibility, its movement through (accelerated) history, must be taken into consideration. I would go so far as to argue that "camp" has replaced "irony" as the go-to sensibility in popular culture, and it has, at the risk of generalization, long since lost its essential qualities of esoteric sophistication and secret signification, partly owing to the contemporary tendency of the gay sensibility to allow itself to be thoroughly co-opted, its mystery, and therefore its power, hopelessly diffused. In other words, and not to put too fine a point on it, I will argue that now, in this moment, the whole goddamn world is camp.

A critic in *Harper's Bazaar* once identified irony as "the ideological white noise of the nineties," a proclamation that always stuck with me. This wasn't to say that irony no longer operated as a useful device or sensibility, or that it could no longer be used to subtle or witty effect. It simply meant that irony had itself been normalized and generalized into the default sensibility of the entire popular culture, thereby rendering it more difficult to detect and less effective to use unless expressed very carefully and consciously for a particular effect. The net result was that much of the general populace (now roughly equivalent to "pop culture") had adopted the posture as a given to the extent that people generally lost track of its meaning or purpose: there was a kind of ironic detachment from everything. People started routinely to say the opposite of what they meant, and meant it, failing to understand that their new "sensibility" had become a betrayal of their actual former set of beliefs or tastes, which they even perhaps once held sacred.

So, in a sense, irony became a malaise, a kind of generalized disaffection that infected the dominant culture. I surmise that this is what opened up the floodgates for the rise of camp culture, or rather the corruption and misinterpretation of camp culture—a certain detached artificiality and forced excess which, in the wrong hands, and in its popularization, one might go so far as to call the ideological white noise of the new millennium.

BAD STRAIGHT CAMP

Camp is now for the masses. It's a sensibility that has been appropriated by the mainstream, commodified, turned into a fetish, and exploited by a hyper-capitalist system, as Adorno warned. It still has many of the earmarks of "classic camp"—an emphasis on artifice and exaggeration and the unnatural, a spirit of extravagance, a kind of grand theatricality. It's still based on a certain aestheticism and stylization. But what's lacking is the sophistication, and especially the notion of esotericism, something shared by a group of insiders—or rather,

Bruce LaBruce is a Toronto-based filmmaker, writer, director, photographer, and artist. He has directed and starred in numerous films and theatrical productions and his photography has been featured in exhibitions across the U.S. and Canada. This piece, which originated as a presentation in Berlin (see above), was first published in Nat. Brut magazine (www.natbrut.com), Issue 3 (April 2013).

Susan Sontag



outsiders—a secret code shared among a certain “campiscenti.” Sadly, most of it falls under the category of “Bad Straight Camp.”

What is Bad Straight Camp? Examples would include the exaggerated and stylized streetwalker–stripper fashion co-opted by many contemporary pop music celebrities, from Rihanna to Britney and Christina on down, a performative femininity by females filtered through drag queens that has transmogrified into an arguably more “avant-garde” style (Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj) characterized by hyper-self-referentiality, extreme hyperbole, a crudely obvious, unnuanced female sexuality, and even a vaguely pornographic sensibility which, unhappily, is post-feminist to the point of misogyny: a capitulation to the male gaze and classic tropes of objectification to be found only in the worst nightmares of Laura Mulvey. (Let it be clear that I am obviously opposed neither to pornography nor to male spectatorship per se, but rather to the continued attempt to erase all autonomy of women to control their own destinies outside of their participation in these played-out patriarchal institutions.) Obviously it’s not the form itself that is reactionary: strippers, street-smart drag queens, female porn stars, and hookers have often evinced a radically exaggerated appearance that transcends and deflects patriarchal co-optation. The problem is its utter and complete normalization and de-contextualization away from subversive or transgressive impulses in the service of capitalist exploitation, utterly heteronormative in practice and corporate in tone.

The great gay camp icons of the past—Barbara Stanwyck, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Mae West—had a sexual ambiguity that extended deeply into real life. (All were either practicing lesbians or bisexuals or, in the case of West, played with androgyny to the degree that her final performance—her autopsy—was necessary to prove her biological femaleness.) The modern gay camp icons are decidedly straight, although perversely they still attract throngs of homosexual

admirers, who seem now to prefer their idols to be sexually conventional females dressed up in extreme and flamboyant style. One need look no further than battered-wife-syndrome star Rihanna or super-conventional, baby-bump exhibitionist Beyoncé, both utterly content to promote themselves tirelessly in the traditional, subservient wife and/or mother roles. (Interestingly, more contemporary camp musical icons like Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, who most likely evinced unorthodox and “deviant” sexuality in their “real” lives, tend to come to a bad end.) The twin peaks of classic camp, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, both had disastrous relationships with their daughters, whose memoirs turned into camp classics in both cases. Nurturing motherhood and well-balanced heteronormativity have never managed to co-exist with great camp.

Other examples of Bad Straight Camp might include the genres of extreme gross-out comedy (the “Hangover” franchise, Melissa McCarthy movies); certain instances of torture porn (the horror genre has largely been infused now with a camp sensibility, whether self-consciously, such as the “Scream” franchise, or not); and last but not least, reality television, including such camp-fests as *Mob Wives*, the “Real Housewives” franchise, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, and *Jersey Shore*, to name only a few. (The fact that all are probably gay-friendly does little to ameliorate their general heteronormative, capitalist and materialist tenor, with the notable exception of Honey Boo-Boo.)

This new annexation and corruption of the camp sensibility now exists largely without the qualities of sophistication and secret signification that were developed out of necessity by the underground or outsider gay world, which originally created camp as a kind of gay signifying practice not unrelated to black signifying, or even black minstrelsy. It was developed as a secret language in order to identify oneself to like-minded or similarly closeted homosexuals, a shorthand of arcane and coded, almost kabbalistic references and practices developed in order to operate safely apart and without fear of detection from a conservative and conventional world that could be aggressively hostile towards homosexuals, particularly effeminate males and masculine females. In the contemporary world, in which gays have largely assimilated into the dominant order, such signifying practices have become somewhat obsolete, and the previous forms of camping and camp identification have long since been emptied of camp or gay significance, rendering them easily co-opted, commercialized, and trivialized.

GAY CONSERVATIVE CAMP

This phenomenon has also led to the rise of what I call “conservative camp.” For what are Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, Bill O’Reilly, Donald Trump, and Herman Cain other than conservative camp icons enacting a kind of reactionary burlesque on the American political stage? Wholly without substance, their rhetoric exaggerated and stylized, evincing a carefully contrived posture of “compassionate conservatism,” they function merely as a crude spectacle that mocks the unwashed masses by pretending to be one of them while simultaneously offering them policies that are directly antithetical to their authentic needs. Conservative camp has always been around—William F. Buckley, Jr. is a prime example—but it has now become an entire genre, thoroughly entrenched and embraced by the Amer-

ican public.

Alarming, with the rise of gay conservatism, there is also another new category of camp to contend with: Conservative Gay Camp. A recent example is the Hollywood movie *J. Edgar*, featuring two wildly camp performances by presumably straight actors: Leonardo DiCaprio as longtime FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, and his reputedly platonic lover, Clyde Tolson, played by Armie Hammer. Written by a young gay screenwriter, Dustin Lance Black, and directed by a classical heterosexual Hollywood director, Clint Eastwood, whose macho posturing has always bordered on straight camp, the film combines a serious, hyper-masculine style with a mocking, self-consciously queer contemporary sensibility that results in a strange confluence of straight and gay camp. The project of the film could be characterized as “conservative drag,” a loose reworking of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* that attempts to recuperate the ultra-reactionary, cross-dressing J. Edgar by presenting him as a pathetic, repressed Mama’s boy who could have been a great American hero if only he’d been allowed to have an open, sexually honest, and of course monogamous relationship with his handsome, doting right-hand man, Tolson.

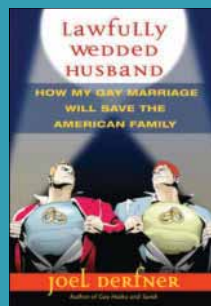
This is the essence of gay conservative camp—a baroque fantasy of revisionist history that projects contemporary homosexual conservative values and morals into the past in order to recuperate and reclaim these complex, monstrously pathological characters as themselves mere “queer” victims of a repressed and homophobic society. (Judi Dench as J. Edgar’s mother telling him she would rather have a dead son than a “daffodil” is quintessentially camp.) Aside from amounting to questionably reductive pop psychology (the smothering mother, etc.), it belies the reactionary impulse to attribute sexually “deviant” behavior—cross-dressing, extreme aestheticism, dandyism—to a negative consequence of corrupt and oppressive systems, as opposed to instances of rebellion and revolt and a healthy acting out against such regimes. In other words, such “deviance” wouldn’t be necessary if only the system were liberalized and reformed to reflect a healthy, normalized, and assimilated homosexuality, one that is indistinguishable from the heterosexual status quo save only for its preference for same sex partners—in a word, “homonormativity.”

This kind of conservative camp tends to ignore or revise historical and political context in order to bolster its recuperative project; other recent examples would include, in post-feminist terms, *The Queen* and *The Iron Lady*. This new tendency runs in diametrical opposition to the impulses of classic gay camp, which sought to celebrate, elevate, and even worship the qualities of deviance, difference, and eccentricity that characterized the highly aestheticized homosexual experience of past eras.

If I have expressed a rather depressing and unhelpful analysis of camp, or perhaps what might now reasonably be termed “anti-camp,” I can only offer by way of an antidote an express wish to radicalize camp once again, to harness its aesthetic and political potentialities in order to make it once more a tool of subversion and revolution. Camp itself should almost be defined as a kind of madness, a rip in the fabric of reality that we need to reclaim in order to defeat the truly inauthentic, cynical, and deeply reactionary camp—or anti-camp—tendencies of the new world order.



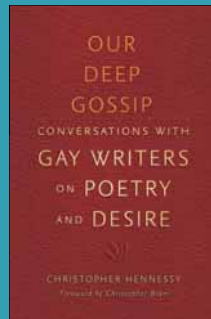
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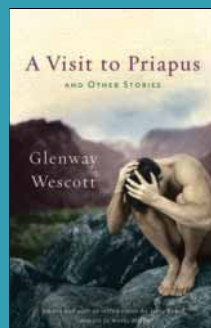
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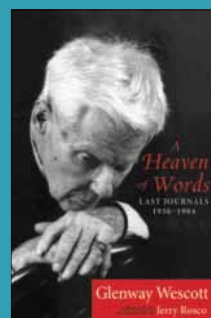
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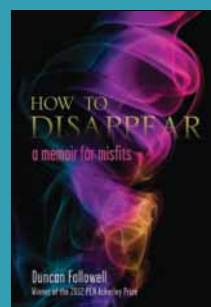
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Drag Kings by Any Other Name

CLARE WALL

ONE OF THE EARLIEST literary depictions of gender bending can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*, telling of the adventures of the mythical hero Odysseus, after the fall of Troy in 1200 B.C., as he makes his voyage home. "Bright eyed Athena," sometimes also referred to in the transgender community as the "Bigender Goddess," acts as the protector of Odysseus while he journeys. Athena shape-shifts into different guises, one of which is that of a male warrior, in order to visit Odysseus's son, Telemachus:

She flashed down from the heights of Olympus, and on reaching Ithaca she took her stand on the threshold of the court in front of Odysseus's house; and to look like a visitor she assumed the appearance of a family friend, the Taphian chieftain Mentès, bronze spear in hand. ... [Telemachus] caught sight of Athene. ... He went straight up to his visitor, grasped his right hand, took his bronze spear and gave him cordial greetings. "Welcome, friend!" he said.

Little is known about Homer, and some academic studies even theorize that *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* were written by a woman rather than the man Homer is generally presumed to be. Regardless of the identity of the author, Athena's act of gender-morphing gives her a powerful and fascinating status as a sacred figure in mythology.

Two millennia later, in medieval France, one of the most extraordinary episodes in theological and political history occurred when the sixteen-year-old Joan of Arc claimed to have been instructed by the Archangel Michael to fight against the English, and boldly went to the Dauphin with the message that she had been sent by God. In full armor, she proceeded to lead an entire division of soldiers to the City of Orléans, where she was hailed a heroine, until a series of misfortunes caused her to be put on trial by the Inquisition. The primary reason for the trial was not heresy but her male attire. Scholar Marjorie Garber writes in her book *Vested Interests*: "No less than five charges against her detailed her transvestism as emblematic of her presumption: she was unwomanly and immodest, ran the charges, she wore sumptuous clothing to which she was not entitled by rank, and she carried arms." Even at the trial Joan refused to remove her masculine attire, which had been donned as a direct consequence of her religious "visions." She declared that she had been commanded by spiritual voices to wear male clothing, and that she would "rather die than relinquish these clothes." She was convicted and burned at the stake, only to become a French national heroine and eventually a saint.

Women from the 16th century onward are known to have cross-dressed with the intention of "passing" as men so as to fol-

low the careers barred to them. And they occupy the whole class hierarchy, from the highly respected physician and surgeon Dr. James Barry—who served as Inspector General of the British Army's Medical Department for over forty years until "his" death in 1865, after which Barry's true gender was discovered—to various pirates. Among the latter class were two women who became famous for their adventures as Ann Bonny and Mary Reed in the 18th century. Bonny had initially fallen in love with Reed, not realizing that behind the masculine facade "he" was also a female. The two subsequently became close comrades and friends.

But the motives for many early cross-dressing women were based on a desire to be liberated from the social constraints imposed upon them. As historian Lillian Faderman commented in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981): "Transvestites were, in a sense, among the first feminists. Mute as they were, without a formulated ideology to express their convictions, they saw the role of women to be dull and limiting. They craved to expand it, and the only way to alter that role in their day was to become a man." Faderman adds that public cross-dressing could be linked with lesbian identity, though records of these women being physically attracted to other women are rare.

Such was the case for the central character in a 2011 film, *Albert Nobbs*, set in 19th-century Ireland, and starring Glenn Close as "Albert": a woman passing as a man in her work as a member of staff at a hotel. The idea of a lesbian relationship doesn't seem to have occurred to her until she meets another cross-dresser who has "taken a wife" and lives a contentedly married life. Viewers are left wondering about the precise identity of Albert, whose subsequent aspirations to raise the status of her cross-dressing lifestyle by becoming a husband and setting up her own business seem to stem from a keen desire for full equality in society, rather than genuine lesbian attractions. Generally speaking, until the 20th century, passionate attachments between women, including those we now know to have been sexual relationships, were considered by much of society to be intensely affectionate but platonic bonds, particularly idealized in 18th century society as "romantic friendships."

Nevertheless, this term took on new meaning with the two "ladies of Llangollen," Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler. In 1775, the two Irishwomen, determined to lead a life together, eloped and eventually settled in the Welsh town of Llangollen. They cropped and powdered their hair and wore outfits which from the waist up strikingly resembled male attire. Elizabeth Mavor's compilation of diary entries and accounts includes a letter written by John Lockhart in 1819 after visiting the Ladies, relating that they were "dressed in heavy blue riding habits, enormous shoes, and men's hats, with their petticoats so tucked up, that at the first glance of them, fussing and tottering about their porch in the agony of expectation, we took them for a couple of

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hazy or crazy old sailors.” Although reliant on others for financial support after being largely disowned by their families, they existed in an exclusive union of “sweet and delicious retirement” for over fifty years, until Eleanor died in 1829. The Ladies and their home, Plas Newydd, won the admiration of many, including the famously candid lesbian diarist of their time, Anne Lister from Halifax, Yorkshire. Lister was also known for her masculine sense of style and in certain enlightened circles acquired the nickname “Gentleman Jack.”

WITH THE DAWNING of the 20th century, masculine dress among women took on a new significance as it became an overt expression of lesbian identity. It was also closely bound to social status and class, and only those of considerable financial means could afford to cross-dress in the upper-class manner that became the vogue.

England in the 1920s saw the emergence of the painter Gluck and the novelist Radclyffe Hall, both of whom dressed in male clothing full-time while living openly with their lesbian partners. Hall’s famous novel *The Well of Loneliness* presented lesbianism as a “social problem” in order to introduce the theme into mainstream publishing. At the same time, sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing were promulgating dubious theories on the psychology of relationships between women, female masculinity, and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identity. Pseudoscientific terminology such as “invert” now became popular. Hall, aware that “accepting” such labels could give her the power to ultimately transcend them, referred to herself as an invert—and even got Havelock Ellis to write the introduction to the novel.

At first accepted and highly commended by many readers, deliberately scathing reviews by a journalist hoping to stir up scandal caused an infamous court case over *The Well of Loneliness*, and the book was eventually banned on the grounds of “obscenity.” One of the passages cited highlighted the masculinity of the novel’s wealthy central character Stephen (a woman): “She would go into Malvern that very afternoon and order a new flannel suit at her tailor’s. The suit should be grey with a little white pin stripe, and the jacket, she decided, must have a breast pocket. She would wear a black tie—no, better a grey one to match the new suit with the little white pin stripe.”

Many of the women who wore male attire from the Edwardian era onward were members of artistic and literary circles. They were women of the upper classes who were no longer willing to live secondary lives in disguise. Much of the motivation behind female cross-dressing at this time was to present a provocative and controversial image to the world, defiantly declaring one’s nonconforming identity. The poet Nathalie Barney held “Sapphic” soirées at her Paris salon, which numerous women attended, including many cross-dressers, for lively debate on lesbian and gay society and its contributions to the arts. Over in London, Virginia Woolf, a member of the famous Bloomsbury circle, was writing the novel *Orlando*, which chronicled the journeys of the title character over a series of centuries. In each century Orlando takes on a different gender and persona, and the precise identity of the hero/heroine becomes indeterminate.

Orlando was actually inspired by one of Woolf’s lovers, the

author Vita Sackville-West, who appears cross-dressed in photographic illustrations for the novel and who in real life disguised herself as a man when she eloped with Violet Trefusis in 1919. At this point female transvestism had taken on an aura of glamour and thrill. Sackville-West later described the experience in *Portrait of a Marriage* with a sense of elation, almost as if she were role-playing in an elaborate game:

I used to stroll about the boulevards as I had strolled down Piccadilly, I used to sit in cafés drinking coffee, and watching people go by; sometimes I saw people I knew, and wondered what they would think if they knew the truth about the slouching boy with the bandaged head and the rather *voyou* [rogue or hoodlum] appearance, and if they would ever recognize the silent and rather scornful woman they had perhaps met at a dinner-party or a dance? I never appreciated anything so much as living like that with my tongue perpetually in my cheek, and in defiance of every policeman I passed.

Cross-dressing at this point was akin to what we would call today a “fashion statement.” The sensational and usually feminine French author Colette was photographed in drag in 1910, coyly looking at the camera, one hand suggestively poised with a cigarette emitting faint wisps of smoke. In *The Pure and the Impure*, she speculated about what the Ladies of Llangollen would have been like had they lived in 1930: “They would own a car, wear dungarees, smoke cigarettes, have short hair, and there would be a liquor bar in their apartment. Would Sarah Ponsonby still know how to remain silent? Perhaps, with the aid of crossword puzzles. Eleanor Butler would curse as she jacked up the car, and would have her breasts amputated.” Although controversial at the time, today the image of Sarah Ponsonby doing crossword puzzles while her partner “jacks up” the motor car in dungarees puts the Ladies in yet another quaintly archaic setting.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, female cross-dressing in a theatrical sense had found a fresh public appeal, as male impersonators of the London music hall circuit took to the stage. The three most famous women to embark upon such careers were Ella Shields, Vesta Tilley, and Hetty King. They also performed in female roles, although Tilley eventually communicated a decided preference for performing in male persona, commenting: “I felt that I could express myself better if I were dressed as a boy.” Transvestism on stage, as a purely theatrical representation of identity, has always been granted privileges denied to those instances of cross-dressing which merged into reality and presented a perceived danger to the social order. Women who performed as men were generally presumed to restrict their masculinity to the area of entertainment only. It is worth noting that initially the term “drab”—“dressed as a boy” was used for female cross-dressers. The now universal term “drag” was derived from the opposite acronym “dressed as a girl.”

Vesta Tilley, Hetty King, and Ella Shields became highly esteemed in mainstream London theaters. Each had a repertoire of characters, including soldiers, sailors, cowboys, factory workers, and “toffs.” Vesta Tilley’s “Burlington Bertie from Bow” is perhaps the best known of these character routines, comprising lyrics attributed to the songwriter William Hargreaves that make farcical commentary on the serious subject of class divides: “I’m Burlington Bertie, I rise at ten thirty/ And saunter along like a toff. I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my hand/ Then

I walk down again with them off. ... Nearly everyone knows me from Smith to Lord Rosebr'y, I'm Burlington Bertie from Bow."

After the success of these early performers, cross-dressing for women on the stage was limited mostly to the role of pantomime prince, Peter Pan, and occasionally Captain Hook. The role of the male impersonator, with a genre and relevance of her own, pretty much vanished from the theatrical program for a considerable time. It is likely that theories being popularized by Havelock Ellis and his ilk had brought new implications to male impersonation in relation to one's sexual identity, and caused a veil of secrecy to descend upon theatrical platforms for the female transvestite.

However, this figure had also found her way into the movies. As early as 1916, Charlie Chaplin's leading lady, Edna Purviance, appeared disguised as a male character in *Behind the Screen*. Even before this, in 1915, the actress Minerva Courtney had successfully impersonated Chaplin in her own version of his comedy *The Champion*. Chaplin himself was a gifted female impersonator, and at the beginning of his career cross-dressed onscreen a few times. Marlene Dietrich, who once said "I am at heart a gentleman," appeared wearing top hat and tails in the 1930 film *Morocco*, and with similar aplomb Greta Garbo strode in a princely 1600's costume across the sets of *Queen Christina* in 1933, declaring "I shall die a bachelor!" In actual life, Garbo and Dietrich may have been romantically involved for a time—and both undoubtedly had relations with other women—reinforcing the hypothesis that women's penchant for cross-dressing is highly correlated with an attraction to other women.

In 1935, the film *Sylvia Scarlet* was released starring Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn cross-dressed as a boy. One is struck by how natural Hepburn appears in this masculine persona. Lively and engaging in male attire, she becomes visibly uncomfortable and restricted when she puts on the "appropriate" clothes for her gender. This movie foreshadowed other, similarly plotted films involving female-to-male gender-bending. Among these was the 1982 film *Victor Victoria* starring Julie Andrews as an unsuccessful female singer who becomes famous disguised as a female impersonator. In the same year, *Tootsie* was released, this time exploring the theme of male-to-female cross-dressing, with Dustin Hoffman playing an out-of-work actor whose drag persona gains him public acclaim. The following year *Yentl* came out, starring Barbra Streisand as a Jewish girl who disguises herself as a boy to pursue an education.

