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### About BTWOF

Books to Watch Out For publishes monthly e-letters celebrating books on various topics. Each issue includes new book announcements, brief reviews, commentary, news and, yes, good book gossip.

### The Lesbian Edition

covers both lesbian books and the whole range of books lesbians like to read. It covers news of both the women in print movement and mainstream publishing. Written and compiled by Carol Seajay.

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### The Gay Men's Edition

## The Gay Men's Edition

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Volume 2 Number 2

By Richard Labonte

### Coming Out Queer (This Year) at Carroll & Graf

Bill Whitehead did it in the late '70s and early '80s at EP Dutton (before it was swallowed by the Pearson conglomerate) - he championed gay writers, from reprints of fey British author Denton Welch's delicate novels and books edited by John Preston, the daddy of the queer nonfiction anthology, to the genteel fiction of Doris Grumbach and the sizzling S/M of AN Roquelaure, the pseudonym Anne Rice first used for her forays into intense pansexual S/M books; the Publishing Triangle's Lifetime Achievement Award was named in his honor.

Michael Denny did it a few years later at St. Martin's, inaugurating the Stonewall Inn imprint of gay books, which gave voice to dozens of new writers (a welcome mat laid out as well by Denny's successor, Keith Kahla), including Allen Barnett (*The Body and Its Dangers*), Peter McGehee (*Boys Like Us*), John Fox (*The Boys on the Rock*), Joey Manley (*The Death of Donna-May Dean*), and Christopher Davis (*Joseph and the Old Man*). The original stonewallinn.com web site is gone (the domain name is for sale!), since the imprint was shut down a few years ago. But its history - and capsule commentaries on its fiction and nonfiction titles - is available here: <http://www.echonyc.com/~stone/Contents/KKLetter.html>

Richard Kasak did it at Masquerade Books - counseled in the early days by John Preston - with his Bad Boy, Hard Candy, and Richard Kasak Books imprints, multiplying by many the number of erotic-reading choices available in the 1990s to gay (and lesbian) readers, as well as publishing books of a more literary sort by Patrick Moore, Stan Leventhal, Robert Patrick, Kevin Killian, Michael Lassell, and dozens more - even poetry anthologies: *The Bad Boy Book of Erotic Poetry*, edited by David Laurents. In an interview in Salon, undated but probably from 1997, he discussed being "straight but queer":

<http://www.salon.com/weekly/kasak960729.html>

More recently, Jay Quinn at Haworth Press has built a large and eclectic fiction/nonfiction imprint, Southern Tier (see [BTWOF/Gay Men's Edition #12](#)); and John Scognamiglio has developed a stable of mystery, romance, comic, and coming-out/coming-of-age writers - often combining the genres -

announces and reviews new books by and about gay men as well as other books of interest and gay publishing news. Written and compiled by Richard Labonte.

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at Kensington Books.

The right editor with the right interest in the right place at the right time - and queer books can flourish.

That's what's happening now at Carroll & Graf, where Don Weise, who cut his editing teeth at Cleis Press after working for book distributor Publishers Group West, has launched a strong gay line with a bow to elders (James Purdy, John Rechy) and an emphasis on new voices - the contributors to *Fresh Men*, first books by Vestal McIntyre, Keith McDermott, and Joe Babcock. Weise was responsible for five books in Winter 2004, and he estimates about 20 gay and lesbian titles for 2005; the Fall 2005 list is still coming together.

It's not as if C&G wasn't publishing gay-interest books before last year, of course. Consider the fiction of EF Benson and John Rechy's novels *Marilyn's Daughter* and *Bodies and Souls*; Peter Burton's anthology *The Mammoth Book of Gay Short Stories* and Lawrence Schimel's anthology *The Mammoth Book of Gay Erotica*; a series of reprints of Sandra Scoppetone's hardboiled mysteries, including *A Creative Kind of Killer* and *Razzamatazz* (not her lesbian-sleuth Lauren Lurano, alas) and Richard Ormrod's *Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radclyffe Hall...* a book or three a year for two decades.