IN THE 1960s AND '70s, the rise of the Second Wave Feminist movement gave women increased freedom of speech and expression, socially, economically, politically, and personally. The fight for women's liberation became central to countless lives, and lesbian feminism ensured that love between women was viewed not only as an expression of personal commitment but also an extension of political consciousness. In 1977, the poet Elsa Gidlow asserted that "The lesbian personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in willingness to take responsibility for oneself, not to take 'authorities' and their dictum of trust. ... The important point is that the lesbian has sought wholeness within herself, not requiring, in the old romantic sense, to be 'completed' by an opposite."

Women of all classes began to cross-dress in an integrated

way, wearing "butch" attire, no longer to emulate men, but as a serious and non-theatrical mark of lesbian identity, with masculinity becoming a celebration of womanhood rather than a defiance of it. Clothes originally designated to denote male identity became symbols of women's strength and liberation. With the rise of transgender equality, those who felt unaligned with their biological gender finally won the right to assert their true identities. Clearly those who have transitioned in this way are no longer cross-dressing but instead enacting the customs of their acquired gender identity.

The 1970s also saw the revival of the male impersonator in America, this time as a "drag king." Now the illusion was a much more modernist statement than the quaint routines of the music hall: the new era of male impersonation promoted an assertive realism that included "binding" the chest and "packing" the crotch area to create a masculine physique. Crepe wool beards and stubble created facial authenticity. In the 1980s and '90s, performers such as Annie Lennox and k.d. lang began to introduce female masculinity, drag, and androgyny into mainstream popular culture. The year 1998 saw publication of Sarah Waters' novel *Tipping the Velvet*, portraying Victorian male impersonation through a memorable lesbian narrative, later adapted as a popular BBC television series.

With the arrival of the 21st century, female cross-dressing has taken a definitive step toward a new era. UK-based vocalist Gizell Timpani, after admiring acts by drag queens, decided to devise an equivalent of her own, restoring an art form mostly uncelebrated in contemporary contexts, bringing it to modern audiences while retaining a respect for the tradition and heritage of female cross-dressing performance. Altering the pitch effects of her voice, she performs a varied repertoire of masculine songs in her drag persona of Valentino King, has appeared on *Britain's Got Talent*, at Pride Festivals, LGBT events, and mainstream venues, and is increasingly admired by audiences across the spectrum as an icon for liberated identity expression. In live performance, Valentino is impressively convincing in male role, while retaining eloquent hints of femininity that keep a sense of theatrical mystique at the heart of "his" image.

As the drag king community grows, Valentino inspires many other women to develop their own drag personas. The implications of a king "scene" finding a niche in modern society and LGBT culture are diverse, and reasons for "dragging up" are personal to the individual. Drag kinging in general is a form of transgender expression. For some, this goes no further than cross-dressing for the purposes of performance or socializing. As a portrayal of masculinity with hidden female qualities, this form of extrovert gender-bending creates a powerful contradiction that still inspires and intrigues. There is a fantasy element connected with the drag king world, involving provocative exploration of gendered ideologies and a transcendental presentation of self that takes female masculinity a step beyond mere dress statement or fashion preference.

So, following this long evolution, the heritage of the "woman in men's clothing" continues to flourish, constantly finding new branches of expression via art, performance, and social politics, challenging and liberating concepts of gender and identity. It holds importance for LGBT culture in general, while retaining its own enduring significance as an ancient tradition manifesting itself in a modern world.



Vampires Are Us

RICHARD S. PRIMUTH

VAMPIRES HAVE BEEN a part of popular culture in the West for several centuries. American vampire stories are rooted in the folklore of Eastern Europe, but similar creatures have also turned up in Western Europe, India, and China. The contemporary vampire story has roots in traditional folklore, in 17th- and 18th-century pseudo-science, and in historical figures such as the “Blood Countess,” Elizabeth Bathory, and Romanian ruler Vlad “The Impaler” Tepes. Well-known precursors to today’s stories include the 1748 German poem, “Der Vampyre” and an 1819 short story by John Polidori titled “The Vampyre.” In this story, the vampire, Lord Ruthven, was first portrayed as the “aristocratic seducer” that is so familiar to Americans. Polidori was Lord Byron’s physician, and many readers saw a resemblance between Byron and the vampire.

By the 1840s, vampires were seen in English theatrical productions, and “Varney the Vampire,” created by James Malcolm Rymer, was a popular newspaper serial. In 1871, a vampire story with subtle lesbian undertones, “Carmilla,” by Sheridan Le Fanu was published. In 1897, the best known vampire book, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, was published. Hugely popular in the U.S., it had been adapted for both stage and screen by the 1920s. The first vampire films were actually made by the French in the 1890s. By the 1920s, the Germans had produced *Nosferatu*, and in 1931 Hollywood jumped in with Tod Browning’s *Dracula*.

WAS DRACULA GAY?

Sexuality and homosexuality have been a part of vampire stories in popular culture, mostly as a subtle undercurrent, since at least the 19th century. In the Romantic and Victorian Eras, vampires often served as sexual metaphors. In 1895, Oscar Wilde was being sent to prison for “gross indecency” while Bram Stoker was writing his novel. The lesson must have been obvious, but there are several homoerotic scenes in *Dracula*. In a time of extreme repression and fear for gay people, using their vampire characters as a metaphor for their own hidden sexuality was an outlet for self-expression. As times changed, these vampires and vampire stories, movies, and later television evolved as well. Vampires, especially in modern American literature, film, and television, can be used as a “window” on gay culture of the corresponding era.

Bram Stoker was a closeted homosexual and a friend of Oscar Wilde, a not-so-closeted gay man. Stoker idolized Walt Whitman and met him while touring the U.S., and he had a “passionate” relationship with actor Henry Irving. He began writing *Dracula* one month after Wilde was convicted of

sodomy and sentenced to hard labor. In a nod to Wilde, he used the “idiom of Oscar Wilde’s letters to Lord Alfred Douglas” in *Dracula*. His friend of over twenty years was going to prison, and he began writing a novel about sexual repression and fear. Talia Schaffer (1994) writes that “*Dracula* explores Stoker’s fear and anxiety as a closeted homosexual man during Oscar Wilde’s trial. ... This peculiar tonality of horror derives from Stoker’s emotions at this unique moment in gay history.”

In 1931’s *Dracula*, the character of Jonathan Harker stands in for the author and his own fears and desires *vis-à-vis* his repressed homosexual feelings. Harker describes his sensations when about to engage with a trio of female vampires: “I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the super-sensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart.” The use of females in scenes such as this is explained by Christopher Craft (1988). He sees all gay men of this time as wearing a “heterosexual mask” and any erotic male contact as being “mediated” by females, the “correct” gender. Stoker does not let this seeming heterosexual encounter reach fruition; Count Dracula breaks it up, declaring: “How dare you touch him, any of you? ... This man belongs to me!”

In a short story from 1911, *For the Blood is the Life*, American writer F. Marion Crawford demonstrated the same mixture of desire and fear, describing his vampire thus: “She had very red lips and very black eyes, she was built like a greyhound, and had the tongue of the devil.” There is sexual attraction but complete dread at the same time, an apt description of the feelings surrounding same-sex eroticism at this time.



Bela Lugosi and David Manners (as Jonathan Harker) in 1931’s *Dracula*

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THE ERA OF REPRESSION—FOR GAYS AND FOR DRACULA

The inter-war period was a more hopeful time for gays and lesbians, especially in large cities, and this is reflected in the popular culture. The first openly gay films, *Different from Others* (1919) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), were produced in Weimar Germany, but urban areas in the U.S. such as Greenwich Village were becoming known as “bohemian enclaves” where homosexual relationships were at least tolerated. There were numerous gay baths bringing sex into a much more public sphere. Harlem, while not as open as the Village, was another oasis of expression in the 1920s and came to be known for “drag balls” that attracted thousands. While these “oases” thrived, the majority of the nation remained conservative in all matters sexual, especially homosexual, and by the late 1930s the social climate was changing even in places such as these.

Vampires were also becoming more conspicuous in American popular culture in the '20s and '30s. Just as homosexuals seemed centered in specific areas, vampires were mostly limited to Hollywood films, and both groups were seen as “spectacles” by much of the public (*Dracula* on the big screen or a Harlem drag ball). Much of gay culture during this time was as flamboyant as was 1931's *Dracula*, with his flowing cape, transfixing gaze, and heavy accent. Tod Browning, the director of *Dracula*, was himself gay, and much of his work centered on the position of the outsider. After his most famous film, he went on to direct *Freaks* (1932), about a group of outsiders who form their own “family,” and *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), featuring Bela Lugosi as the vampire. Psychiatry was becoming more prevalent in this era, and in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), vampire Countess Marya Zaleska goes to psychologist Dr. Garth for help. She's hoping to use psychiatry to free herself of her “vampire curse”—something that unhappy homosexuals might have done.

World War II was in some ways a liberating event for many gay men and lesbians, and so it was for the culture of vampires as well. Gays who had lived their lives on farms or in small towns joined the military, met other gay people, and spent time in large, anonymous cities. Vampire movies stretched in new and interesting ways as well. In *Return of the Vampire* (1943), a werewolf plays a starring role—a man who becomes something totally wild and unexpected during the full moon. In *Creature of the Devil* (1943), a vampire is jealous of his twin's attraction to a woman and uses a “hunchback” (another outsider) to kill him. The mood lightens up in the next wave of films. *House of Frankenstein*, which featured an “all-star cast of villains,” was released in 1944, and by 1948 movies such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (which featured *Dracula*) were popular.

In the 1944 short story, *The Bat Is My Brother*, author Robert Bloch, best known as the writer of *Psycho* (1959), describes a man's first-person experience of “coming out” as a vampire. He has a “guardian” who helpfully explains: “Yes, I am a vampire. And ... so are you!” The guardian shows the new vampire the ropes—an older, more experienced man (or vampire) teaching the cultural norms to a younger one. This new world could seem frightening or overwhelming, and with the counsel of a mentor it becomes as normal as breathing. This vampire story could as easily be describing a young person fresh off the farm in the big city of San Francisco and experiencing gay culture for the first time.

The pre-Stonewall era for gays and lesbians in American society, lasting from the end of World War II to the late 1960s, was mostly a time of repression, fear, and the closet. It was a time of conformity not just for gay people, but for women and other minorities as well, who were expected to play their role in order to keep America safe from “Godless Communism.” In her book *Homeward Bound*, historian Elaine Tyler May (1999) argues for a similarity between “domestic containment” and Cold War containment policies. She points out that homosexuals had it especially tough and that many “used marriage as a cover during these years to escape stigma and persecution.” Senator Joseph McCarthy, his notorious (and closeted) righthand man Roy Cohn, and others of their ilk were hunting not just communists but homosexuals as well. There were congressional hearings aimed at rooting “sexual perverts” out of government jobs, and postal surveillance of magazines geared toward gay men continued until 1966.

Representations of homosexuality in popular culture were correspondingly negative. In *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), the homosexual character never appears or speaks, and dies a terrible off-screen death, torn to pieces by an angry mob. The movie was based on a play by gay writer Tennessee Williams, whose works *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* referenced homosexuality (though not in their movie versions). In 1961's *The Children's Hour*, actress Shirley MacLaine played a repressed lesbian who's miserable and eventually commits suicide. Gay characters were beginning to appear on screen and stage, but it was necessary that they be desperate souls, and preferably that they die.

Once again, vampires (mostly in film) served as metaphors for the place that gays and lesbians held in American culture at the time. Vampires were evil, scary monsters that children and nice people needed to avoid, just like homosexuals. Many science fiction films of the 1950s, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, were metaphors for the hysteria over the communist menace, but could just as easily be metaphors for the “lavender menace” with which many in government were obsessed. In 1951's *The Thing (from Another World)*, a vampire from outer space runs wild, attacking and killing men and draining them of their blood. This is emblematic of a homophobic society in which male-male contact leads to death or ruin. In *Not of this Earth* (1957), the creature looks like everyone else but hides a terrible secret: he stalks men. Finally, in *Queen of Blood* (1966), a female vampire attacks astronauts on a distant planet while trying to breed a new race, somewhat reminiscent of the outlandish belief that gays must go out and “recruit” to replenish their numbers.

Arguably the scariest vampires of this era were those created by Hammer Films. Produced in Great Britain, the films were extravagant by Hollywood standards and popular in the U.S. The first was a 1958 update of *Dracula* called *The Horror of Dracula*, starring Christopher Lee (as *Dracula*) and Peter Cushing (as Dr. Van Helsing). The movie stays relatively close to the novel, as when *Dracula* chases away the female vampire from Jonathan Harker so that he can maintain control over the young man. This film is much more graphic than the original in depicting both violence and sexuality. Unlike the flamboyant vampire of 1931, the *Dracula* portrayed by actor Lee is violent, vicious, and authentically frightening. Another difference is that

now the vampire is destroyed by exposure to the sun rather than killed with a stake. This is reminiscent of McCarthyism and the quest to force dissidents—along with homosexuals—out into the obliterating light of public exposure.

This need to destroy the enemy is evident in other Hammer films, such as *The Brides of Dracula* (1960), in which the vampire is torn to pieces and the remains are scattered under the shadow created by a cross. But Dracula tends to rise from the dead, as he does in *Dracula, Prince of Darkness* (1966). Here he returns by drinking the blood of another man—read into that what you will—but is of course destroyed by the end of the film, this time drowned under a layer of ice. He returns yet again in 1968's *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave*, and is again revived by the blood of a man.

THE ERA OF LIBERATION

Explicitly “gay” movies began to appear following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, starting with *The Boys in the Band* in 1970 and continuing with such films as *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1971), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *Midnight Express* (1978). There were also a number of “underground” gay movies, notably those of John Waters (1973's *Pink Flamingos* and 1975's *Female Trouble*), and of course *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

Vampires in American popular culture reflected this opening of the gay closet, yielding a kind of “coming out of the coffin.” In *Dracula A.D. 1972*, Dracula shows up in the late 20th century and encounters outlandishly clad hippies. The Count is worshipped in the film by Johnny Alucard (Dracula backwards), described by one critic as being modeled on Malcolm McDowell's character in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), “a black-clad Goth-punk vampire wanna-be.” This shock of change for Dracula was similar to what much of Middle America must have experienced seeing “out” homosexuals and gay pride parades on television. Another film, 1967's *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, directed by Roman Polanski, was an early signal that sex was back. This funny, slickly produced movie helped pave the way for the more sexual, and even openly gay, vampires to come in the 1970s.

Blatantly sexual vampires began to proliferate in popular culture, just as open and sometimes public sexuality was becoming a major part of gay culture. In the early 1970s, European films such as *Dracula's Vampire Lust* (1970), *Bite Me, Darling* (1970), and *Jacula* (1973) were released with explicit sex scenes. In 1976, *Spermula* was released in the U.S. with semen substituting for blood and with obvious homosexual undertones. Vampires were also becoming more sympathetic. In *Count Yorga, Vampire* (1970), the vampire lives in modern-day L.A., and he's just like everyone else in his need for affection. Then came *Blacula* (1972) and *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973), in which a black Dracula lives, parties, and has sex in L.A. The decade ended with a remake, *Dracula* (1979). The vampire, portrayed by actor Frank Langella, is attractive and highly erotic. This romantic version of the classic novel takes the emphasis away from explicit sex, as though in anticipation of the 1980s.

In the 1970s, vampire literature made a big splash with author Anne Rice. In her novels, vampires live among humans, have always lived among humans, and have a distinct, separate culture. This is analogous in a number of ways to homosexuality, with its wider acceptance, the realization that being gay is not a choice, and the existence of a separate and still largely hidden gay sub-

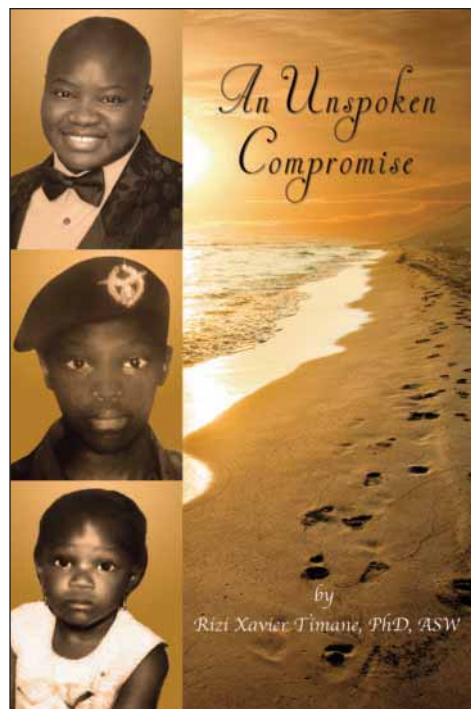
An Unspoken Compromise

by Rizi Xavier Timane, PhD

Rizi Xavier Timane, PhD, ASW, is a Nigerian-born transgender minister and certified grief recovery specialist residing in Los Angeles, California. He grew up in an extremely religious Christian home and was subjected to multiple exorcisms and other reparative attempts by his family and the church to “pray the gay away.” *An Unspoken Compromise* takes you through his journey of self-discovery and spiritual exploration including:

- Coming out as a trans boy at eight years old
- Identifying as a lesbian in homophobic Africa
- Transitioning while facing societal and family rejection
- The religious persecution & bullying he has suffered all along

Rizi's message to the LGBT community is twofold. First, be your authentic self—it's the only way to inner peace and happiness. Second, if you are in search of a relationship with God, a spiritual path to unconditional love and acceptance does exist for you free from condemnation and negative judgment.



“A searing memoir.”

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“An honest and important piece of work!”

— Jami Davis, MSW

“Dr. Timane brings up thought-provoking points and consistently finds ways to raise the self-esteem and value of anyone reading....something that usually takes us at least two dirty martinis.”

— Gay List Daily

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culture. Rice's books with her frequent portrayals of homosexual relationships have been stunningly successful. In *Interview with the Vampire*, which was published in 1976, the male vampires form a family, even "giving birth" to a young female vampire who becomes their "daughter." Not all of the book is so family oriented, however. Scholar George E. Haggerty (1998) examines an early scene in the novel, in which the vampire Louis meets a young gay man in a bar and tells his life story as "a straightforward parody of a queer seduction." He argues that Rice is most interested in male-to-male desire, and her characters symbolize gay predators "roving in the darkness" with an "insatiable appetite." At the same time she is portraying a somewhat glamorous world that's not accessible to the majority of people.

There can be no doubt that Anne Rice created a lush, detailed, and highly erotic world. The vampires live in the world of mortals yet somehow remain separate. They feel and want many of the same things as everyone else. They are also very appealing to gay men, for whom the thought of remaining young and beautiful forever can be intoxicating. By the end of *Interview with the Vampire*, the boy wants to become a vampire himself. When the vampire does bite him, it is completely sexualized: "two fangs came down into the boy's flesh. The boy stuttered, a low guttural sound coming out of his throat ... his eyes widening only to become dull and gray as the vampire drank." While the vampires in the world created by Rice were erotic beings and are symbolic of the new gay sexual freedom that developed in the 1970s, there was a backlash. This is one way to interpret the vampires created by Stephen King in *Salem's Lot* (1975). These vampires are truly frightening. They settle in an all-American town in Maine and immediately start to attack the town's children.

CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

The "party" that was the 1970s for many gay people ended with the onset of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the conservative era of Ronald Reagan. To be sure, a huge number of gay and lesbian authors emerged in this era or continued to publish openly GLBT books—Edmund White, Larry Kramer, Rita Mae Brown, et al.—but there was a palpable backlash against gay people in the popular imagination. In *Cruising* (1980), there was an undeniable message that gay sex and promiscuity lead to death. Gays are portrayed as killers (this is also evident in 1991's *Silence of the Lambs*) or as practitioners of kinky sex who deserve to die. A backlash can also be seen in movies such as *The Birdcage*, in which gays are merely harmless and humorous objects of derision. A few years later there were a number of movies such as *Threesome* (1994) and *The Opposite of Sex* (1998), which suggested that sexual orientation could be turned on and off like a light switch, advancing the "choice" theory.

Against this reactionary backdrop, vampires were often seen in a similar light. In *Fright Night* (1985), the vampire bites a young, somewhat naïve boy and turns him into a creature of the night who stalks others. This is a clear metaphor for homosexual seduction and the fear of gays promulgated by some conservatives. *The Lost Boys* (1987) serves as a cautionary warning: a group of boys who only want to play at night are coming for your sons. The movie at its core is about family (a dominant theme in



Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt in 1994's *Interview with the Vampire*

the 1980s), whether made up of a mom and her sons or created by homosocial male bonding. The gay vampires in Anne Rice's books of this time live extravagantly: "This world was one of spacious rooms, decorated walls, generous fragrant light and a regular parade of high fashion, to which I grew accustomed completely, never seeing much of the pain and misery of the poor of the city at all." Her vampires are mostly gay, but rather than being concerned for humanity, they revel in opulence. In *The Hunger* (1983), the bisexual vampires live a decadent lifestyle, again symbolic of the 1980s, but most come to a deservedly nasty end.

The AIDS crisis was reflected in vampire culture as well. Scholar Nina Auerbach (1995) writes that vampires were stricken (like many homosexuals), and would no longer be young and beautiful forever, but become tragically mortal. She discusses a novel by Brian Aldiss, *Dracula Unbound* (1991), in which Dracula suffers from syphilis, another sexually transmitted disease. This link between blood, disease, and vampires is evident in the movie *Blade* (1998), in which the pseudo-vampire played by actor Wesley Snipes must take preventative serum, much as people who were HIV-positive were beginning to take a "cocktail" of pills to ward off AIDS. Scholar David J. Skal (1990) writes that "when the definitive anthropological history of the AIDS epidemic is finally written, the irrational, vampire-related undercurrents of scapegoating, blood superstition, and plague panic will no doubt be prominent considerations." The "sex is bad" theme so pronounced during this time is exemplified by movies such as *Vamp* (1986), in which three college boys go looking for sex and of course wind up dead.

THE AGE OF ACCEPTANCE

It was in the '90s, and especially after the scourge of AIDS was lifted, that GLBT people and representations began to find their place in American popular culture. Out lesbian Rosie O'Donnell hosted a popular daytime talk show, as Ellen DeGeneres has done for many years. The hit comedy series *Will & Grace* began its eight-year run in 1998. There were gay characters in movies, on television, on stage, and in books. Some were even "normal." Movies intended for gay audiences ranged from funny, such as *But I'm a Cheerleader* (2000), to creepy, like *Chuck and Buck* (2000). Also popular were romances such as *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Edge of Seventeen* (1998), and *Get Real* (1998), which presented gay love as entirely ordinary. There was also a growing underground gay film scene led by filmmaker Bruce

LaBruce, whose films have explored all genres of sexual expression, however extreme, including the presence of vampires and zombies. He described his recent feature film, *Otto; or Up With Dead People* (2008), as a “gay, zombie love story.”

A more accepting attitude is also evident in recent works about vampire culture. Author Ulysses G. Dietz writes a series of books about Desmond Beckwith, a successful financial genius with many friends and an active gay sex life who just happens to be a vampire as well. He also plays out a gay fantasy by limiting his killing to “fag-bashers,” whom he sees as deserving of death. Like many, he lives a relatively normal life, spending a good deal of time searching for real love. Much more representative of gays in American culture are the vampires in the television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004). Buffy’s best friend is a lesbian; and while Buffy does kill vampires, they are portrayed as just a part of normal life in Southern California. There are “good” vampires such as Angel and Spike. There’s even a bisexual vampire who plays a major role in the “young adult” series of vampire books *The Last Vampire*, which came out in the late 1990s.

The HBO series *True Blood* (2008) is an almost perfect metaphor for gays and lesbians in current American culture. It was created by an openly gay man (as was *Buffy*), which gives the series a mostly “pro-gay” stance. In the show, vampires have “come out of the coffin” and live openly in American society. There are “vampire-rights groups” similar to gay rights organizations. Their representatives go on television discussion shows to make their case for equal rights. A subculture known as “fang-bangers” cruise vampire bars for sex. Vampire-human marriage has recently been legalized, provoking a backlash similar to the one against gay marriage. A politician on the series “vampire-bashes” to further his career, much as was done to gays in the 2004 election. The similarities are endless, and deliberate. Those who oppose “vampire rights” are painted as hopelessly backward, ignorant, and “vampirephobic.” A sign outside a church reads: “God Hates Fangs.” The main character, Sookie, who is smart, pretty, and a mind reader, sums up how most people feel when she says, “I don’t think Jesus would mind if someone was a vampire.”

Vampires have become omnipresent in American popular culture. They’re on television, movies, and stage, in books, and even on cereal boxes. They are the stars of documentaries on the History Channel. The vampire movie *Twilight* (2008), based on a hugely popular novel written by a Mormon, was recently the American box office champion. This constant metamorphosis reminds us that monsters are a product of the culture in which they arise, that difference or otherness is part of what makes them scary, and that there is always a mixture of fear and desire surrounding monsters. All three of these properties can be applied to GLBT people as conceived in the popular imagination, including even the third, as much of the most virulent homophobia appears linked to repressed same-sex desires.

The great change that has occurred in societal attitudes towards vampires and gays is especially evident in literature. Bram Stoker describes a freshly sated Dracula in the late 19th century in the language of disgust: “It seemed as if the whole awful creature were simply gorged with blood. He lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion.” By the late 20th century, Anne Rice was writing about a sympathetic vampire

named Armand who feels love: “I felt an instinctive shame, but this quite slowly vanished. He picked me up, easily as always, and pushed my face into his neck. The wind rushed around us.”

What does the 21st century hold? I can see nothing but a continuation of a parallel trajectory for both gays and vampires. No one is really scared of vampires any more, as witness the continuing popularity of the romantic vampires in the ever popular “*Twilight*” series and in *The Vampire Diaries*. Similarly, a majority of Americans now favor same-sex marriage, which was a truly scary prospect only a decade ago. President Obama announced his support for marriage equality and was re-elected handily. Gay people, like vampires, have lost their alien status and no longer frighten people—including voters, whose fears cannot be so easily demagogued by right-wing politicians. If people want scary, they can always go back to the old vampire movies. But here is where reality and fantasy part company: there is no going back to the bad old days of GLBT ostracism and oppression.

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The Lives and Times of Harry Chess

MICHAEL J. MURPHY

THE WORLD'S FIRST gay comic strip was arguably *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.*, which first appeared in the Philadelphia homophile publication *Drum* from 1965 to '66. The strip pits the hirsute pectorals of protagonist Harry Chess, secret agent #0068 7/8 of the Agents' Undercover Network to Investigate Evil (A.U.N.T.I.E.), and his muscular but monosyllabic teenage "assistant" Mickey Muscle, against a series of colorfully evil and sexually naughty nemeses. Although its title was inspired by the 1964-68 television series *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, the strip was a campy and (homo)sexually explicit spoof of the larger international espionage genre with its futuristic gadgets, shadowy acronymic organizations, and morally ambiguous secret agents whose exploits were regularly punctuated by gratuitous sexual encounters. But more than just another example of the mock-Bond phenomenon, *Harry Chess* demonstrates the important role of popular visual culture in the mid-1960s emergence of a gay liberationist sensibility in the U.S.

Harry Chess resulted from a fundamental shift in priorities and tactics within the Philadelphia-based Janus Society, one of a number of homophile organizations on the Eastern seaboard. In 1963 Janus elected as its president Clark P. Polak, a candidate who was openly critical of the organization's past leadership, and promised a more structured, business-like organization with a strong community presence. But beyond organizational reform, Polak rejected the Janus Society's strategies, which tended toward accommodation and assimilation, in favor of a gay-centered and sex-affirmative politics. In a 1966 *Drum* editorial, he described earlier homophile activists as "a group of Aunt Marys who have exchanged whatever vigorous defense of homosexual rights there may be for a hyper-conformist we-must-impress-the-straight-that-we-are-as-but-ah-as-they-are stance. It is a sell-out."

Recalling that in mid-century gay slang "auntie" was a pejorative term for an older, effeminate gay man, we can understand that the virile, handsome, and above all masculine Harry Chess really was "that man from A.U.N.T.I.E."—a departure from older, seemingly outmoded modes of gay sensibility. Polak was perhaps at the more radical edge of a general shift, evident in other

mid-1960s homophile organizations, toward a positive reevaluation of homosexuality and a rejection of scientific and medical expertise on "the homosexual" in favor of the personal authority and everyday experience of actual gays and lesbians.

Key to realizing Polak's vision was the Janus Society's monthly newsletter, which he renamed *Drum: Sex in Perspective*. Featuring national and international news coverage, editorials, cultural reviews, advice columns, parodies, and, of course, a comic strip, *Drum* was the prototype of later gay lifestyle publications such as *Genre* and *Out*. With *Drum*, Polak sought "to put the 'sex' back into 'homosexual,'" a goal reflected in the how-to column "A Beginner's Guide to Cruising" and the use of male physique photography on the cover. An ad in the New York Mat-tachine Society newsletter (November 1964) succinctly characterized *Drum's* approach: "*Drum* stands for a realistic approach

to sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. *Drum* stands for sex in perspective, sex with insight and, above all, sex with a sense of humor. *Drum* represents news for 'queers,' and fiction for 'perverts.' Photo essays for 'fairies,' and laughs for 'faggots.'" *Drum's* combination of news, sex, and humor proved immensely successful. Circulation topped 10,000 after two years, with a print run two or three times that of other homophile publications.

THE BIRTH OF HARRY

In 1964, Polak placed classified ads in East Coast newspapers seeking "a cartoonist for a new gay and sophisticated magazine." (A subsequent form letter responding to applicants suggests that a great many cartoonists misunderstood Polak's use of the word "gay," a fact that probably explains why newspapers accepted the ad in the first place.) Allen J. Shapiro, a Pratt Institute of Art-trained illustrator, responded to

an ad in *The New York Times* with an 11" x 14" drawing of Harry Chess wearing bikini underwear, signed with the pen name "A. Jay." Polak later remembered thinking: "That was it." The Harry Chess character first appeared in *Drum's* November 1964 issue as a graphic accompaniment to the parody "Franky Hill: Memoirs of a Boy of Pleasure," and the stand-alone comic strip debuted in the April 1965 issue. The strip was a collaborative product, with Shapiro first roughing out the story, then meeting with Polak to fine-tune the humorous dialogue.

Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E. borrowed the popular Bond film formula, but re-imagined it from a mid-1960s gay male perspective, for a gay male audience, to affirm



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a diversity of gay male sexual styles. The strip's megalomaniacal villains and their nefarious plots reflected actual threats to a vulnerable gay male community, while the agents of A.U.N.T.I.E. embodied a sex affirming, muscular, and always humorous resistance to their would-be oppressors. Every detail of the strip—the names of spy organizations, the agents, the plots and locales—was saturated with sexual innuendo and gay double entendres. Polak and Shapiro took special delight in winking at the well-known homoerotic valences of hetero-masculine rituals, such as men's wrestling, physique photography, military academies, Hollywood westerns, and bodybuilding contests. Described as a "stripped comic," everyone in Harry's world seemed to have an aversion to clothing, which conveniently facilitated his many humorous sex-capades. Like James Bond, Harry's adventures always involved plenty of sex, and the sex was always plenty adventurous.

The strip's theme was established in the very first storyline when the "very mean and terribly oversexed" Lewd Leather and his motorcycle gang from the Maniacal Underworld Control Korp (M.U.C.K.) "trick-nap" the hunky but virginal Biff Ripples, who has just been crowned "The World's Most Succulently Beautiful Male" at the Mr. Planetarium Physique Contest, taking place in the Grand Ballroom of the Slumhouse YMCA. After Lewd cuts the power, the all-male audience devolves into a riot—or is it an orgy?—in the resulting darkness. Agent FU2, head of the secret A.U.N.T.I.E. organization, alerts "top agent" Harry Chess, who's busy "working out" Mickey Muscle at his New York brownstone. The pair heads for the Bloody Basket, a seedy gay bar, to consult with stubbly-chinned informant, bouncer, and "Girl Bartender" Big Bennie. They learn that Biff's abduction was ordered by the wealthy, monocle-wearing aesthete Gaylord Dragoff, who wants to add Biff to his private "piece corps." Big Bennie directs Harry and Mickey to a gay bathhouse, where they find Lewd and his boys have absconded with Dragoff's \$5,000,000 reward—but not before having their way with a not *too* unwilling Biff Ripples, left hogtied and moaning contentedly in the steam room. Dragoff consoles himself with the fact that Biff is alive and a natural for "The Steve Reeves Story," a future film currently casting in Hollywood.

In subsequent "undercover operations," Harry and Mickey encounter villains such as the Scarlet Scumbag, the Groping Hand, Brownfinger and his sidekick Belowjob, and Mung the Mean and his Deadly Dildo Death Squad. They foil a plot by the Pornography Intern Solely for Soviet Hotrocks (or P.I.S.S.H.) to corner the world's gay porn market. Next they recover the FBI's official "homo-file" and the kidnapped astronaut Hunky Dorie. Another time they successfully prevent ground glass from being dumped into the vats of the "Cay-Why" factory. Following the Bond formula, Harry and Mickey are subjected to wildly inventive and heavily sexualized tortures and enjoy plot-incident sex with a variety of gorgeous guys, with names like Tooshie Supreme and Gary R. Pigeon.

HARRY PRO AND CON: SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The strip's explicit sexual references and raunchy humor were a magnet for criticism, reflecting larger factional divisions inside the era's homophile organizations and the wider gay community. Clearly favoring a politics of conformity and respectability of the kind that Polak detested, Richard Inman,

then president of the nascent Mattachine Society of Florida, wrote to Janus Society member Barbara Horowitz in April 1965: "Look at your champ Harry Chess. Frankly I think the whole idea is SICK. ... What is the sense of trying to see how MUCH you can get away with? What is the sense of such unnecessary defiance? ... Does it reflect what the homophile movement stands for? ... HELL NO IT DOESN'T and the only result could be one of damage to the movement."

At the time, printed matter that depicted or discussed homosexuality was a favorite target of censorship campaigns by crusading politicians using anti-obscenity laws. Physique magazines and homophile publications were regularly seized by local police, the FBI, and the Postmaster General's office. Polak and Shapiro anticipated the threat of censorship when writing *Harry Chess*. As Polak put it, "our greatest single problem is attempting to predict which of our quips we can use without ending in jail on an obscenity rap." Understandably, full-frontal nudity was not depicted in *Harry Chess* while the strip appeared in *Drum*, even after the 1962 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *MANual Enterprises v. Day*, which held that physique magazines with nude models were not inherently obscene.

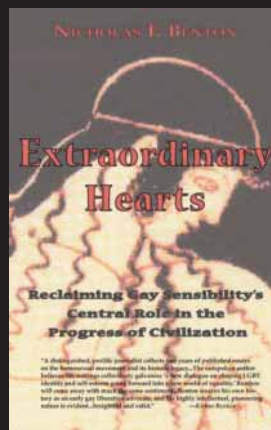
Despite these precautions, *Harry Chess* appears to have sharply polarized *Drum* readers. A letter from Toronto in the September 1965 issue begged that Harry not be dropped, while a reader from Santa Monica cautioned: "Harry Chess is your Henry Miller. Squeamish souls had better look elsewhere. Of course you may be banned eventually (by jealous witches)." In the November 1965 issue editor Polak reported, in answer to a reader's query about the popularity of the previous issue, that

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“the most violent reactions came about *Harry Chess*. About 80% made cancellation threats if we dropped him and the other 20% threatened to cancel if we did not drop him.”

These extreme positions were made vividly clear in letters printed in the December 1965 issue. A Canadian subscriber described by the editor as a “leather and boot fetishist” wrote: “Above all else, I enjoyed the right hand, top panel of *Harry Chess* (*Drum*, Oct.) marked ‘odors’ in the control panel of the torture chamber. I was really thrilled to read amongst the scents of torture the words ‘leather’ and ‘extract of cycle boots.’” This was immediately followed by this opinion from San Francisco: “What began as a funny romp has ebbed into a sick excursion into the depths of what I feel is [the] worst depravity. I can only suggest, for whatever its [sic] worth, that you drop *Harry Chess*.”

Polak took delight in tweaking what he saw as his critics’ prudish and outmoded sensibilities by frequently citing their objections to *Harry Chess*. Characterizing his critics as “failing in a sense of humor,” Polak preened: “[T]here is a substantial number of persons who are as opposed to *Harry* as the pre-t.v. *Batman* was opposed to girls. They call him obscene, crude, vulgar and about the only thing I can think of answering them is that I agree, and I am glad to see they understand him so well.”

Although the strip’s themes implied that Harry Chess and Mickey Muscle represented a larger gay constituency, certain clues suggest the characters were more than abstract idealizations. In a 1966 *Harry Chess* compilation, Clark Polak concluded his description of Shapiro’s contributions to the strip with the revealing assertion that “Harry Chess is A. Jay.” Indeed, later self-representations by the cartoonist confirm his physical similarity to the muscular, hairy-chested secret agent he limned for *Drum*. Armed with this clue, it becomes easy to see the resemblance to A.U.N.T.I.E. chief FU2 in photographs of the young Clark Polak. But lest we judge *Harry Chess* to be nothing more than the public expression of Polak’s and Shapiro’s egotistical fantasy life—though it was that—we should also note the ways in which the strip invited readers to imagine themselves into Harry’s world. Anticipating (but also parodically mimicking) the censor’s black-marker “redactions” in a way designed to enlist the reader’s X-rated imagination, Shapiro coyly included blacked-out panels illuminated only by thought balloons filled with ambiguous but suggestive dialogue, as in this “shower scene”: “Dropped what soap?” “Ooooooow!” “I’ll give you 40 minutes to stop that!” “Glorie-oskie!!” “What’s this damp, sweeling [sic] thing I feel?” “A sponge silly!” “Gee!”

Through such visual and narrative strategies, Polak and Shapiro welcomed readers into a fantastic if recognizable world structured by gay male sexual desire, the articulation of which constituted a form of both self-expression and resistance. *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.* represented a new kind of

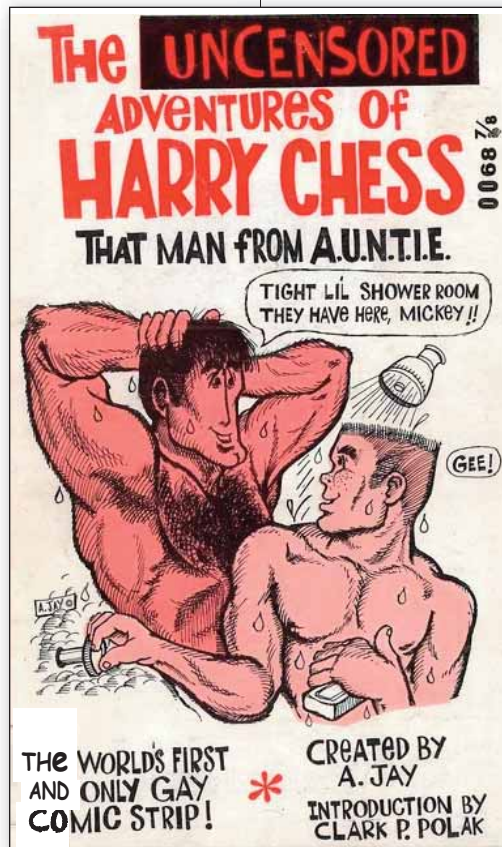
sexual politics in which a self-affirming, sex-positive, and subversively humorous homosexuality triumphed over the considerable real-world forces arrayed against it. It helped to catalyze a gay liberationist sensibility by offering a cultural space in which gay men could envision themselves as both heroic *and* homosexual, while the agents of homophobic oppression (often closeted homosexuals) are portrayed as sexual deviants and villains.

AFTER *DRUM*: GO WEST, HUNG MAN!

From its modest and somewhat amateurish beginnings in *Drum*, *Harry Chess* would subsequently “star” in a number of thematically related comic strips published in several gay publications well into the 1980s. Beginning in 1965 the strip was translated into German and Swedish, making Harry an international icon of gay male culture. But, for reasons that remain unclear, in 1966 *Drum* ceased publishing the strip.

But Harry’s career as a secret agent wasn’t over. He resurfaced in a different strip in *Drum* in 1967, which continued until the newsletter ceased publication in 1969. That same year, Shapiro launched *The Super Adventures of Harry Chess* in the New York-based *Queen’s Quarterly*. In 1977, Harry jumped ship to *Drummer*, a periodical whose hyper-masculine leather orientation was ideally suited to the strip’s espionage theme and its protagonist’s physical features and sexual proclivities. (Shapiro was the founding art director of the San Francisco *Drummer* and produced illustrations associated with that city’s bathhouses and leather community until his death of AIDS in 1987.) In the 1980s, select episodes of the original *Harry Chess* strip were republished in anthologies of gay male comics, but without reference to their earlier origins. In the later series, all references to A.U.N.T.I.E. had vanished, and Harry was described as “secret-super agent #2 for F.U.G.G. (Fist-flying Undercover Good Gays), the super secret protective force of the Mottomachine Society (and we all know who they are!)”

Over these years the crudeness and hesitancy of Shapiro’s early drawing style developed into a confident visual artistry in the service of more elaborate and explicit narratives. Where *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.* tiptoed around full-frontal nudity, the later strips positively wallow in the sexually fantastic and esoteric. Eventually, even *Harry* went “the full Monty,” rendered by Shapiro in to-be-expected anatomical hyperbole. The cultural politics of the strip had shifted from critiquing the mid-century tactics of respectability and asserting a sex-positive militancy to exploring the sexual possibilities that these earlier efforts had opened up.



The author would like to acknowledge Marc Stein (York University), the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, and the San Francisco Public Library for their help with this research.

James Purdy's World of Extremes

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

YOU BEGIN to get at the problem of James Purdy by noting, as almost everyone writing on him does, that Dame Edith Sitwell praised him: "I am convinced that, long after my death, James Purdy will come to be recognized as one of the greatest writers America has ever produced." Dorothy Parker and Langston Hughes, more recent than Sitwell but not all that recent, were among Purdy's admirers. Marianne Moore called him "a master of vernacular." Edward Albee adapted a Purdy novella for the stage. But even adding Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal to the list doesn't take away the sense that Purdy (1914–2009) is not exactly a writer for our times.

Nevertheless, when Reed Woodhouse and I were teaching a continuing education class on gay male literature, Purdy was central to the reading list. We would begin the first class with "Walking to the Ocean This Morning," a two-page story by Sam D'Allesandro, who died in 1988 at age 31, which starts: "The truth of the matter is I like to be beaten and then fucked like a dog." This is shocking, yes, and contemporary in its first-person, matter-of-fact admission of aberrant sexual pleasure. Then we'd turn to "Rapture," published in 1981 when Purdy was 67. It's about a young, dying widow, mother to a teenage son. Her brother, just out of the military, comes to visit. After she dies, her brother and her son become lovers.