But more is better. Here's what Weise has to say about launching a line, the state of queer publishing, and being the Big Gay Editor at Carroll & Graf:

**BTWOF: After years of queer-title doldrums, Carroll & Graf emerged in 2004 as an invigorating source for gay titles, just months after you started working there. How did you go from 0 to 60 so quickly?**

DW: When I arrived in New York a year and a half ago, knowing exactly two people in town, I'd been working with lesbian and gay books for the past seven years. I was therefore looking for a change of pace, hoping to do some non-gay projects, more African American titles in particular. The last project I'd acquired in San Francisco had been a book of Edmund White's essays, *Arts and Letters*, which Ed was kind enough to agree to do. I had never met him, only communicated by e-mail. However, he struck me as a nice guy and I knew he lived in Chelsea, which happened to be where my new office was located. I invited Ed to lunch and everything spun off for me in a new direction from that meeting forward.



It wasn't so much that the friendship that followed inspired or enabled me to do a new line of gay books; rather, I met so many new writers through Ed and his partner, the writer Michael Carroll, that a line of gay books just seemed like the natural thing to do. Suddenly, I was meeting one writer after the next (Keith McDermott, Vestal McIntyre, Robert Hughes, Wayne Hoffman), each of them never before having done a book but all of them having a marvelous manuscript waiting to be published. I don't hesitate for a minute to say with deep affection that my list of gay titles would not have taken off with the same flash—would never have been as exciting to me personally—without Ed and Michael.

On the other hand, I have published many authors outside of their circle. I recently brought out Keith Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low*; John Rechy's essay collection, *Beneath the Skin*; E. Lynn Harris's *Freedom in This Village*; and James Purdy's *Moe's Villa and Other Stories*. Plus, I have in the wings new books by Dennis Cooper, Michelangelo Signorile, Daniel Harris of *Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* fame, and Edward Albee's first-ever essay collection. Although I picked up all of these terrific projects on my own, I think the genesis of everything—and by "everything" I mean literally my whole new life in New York—really began the day I met Ed for lunch. The path has been clear to me ever since.

**Before C&G, you were with Cleis Press, where you shepherded two types of titles new to that publisher - venerable-gay titles (Gore Vidal, the Beats, Edmund White) and black-interest titles (*Black Like Us*, *Time on Two Crosses*, the poetry and prose of Melvin Dixon and Essex Hemphill); at C&G, you've continued to champion those two**

**underappreciated branches of queer lit. What inspired such passion in a young white fellow?**

Part of the success in shepherding the two types of books that I care most about has been choosing to publish them in companies that are open-minded and unafraid of taking their lists in new directions. Cleis has long been at the vanguard of smart, provocative queer publishing. Frederique and Felice were my comrades every step of the way. And while Carroll & Graf is much newer to lesbian and gay titles, it's actually an ideal home for queer lit. My boss, Will Balliett, had just taken over the reins as publisher when I joined the company, and he expressed enthusiasm for picking up projects that were dramatically different from the old Carroll & Graf list. Nothing I've proposed to him has ever been off-limits or out of bounds. He's supported my decisions without fail, which is not something I ever expected outside of small press publishing.

In terms of what inspired me to do black gay titles in the first place, I came out in college within the context of an affirmative action program of sorts, wherein low-income whites were enrolled in university programs that targeted students of color. Consequently, my closest friends came from this pool of students, all of whom were wrestling with identity issues of one kind or another.

That said, issues of sexuality and race, for me, were joined from the start. My friends and I were influenced by the likes of bell hooks, June Jordan, and Marlon Riggs, and critical race theory made a lasting impression on each of us, especially when charged by a feminist thrust. With this intellectual foundation, it's not surprising that many years later projects such as *Black Like Us* and *Time on Two Crosses* would be projects I'd champion at Cleis, or that Keith Boykin and E. Lynn Harris would be key authors for me at Carroll & Graf.