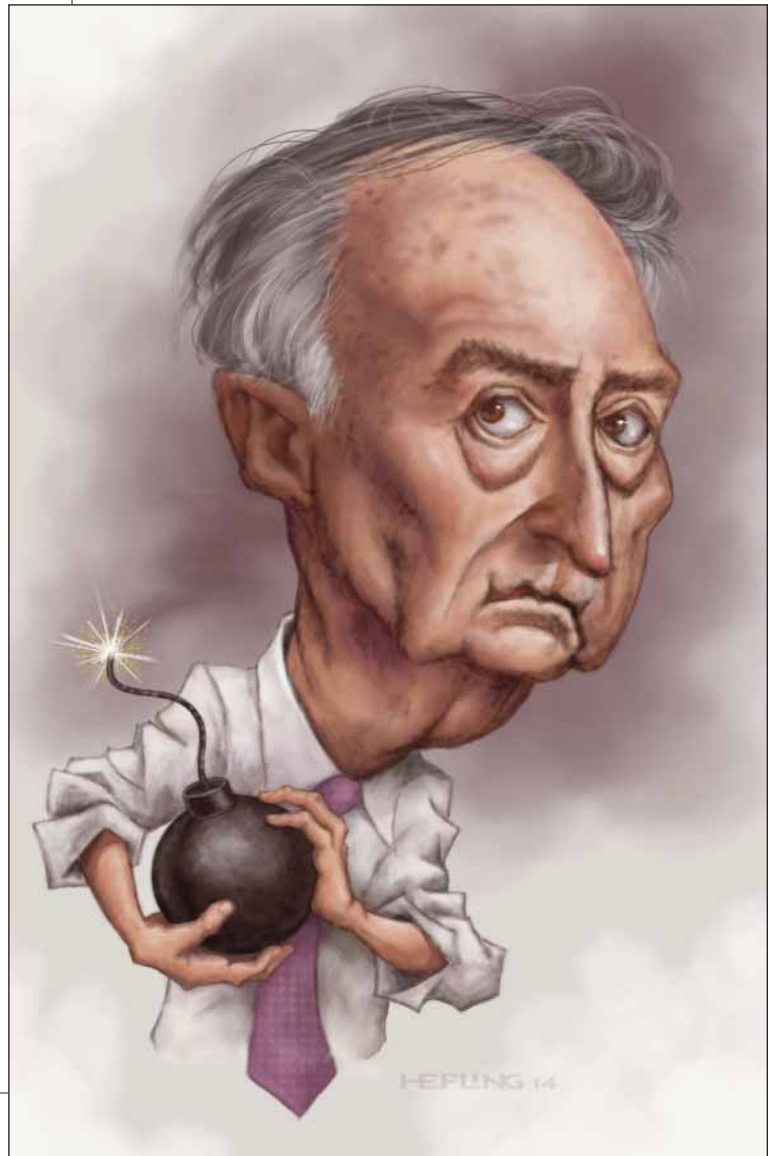
But that's not the shocking part. That comes when the mother realizes that her brother physically desires her son: "Mrs. Muir felt, she did not know why, the same way she had when her father, the day of her wedding, had held her arm and they had walked down the aisle of the church together, and her father had then presented her to her bridegroom. She had felt at the moment a kind of bliss. She now felt she could give up her son to someone who would cherish him as her bridegroom had cherished her." Think about it: the mother can die comfortably because her brother will do to her son what her husband did to her. Merely liking to get fucked like a dog pales in comparison.

Our class always included one of Purdy's two greatest gay novels: *Eustace Chisholm And the Works* (1967) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978), both wild narratives about the desperate attempt to resist desire and the violent, humiliating grace of finally submitting to it. These novels should have secured Purdy's place in the gay canon, and his vast writings should have won him the wide acclaim that Sitwell predicted for him. (Reed has covered Purdy in these

pages: an appreciation in the Fall 1994 issue and a visit with the man himself, in Brooklyn, in the Spring 1995 issue.)

Now we have this complete collection of Purdy's short stories, some published for the first time. Only a handful of the stories in these 700 pages are explicitly gay—for the most part, they're the better ones—but they all offer a slice of Purdy's intense, disturbing vision. This is another opportunity for readers to encounter Purdy and his unique subject and style. I'd like to take this opportunity to explore that style in some depth.

"Rapture" is for me Purdy's best story. It also illustrates the key negative reaction that Purdy provokes: people just don't talk like that. Take the scene where the uncle, Kent, learns that his nephew loves him:



Michael Schwartz, a full-time writer based in Boston, is an associate editor of this magazine.

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What is the most important information I should know about STRIBILD?

STRIBILD can cause serious side effects:

- **Build-up of an acid in your blood (lactic acidosis),** which is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms of lactic acidosis include feeling very weak or tired, unusual (not normal) muscle pain, trouble breathing, stomach pain with nausea or vomiting, feeling cold especially in your arms and legs, feeling dizzy or lightheaded, and/or a fast or irregular heartbeat.
- **Serious liver problems.** The liver may become large (hepatomegaly) and fatty (steatosis). Symptoms of liver problems include your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice), dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored bowel movements (stools), loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, and/or stomach pain.
- **You may be more likely to get lactic acidosis or serious liver problems** if you are female, very overweight (obese), or have been taking STRIBILD for a long time. In some cases, these serious conditions have led to death. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any symptoms of these conditions.

- **Worsening of hepatitis B (HBV) infection.** If you also have HBV and stop taking STRIBILD, your hepatitis may suddenly get worse. Do not stop taking STRIBILD without first talking to your healthcare provider, as they will need to monitor your health. STRIBILD is not approved for the treatment of HBV.

Who should not take STRIBILD?

Do not take STRIBILD if you:

- **Take a medicine that contains:** alfuzosin, dihydroergotamine, ergotamine, methylergonovine, cisapride, lovastatin, simvastatin, pimozide, sildenafil when used for lung problems (Revatio®), triazolam, oral midazolam, rifampin or the herb St. John's wort.
- **For a list of brand names for these medicines,** please see the Brief Summary on the following pages.
- **Take any other medicines to treat HIV-1 infection,** or the medicine adefovir (Hepsera®).

What are the other possible side effects of STRIBILD?

Serious side effects of STRIBILD may also include:

- **New or worse kidney problems, including kidney failure.** Your healthcare provider should do regular blood and urine tests to check your kidneys before and during treatment with STRIBILD. If you develop kidney problems, your healthcare provider may tell you to stop taking STRIBILD.
- **Bone problems,** including bone pain or bones getting soft or thin, which may lead to fractures. Your healthcare provider may do tests to check your bones.
- **Changes in body fat** can happen in people taking HIV-1 medicines.
- **Changes in your immune system.** Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any new symptoms after you start taking STRIBILD.

The most common side effects of STRIBILD include nausea and diarrhea. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effects that bother you or don't go away.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before taking STRIBILD?

- **All your health problems.** Be sure to tell your healthcare provider if you have or had any kidney, bone, or liver problems, including hepatitis virus infection.
- **All the medicines you take,** including prescription and nonprescription medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. STRIBILD may affect the way other medicines work, and other medicines may affect how STRIBILD works. Keep a list of all your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist. Do not start any new medicines while taking STRIBILD without first talking with your healthcare provider.
- **If you take hormone-based birth control** (pills, patches, rings, shots, etc).
- **If you take antacids.** Take antacids at least 2 hours before or after you take STRIBILD.
- **If you are pregnant** or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if STRIBILD can harm your unborn baby. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while taking STRIBILD.
- **If you are breastfeeding** (nursing) or plan to breastfeed. Do not breastfeed. HIV-1 can be passed to the baby in breast milk. Also, some medicines in STRIBILD can pass into breast milk, and it is not known if this can harm the baby.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch, or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please see Brief Summary of full Prescribing Information with **important warnings** on the following pages.

STRIBILD is a prescription medicine used as a complete single-tablet regimen to treat HIV-1 in adults who have never taken HIV-1 medicines before. STRIBILD does not cure HIV-1 or AIDS.

I started my personal revolution

Talk to your healthcare provider about starting treatment.

STRIBILD is a complete HIV-1 treatment in **1 pill**, once a day.

Ask if it's right for you.

STRIBILD™ 

elvitegravir 150mg/ cobicistat 150mg/ emtricitabine 200mg/ tenofovir disoproxil fumarate 300mg tablets

Patient Information

STRIBILD™ (STRY-bild)

(elvitegravir 150 mg/cobicistat 150 mg/emtricitabine 200 mg/tenofovir disoproxil fumarate 300 mg) tablets

Brief summary of full Prescribing Information. For more information, please see the full Prescribing Information, including Patient Information.

What is STRIBILD?

- **STRIBILD is a prescription medicine used to treat HIV-1 in adults who have never taken HIV-1 medicines before.** STRIBILD is a complete regimen and should not be used with other HIV-1 medicines.
- **STRIBILD does not cure HIV-1 or AIDS.** You must stay on continuous HIV-1 therapy to control HIV-1 infection and decrease HIV-related illnesses.
- **Ask your healthcare provider about how to prevent passing HIV-1 to others.** Do not share or reuse needles, injection equipment, or personal items that can have blood or body fluids on them. Do not have sex without protection. Always practice safer sex by using a latex or polyurethane condom to lower the chance of sexual contact with semen, vaginal secretions, or blood.

What is the most important information I should know about STRIBILD?

STRIBILD can cause serious side effects, including:

1. Build-up of lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis). Lactic acidosis can happen in some people who take STRIBILD or similar (nucleoside analogs) medicines. Lactic acidosis is a serious medical emergency that can lead to death. Lactic acidosis can be hard to identify early, because the symptoms could seem like symptoms of other health problems. **Call your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following symptoms which could be signs of lactic acidosis:**

- feel very weak or tired
- have unusual (not normal) muscle pain
- have trouble breathing
- have stomach pain with nausea or vomiting
- feel cold, especially in your arms and legs
- feel dizzy or lightheaded
- have a fast or irregular heartbeat

2. Severe liver problems. Severe liver problems can happen in people who take STRIBILD. In some cases, these liver problems can lead to death. Your liver may become large (hepatomegaly) and you may develop fat in your liver (steatosis). **Call your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following symptoms of liver problems:**

- your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice)
- dark “tea-colored” urine
- light-colored bowel movements (stools)
- loss of appetite for several days or longer
- nausea
- stomach pain

You may be more likely to get lactic acidosis or severe liver problems if you are female, very overweight (obese), or have been taking STRIBILD for a long time.

3. Worsening of Hepatitis B infection. If you have hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection and take STRIBILD, your HBV may get worse (flare-up) if you stop taking STRIBILD. A “flare-up” is when your HBV infection suddenly returns in a worse way than before.

- Do not run out of STRIBILD. Refill your prescription or talk to your healthcare provider before your STRIBILD is all gone

- Do not stop taking STRIBILD without first talking to your healthcare provider

- If you stop taking STRIBILD, your healthcare provider will need to check your health often and do blood tests regularly for several months to check your HBV infection. Tell your healthcare provider about any new or unusual symptoms you may have after you stop taking STRIBILD

Who should not take STRIBILD?

Do not take STRIBILD if you also take a medicine that contains:

- adefovir (Hepsera®)
- alfuzosin hydrochloride (Uroxatral®)
- cisapride (Propulsid®, Propulsid Quicksolv®)
- ergot-containing medicines, including: dihydroergotamine mesylate (D.H.E. 45®, Migranal®), ergotamine tartrate (Cafergot®, Migergot®, Ergostat®, Medihaler Ergotamine®, Wigraine®, Wigrettes®), and methylergonovine maleate (Ergotrate®, Methergine®)
- lovastatin (Advicor®, Altoprev®, Mevacor®)
- oral midazolam
- pimozide (Orap®)
- rifampin (Rifadin®, Rifamate®, Rifater®, Rimactane®)
- sildenafil (Revatio®), when used for treating lung problems
- simvastatin (Simcor®, Vytorin®, Zocor®)
- triazolam (Halcion®)
- the herb St. John’s wort

Do not take STRIBILD if you also take any other HIV-1 medicines, including:

- Other medicines that contain tenofovir (Atripla®, Complera®, Viread®, Truvada®)
- Other medicines that contain emtricitabine, lamivudine, or ritonavir (Combivir®, Emtriva®, Epivir® or Epivir-HBV®, Epzicom®, Kaletra®, Norvir®, Trizivir®)

STRIBILD is not for use in people who are less than 18 years old.

What are the possible side effects of STRIBILD?

STRIBILD may cause the following serious side effects:

- **See “What is the most important information I should know about STRIBILD?”**
- **New or worse kidney problems, including kidney failure.** Your healthcare provider should do blood and urine tests to check your kidneys before you start and while you are taking STRIBILD. Your healthcare provider may tell you to stop taking STRIBILD if you develop new or worse kidney problems.
- **Bone problems** can happen in some people who take STRIBILD. Bone problems include bone pain, softening or thinning (which may lead to fractures). Your healthcare provider may need to do tests to check your bones.
- **Changes in body fat** can happen in people who take HIV-1 medicine. These changes may include increased amount of fat in the upper back and neck (“buffalo hump”), breast, and around the middle of your body (trunk). Loss of fat from the legs, arms and face may also happen. The exact cause and long-term health effects of these conditions are not known.
- **Changes in your immune system** (Immune Reconstitution Syndrome) can happen when you start taking HIV-1 medicines. Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections that have been hidden in your body for a long time. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you start having any new symptoms after starting your HIV-1 medicine.

The most common side effects of STRIBILD include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea

Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effect that bothers you or that does not go away.

- These are not all the possible side effects of STRIBILD. For more information, ask your healthcare provider.
- Call your healthcare provider for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before taking STRIBILD?**Tell your healthcare provider about all your medical conditions, including:**

- If you have or had any kidney, bone, or liver problems, including hepatitis B infection
- If you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if STRIBILD can harm your unborn baby. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while taking STRIBILD.
 - There is a pregnancy registry for women who take antiviral medicines during pregnancy. The purpose of this registry is to collect information about the health of you and your baby. Talk with your healthcare provider about how you can take part in this registry.
- If you are breastfeeding (nursing) or plan to breastfeed. Do not breastfeed if you take STRIBILD.
 - You should not breastfeed if you have HIV-1 because of the risk of passing HIV-1 to your baby.
 - Two of the medicines in STRIBILD can pass to your baby in your breast milk. It is not known if the other medicines in STRIBILD can pass into your breast milk.
 - Talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to feed your baby.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and nonprescription medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements:

- STRIBILD may affect the way other medicines work, and other medicines may affect how STRIBILD works.
- Be sure to tell your healthcare provider if you take any of the following medicines:
 - Hormone-based birth control (pills, patches, rings, shots, etc)
 - Antacid medicines that contains aluminum, magnesium hydroxide, or calcium carbonate. Take antacids at least 2 hours before or after you take STRIBILD
 - Medicines to treat depression, organ transplant rejection, or high blood pressure
 - amiodarone (Cordarone®, Pacerone®)
 - atorvastatin (Lipitor®, Caduet®)
 - bepridil hydrochloric (Vasacor®, Bepadin®)
 - bosentan (Tracleer®)
 - buspirone
 - carbamazepine (Carbatrol®, Epitol®, Equetro®, Tegreto®)
 - clarithromycin (Biaxin®, Prevpac®)
 - clonazepam (Klonopin®)
 - clorazepate (Gen-xene®, Tranxene®)
 - colchicine (Colcrys®)
 - medicines that contain dexamethasone
 - diazepam (Valium®)

- digoxin (Lanoxin®)
- disopyramide (Norpace®)
- estazolam
- ethosuximide (Zarontin®)
- flecainide (Tambocor®)
- flurazepam
- fluticasone (Flovent®, Flonase®, Flovent® Diskus, Flovent® HFA, Veramyst®)
- itraconazole (Sporanox®)
- ketoconazole (Nizoral®)
- lidocaine (Xylocaine®)
- mexiletine
- oxcarbazepine (Trileptal®)
- perphenazine
- phenobarbital (Luminal®)
- phenytoin (Dilantin®, Phenytek®)
- propafenone (Rythmol®)
- quinidine (Neudexta®)
- rifabutin (Mycobutin®)
- rifapentine (Priftin®)
- risperidone (Risperdal®, Risperdal Consta®)
- salmeterol (Serevent®) or salmeterol when taken in combination with fluticasone (Advair Diskus®, Advair HFA®)
- sildenafil (Viagra®), tadalafil (Cialis®) or vardenafil (Levitra®, Staxyn®), for the treatment of erectile dysfunction (ED). If you get dizzy or faint (low blood pressure), have vision changes or have an erection that last longer than 4 hours, call your healthcare provider or get medical help right away.
- tadalafil (Adcirca®), for the treatment of pulmonary arterial hypertension
- telithromycin (Ketek®)
- thioridazine
- voriconazole (Vfend®)
- warfarin (Coumadin®, Jantoven®)
- zolpidem (Ambien®, Edlular®, Intermezzo®, Zolpimist®)

Know the medicines you take. Keep a list of all your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist when you get a new medicine. Do not start any new medicines while you are taking STRIBILD without first talking with your healthcare provider.

Keep STRIBILD and all medicines out of reach of children.

This Brief Summary summarizes the most important information about STRIBILD. If you would like more information, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for information about STRIBILD that is written for health professionals, or call 1-800-445-3235 or go to www.STRIBILD.com.

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"Is this true, Brice?" Kent said after a while in the midst of an unparalleled joy. "Are you sure you want to be with me?"

Brice held his uncle in his desperate embrace, and kissed him almost brutally on the mouth.

"I said you had dried all my tears," Brice told him. He kissed his uncle again and again, and his hand pressed against the older man's thigh.

"I hope in the morning I will find you against my heart and it will not be just a thing I felt in slumber," Kent said.

Purdy's language is stilted and archaic, almost biblical. His characters talk in awkward clichés: drying my tears, waking to find you. And it all strikes me to the heart. Clichés here are the expression of inexpressive people, of people trying to reach the depths of what they're feeling, often for the first time. Paradoxically, the use of cliché also holds the characters at a distance from us by short-circuiting the very idea of psychologically realistic motivation: people do these things for the reasons that people have always done these things. Purdy doesn't push beyond that mystery.

The mystery of motivation supplies the title to the most lacerating of the non-gay stories, "Why Can't They Tell You Why?," about a boy and his widowed mother, this one the absolute inverse of the mother in "Rapture." It begins, "Paul knew nearly nothing of his father until he found the box of photographs on the backstairs." This could be a story about claiming a patrimony, but that would be too easy, too comfortable. Paul obsessively, and secretly, looks at the photographs, to the point of not going to school for several months. The mother, Ethel, demands to know why he looks at them. This is the mystery, the "Why" of the title, but just as mysterious is the sadistic rage behind Ethel's demand to know:

She took hold of his hair and jerked him by it gently, as though this was a kind of caress she sometimes gave him.

"If you don't tell Ethel why you look at the photographs all the time, we'll have to send you to the mental hospital with the bars.

"I don't know why I look at them, dear Ethel," he said now in a very feeble but wildly tense voice, and he began petting the fur on her houseslippers.

This is grotesque—the gentle hair jerk that is like a caress, the mental hospital "with the bars," petting the houseslippers, the awkward formality of "dear Ethel"—but it descends further, to the final image of the boy: "He had crouched on the floor and, bending his stomach over the boxes, hissed at her, so that she stopped short, not seeing any way to get at him, seeing no way to bring him back, while from his mouth black thick strings of something slipped out, as though he had spewed out the heart of his grief." Something primal and horrible is laid bare here, made more so by Purdy's refusal to give us the escape valve of comprehensible motivations for the mother or the son.

A less brutal but even murkier battle occurs in "Everything Under the Sun," about Jesse, a young man, who lets Cade, fifteen, live with him, because Cade's brother died saving Jesse's life in the army. They argue, ostensibly because Cade doesn't have a job, but something dark and unspoken lies under the tense back and forth:

"You never did give a straw if I lived or died, Jesse," Cade said, and he just managed to control his angry tears.

Jesse was silent, as on the evenings when alone in the dark, while Cade was out looking for a job, he had tried to figure out what he should do in his trouble.

"*Fact* is," Cade now whirled from the window, his eyes brimming with tears, "it's all the other way around. I don't need you except for the money, but you need me *to tell you what you are!*"

The archaic, resonant phrase "in his trouble" points to but does not name what the "trouble" might be, while Cade's statement ascribes an obscure but, again, resonant motivation to Jesse. Jesse eventually admits his need for Cade: "Of course your brother saved my life, but you saved it again. I mean you saved it more." Cade agrees to stay, with a condition:

"But you leave me alone now if I stay," Cade said.

"I will," Jesse said, perhaps not quite sure what it was Cade meant.

We aren't sure either, and the ending elucidates nothing. Earlier in the story, the heat makes Jesse remove his shirt, revealing the tattoo of "a crouched black panther." At the end of the story, Cade does the same, "exposing the section of his chest on which rested the tattooed drawing of a crouched black panther, the identical of Jesse's." Does the identical tattoo mean that Jesse's love for Cade—if that's what it is—is reciprocated, whatever that might mean in this context? Purdy doesn't say, because it's not his style to say.

Another paradoxical aspect of these stories is that, for all the sexual intensity, there is little physical description. One unpublished story, from 1956, is explicit, and mildly embarrassing: "The Cuban's head, with its thick entwined locks, fastened securely to his organ like some great revolving planet of the heavens." For the most part, Purdy's world is oddly non-physical. It's all dialog with stage directions on how the dialog is delivered. The physical locations are only sketched in lightly. As a result, when an object makes an appearance, it becomes charged with significance.

In "Mr. Evening," the title character, a young collector of rare items, puts an ad in the paper: "a desperate plea, it turned out, for information concerning a certain scarce china cup, circa 1910." The ad reaches its intended target, Mrs. Owens, an older woman who counts the cup among her heirlooms and invites Mr. Evening to see it. He hesitates: "He was uneasy with old women, he supposed ... [but] he wanted, he finally said out loud to himself, that hand-painted china cup, 1910, no matter what it might cost him." When he does visit, Mrs. Owen moves to a table that has an object on it: "It was the pale rose shell-like 1910 hand-painted china cup. 'You don't need to bring it to me!' he cried, and even she was startled by such an outburst. Mr. Evening had gone as white as chalk."

After the obsessive repetition of the precise name ("1910"), the object itself finally makes an appearance. All of Mr. Evening's desire, with its suggestions of sublimated erotic energy, is displaced onto the cup. At this point, however, we begin to discover that Mrs. Owens' desire needs no such displacement. She eventually claims Mr. Evening as her own very precious object, and, in the final scene, serves him coffee from the cup. "He had put down the 1910 cup because it seemed unthinkable to drink out of anything so irreplaceable, and so delicate that a mere touch of his lips might snap it." Mrs. Owens, on the other

hand, has no such scruples about handling precious things, so the story ends with Mr. Evening stretched out on a bed, “naked as he had come into the world.”

Similarly, a physical object in “Rapture” mediates between one kind of love and another. Brice, the son, has long “gold hair.” When Mrs. Muir cleans the bathroom, she takes the strands of hair from his comb and saves it in a small box. After Kent arrives, she discovers that there are no hairs left in the comb: “She felt then, strangely, unaccountably, as if a load had been lifted from her heart.” Afterwards, she observes the daily “ceremony of the cleaning of the bathroom and the looking at the comb,” which never again has hairs in it. Eventually, she looks in Kent’s dresser:

She left the top drawer for last, as if she must prepare herself for what she would find in it. There was a small mother-of-pearl box there. She opened it. At first she saw only the reproduction on its underlid of a painting of John the Baptist as a youth. But in the box itself, arranged in pink tissue paper, she spied a gathering of the gold hair of Brice Muir. She closed the box. There was a kind of strange smile playing over all her features at that moment.

Then follows the paragraph, quoted earlier, about how Mrs. Muir finds peace because Kent will be the bridegroom to her son. Here, the manifestation of the box—mother-of-pearl, with John the Baptist thrown in for additional religious and homoerotic resonance, because Purdy does not fear excess—makes the “gold hair” itself assume a power somewhere between the totemic and the fetishistic. When Mrs. Muir cherishes the hair, it’s maternal love; when Kent does, it’s incestuous lust. As in “Mr. Evening,” the revered object, effectively spot-lit by isolation, has the power to make the transition from one form of desire to another.

Purdy does present one of the problems found in writers of his generation: he sometimes uses women and African-Americans more as symbols than as fully defined characters. Women are often grotesques, and their sexuality is discounted, in a way that men’s is not. For example, “Lily’s Party” is a kind of sex comedy that Lily herself might not find funny, but the action and the imagery still show Purdy’s touch. Lily tells a man named Hobart, “‘I gave your brother Edward two of the best years of my life.’ Lily spoke with the dry accent of someone testifying in court for the second time.” “Testifying for the second time” is striking in its accuracy about how facts, when repeated, sound formal and a little tired. Later, Hobart follows Lily on her way to an assignation with a man he thinks of as the “preacher” and watches from outside her home:

The preacher at this moment tore off the upper part of Lily’s dress, and her breasts and nipples looked out from the light into the darkness at Hobart like the troubled faces of children.

“I’m coming into the house to explain!” Hobart called to them inside.

“You’ll do no such thing! No, no, Hobart!” Lily vociferated back to him.

**The Complete Short Stories
of James Purdy**
Liveright (Norton). 752 pages, \$35.

Lily is repeatedly penetrated by the two men, one of them her brother-in-law, without quite consenting, but not quite resisting. When Hobart joins in, “She let out perfunctory cries of expected rather than

felt pain as one does under the hand of a nervous intern.” Again, the language—troubled children, expected rather than felt pain, the nervous intern, “vociferated”—shows Purdy’s style in full splendor.

Just to make things even odder, Lily has baked pies for the church social. As in the other stories, the objects—here the pies—mark the transition between desires. The “preacher” throws one at Lily, and then targets himself: “[T]he ‘preacher’ was softly slowly mashing pies over his thin, tightly muscled torso. Then slowly, inexorably, Hobart began eating pieces of pie from off the body of the smeared ‘preacher.’ The ‘preacher’ returned the favor, and ate pieces of pie from Hobart, making gobbling sounds like a wild animal. Then they hugged one another and began eating the pies all over again from their bare bodies.” The men have their odd, erotic moment together, while Lily ends the story by herself “eating a piece of her still-unfinished apple pie.”

Like women, African-American characters can also be used symbolically, again in unexpected ways. In “The Candles of Your Eyes,” a startling story, a black man named Soldier and a white boy named Beaut (the names suggest that we’re dealing with semi-symbols anyway) live together. Soldier sits in a rocking chair with Beaut in his lap, yielding an erotic image of white on black: “It was an unforgettable sight, midnight-black strapping Soldier holding the somewhat delicate, though really tough, Beaut. If you looked in on them in the dark, you seemed to see only Beaut asleep in what looked like the dark branches of a tree.” Purdy varies the image throughout the story. Soldier leaves, and when he doesn’t come back, Beaut sits in the chair alone: “Beaut stirred after a while in the chair, like a child in his mother’s body waiting to be born.” When Soldier does return, he finds Beaut in the chair with someone else: “They looked to him like flowers under deep mountain springs, but motionless like the moon in November.” The imagery has become almost hallucinatory in its beauty. This story begins, by the way, with Soldier walking up and down East Fourth Street with a sign, “I AM A MURDERER.

Why Don’t They Give Me the Chair!” In fact, he hasn’t really killed Beaut, but this just makes the tragedy all the more devastating.

I don’t want to end with the impression that all of Purdy’s stories are this grim. There is “Kitty Blue,” about a talking cat who is given by the Crown Prince to Madame Lenore, an opera singer. Kitty Blue goes missing, has adventures, and comes home again, to go on “a world cruise with a royal protector and the greatest living singer.” It’s dedicated to Teresa Stratas. And it has the only unambiguously happy ending in the collection. It’s worth cherishing, if only for that reason.

after Resume

Roger never loved you.
And you never cared for Sid.
Patrick was in the closet.
And Ben detested kids.
Leo—addicted to pills.
Seth cheated with Tyrone.
Pablo moved back to Brazil.
Might as well live alone.

MICHAEL MONTLACK

Truth and Reconciliation

RAYMOND-JEAN FRONTAIN

TERRENCE McNALLY has become the American theater's great poet of the urgency of interpersonal relationships. "We gotta connect. We just have to. Or we die," Johnny warns in *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*—a play that movingly defines "a blowjob [as] a sensual metaphor for mutual acceptance." Roughly from 1985 through 1995—that is, at the height of the AIDS pandemic in America—McNally penned one extraordinary play after another in which he addressed the global trauma in terms of the human need for connection and the obstacles that we create for ourselves in connecting with another person: *The Lisbon Traviata* (1985), *Frankie and Johnny* (1987), *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991), *A Perfect Ganesh* (1993), and, of course, the critically acclaimed and enormously popular *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994). More recently, he has celebrated in *Some Men* (2007) the bonds that gay men create both intentionally and unintentionally across decades and generations; the discovery in *Deuce* (2007) of a heroic partnership between two long-retired women tennis players; and in *Unusual Acts of Devotion* (2008), the small, life-affirming acts that members of a lower West-side apartment building quietly perform for one another.

Throughout his oeuvre, the two classes of people who seem to have the greatest difficulty connecting are mothers and their gay sons. In *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1965), McNally's first professionally produced play, the tyrannical Ruby mocks her son Sigfrid for bringing home a male sexual partner for that evening's game of "Get the Guest" and for writing a poem about an eagle's desire to break free of earthly bonds and soar. Similarly, in *A Perfect Ganesh*, Katharine Brynne is inconsolable after her son Walter is beaten to death on the street late one night by five African-American males trawling a gay neighborhood for fags to bash. Yet while he was alive, she had resented deeply Walter's orientation and had objected to his referring to the apartment that he shared with his male partner as a "home." Traveling in India, she meets an HIV-positive gay man who ruefully acknowledges having been similarly rejected by his own mother.

In *Corpus Christi* (1998), Mary is indifferent to the trials of Joshua, her gay teenage son, and proves to be anything but the archetypal loving mother who holds her infant son on her knee or sorrowfully gathers to her bosom his adult corpse. Even Chloe in *Lips Together*, who gets along famously with the gay men with whom she performs in community theater, admits that she would never want one of her pre-pubescent sons to turn out

gay. The one thing that all children want to hear, Chloe instructs her childless sister-in-law, is "that they're loved. That they're safe." But in McNally's world, this is the one message that a mother seems to find impossible to deliver to her gay son.

In 1988, *Andre's Mother* bore witness to a significant moment in American social history as the country reeled with pain and confusion at the height of the AIDS pandemic. First presented on stage at the Manhattan Theatre Club as an eight-minute vignette that was part of an evening of short plays titled *Urban Blight*, *Andre's Mother* was expanded by McNally into a fifty-minute Emmy Award-winning teleplay that first aired in 1990 as part of PBS's *American Playhouse*. It starred Richard Thomas as the all too eager-to-please Cal, and the magisterial Sada Thompson in the title role, on whose silent face played her character's tumultuous interior drama as stoical confusion mingled with angry resentment and dissolved into unspeakable grief. Although the play clearly faults *Andre's Mother* (she has no other name in the original text) for having been so judgmental of *Andre's* sexuality that she lost her chance to have a genuine relationship with him while he was alive, the teleplay resonated for female viewers whose sons were ill or had died of AIDS. The McNally Archive in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas, preserves a file of letters that McNally received during the months following the initial broadcast in which women thanked him for voicing so eloquently the pain of mothers who had no idea how to talk with their sons about the latter's sexuality, or how to care for them in their final illness. The letter-writers often signed themselves simply "Peter's Mother" or "Michael's Mother."

McNally's latest play, *Mothers and Sons*, is essentially a continuation of the 1988 AIDS drama only twenty years later. Cal Porter receives an unexpected visit from Katharine Gerard (*Andre's Mother* now has a name), last seen at the memorial service that *Andre's* friends were holding for him in Central Park. Then he'd struggled to break through Mrs. Gerard's angry and disapproving silence, eventually leaving her alone to grieve. At the climax of *Mothers and Sons*—which enjoyed a trial run this summer at Bucks County Playhouse and begins previews on Broadway at the Golden Theatre as of February 23—Cal finally loses his self-control in the face of Mrs. Gerard's stony façade, telling her: "You should have held me that day in the park [when I embraced you as I said goodbye]. ... I wanted you to hold me back. Jesus Christ, woman, reach out to someone. Let someone in." Exasperated by her seemingly inexhaustible fund of hauteur and bitterness, Cal accepts that they will never share common ground and finally begins ushering her out of his apartment by helping her into her coat. But, the stage directions record, "her arms stay at her side. Awkwardly, her coat over her

Mothers and Sons describes the sea-change in American gay life from 1993 to 2013.

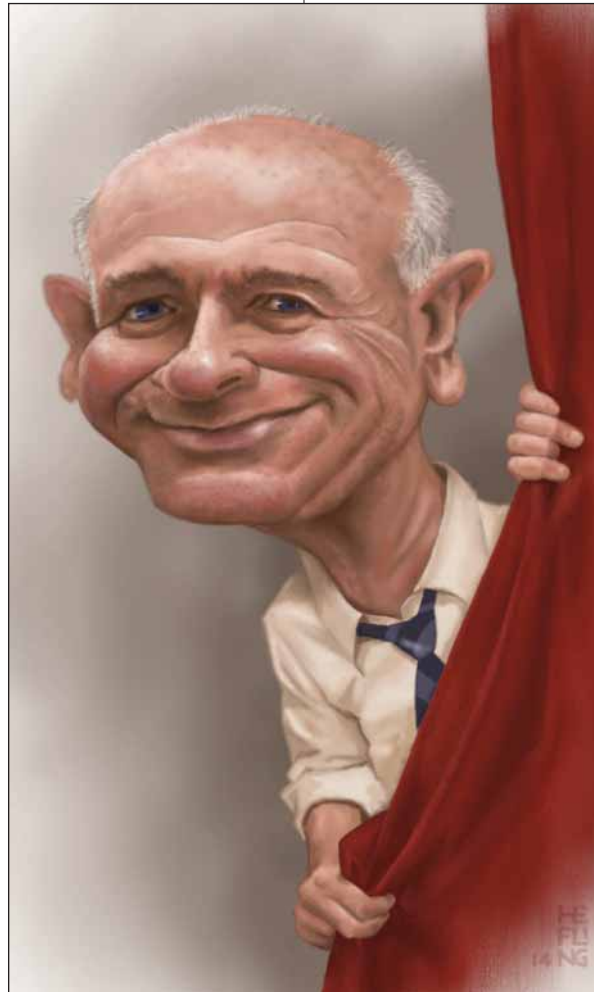
Raymond-Jean Frontain is professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas.

shoulders, he hugs her. He holds her for a long while. Her arms finally reach out to embrace him back.”

Andre's Mother was written at the darkest moment in the AIDS epidemic as the death count climbed precipitously, public dialogue grew cacophonous, and no hope lay on the horizon. In *Mothers and Sons*, McNally alters the chronology slightly by moving Andre's death from 1988 to 1993—just a few years before protease inhibitors made HIV a manageable condition and AIDS began to disappear from American public discourse. Otherwise, his characters seem to have aged naturally: Katharine is still a handsome woman in her mid-sixties. Cal—who has been living for twelve years with his 35-year-old partner, Will Ogden, with whom he's raising a six-year-old son, Bud—is approaching fifty. To drive his new plot, however, McNally has imagined an action not dramatized in the earlier play. Some time after the memorial service, Cal mailed to Mrs. Gerard her son's diary in order that she might know the man that Andre had become after leaving his parents' home in Dallas and moving to New York City some ten years before he died. Now, twenty years later, herself a widow, she has come to Cal and Will's condominium on Central Park West to return the diary (still unread, she claims).

Mothers and Sons describes the sea-change in American gay life from 1993 to 2013. The socially conservative Mrs. Girard is taken aback to learn that Cal and Will are legally married, a state that Cal somewhat sarcastically contrasts with the more open sexual relationship that he and Andre enjoyed in the 1980s: “Of course we'd never taken marriages vows. We weren't allowed to then. Our relationships weren't supposed to last. We didn't deserve the dignity of marriage. Maybe that's why AIDS happened.” The fifteen year age difference between Cal and Will—the latter having come of age after the threat was largely under control—guarantees a conflict in expectations and values within their marriage. For example, Cal confides to Katharine that being a father comes more naturally to Will: “I think it's generational. I never expected to be a father. He never expected not to be one.” And whereas Cal still struggles to find the right word to describe their relationship—“Andre and I were boyfriends, I guess. Or partners. Lovers was another word people used. We didn't like any of them. Boyfriends sounded like teenagers, partners sounded like a law firm and lovers sounded illicit”—Will confidently stares down Mrs. Gerard's contumely by identifying himself as “Cal's first husband.”

Mothers and Sons
by Terrence McNally
John Golden Theatre, New York City



Perhaps most troubling to Katharine is the new sort of family that she witnesses in the Ogden-Porter household. Cal and Will conceived their six-year-old son Bud by mixing Will's sperm with a female donor's

eggs, which were then implanted in the womb of an obliging lesbian friend. “What are you going to tell him” about his parentage when Bud is old enough to understand, Mrs. Gerard asks pointedly. But Bud himself indirectly answers her question when, innocently prattling, he asks her if she would be his grandmother, as both Cal's and Will's mothers are deceased. Objecting that he doesn't know her well enough to consider her a close relation, she's taken aback when Bud reasons that he meets “lots of aunts and uncles and godfathers and godmothers” whom he didn't know he had, some of whom “I don't even like.” The boy happily accepts that “families just grow.” For McNally, family is not a concrete, indissoluble entity but a living organism that shifts shape to meet our needs: we choose our family members as much as we inherit them or have them thrust upon us.

Indeed, choice and change prove the twin poles of McNally's play. Cal acknowledges to Katharine that he “almost bolted” when Will first made it clear that he wanted to have children, but eventually complied with his younger partner's demand because “I was afraid he'd leave me.” His willingness to accept Will's very different idea of what a gay relationship can be has had a radical consequence for Cal. “Now, to imagine my life without either of them ... I didn't know who I fully was until our son was born. I'm so much ... *more* than I thought I was. More interesting, more resourceful, more less-self-centered.” Ultimately, he says, he and Will “*chose* to be a family.” Conversely, Katharine recognizes that “people have to want to change” and that she has not wanted to. Instead, during the past twenty years her life

has diminished into a bitter, angry desire to wreak revenge on those who took her son from her. Referring to the framed theater poster of Andre starring as Hamlet that Cal has hanging on the wall, she spits out: “There is no closure for what happened to me. I want revenge. I'm like Hamlet. Take my picture. I'm my own poster. Vengeance!”

THE MUSIC OF FORGIVENESS

In McNally's *Golden Age* (2012), when asked what *I Puritani* was about, composer Vincenzo Bellini said that his opera contained the music of forgiveness. That same music continues to play in *Mothers and Sons*. Challenged by the vengeful

Katharine as to why he didn't want to learn who had infected his beloved Andre with HIV in order to seek revenge on that person, Cal quietly explains:

We were in enough pain without adding to it. Something was killing us. What would killing one another have accomplished? There was so much fear and anger in the face of so much death and no one to help us. There wasn't time to hate, so we helped each other, helped each other in a way we never had before. I wanted to kill the world when Andre was diagnosed, but I didn't. I took care of him. Andre had slept with someone other than me but I had to forgive him. He was one of the unlucky ones.

Over the years, Cal's pain has been intensified by the knowledge that if Andre had been infected just two years later, he might still be alive. "One of our best friends was diagnosed eighteen years ago, two years after Andre died. He's skiing in Park City as we speak." But he understands that there is no logical reason why one person was infected and another was not, or why one individual had to die before help finally arrived while another had the good fortune to fall ill only after the discovery of the "triple cocktail." Rather than lamenting that one's life did not turn out differently, as Katharine does, Cal accepted the need to act with the love, valor, and compassion celebrated in the title of McNally's most famous play, and to care for Andre, the man he loved deeply, in the latter's decline.

When Will returns on stage from giving Bud his evening bath, he finds Cal and Katharine standing at opposite ends of the room, like boxers in opposite corners of the ring. To break the tension, Will picks up Andre's diary—which has sat on the mantelpiece like a silent recrimination to both Katharine and Cal—and begins reading at random: "One day we're certain we're going to beat this thing. The next, I'm dying. Cal is a rock. I am blessed. My family wouldn't be able to handle it." Katharine is shaken to hear Andre's testimony concerning the love and dedication with which Cal nursed him during his painful decline—qualities that Andre understood his own mother would not have been able to muster. Devastated by her son's recrimination as from the grave, she moves mechanically to leave. But in an exquisite gesture of compassion and forgiveness, Cal, choosing not to let her feel dwarfed and alone, makes one final attempt to realize his "hope for that connection" by embracing her. And, unlike that cold winter day in the park twenty years ago, this time Katharine chooses to let someone in.

POST-AIDS GAY CULTURE

McNally's revival of characters that he had created at the height of the epidemic highlights his unusual place in AIDS and post-AIDS gay culture. The impact of the epidemic on American culture has been felt in four stages.

At the outset, books like David Feinberg's *Eighty-Sixed* and John Weir's *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket* depicted a community reeling with confusion as the tidal wave hit. The soon-to-follow second stage offered howls of pained, angry protest as the dimensions of the epidemic—and the indifference or outright animosity of those in power—became clear, as evinced in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, Paul Monette's *Love Alone*, and the two parts of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The third stage witnessed an acknowledgment of

AIDS as an inescapable reality as the community organized to find ways to care for the infected and to live with the love, valor, and compassion celebrated in McNally's play. The availability of protease inhibitors after 1996, however, created a new sea change and a "post-AIDS" culture, as writers pondered how to represent the disease now that it was no longer an emergency of the first order even though its shadow continued to cast a pall over gay life. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* is a signal work in that AIDS is not at the center of the drama but functions as one of several overwhelming challenges to the characters' psychic survival.

McNally has generally been grouped in the third stage of writers. His works in the 90s were not aggressively political but were concerned more generally with how people lose their humanity when unable to accept gender and racial differences. But at heart McNally has always been a post-AIDS writer, able to look at AIDS in the larger context of the wounds that people inflict on one another. When *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* premiered, few people thought of it as a gay play or an AIDS play. Yet as one of the heterosexual characters sucked blood from the cut finger of the other—soon after the world had learned that HIV is transmitted through bodily fluids—a collective gasp was sounded by the audience, endowing Johnny's plea that "we gotta connect ... or we die" with great resonance. For McNally, it is fear of connection with others, not sexual connection itself, that is deadening. In *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, two married heterosexual couples spend three acts rationalizing their decision to refrain from using a swimming pool in which the brother of a relative, now dead, once swam.

Mothers and Sons looks back without flinching at the nightmare in which we floundered twenty years ago: "Andre thought of suicide when things got really bad. I'm very glad he didn't. I know that was selfish of me. We stuck it out together. Some together! They put him through hell trying to keep him alive. Some of the treatments were very painful then. You don't want to know. They were trying to find a cure and they didn't care how they went about it. That's not fair; they were desperate to find one."

The details of the play, such as the repeated references to the darkness and coldness of the day, suggest that Cal's encounter with Katharine will once again end in tragedy. Yet Cal's capacity for forgiveness, coupled with his determination to achieve "the miracle of communication" with Katharine, allows an incipient tragedy to be transformed into a transcendent ending in which a reconstituted family sits before the fireplace as Bud tells Katharine a winter's tale that ends in renewal. "I wasn't expecting this," Cal protests at one point as he skirmishes with Katharine; "this was going to be just another day."

At one point in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* two of the eight men at a weekend house party are taken aback by the deathly quiet of the summer afternoon. "We could be the last eight people on earth," Perry observes. "That's a frightening thought," Buzz replies. "Not if you're with the right people," Perry counters. As the December darkness presses against the windows of their apartment, Cal, Will, Bud, and Katharine might themselves be the last four people on earth. But that's all right because they've clearly chosen to create a family made of the right four people.



Being There in the Age of AIDS

IN 1976, at age seventeen, Sean Strub got a job operating an elevator on the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol. He scarcely believed his luck. What could be better than daily contact with the most distinguished statesmen in the country? “There wasn’t much room in my elevator, but I loved how large the world became for me within its walls.”

Other boys went girl-crazy; Strub found his passion in politics. Soon enough he learned that it didn’t have to be chaste. Washington was a very gay town. Passengers in the elevator included men who spoke a certain way, dressed with particular flair. Strub noticed them, and they noticed him. He discovered the existence of a sexual subculture that communicated with secret codes, a demimonde at play in niche restaurants and bars. A bright and ambitious young man could make friends in that kind of environment. Strub forged alliances useful for a public-service career. But there was a problem. His sexual side had to remain hidden.

This memoir reminds us how taboo it was back then to be gay. Paradoxically, however, gay men ran some of the country’s sharpest political organizations. Why did they choose a profession that could ruin them? Strub’s motivation, which applied to a number of notable gays in politics—Bayard Rustin, Allard Lowenstein, Gerry Studds, and Barney Frank come to mind—perhaps can be summed up with one word: idealism. It was a way to serve the country. Strub doesn’t theorize about connections between homosexuality and working for the public good, maybe because it’s a question for the sociobiologists. He does discuss the irony that he entered secret service, so to speak, on the eve of gay liberation’s national eruption.

He had heard of Harvey Milk, a San Francisco city supervisor and one of first openly gay elected officials in the U.S. When a deranged colleague murdered Milk in November 1978, most media covered it with an “only in San Francisco” angle. Washington’s scruffy gay press saw it differently, as the martyrdom of a new kind of hero. Strub started to think about the viability of gay politics. In October of the following year, massive numbers of lesbians and gay men converged on D.C. for the first national gay rights march. It was a festive event, huge, confident, inescapable. By this time Strub was leading two very busy lives, one closeted, the other devoted to electioneering. They didn’t intersect publicly because he wanted to make his mark in big-time politics, where homosexuality remained anathema. He had gay friends in the same predicament. Most of them didn’t dwell on it and tended to make themselves scarce when he brought up sexual liberation. It didn’t seem to Strub that he could combine the two sides of his life.