People sometimes think of the works of Gore Vidal, Edmund, and the Beats as somehow existing apart from black gay and lesbian literature. As if black gay men read only Baldwin or Lorde, while white guys focus on the Violet Quill canon. I've experienced this differently. Like most people, I've learned a great deal from all of the above, not from a single source and not always from men and women of my own era. Vidal in particular has been a major role model to me; more than anyone, he was the first person to show me ways of being a gay man on one's own terms. When I worked with him on his essay collection, *Gore Vidal: Sexually Speaking*, I didn't have the guts to tell him this, though I would have loved to. But the timing never felt right, and I was too in awe of his presence, not to mention the simple fact of sitting in his home.

John Rechy is special to me in the same manner—I love his spot-on renderings of “the sex hunt,” especially moments like the balcony scene in *Numbers*—and I was lucky enough to work with him this past fall. The same is true of James Purdy, the great overlooked modern master of gay lit. Recently he showed me pages of something new, a story about a gay priest having an affair with his brother. I fell in love with it on the spot! But I admire pioneering authors and make it a point to work with them not merely because they broke new ground generations ago but because their work remains meaningful today.

**At the same time, with the *Fresh Men* anthologies, Vestal McIntyre's short stories, and Keith McDermott's novel, C&G has become a go-to publisher for new writers. What differentiates your fiction titles from the Alyson/Southern Tier/Kensington formulae?**

Alyson and Kensington have long been welcoming homes to gay writers—and thank god for that. They continue to break out countless new authors when few other publishers are taking on new gay fiction. Both publishers deserve praise in that respect. If there is a formula to the kinds of books Alyson and Kensington choose to do, I'd say my list differs in the sense that I have no formula or at least none that drives my list, which I would find rather boring. I look for surprises, works that say something new and original in a surprising manner. I have the added benefit of there being no one above insisting that I crank out a new novel every week or telling me that I have to repeat past successes by publishing the same book over and over. That kind of publishing would kill my spirit.

Instead, I've acquired only those works that really grab me. I've just released a brilliant new AIDS novel (and when was the last time you heard an editor say that?), *Acqua Calda*, that turns the tired, old AIDS novel on its head; I've published an extraordinary debut story collection, *You Are Not the One*, which the *New York Times* compares to Augusten Burroughs; I'm about to bring out *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers*, a touching and often funny first novel that JT LeRoy raves about on the book's cover; there's an expanded new edition of Charles Busch's fabulous novel, *Whores of Lost Atlantis*; and, of course, I edited *Fresh Men*, an anthology of stories by new writers, which is a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. New writers are important to me. I believe it's the responsibility of gay and lesbian editors in particular to cultivate new talent. It's therefore no coincidence that the majority of my gay fiction has thus far been debut novels and story collections.

**Up to now your catalogue has leaned heavily towards gay titles. Are you looking for new lesbian voices? Why do you think women writers continue to be underrepresented in queer publishing, outside of the "women's" presses? (A breakdown of the Lambda Literary Awards this year shows 45 gay titles and 30 lesbian titles nominated; and Alyson, Harrington Park, and Kensington, while all publishing lesbian-interest titles, are majority male.)**

Over the past few months I helped assemble the Publishing Triangle's first ever Notable Lesbian Book List. Modeled on the New York Times Notable Book List, ours was organized—with the participation of more than a dozen lesbian booksellers, reviewers, librarians, and writers—to showcase the most outstanding lesbian books published in 2004. The list was launched because most of us at the Publishing Triangle have so frequently heard that “no one” is publishing lesbian fiction, that lesbian literature has all but dried up at the big publishing houses, and that those few lesbian books that actually were done by large and small publishers alike received little to no press.