LEWIS GANNETT

**Body Counts:
A Memoir of Politics, Sex,
AIDS, and Survival**

by Sean Strub

Scribner. 420 pages, \$30.

AIDS intervened. The decade preceding the plague had seen a rapid expansion of gay entertainment culture. Liberation meant a party, and why not? Homophobia still ruled the land, but that provided all the more reason to flaunt newfound self-confidence. For the first time gays celebrated themselves as belles of the ball. Strub notes that it helped to dispel a sense of woundedness that many gay men, including him,

had harbored since their bullied boyhoods. Erstwhile wimps suddenly ruled a new world, from the dance floor no less. Strub found the D.C. political closet increasingly restrictive. He moved to New York, where doormen at Studio 54 waved him in. And then, kaboom! AIDS crashed into gay life like a giant asteroid—like an extinction-level event.

Surprisingly little history has been written about the community’s response to the early plague years. Of course, everybody knows that it was a harrowing time. Or maybe not; how many are old enough to remember wraith-like men with purplish skin barely able to hobble down the sidewalk? Strub tells his stories calmly, and he deploys a gentle sense of humor. At first this comes across as a polite effort to help the reader through the rough spots. Then you realize he’s describing experiences so horrifying that just the facts will do. Here’s an example: A friend of Strub’s collected exotic curiosities, mummy fragments, taxidermy, and the like. This man’s lover was desperately ill; patches of his body had turned “nearly black with thick, waxy, foul-smelling lesions and dead skin.” One day they were preparing to leave for the hospital. In the bed they found “a piece of dark organic matter about the size of a flattened walnut.” Apparently the lover had molted a lesion. Strub’s friend took it to the hospital for the doctor’s inspection. Later, back home, “he looked up at the stuffed deer head hanging on the wall above their bed and saw that it was missing its nose.”

Strub covers a lot of highly personal ground in *Body Counts*. Gay men his age lost staggering numbers of friends, on a scale otherwise known only to wartime soldiers. It was the kind of loss that soldiers famously find hard to discuss; maybe this is a reason that relatively few AIDS memoirs have been published so far. But AIDS wasn’t, of course, just a personal ordeal. I recall a widespread fear in the 1980s that authorities would put gays in concentration camps. Strub didn’t feel that degree of panic, but very early on, before AIDS had even been named, he worried about the fate of gay liberation. If the disease became known as a buttfuck curse, would hopes for acceptance vanish?


That fear turned out to be naïve. But does it tell us something? I think so. It was only on reading Strub that I understood how fragile and experimental gay legitimacy was 35 years ago. The grand fanfare of the 1970s hadn’t really been all that successful. To put it another way, if gay pride had been secure by

Lewis Gannett, an associate editor of this magazine, has contributed several articles on Abraham Lincoln’s same-sex relationships.

1980—if it had reflected a genuine self-confidence—then AIDS wouldn't have so easily called up visions of banishment, of liberation tumbling down.

The crisis led to what came next, namely, gay fury and organization. AIDS decimated the community, and the community, much to everyone's surprise, got up and fought back. This chapter of AIDS history, of Larry Kramer and ACT UP, is the most familiar. By 1987 Strub had established a successful direct-mail business that raised money for nonprofit corporations. ACT UP recruited him to lead its fundraising efforts. Pushing thirty, he felt a little "old" compared to many of the organization's activists. Also, he still entertained ambitions to run for office. But he had a pressing personal reason to join: he'd been

showing AIDS symptoms for some time, and was starting to get sick. Strub had found a way to fuse his private life with a public-service calling. He pursued it with impressive determination, founding *POZ* magazine in 1994 [the same year in which this magazine began], a glossy periodical for people living with HIV. Today he runs the Sero Project, which combats AIDS stigma and criminalization.

Body Counts contains a number of celebrity cameos, including Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, and Yoko Ono. It also includes some very interesting photographs. The Vidal anecdote is especially fun, an instance of Strub's amusing deadpan humor. This book is downright uplifting; reading it will do you good. 

Prisoners of Culture

HIGHLY ACCLAIMED when it was published in the UK in 2002, *Bitter Eden* is a novel by a South African writer named Tatamkhulu Afrika (his chosen name means "Grandfather Africa"). The author died shortly after the book, which was written years before, was finally published. Only now is the book making its way to American readers with a new U.S. edition. Based on the author's own experience as a prisoner of war in Northern Africa during World War II, *Bitter Eden* tells the story of three men negotiating their emerging sexuality in an inhospitable time and under the bleakest of circumstances.

Tom, a young man from South Africa, meets Douglas, a fellow POW from England, and agrees to become his "mate," a word fraught with a great deal of emotion as well as consequence. Tom, who narrates the story, is initially reluctant to have anything to do with the flamboyant Douglas, especially in a space as confined as a POW camp, given the realities of day-to-day survival. Writes the narrator: "What does put me off are his movements: the little almost dancing steps he takes even when, supposedly, he is standing still, the delicate, frenetic gestures of his hands, the almost womanliness of him that threatens to touch—and touch—and touch—and I have already told of my feelings concerning that." Right from the start, then, the narrator writes of his desire to "abort a relationship upon which [Douglas] seems ferociously intent." That the two men do wind up becoming friends has as much to do with Tom's reluctant attraction to Douglas and his ambivalence about his own sexuality as it does with Douglas' persistence.

Some readers may be put off by the harshness of the language, as well as the brutality of the conditions the novel depicts. But these were brutal times and an era in which expressions of tenderness or affection between men were strictly limited. As novelist André Aciman points out, "the word love is never mentioned" in the novel. However, it is all

DALE W. BOYER

Bitter Eden

by Tatamkhulu Afrika
Picador. 232 pages, \$25.

the more powerful for never being uttered, and makes every gesture of tenderness and affection stand out like a dandelion in a coal field.

Complicating Tom's developing relationship with Douglas is the entrance of another prisoner of war, another Brit named Danny. Unlike Douglas, Danny is

fully the masculine ideal: "His hair is black, springy, tightly curled, capping his head like a Renaissance cherub's or an old Greek bust of a beautiful boy... Lower down is the body of a man who works at it—the breasts at the apex before masculinity becomes womanishness, the nipples pert and clear, the hair in the armpits tufting and lush, as lush a body-hair flowing with the flat belly down into the generous crotch, the tautly powerful thighs." Bedding down beside Tom one cold winter night, Danny's appearance instantly causes a disruption in the uneasy relationship between Tom and Douglas:

"Is this worrying you?"
I play it dumb. "Is what worrying me?"
"Me lying here with nothing on."

Danny quickly adds: "Don't get any wrong ideas. I'm married though no kid yet ... and nobody gets to touch me down there. ... Only my wife."

After wrestling with whether to befriend Douglas, the narrator is forced to take stock of what he's feeling night after night as he and Danny bed down beside him naked and they hold each other for warmth. Not surprisingly, Douglas becomes jealous of Tom and Danny's new intimacy. The jealousy he soon displays, as well as his (incorrect) assumption about their sexual intimacy, provides an effective foil to Tom, as well as a goad for him to decide what it is, in fact, he feels toward Danny. The narrator writes: "A misshapen moon is now low in the sky. I do not know if it is rising or setting, suddenly do not even know where we are, never having been further than where we lost the war." Now that Tom has begun to have feelings for another man, he's totally uncertain how to process these feelings—or how to express them to Danny.

Dale W. Boyer is a writer based in Chicago.

Further complicating all the relationships is the implication that both Tom and Danny may have been abused by their fathers when they were young. This presents yet another hurdle for them to confront as they wrestle with their feelings for one another.

If *Bitter Eden* were merely the story of a reluctant gay man finally acknowledging his sexuality, that might make for a fine, if otherwise unremarkable, novel. What makes the novel so extraordinary is the simplicity with which its meaning unfolds. Issues of gender identity, sexuality, and societal repression all arise organically from the flow of events. Only after Tom is asked to play the role of a woman in the camp play (*Lady Macbeth*, no less!) does he allow himself to truly acknowledge what he feels toward Danny. As he does so, the

issue of masculine versus feminine roles becomes even more clouded for both. Thus, ironically, it is only within the context of a POW camp (the “Bitter Eden” of the title), and by virtue of playing a woman’s role in a play, that Tom is able to acknowledge his feelings for another man. Tragically and ironically, the society outside the camp will not be nearly as tolerant, nor allow them or their relationship a place in which to flower.

For the details of life as a POW in World War II alone, *Bitter Eden* is an important novel. But it is much more than that. Its depiction of the growing love between Tom and Danny is the frankest, most surprising treatment of love between two men during wartime that I have ever encountered. It is a novel of thrilling artistry, astonishing harshness, and great beauty. 🏳️‍🌈

Lenny’s Letters on Display

EDITOR Nigel Simeone has selected some 650 letters for this collection of Leonard Bernstein’s correspondence over a span of six decades of the 20th century. The first letter is from 1932, written by a fourteen-year-old Bernstein to his piano teacher, Helen Coates. The last is from 1990: a letter to conductor Georg Solti.

Needless to say, Leonard Bernstein’s correspondents include a “who’s who” of 20th-century musical, literary, political, intellectual, and newsworthy figures: composers Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Marc Blitzstein; conductors Dimitri Mitropoulos, Serge Koussevitzky, Bruno Walter; actors Judy Holliday, Farley Granger (with whom he purportedly had an affair), Bette Davis; writers Thornton Wilder, James M. Cain,

IRENE JAVORS

The Leonard Bernstein Letters

Edited by Nigel Simeone

Yale. 606 pages, \$38.

Martha Gellhorn (one of Hemingway’s former wives). In addition, there are the musical collaborators: Adolph Green and Betty Comden from *On The Town*; Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim from *West Side Story*; and choreographer Jerome Robbins, with whom he worked on *Fancy Free*, *West Side Story*, and *The Dybbuk*.

Among the entertainers with whom he corresponded were singers Lena Horne and Frank Sinatra and jazz legends Miles Davis and Louis Armstrong.

From these letters, Bernstein emerges as a highly intelligent, emotional, impossibly busy, incredibly gifted individual. His musical interests ranged from sacred classical to Broadway lite, while his professional life divided itself more-or-less equally between conducting and composition. Bernstein himself was acutely aware of his scattered interests and sometimes wondered whether he’d sacrificed a “great” career as a classical composer in pursuit of a public life as a conductor, teacher, and lecturer. Offsetting that concern was an authentic lust for life that led him to grab for everything within reach, musically and otherwise. His personal life included a loving marriage to a woman, children, extra-marital affairs with men, and a long-term relationship with a man.

Bernstein’s struggle with his sexuality is a theme that runs through many of the letters. He was attracted to men but wanted a traditional family with a wife and children. After an on-again, off-again engagement, he finally decided to marry Felicia Montealegre, a Chilean actress and musician. She adored him but also knew of his sexual proclivities. She wrote to him (1951-1952): “you are homosexual and may never change. ... I am willing to accept you as you are ... our marriage is not based on passion but on tenderness and mutual respect.” Surprisingly enough, this understanding actually worked. The couple stayed together for decades, and they even had a few children along the way. Bernstein’s conducting schedule was such that he’d have to be marked down as a “mostly absent” father. He did his best to stay in touch with the family through copious newsy let-



Photo by Allan Warren

Irene Javors, author of *Culture Notes: Essays on Sane Living* (2010), is on the faculty of the *Mental Health Counseling Program of Yeshiva University in New York City*.

ters, many of which appear in this volume.

It was only in the mid-1970s that Bernstein finally left Felicia to take up with Tom Cochran, who'd been his de facto lover since 1971. But soon Felicia was stricken with cancer—the suspicion has lingered that somehow it was a direct result of her husband's departure—so Bernstein moved back home and saw her through until her death in 1978. He was devastated by her demise and lamented that she never forgave him for having left. However, her departure does seem to have freed something in Bernstein, who now became, at the age of sixty, much more open about his homosexuality. (By the way, *Someone* does not include any material related to Bernstein's relationship with Tom Cochran, which seems an odd omission.)


A general impression one gets from these letters is the sense that Bernstein wanted to be loved by everyone, and that he drove himself mercilessly to this goal, however unachievable. A work titled "Bernstein Agonistes" would depict a man torn by inner conflicts involving his need to be everything to everyone. He always felt that he wasn't doing enough. When composing, he wondered if he should be conducting; when writing musicals, he felt he should be working on an opera.

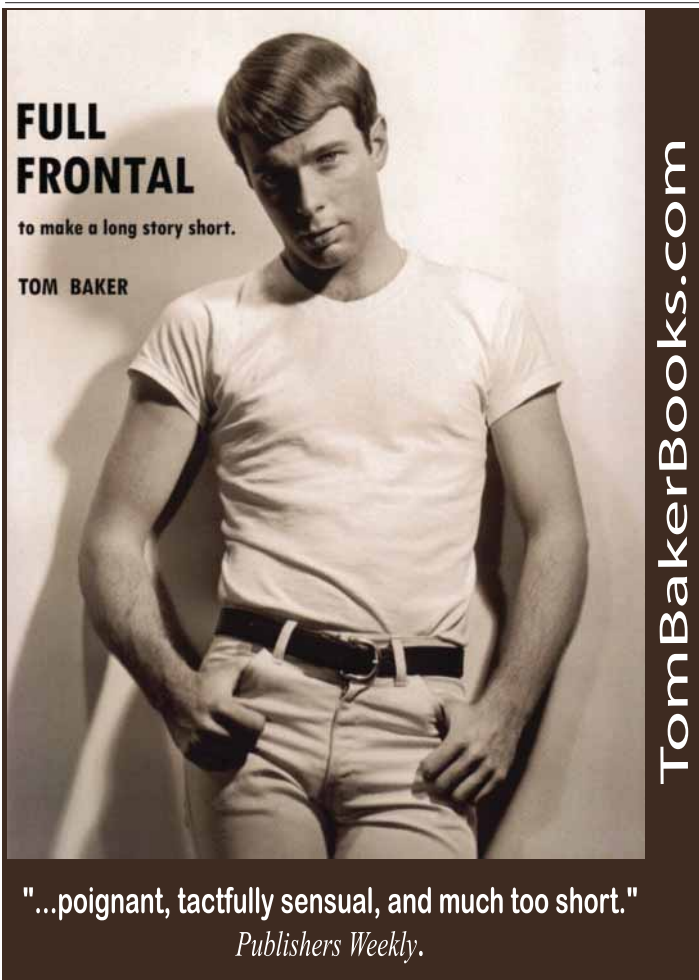
Added to the mix was Bernstein's Jewish identity. He needed to prove himself as a Jewish man in a world that was still quite anti-Semitic. Excused from military service during World War II due to health problems, he learned from afar about the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis. When he conducted in Vienna and in Bayreuth, Germany, Jews all over the world felt a sense of pride in his triumph. In my own family, Bernstein was

worshiped as a "Jewish boy who made good." His Young People's Concerts and his Omnibus Series were must-hear events at our house. My mother bought tickets to see *West Side Story* on Broadway within the first month of its opening.

Behind the scenes, the letters about the making of *West Side Story* will be of great interest to anyone who's a fan of the brilliant musical. We learn about the difficulty that Bernstein had collaborating with Jerome Robbins, who was notoriously difficult to work with, and that he almost quit the show because of Robbins.

Now for a couple of complaints about this book, as well-produced as it generally is. *Someone* does not include many letters from Bernstein's later years. There are no letters about his refusal to accept the National Medal of Arts from President George H. W. Bush as a protest against the revocation of an NEA grant for an AIDS exhibit when it was learned that the show featured works by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. A second quibble is that the footnotes are often unnecessarily long and compete for space with the letters themselves.

Those peccadilloes aside, *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* opens a window into the world of one of the most accomplished and brilliant artists of the 20th century. His letters reveal his search for meaning through his involvement, not with abstract ideas for the most part, but with the flesh-and-blood world of family, friends, lovers, and, of course, his music. 



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Provincetown 2013

Check out the beaches, chewed back
by last fall's hurricanes. At Herring Cove
new showers, change rooms, snack shops

cluster in the reconfigured dunes,
wooden roofs angling clean
above the sands, a rustic version

of the Sydney Opera House. The sea
seduces with same old tides, the air
with its same salt tang. Seaweed clings

to swimmers' flesh in dark designs,
Rorschach-like. Appetites grow
for clam and lobster rolls, fried cod,

cilantro mojitos, tea dance
and after, the glamour and the camp.
A full moon settles into pillows of cloud

while Cher slices on her skateboard
through gathering crowds, races the ebb
and flow along Commercial Street.

JUDITH SAUNDERS

The Splendid, Drunken van Vechten

THE LAST TWO DECADES have seen a strong revival of interest in Carl van Vechten (1880-1964), the Midwestern author, patron of and enthusiast for Harlem Renaissance writers, for “Jazz Age” Negro subculture and, more broadly, for 1920s Americanized dandyism and decadence. Yet, understandably, no single sense of why we should return to, or even reclaim, van Vechten, has emerged.

NYRB Classics evidently thinks *The Tiger in the House: A Cultural History of the Cat* (1920, reprinted 2007) is his masterpiece—though one senses here the pull of the marketplace. Bruce Kellner has more adventurously overseen the first publication of van Vechten’s journals as *The Splendid Drunken Twenties: Selections from the Daybooks, 1922–30* (2007). In 2012, Yale published Emily Bernard’s somewhat pedestrian “partial biography,” *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance*, concentrating on the subject’s “black life.” Bernard had previously edited the 2002 volume *Remember Me to Harlem*, the collected correspondence of van Vechten and African-American poet Langston Hughes. In July 2013, Columbia University Press brought us the first paperback edition of *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913–1946*, edited by Edward Burns, weighing in at a very Steinian 920 pages and perhaps also confirming that interest in van Vechten today primarily lay in whom he knew, not in what he achieved. Now, however, van Vechten receives the copious and discriminating biographical analysis he has long needed, in the form of *The Tastemaker*, an exceptional publication and Edward White’s first book.

The elephant in the room throughout all this attention is captured in a single word—“the n word,” rarely seen today in publishing or in public discourse. But in 1999 Illinois republished van Vechten’s bestselling novel, *Nigger Heaven*, which brought forth some concern—though White shows carefully that similar concerns had been every bit as pronounced when it was first published in 1926. Van Vechten had already dipped his toe in the water of this particular controversy, in a sense, by persuading the English novelist Ronald Firbank that his Caribbean-set novel *Sorrow in Sunlight* would enjoy renown and huge sales stateside if the title were changed to *Prancing Nigger* (1924). Firbank agreed to the switch, in-

RICHARD CANNING

**The Tastemaker:
Carl van Vechten and
the Birth of Modern America**
by Edward White
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 384 pages, \$30.



Carl van Vechten, Self-Portrait, 1932

deed securing his only commercial success, either in the U.S. or in Britain. Van Vechten, meanwhile, was able to promote the book, but was also testing the water relative to using the notorious slur in a title.

Two years later, *Nigger Heaven*—an ironic reference, van Vechten insisted, to a nickname for the cheap seats at the top of any theater frequented by African-Americans—sought not so much to document Negro lives, cultures, and *mores*, as to subject them to satire. Firbank’s novel had deployed humor in portraying the journey of the Mouth Family to “the Celestial city of Cuna-Cuna,” but the esprit was evidently warm-hearted. Van Vechten’s novel meant to celebrate Harlem, but in a “warts and all” style that many African-Americans resented. Artists and writers understandably did not relish the sense that among their greatest achievements were the speakeasies where louche white cats drank all night alongside their black peers, invariably being offered a range of extra *divertissements* for an additional fee. Some figures of the Harlem Renaissance—Countee Cullen and W. E. B. Du Bois among them—protested the novel’s title. Other of van Vechten’s friends, such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, stayed loyal, but even they defended the book with caution. Hughes noted the problem of “the n word” thus, even while promoting *Nigger Heaven*:

The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY, the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have. The unions you cannot join. The word *nigger* in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word *nigger* in the mouths of foremen on the job, the word *nigger* across the whole face of America!

The oddest thing to emerge from White’s extensive researches is the extent to which van Vechten, as an established author in mid-career, was continually waging a private battle with his Iowan family. His father, particularly, Carl simply wanted to shock. On the one hand, Charles van Vechten had been and remained a provincial conservative, epitomizing the small-town values of Cedar Rapids, van Vechten’s birthplace. Earlier novels, with their less-than-subtle homoerotic innuendoes—such as *Peter Whiffle* (1922), *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923), and *The Tattooed Countess* (1924)—had scandalized his father accordingly. The middle title here, he told his son, was “a very

Richard Canning’s most recent publication is an edition of Ronald Firbank’s *Vainglory* for Penguin Classics (2012).

well-written picture of depravity.” On the other hand, the van Vechtens were relatively enlightened by the standards of the day in terms of race. For example, Charles wrote accusingly to Carl on reading *Nigger Heaven*: “I have myself never spoken of a colored man as a ‘nigger.’”

White’s account of van Vechten’s turbulent and multi-faceted career is undoubtedly the best we’ll get—and the best its subject could hope for. Informed, nuanced, and balanced, it hesitates to make claims for the writer that would be hard to support. Yet it vigorously argues for the efficacy of van Vechten’s best novels, such as the autobiographical *Peter Whiffle* and the many jazz-themed and jazz-styled stories he collected in 1930’s *Parties*. Ultimately, though, the title of *The Tastemaker*, it is true, concedes that van Vechten’s most enduring achievements did not lie in his own creativity at all, but in his advocacy of forms of art, and ways of living, through his critical reviews, private recommendations to publishers, sponsorship, and so on.

The Tastemaker has pace and brio; White is helped throughout by the sheer vivacity of his subject. The book *Parties* readily summarized the lifestyles in which van Vechten specialized; his writings were always singularly informed by personal experience. He and his second wife, the long-suffering actress Fani Marinoff, could drink almost everyone under the table. They were married for fifty years, though they lived independently and for long periods separately. Throughout his life, van Vechten was, it transpires, open to all offers.

The photographic career into which he moved later in life included portraiture for money as well as van Vechten’s own interests. There were few African-American artists of any kind

who did not appear before his lens. But there was an avant-garde thread, too, in which young male beauty, reflected in both the fair- and dark-skinned, was unambiguously celebrated.

Van Vechten was, White demonstrates, as imaginative in his many newspaper reviews as he was in his fiction. He willingly elaborated on events, and certainly at times reviewed things he could not possibly have seen. He was as disposed to comment on a fellow audience member’s body odor as on the stagecraft in front of him. A fan of Oscar Wilde, he rhapsodized over each revival of Wilde’s plays, particularly a 1907 performance by Olive Fremstad as Salome in Richard Strauss’ operatic adaptation of Wilde’s play at the Met.

A half-century later, the world had moved on, and van Vechten’s support for African-American authors, composers, musicians, and actors seemed quaint or even corrupt. In a sense, he was eclipsed as society moved steadfastly in his direction. He donated his monumental collection of African-American cultural artifacts to Yale but named it the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, knowing that it would thus attract many more contributions than if his own name figured prominently.

White wittily summarizes van Vechten’s broader political naïveté as the belief “that the world could be revolutionized one cocktail party at a time.” Still, New York City in particular has always had a place for the unrepentant hedonist. True to form, in his last weeks, in 1963, van Vechten was interviewed by the *New Yorker*, still stylishly dressed, still downing a Bourbon highball—and still very much, as the magazine put it, “one of the city’s most durable boosters.”

Living Consciously in the Berkshires

FOR THOSE OF US who grew up city-side, the idea of discovering yourself, of settling into place by returning to a landscape of woods and water, not to mention hills and fields replete with indigenous wildlife exquisitely tuned to seasons, to weather, to cycles of light and dark, could feel like a foreign concept. In these spare and compelling essays, Catherine Reid brings it all back home even for city folk as she returns to the scenes of her childhood in the Berkshires.

Reid, a professor of creative writing at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina, drew from many of the same experiences a decade ago in a memoir called *Coyote: Seeking the Hunter in Our Midst* (2004). *Falling into Place: An Intimate Geography of Home* amplifies the writer’s tale of return, showing not only what drew her back to Massachusetts, but also how she came to leave again, without rancor, but this time for good.

Written in a direct, lean style, *Coyote* marked Reid as a sort of modern naturalist, aware of the harm that’s been visited on the

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ROSEMARY BOOTH

**Falling into Place:
An Intimate Geography of Home**

by Catherine Reid
Beacon Press. 184 pages, \$24.95

planet by humans yet still attentive to persistent patterns of animal behavior: cycles of mating and birth, of killing and feeding, of flight and migration, and of dying. *Coyote* also displayed the author’s capacity for observing life and human behavior briskly and without sentimentality. The title animal served as the object of Reid’s quest as well as her metaphorical stand-in. An outcast and rogue, the coyote is poorly understood and widely reviled.

As a lesbian, Reid had felt similar stings of social rejection, and this insight propelled her search. For most of *Coyote* Reid was the pursuer, following animal tracks and calls. Near the end of the book, as she was about to re-enter her car after an exhausting day combing the woods around a deserted concrete dam, she found herself staring at a coyote. Suddenly seeing what she had been seeking so arduously, the author realized that the search had readied her to confront major fears in her own life.

As a kind of sequel to *Coyote*, the essays in *Falling into Place* trace a similar arc of return and discovery. The essays are roughly chronological. Thus, in the opening essay, “Song Heart Rail,” we meet the author’s partner Holly and learn that the pair has just moved into to an old farmhouse they bought near where Reid’s

parents and five siblings still live. We learn about the surrounding countryside, its rivers and valleys, and about the Wetlands Birds Project, for which Reid is a volunteer. The essays recount Reid's day-to-day treks and meet-ups with local fauna and describe their habitats. Her writing is detailed without being dull, informative but not pedantic. Reid is a published poet, and images abound—visual ones, like “a circle of fire-lit snow,” and aural ones, like the bird names that punctuate the text, such as rose-breasted grosbeaks, marsh wrens, mergansers, ivory-billed woodpeckers, greaves, waxwings, wood ducks, poor wills, and king rails, among many others.

Reid's enthusiasm brings to mind the works of poet John Clare and essayist Henry David Thoreau. Like theirs, her observations are carefully rendered, as, for example, in these comments about a beaver lodge she stumbles upon while out walking with an old friend: “Such a foolish place to build! ... This will never be that marshy place made for ducks and frogs and great blue herons, for dragonflies and sleep turtles. This valley is too steep and rugged, the river too violent. ... These may be teenaged beavers, kits kicked out by a new brood's arrival, too naïve to know they can't slow a river. ... Or perhaps all the good brooks were already taken and this was where winter, not desire, made them stop.”

Falling into Place abounds in descriptions of Reid's explorations during every season in the Berkshire outdoors. At the same time, a few core essays pull the reader back indoors, to the human settings in which change happens, and to matters of the heart. Even as the couple is settling in, for example, Reid's father is found to require immediate surgery for a life-threatening heart condition. We see how that crisis affects father and daughter, as the writer skillfully depicts their earlier, profound estrangement and also the possibility of reconciliation. As she and Holly are leaving her father toward the end of his recovery, Reid tells us, he looks at them both, saying, “Take care of each other,” and in his words she hears newfound support for their life together.

“Hitched, Massachusetts, 2004” further explores the topic of family, recounting the story of Reid and Holly's wedding just after the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that same-sex couples have the right to marry. The piece is ample, and tough. Far from feeling starry-eyed at the prospect of getting legally married, the author says, she found herself weighing the downside risks of making such an open declaration, fears based on her experience as a lesbian woman. One real fear was that of being physically or emotionally targeted.

We learn about the death at age 101 of Reid's grandmother, a woman from whom she learned the skills of birdwatcher and naturalist. This same grandmother, however, did not want to hear about Reid's life with another woman, an attitude that greatly pained her granddaughter. This essay is exemplary in its reticence. No dramatic last words, no deathbed conversion. But in the old woman's dying calls for her granddaughter, the author comes to find a kind of sufficiency.

One way we make peace with losses in nature, and with our own human failings, Reid decides, is to look for a balance between “reckless solo acts” and making choices “with a community in mind.” After several years in the Berkshires, Holly longs to be living closer to her three grown children. With sadness, but realizing she has probably found what she came for, Reid agrees to move to North Carolina. What was revealed in her Berkshires

No Geese This Evening

No geese this evening.
No point in coming.

For them.

When the tide's not right,
When the water pancakes out
Taking the current down with it,
Leaving nothing but dreg shallows

And the pleasure barges which
Like selling their Hampton Court shuttle as a trip
Down the Mississippi, with Huck Finn himself
 crewing,
Are forced to say no to the punters,
The geese cancel too.

Why the river has flatlined and will not permit
The short, lovely glide to the bank
Opposite their grazing ground, where
Just before shore, a bounce
Built of wake always kicks in

Tipping them over the wire fence
Onto dry land

Is and isn't clear.

But the lead will not open his troop
To the perils of formation flying.

This is not a species that does
One single thing on whim.

Not when life means limb.

Birds are ambitious.
By the end of the day
They want to live through it.

The lead has scrubbed tonight's crossing.
Tonight the Thames is all out of tides.

HELENA KAMINSKI

stay? Poet Merrill Gilfillan has described landscape writing as a kind of “fundamental noticing.” Reid's book offers three models of women who were good at paying attention: a 17th-century explorer and naturalist, a climber who was the first woman to ascend the Matterhorn, and an early 20th-century photographer of birds. These three women, all of them passionately focused on the natural world, experienced failure, but they refused to give in, persisting and at length prevailing in fraught and risky places. Like their stories, *Falling into Place* shows a successful quest for elusive, hard-won goals, on natural territory.



A Conjectural Romp across Art History

Editor's Note: This review is an edited transcript of a video presentation that can be viewed on the GLR blog at www.GLReview.org.

RICHARD M. BERRONG

**A Little Gay History:
Desire and Diversity across the World**
by R. B. Parkinson
Columbia. 128 pages, \$19.95

THE PROJECT that finally became this book began as a web trail from the British Museum. It is a pictorial sampling of items from that museum across centuries and cultures of mostly visual representations of same-sex desire and gender ambiguity. Each depiction has a paragraph or two of explanation, much as you would find on the plaques that accompany art works in a museum exhibit. The items are arranged in roughly chronological order.

The book starts with its only extended piece of prose: an introduction that, in explaining the choice of the word “gay” for the title, reviews the work that has been done on sexual identity over the last 150 years. It cautions, as historians such as Foucault have done for almost half a century now, against viewing past cultures through the gender constructions of our own time. In viewing these various artifacts, in other words, “it is impossible to have an infallible ‘gaydar’ across other cultures and periods.” The introduction also reminds the reader, more generally, that “art is never simply a reflection of social reality.” Artists, whether great painters or simple potters, craft their work in accord with particular personal ideas. Their work can never be read as a transparent window on or reflection of the culture in which they were produced.

Still, Parkinson argues, specialized histories such as this “can offer a valuable alternative to the official histories that nation states have often produced—and still produce—for themselves.” More specifically, he expresses the hope that this book “will not only illustrate some aspects of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history, but will also show the diverse material forms that such history takes.”

And with that we are off to the items on display. Parkinson starts with a small sculpture found near Bethlehem that dates back almost 11,000 years. It depicts two persons embracing. “Nothing makes it absolutely certain that it is a man and a woman,” Parkinson observes. “The genders of the figures are unmarked.” “We need not assume that ‘heterosexuality’ or the modern nuclear family as we know them are the default options for any society, ancient or modern,” he concludes. So this collection begins in ambiguity.

That remains one of its main themes. We see a clay relief of the goddess Ishtar from Mesopotamia with the claws of a male bird of prey and are told that in some instances she was even depicted with a beard—though we don’t get to see an example of that. There is also a statue of the male god Shiva from 12th-century India in which the figure wears one man’s earring and one

Richard M. Berrong, professor of French lit at Kent State, is the author of In Love with a Handsome Sailor, a gay reading of Pierre Loti’s novels.

woman’s earring.

As Parkinson explains in the preface, “desire and identity are not limited to sexual activity, but inevitably depictions of sex are the most unambiguous historical records that we have of such desire.” As a result, there are also plenty of examples of same-sex activity in this exhibit, most of them involving men. Some are mild, such as an

early 19th-century print by Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro of one warrior tenderly holding the hand of his male page while another warrior looks less tenderly at a woman.

One of the more remarkable of the depictions of same-sex desire comes from the first century C.E., a silver drinking cup supposedly found near Jerusalem, now known as the Warren Cup, because it was once owned by gay American art collector Edward Perry Warren. The book doesn’t offer us much in the way of an analysis of such a striking item, however. Rather, it gives us its history and a few generalizations about sexuality in the Roman Empire, and then moves on to the next item. At such



Detail of the Warren Cup. British Museum, London.

times, this book gets a little frustrating. Unlike an exhibition catalog, there are no essays to offer detailed scholarly discussions.

When we get to the 20th century in the last few pages, the examples are less striking for being more familiar. We see, for example, three figurines sculpted by German ceramicist Hedwig Marquardt in 1924, two of them women. But while Marquardt herself may have been a lesbian, it’s hard to see what her sexuality had to do with these works.

There is nothing in this book that is intended to change our way of seeing sexuality and identity through the ages. Rather, it provides us with several examples of how it has been depicted, reminding us that no matter how natural our desires may seem to us, depictions of it from other times and places need to be viewed with an awareness of how variably even something as “natural” as sexual desire has been perceived.

If Dorian Had Lived...

JEAN ROBERTA

The Wilde Passions of Dorian Gray

by Mitzi Szereto

Cleis Press. 288 pages, \$15.95

AUTHOR Mitzi Szereto, who recently wrote a funny, sexually explicit riff on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* subtitled *Hidden Lusts* (2011), has now written an erotic sequel to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that gothic tale of a young man who magically trades places with his portrait, which ages for him in the attic.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, first serialized in a magazine in 1891, is a kind of literary experiment by a playwright who was attempting a novel. Approximately one third of it follows the moral degeneration of the attractive Dorian after his friend, the painter Basil Hallward (who believes that everyone's character can be read in their face) asks him to pose for a painting. Basil's friend Lord Henry Wotton insists on meeting the young Adonis, and then apparently corrupts the innocent Dorian by constantly making witty comments that overturn conventional Victorian morality. Another third of the book could be titled "The World According to Lord Henry." A final third is devoted to references to historical figures and descriptions of the beautiful objects that Dorian obsessively collects, including ecclesiastical garments worn by Roman Catholic clergymen during Mass. Dorian enjoys the perversity of owning these things as a nonbeliever.

Oscar Wilde's real-life disgrace in the 1890s due to his reckless lawsuit against the Marquess of Queensbury (father of Oscar's younger friend and lover, "Bosie")—followed by Wilde's conviction for sodomy, his prison term, and his early death in exile in Paris—has made his story of the beautiful, dangerous boy, Dorian Gray, seem like a prophesy. The book itself, however, which lacks the coherence of most celebrated 19th-century novels, can only hint at the nature of Gray's degeneracy, still an unspeakable topic in literature.

Mitzi Szereto has wisely avoided following the structure of the original work. Instead, she has resurrected Dorian (who dies upon destroying his hideous portrait) as a kind of immortal predator. After a brief chapter in London in the 1890s in which the original exchange of Dorian with his own image is summed up, we next encounter Dorian in Paris in the 1920s playing sex games with thinly disguised avatars of the writers F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and the painter Salvador Dali. Dorian is shown to be a sensation seeker for whom nothing is off-limits, fully pansexual with a special appetite for playing the dominant partner who sometimes "tops from below."

Dorian moves to Marrakesh in the 1940s in order to prevent aging London acquaintances from recognizing him in Paris. The influence of Lord Henry in some sense accompanies Dorian wherever he goes, taking the form of aphorisms directly quoted at the beginning of each chapter. Dorian eventually takes refuge in a Peruvian monastery in the 1960s, where he finds a way to

cause trouble.

Despite Dorian's usual preference for young men as bedfellows, he is haunted by a recurring dream of a beautiful young woman whose aura of innocent love shows his life in perspective. Perhaps he is haunted by his own hopes for salvation, which confront him in New Orleans in the "present day" (post-Hurricane Katrina). There he is recognized as a kindred soul by a group of apparent goths who are actual vampires (shades of Anne Rice). This close-knit group is led by a modern-day dandy who reminds Dorian of his old mentor, Lord Henry, in the London of over a century before. Unfortunately, the vampire-leader is a man of few words who lacks the breezy wit of the original Lord Henry.

The climax of Dorian's long search for something he is only dimly aware of wanting is as satisfying in Mitzi Szereto's version as it is in Oscar Wilde's—possibly more so. Szereto's use of language is faithful to the original, even in the frequent sex scenes. She's a novelist who knows how to construct a coherent plot, and she treats Oscar Wilde's book with respect. So by all means check out *The Wilde Passions of Dorian Gray*, especially if you've already read the original novel, or use it as an excuse to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* if you haven't.

Jean Roberta is a widely published writer based in Regina, Saskatchewan.

If Aschenbach Returned...

ANTHONY GUY PATRICIA

Death in Venice, California

by Vinton Rafe McCabe

The Permanent Press. 192 pages, \$28.

NOVELIST AND POET Vinton Rafe McCabe presents a compact story that's as compelling as it is disconcerting. Though darkly comic and at times quite erotic, this is not a light read. It is, however, an elegantly written and artfully plotted gay novel that will make you think seriously about art, relationships, obsessions, ageism, philosophy, pornography, and sex.

At the center of *Death in Venice, California* is a character named Jameson Frame, a fifty-year-old writer of some renown, who has published exactly three works during his career: a pair of novels titled *Pennyweight* and *The Antecedents* and a very slim collection of poems called *On Scrimshaw and Others*. Beyond that, he's a professor of creative writing at an unnamed university in New York City. For all his modest success, Frame suddenly finds himself dissatisfied with his life and disturbed by the endless gray, cold days in Manhattan from November till spring. So he heads west by commercial airplane and takes up an extended residence at the posh Hotel des Bains in Venice Beach, California.

Poised as he is on the liminal edge, it is difficult not to suspect that something momentous is about to happen to Frame as *Death in Venice, California* unfolds in its leisurely but insistent

fashion. He very quickly meets two older women, Vera and Elsa, who are eccentric, new-age Bohemians at heart. At a party at their bungalow, Vera and Elsa introduce Frame to a youth named Chase who has pale skin studded with an array of tattoos, dark hair, sculpted muscles, and the surprisingly high-pitched voice “of a boy emanating from the body of a man.” The older Frame feels an almost immediate and overpowering lust/love for the much younger Chase. And it is that feeling that he chooses to act on despite his better judgment.

Chase is a product of the new millennium: a former underwear model who, lacking a real job, has created his own soft-core pornographic website, Chase.com, which is marketed with the cheesy—and not quite true—slogan: “*I Want To Share My Whole Life With You.*” Apparently, Chase.com appeals to a cadre of anonymous viewers willing to pay money to see Chase in a variety of erotic poses and situations. And there’s no small irony in the fact that Chase refers to his legions of fans as the “chasers.” As intrigued by and attracted to Chase as he is, it does not take much cajoling on the seductive Chase’s part to get Frame, or “Jimmy,” as the youth calls him, to film Chase as he showers and then masturbates using Frame’s ritzy room at the Hotel des Bains as a backdrop for Chase’s “art” (as he refers to it).

At Chase’s instigation, Frame also allows himself to be tattooed with an enormous letter “V”—for “vincible” (as opposed to an “I” for “invincible”)—on his leg. Meanwhile, encouraged by Vera and Elsa, he purchases a whole new wardrobe of outrageously expensive clothes, then undergoes liposuction in order to remove his paunch, and has both Botox and Masculane injected into his face to reduce the “stage-four crow’s-feet” around his eyes. These are clearly the actions of someone who is unable to think entirely rationally because of his obsession with a beautiful youth. Frame’s devolution climaxes in a seedy porn studio in Hollywood where he is filmed while fellating Chase for all the world—including the “chasers”—to see. This is the most physical intimacy that Frame will ever share with Chase.

With a title like *Death in Venice, California*, a happy ending is not, of course, in the cards. Frame’s fixation on Chase is such that he fails to take care of his own physical needs, notably the wounds incurred by the tattoos and the plastic surgery, which have left him losing blood, with the predictable result. The novel works due to McCabe’s skillful handling of his central character. Although the story is told from Frame’s perspective, the tone is matter-of-fact to the point of being clinical, allowing the reader to keep his distance from the narrator. Readers can sit back dispassionately and watch what happens to Frame, secure in the knowledge that they would never be so foolish as to sacrifice everything for a pretty face.

Death in Venice, California is McCabe’s homage to Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella. Like Gustav von Aschenbach, Frame is an aging writer who finds himself facing a crisis of the spirit, so he goes on a sojourn to a warmer, somewhat exotic climate, falls under the spell of a beautiful but unobtainable youth, and attempts to camouflage his age with the available tools. Both Frame and Aschenbach are fools in search of new experience—tragic clowns who make the mistake of losing themselves in profane love while ostensibly on a quest for art and beauty. In addition to tracing the consequences of Frame’s foolish choices, McCabe also considers the fate of Chase, a young man whose

chances in life have been limited by no fault of his own, a beautiful youth who catches a break but who’s destined to be tossed aside by the next hot young thing to come along.

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A ‘Real’ Marriage, After All

TERRI SCHLICHENMEYER

**The Marriage Act:
The Risk I Took to Keep My Best Friend in America,
and What It Taught Us About Love**

by Liza Monroy

Soft Skull Press. 320 pages, \$16.95

IN HER LIFE, Liza Monroy confides in *The Marriage Act*, there have been three important men: her father, her boyfriend Julian, and her best friend Emir. She has barely seen her father since she was six years old, following her parents’ divorce. Julian lived in Manhattan, far from Monroy’s home in L.A., and, although they were engaged, their relationship was rocky. Emir, however, lived just three blocks away, and Monroy saw him whenever she felt she needed him. She needed Emir a lot.

Monroy and Emir met in college, both dreaming of making screenplays and films. He was in the U.S. on a student visa, a Muslim boy from a country Monroy called Emirstan. She had been running from her mother’s influence, and he was gay. While she was not gay, they had much else in common, became fast friends, and were soon inseparable. And in the weeks following September 11, 2001, when just being Middle Eastern was cause for suspicion, Emir’s visa was about to expire.

By that time, Monroy’s engagement had fallen apart in a messy, devastating way. She was afraid of love, but more terrified of being alone. She asked Emir to marry her, which seemed like a great solution: Emirstan was murderously intolerant of gay men, and deportation could be dangerous, even deadly. Even Emir’s own father was a homophobe. Marrying her gay best friend would allow Monroy to practice at marriage until she felt comfortable enough to have a “real” husband, at which time they could get divorced. Needless to say, Immigration and Naturalization Service frowned on marriage for a green card’s sake, to put it mildly; and, as luck would have it, Monroy’s mother was an INS agent. Risking deportation for Emir and a heavy fine for both, they asked themselves: what exactly makes a marriage? If the key ingredient is love, then Monroy and Emir had that. If it’s needing one another, they had that, too. Did marriage *have* to be about having sex and raising children?

With all the angst of a Woody Allen movie and a weak ability to keep mum about life-and-death secrets, Monroy describes the stress, misgivings, and melodramatic scenes, and finally how she almost sabotaged her own gutsy plan to keep her gay best friend in the U.S. It all sounds pretty madcap—and it would be, if the author weren’t so nervously repetitive and fussy. Monroy

seems delighted to share pages and pages of agony about her inability to stick with her decision. It's hard not to become irritated with the self-doubting discourse, the needless covertness, the anxious blame-the-parents passages, and the attempts at humor that miss the mark.

There is something of a surprise ending, but by this time it's difficult to be surprised at what happens or to muster much sympathy for the central characters. What saves the book—or could save it for some readers—is the author's bumbling sweetness as she feels her way through uncharted territory, learning as she goes.

No Commies, Jews, or Gays

CHARLES GREEN

Double Agents: Espionage, Literature, and Liminal Citizens

by Erin G. Carlston

Columbia University Press. 332 pages, \$29.50

THIS ENGAGING STUDY investigates the many associations that have been drawn, in both literary works and historical events, between gay men, Jews, and communists as potential traitors and spies. They are among the “invisible others,” as Carlston calls them, who have been considered throughout history, but especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, as “double agents,” pretending to be citizens but actually working as moles and subversives. Based upon their sexual orientation, religious and ethnic background, or political leanings, these groups are seen as not respecting national boundaries or secrets; therefore, they cannot be trusted with the rights of full citizenship. Often there is sense of urgency to identify members of these groups to prevent them from hurting the country.

Carlston examines three major events from the last hundred years or so, from three separate countries, to illustrate her thesis: the Dreyfus Affair in late-19th-century France; the Burgess-Maclean spy scandal in Britain; and the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg trial in the U.S. She also analyzes three literary works that deal in some way with each event, as well as the general theme—Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Auden's early poetry, and Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*—which all consider what it means to be gay, Jewish, or a communist, often more than one at a time. Carlston focuses primarily on Proust and Kushner's works, using Auden's early poetry to demonstrate that many writers at the time, even poets, were interested in spying as a theme.

He begins with Proust, mainly focusing on *Sodom and Gomorrah*, which is Volume Four of the massive novel. Proust refers to the Dreyfus Affair—an 1894 spy scandal involving a Jewish army officer accused of selling military secrets to a bisexual German diplomat—as a way of bringing together sexuality and Jewishness as two kinds of “secret” identity. In the book, the straight, Catholic narrator suddenly discovers the hidden signs of Jewishness and homosexuality (or “inversion” as it was called), and uses this new understanding to piece together the fragments of con-

Isherwood Journals

I am always on the lookout for coincidences in dates he wrote at 34; I am 34 and mindful how so few of us use roadmaps anymore

to get to where we think we're going. I read your face too easily sometimes, when you want to be left alone to battle your mood or the room

is too loud for the portraits midwived in your brain. I read your body like these books, always open to things likely to flush the cheeks,

digestion of last night's dinner, tomorrow's mortality; the sexual pull toward empty boys; the constant questioning of treasure and worth.

How terribly insecure we all can feel. *Just because I in fact won't leave him, I have taken it for granted he somehow knows this.*

Just because
I in fact won't leave you, I have taken it for granted you somehow know this.

BRYAN BORLAND

versation and information he learned about people in the earlier volumes to gain a fuller picture of them.

In a sense, Marcel, the narrator, acts as a spy, examining people and situations for the secret clues that reveal their identity. The readers then become spies as well as they learn to decode history and relationships and discover the truth. And as a closeted gay man and assimilated Jew, Proust had a unique perspective on this situation. He was a sort of spy himself, looking at salon society through the eyes of a partially concealed outsider. In this respect, Jewishness and homosexuality provide a unique way of looking at the world that “insiders” would be likely to miss.

Carlston continues this analysis in her discussion of *Angels in America*, particularly the play's use of Ethel Rosenberg and Roy Cohn. In examining the 1951 trial of the Rosenbergs for passing atomic bomb secrets to the Russians, she remarks on the irony that Cohn, a Jew and a closeted homosexual, helped prosecute Julius and Ethel, fellow Jews and believers in Communism. She argues that Cohn worked so hard against them in order to reinforce his status as an assimilated Jew who had successfully become a part of mainstream America, whereas Julius and Ethel were still on the margins, working for social justice and involved with a group fighting against American creeds.

While Cohn easily comes across in the play as an evil self-hating Jew and gay man, Carlston sees some positive signs in his resolve to be a “tough Jew,” to prosper in a world that has always feared and despised people like him. Perhaps Ethel visits him during his last days because he, too, is a spy, looking at the world through an alien perspective. Through close readings, Carlston draws logical yet unexpected conclusions like these.

Cultural Calendar

Readers are invited to submit relevant items at no charge. E-mail listings to: HGLR@aol.com. Be sure to allow at least a month's lead time for any listing.

Festivals and Events

FILM FESTIVALS

- Tucson, AZ** Out in the Desert. March 3-8.
- Los Angeles** Fusion: LGBT People of Color Film Festival. March 7-8.
- Waterloo, Ontario** Rainbow Reels Queer Film Festival. March 14-17.
- London, UK** London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival. March 20-30.
- Boston** The Boston LGBT Film Festival. April 3-12.
- Los Angeles** Latin@ Queer Arts and Film Festival. April 10-13.
- Miami** Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. April 25-May 4.
- St. Louis** Cinema St. Louis Qfest. April 27-May 1.

EVENTS

Winter Party Festival Produced by the G&L Task Force, a 6-day extravaganza of art events, dance parties, & receptions in South Beach, FL. March 5-10. For info, visit www.winterparty.com.

"Leaders Legends & Lovelies" Ball April 9 at the Filmore Theatre in Miami Beach, a benefit for Hispanic LGBT youth arts scholarships. Lectures, forums, & an exhibition. www.unitycoalition.org.

LGBT Health Workforce Conf. May 1-3 in New York City. "Engineering Institutions and Empowering Individuals To Better Serve LGBT Communities." Visit: www.lgbthealthworkforce.org/contact/

WorldPride Human Rights Conf. 2014 in Toronto, June 25-27. GLBT leaders from 60 countries will speak and strategize on a full range of issues. At University College at the Univ. of Toronto. For info, visit the UC's website and search for "worldpride".

Gay Games IX The quadrennial event will take place in Cleveland, Ohio, Aug. 9-16, 2014. Over 13,000 athletes and cultural participants are expected to attend. Visit: www.gg9cle.com

Feature Films*

Aleksandr's Price (directed by Pau Masó). A young Russian man in New York, an illegal alien, descends into the sex trade to survive, where he discovers life on the razor's edge.

Blue Is the Warmest Color (Abdellatif Kechiche). All about Adèle, a teenage girl who comes of age through two relationships, first with a boy and then with a much more simpatico older woman.

The Case against 8 (Ben Cotner, Ryan White). A behind-the-scenes look at the effort to overturn California's ban on same-sex marriage culminating in victory before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dallas Buyers' Club (Jean-Marc Vallée). Matthew McConaughey stars as a drug-addicted, redneck cowboy who's diagnosed with AIDS in 1985 and finds himself organizing the gay community.

Drunktown's Finest (Sydney Freeland). Three Native Americans, including a promiscuous transsexual, come of age on a reservation.

I Love Your Work (Jonathan Harris). An interactive documentary about the private lives of nine women who make lesbian porn.

Kill Your Darlings (John Krokidas). Three Beat writers—Allen Ginsberg (played by Daniel Radcliffe), Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs—are brought together by the murder of David Kammerer.

Love Is Strange (Ira Sachs). Longtime couple Ben and George get married, but when George loses his job the pair must leave New York and revisit old friends and family. Cast includes John Lithgow, Alfred Molina, and Marisa Tomei.

The Skeleton Twins (Craig Johnson). Bill Hader and Kristen Wiig star as estranged twins Milo and Maggie, brought together by fate and forced to confront their past—including Milo's ex-lover Rich.

Stranger by the Lake (Alain Guiraudie, French). Against the lazy backdrop of a gay resort, a man is murdered and a mystery unfolds, even as a witness to the deed is falling in love with the perp.

To Be Takei (Jennifer Kroot). A documentary about actor George Takei—most famous as Sulu on the original Star Trek—from his World War II internment to married life with his husband Brad.

** Most are screening at film festivals; some are in general release.*

Theater

What Doesn't Kill Me ... Makes a Great Story An evening with playwright Robert Patrick in his first one-man show in 44 years. March 22, 23, & 30 at Spirit Studio in L.A.

Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays At San Francisco's New Conservatory Theatre Center. An evening of short plays by A-list writers. Previews begin on March 21.

Mothers and Sons A new play by Terrence McNally explores a complicated set of family relationships over a 20-year period. Slated to open on Broadway in Spring 2014, starring Tyne Daly. (Reviewed in this issue by Raymond-Jean Frontain, page 32.)

Hedwig and the Angry Inch Neil Patrick Harris has signed on to star in a Broadway revival of John Cameron Mitchell's classic rock musical, slated to open this spring.

Art Exhibitions

Post-Performance Syndrome—Jade Yumang telescopes 2 years of the artist's performance pieces. Now thru April 27 at the Leslie Lohman Museum in Manhattan. Visit www.LeslieLohman.org.

Our Vast Queer Past: Celebrating San Francisco's GLBT History assembles a wide array of personal histories on gay experience in the Bay Area. Ongoing at the GLBT History Museum.

EZTV is an exhibition and screening series on the video gallery that showcased many gay artists and filmmakers after 1979. March 15-June 1 at the ONE Archives Gallery in West Hollywood.

An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle includes 180 works by visual artists and poets who were active in San Francisco in the 50s. At the Grey Art Gallery in NYC to March 29.

In His Own Likeness presents an assortment of erotic images of men highlighting the power associated with maleness. To March 16 at the Richard Shack Gallery in Miami Beach.

Peter Hujar: Love & Lust is an exhibit of the photographer's most radical work. At the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco to March 8.

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James Broughton was an influential poet and experimental filmmaker in the mid 20th century. His colorful personality invited people to embrace their peculiarities and become the persons of their dreams.

James would have turned 100 in 2013, and to celebrate, we made a movie about him.



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Who Made Those Fabulous Duds?

FRED DENNIS, senior curator of costumes at the Fashion Institute of Technology, originated the idea of looking at the fashion industry through a queer lens to establish the centrality of gay creativity to the fashion industry since the 19th century. The result is an exhibition that sets out to document the contribution of gay men and lesbians to fashion over this nearly two-century time frame, both in their capacity as fashion designers and as trend-setters who wore designs that were avant-garde for their time.

Garments designed by Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Halston, Alexander McQueen, and Jean Paul Gaultier are high art. These designs are living embodiments of their theories about bodies interacting with one another in society and culture. These designers are justly celebrated for their ability to capture and break gender conformity for men and women. How they were able to move forward is a measure of their creativity. To figure out what these artists were up to conceptually, one has to go behind the superficial glitz of the commercial fashion scene that is the stage on which they strutted their stuff.

The range of these designers runs the gamut from cartoonish satires to top hats and men in leather and lace skirts. These are postcards from the edge, embodying a variety of people from varying classes of society, but mostly those with the wealth or savoir-faire to adopt the high style of the day. As for the designers of these fashions, at a symposium held in conjunction with the show, Fran Lebowitz, dressed in her signature designer jacket tailored by Anderson and Sheppard, was asked by co-curator Valerie Steele why so many GLBT people went into the fashion industry. "Because they had nowhere else to go," she replied. "Straights could go anywhere but gays were strictly limited."

Regarding fashion through the template of the contemporaneous fashion experience enables us to comprehend just how complex an art form it is. The stylists of these sensations,

Cassandra Langer, a freelance writer based in New York City, is a frequent contributor to these pages.

CASSANDRA LANGER

A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk

Exhibition: The Museum at FIT
(Fashion Institute of Technology)

Curated by Fred Dennis
and Valerie Steele

A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk

Edited by Valerie Steele
Yale. 248 pages, \$50.



Marlene Dietrich in men's formal attire in the 1930s

248 pages, amply illustrated and featuring seven essays, the book covers a history of *couture* ranging from Beau Brummell to dandyism, on up to contemporary lesbian chic and activist T-shirts. Of singular note are Elizabeth Wilson and Vicki Karaminas's contributions for their off-the-cuff concepts of

of these movements, are boldly creating experiments designed for living so that all social interactions become theatrical and performative. Few people understood this as well as those men whom Pierre Balmain described as having girlish interests in dresses, who went on to create the sophisticated, fey, and funny fashions that can be found throughout this exhibit, such as Pierre Balmain's iconic riding costume for Jean Cocteau's 1947 play, *L'Aigle à Deux Têtes*.

The accompanying book for the exhibition is beautifully produced by Yale University Press, but it doesn't generate the excitement of the exhibition itself. In

what a lesbian looks like and how lesbian style has evolved since the 1980s. These had me rushing to the mirror to check myself out to see if I still qualified as a lesbian! Reading their post-modern, ahistorical analysis left me largely clueless. I was grateful for Joyce Culver's wonderfully reaffirming and sexy photograph of a hot young lesbian in a gay pride parade wearing slicked down sideburns, a leather cap, and black bra.

The major problem with these essays is that few if any references are made to fashion foremothers such as La Garçonne or Romaine Brooks' Sapphic portrayals of women. Instead, these writers reinvent the wheel, beginning with lipstick lesbians, cross-dressers, and drag kings, as if we had no historic ground to stand upon. Providing a foundation as Valerie Steele did in her opening

essay would have helped readers comprehend the bedrock for these newly fashioned lesbianisms. The book closes with a well-written and amusing autobiographical account of queer activist fashion by Jonathan D. Katz. If the show had a somewhat unfinished quality, this is perhaps because fashion itself is always unfinished, both a product and a shaper of cultural change.



ironies abound: Warhol was shot by a fanatical fan, as was Lennon, fatally. Two other of John's famous friends, Gianni Versace and Princess Diana, met with sudden, violent ends. Celebrity, for John, is a potential death sentence.

This familiar motif in Elton John's canon is clinched by "Oscar Wilde Gets Out," the album's second track. Over the years John has created a veritable pantheon of characters: Daniel, Benjie, Levon, Lady Samantha, Captain Fantastic. Of course, these

personae are really projections of the musician himself. Wilde is another mirror, another bisexual Brit who didn't just get out but came out. Lest we forget, Wilde also wrote children's stories, just as John did for Disney after rehab. In his homage to another fallen star, John traces the life of Wilde as an ex-con, a "golden boy in velveteen" landing in New York and "knowing how love makes fools of us all." The song is entirely retrospective: "The past is so seductive," Sir Elton sings, "long before the lords and law/ Branded Oscar Wilde a sinner." The album is full of such backward glances and it brims with self-assurance and sagacity. 🌈

B R I E F S

Celibacies:

American Modernism and Sexual Life

by Benjamin Kahan

Duke University Press. 232 pages, \$23.95

Most of us have negative associations with the word celibacy. Catholics think of priests, whose vows of celibacy have been tarnished by the pedophilia scandal. Growing up, we all encountered "old maids" or "bachelor uncles," who were presumed celibate and pitied by adults. For gays and lesbians, celibacy implies the closet, historically the place where those unable to accept their sexual nature lived lives of lonely isolation. This scholarly but accessible study turns our notions of celibacy on their heads. Kahan demonstrates that, starting in the U.S. in the 1840's, celibacy became a source of power, especially for women, to reform public life. By the early 20th century, celibacy provided a way for people to subvert repressive social, economic, racial, and political systems. Before women's and gay liberation made celibacy unfashionable, it had acquired, in the hands of a figure like Andy Warhol, the status of a sexual identity. Warhol's famous Factory was an instance of "secular group celibacy." What celibacy decidedly is not, Kahan insists, is synonymous with repression or closeted homosexuality. Kahan approaches his subject by analyzing the work of writers—Henry James, Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden—and a curious figure from the Harlem Renaissance, Father Divine, whose followers, black and white, lived in cooperative households where celibacy was practiced. The book's power derives from Kahan's skill in making us reconceive sexual categories, particularly celibacy, which he argues convincingly is a positive way of choosing how to be in the world.

DANIEL A. BURR

Growing Up Golem

by Donna Minkowitz

Magnus Books. 216 pages, \$19.99

Donna Minkowitz, lesbian activist and investigative journalist, started writing for the *Village Voice* back in the 1980's, right after graduating from Yale. For thirteen years or so, she wrote about "sexual abuse, rape, baby-and wife-beating ... but mostly about being queer." While she was growing up, her family

lived on the fringes of poverty, moving every year. Her brilliant mother had a doctorate in philosophy but never rose above adjunct level; her father bounced from one low-paying, menial job to another. Of their three children, it was Donna who, as a child, was beaten by her father. As an adult, she wondered if he got sexual satisfaction from hitting her. But all three girls—especially Donna—were on the receiving end of their mother's seductive ways of talking and acting. Minkowitz goes into detail about the (verbal) sexual boundaries that her mother exceeded. It is no wonder that she wrote "I wasn't a real person" but instead a *golem*—"an artificial creature created by magic, often to serve its creator" (as defined by the Jewish Virtual Library). Descended from Eastern European Jewish mystics and feeling close to her roots, Minkowitz understandably chose this being to identify with. Stricken in her mid-thirties with a disabling case of repetitive stress injury, she was reduced to dictating into primitive voice recognition software, then making multiple corrections. Everything that involved her arms and hands, from taking a book off the shelf to having sex, caused agonies of pain. Surmounting this impediment, Minkowitz is an engaging and amusing storyteller. She's at her comic best when describing her girlfriends and the "lesbian therapy Mafia" in which she found herself entangled. While the *golem* trope occasionally wears a little thin, this is a thoughtful memoir by one of our community's stalwarts.

MARTHA E. STONE

With: New Gay Fiction

Edited by Jameson Currier

Chelsea Stations Editions. 278 pages, \$20.

The characters in this anthology of short stories by gay authors run the gamut from husbands and fathers to tricks, hustlers, and boyfriends. As with most anthologies, this one is a mixed bag. There are stories set in New Orleans, San Francisco, and New York, and there's even a piece of historical fiction set during the Civil War. David Bergman's "A Sentimental Education" is a nicely terse, contemporary riff on Flaubert's novel of the same name. Similarly, "The Beautiful Boy," by Shaun Levin, is a kind of gloss on Andrew Holleran's *Dancer From the Dance*, nicely

controlled and lyrical throughout. David Pratt's "What is Real" cleverly uses a series of antithetical statements to make a heartfelt point about the illusions that come into play when the narrator is picked up by another man along a roadside one day: "He did not say, 'How far did you walk?' I did not say, 'Five miles, at least.' ... I did not feel bathed in grace for the first time in my twenty years, nor did I feel at last welcomed into a warm, bright room outside of which I'd long waited." Most of the stories in *With* are written well; some are overly earnest; and one, "Follow Me Through," seems morally indefensible (a man kidnaps a child to compensate for the loss of his lover to AIDS).

DALE BOYER

Fault Tree

by Kathryn L. Pringle

Omnidawn. 80 pages, \$15.95

Selected by renowned poet C.D. Wright for Omnidawn's First/Second Book Prize, Kathryn L. Pringle's second poetry collection, *Fault Tree*, begins with epigraphs about Einstein's theories and Boolean logic. However, it quickly becomes clear that no physical or emotional reality is certain or stable in the world of these poems. How does one live in an exploded moment? *Fault Tree* answers this question in fragments that somehow cohere. The cohesion is partly effected by the ghost of a narrative: A soldier at war is harmed and does harm. A distressed soul takes medications. Some comfort is found in bed. Some panic begins in a Chinese restaurant. But if narration depends on time, this story is out of time; moreover, the narrator is dead. The solitary voice that remains conveys an authority, poise, and wit that make sense out of insanity—a confounding soldier-maniac's voice that is ironically strong, centered, and charming. The tone grounds a work of mind-blown world devastation. Everything is obliterated and isolated: "all is war / we haven't not had one." I recommend reading this memorable and strangely moving book-length poem from beginning to end. Dipping into it could be disorienting, especially if you're not accustomed to conceptual poetry, a genre in which Pringle is clearly a rising star.

MARY MERIAM

Elton Discovers Mortality

THOMAS WOLFE was right: you can't go home again. That's the sad-but-true wisdom at the heart of "Home Again," the first single from Elton's John's latest album, *The Diving Board*. Sir Elton has cultivated one of the most cosmopolitan voices in popular music, and, true to form, "Home Again" spans the globe, from a "spooky little town" to the coast of Spain, where the singer never tires of "hearing songs about going home again." Perhaps the lyric is a self-referential nod to 1973's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" and its fond farewell to Dorothy's Kansas.

Elton John's voice is noticeably deeper than it was back then, and *The Diving Board*, which is the team effort of John's lifelong

COLIN CARMAN

The Diving Board

by Elton John
Capitol/Mercury Records

parently Saturday night's all right for fighting, but now it's Monday night and the kids have homework. On the heels of his bluesy collaboration with Leon Russell on 2010's *The Union*, *The Diving Board* is a milestone in a major musical career. A Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, John has recorded nearly thirty consecutive Top 40 hits and sold more

than 250 million records worldwide.

Born Reginald Dwight, John has said that when he changed his name from "Reg" to Elton John, he "became" Elton John. (It's a riff on the old Cary Grant line that *everyone* wants to be Cary Grant, including Cary Grant.) The Grammy-Tony-Oscar winner is now 66 years old and the father of two with partner David Furnish. *The Diving Board* is John's thirtieth solo album and, like Dylan's *Time Out of Mind* (also his thirtieth), it ponders desire and mortality from the vantage point of old age. It's Dylanesque, after all, to number your dreams, as John does on "Dream #1" through "Dream #3," which are his best instrumentals since "Song for Guy" (from 1978's *A Single Man*). But *The Diving Board* isn't all sparse and somber balladry. "Can't Stay Alone Tonight" and "Take This Dirty Water" ride a gospel wave. "My Quicksand," which John says is one of the best in his catalogue, is too self-dramatizing to be taken seriously, but the abrupt shift in tempo, including a bar from Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King," injects humor and the unpredictable into a song more soppy than sandy.

If there is one theme that resurfaces again and again in Elton John's songwriting, it has to be the impermanence of fame, which in turn is a metaphor for mortality itself. What interests him about fame is how it vanishes, either abruptly (like a "Candle in the Wind") or by degrees ("burning out his fuse up here alone," as the legendary lyric from "Rocket Man" goes). Four decades later, the image of "the diving board" again captures the idea of being up in the air, like Dorothy in the hurricane, about to dive into another state of being altogether. Co-writer Taupin says the title song is meant to evoke "people like Judy Garland, the classic divas who dabbled with their own demons—a metaphor of fame."

Elton John talked about his superstardom, and candidly so, in an interview last year with *Rolling Stone's* Cameron Crowe (the director of *Almost Famous*). He described the inspiration behind his first gay love song (1981's "Elton's Song"), his battles with bulimia, alcohol, and cocaine, and his unyielding love of performing and of his husband David. But the most revealing memory involved another man named John—John Lennon—as the two were holed up in the Sherry-Netherland hotel in the 70s, "stoned out of our minds on coke." When Andy Warhol came by, hoping to join the party, John and Lennon hid from him, afraid that the father of pop art would photograph them at two in the morning. Again it's the paradox of celebrity, which may look to outsiders like a paradise, but can be a prison to insiders. The dark

Continued on page 49



collaborator Bernie Taupin and über-producer T-Bone Burnett, is in every way the work of an older, wiser artist. "I hung out with the old folks in the hope that I'd get wise," he sings on "Oceans Away," while on the rousing "Mexican Vacation (Kids in the Candlelight)," he's a family man carrying his child to bed. Ap-

Colin Carman, PhD, teaches literature at Colorado Mesa University.

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