Personally, I felt as if I've seen quite a few new lesbian releases over the past year, many of them displayed prominently on the new books table at Oscar Wilde Bookstore or in the InSightOut book catalog. Not as many books as those by gay men but a fair amount nonetheless. What was revealing to me from firsthand involvement in assembling this list, however, was that, yes, there are some terrific new works by and about lesbians being brought out, even from major publishers; at the same time, the number of new lesbian titles was nowhere near as many as I thought there would be. It seemed that most of the women who were invited to name the most notable new books often named the same handful at the core of their lists then branched out to include a few others that were either unknown to me—and to many lesbians, including a few reviewers of lesbian books that I spoke with—or fell into genres like mystery or romance.

In other words, if you take away headlining books like *A Seahorse Year*, *Life Mask*, the biographies of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, and a few others, the literary landscape for new lesbian writing suddenly looks a lot more barren. While gay men's books aren't exactly flying off the shelves, there's no comparing the sheer volume of men's books versus women's. In fact, some people have asked me why the Publishing Triangle was focusing on lesbians alone. The answer, simply put, is that over the past six months, long before the Notable List was proposed, I had asked lesbians and gay men to tell me their top 10 favorite new gay titles and their top 10 favorite new lesbian books. Virtually everyone named 10 or more new gay men's books off the tops of our heads, while coming up on the spot with a list of even as few as six notable books by lesbian authors was a taller order. (The Notable Lesbian Books of 2004:

<http://www.publishingtriangle.org/lesbianbooks2004.asp>)

The surprising results of that list (at least to me) certainly helped reframe how I look at new lesbian writing and the role I play in fostering it. Having spent many years promoting lesbian lit at Cleis, working with writers such as Ann Bannon, Tristan Taormino, Joan Nestle, and many others, I feel a personal investment in its future. I'm not one of those gay men who on one hand talks passionately about the importance of lesbian work in the presence of lesbians, then later laughs off to the side about how bad it is. That's happened more frequently than I'd care to admit, and you wouldn't believe the number of dumb lesbian bed-death jokes I heard from guys during my time at Cleis. It's sometimes perfectly clear to me why lesbian separatism was once so popular. Gay men have so seldom understood that

they, too, have a hand in enriching lesbian literature.

That said, I have three new lesbian titles in the pipelines at Carroll & Graf: Kate Clinton's hilarious new book, *What the L?*, Marcia Gallo's first ever history of the Daughters of Bilitis, which is authorized by founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and includes interviews with more than thirty women members, some of whom have never before spoken openly about DOB; and Cheryl Clarke's *Days of Good Looks*, which brings together twenty-five years of her poetry and prose along with new work. I'm also talking with a half dozen women about other projects.

Sadly, I've received almost no lesbian themed submissions from agents. I'd absolutely love to see more lesbian history and biography in particular. For some reason, there's an acute shortage of books in this area, which makes me wonder whether Queer Studies is producing anything beyond academic books written for other academics. I'm also looking for young lesbian writers, fiction in particular and with an edge whenever possible.

**What's your vision of fine gay literature? Aside from any authors you've had a hand in publishing, what contemporary writers do you admire?**

I'm excited by unusual books like Derek McCormack's *Haunted Hillbilly*, one of the most enjoyable reads I've had in months. He's the kind of writer whose short novel leaves you wondering why you've not heard more about him—or why lesser novelists get as much press as they do. I love Michelle Tea and wish there were 10 more lesbian novelists like her. The hole in young lesbian fiction is just that big, if not bigger. I admired John Weir's short story in the most recent issue of *Bloom* quite a bit, too. David McConnell's *Firebrat* continues to impress and fascinate me each time I read it again. And I would include Allen Barnett, David Feinberg, and David Wojnarowicz since these men and many others like them brought fresh voices to gay lit and, had they lived, would have gone on to shape our world in brilliant new ways. There are also dynamic up and comers like Patrick Ryan, Philip Huang, James Hannaham, and Kevin W. Reardon, who produce excellent stories and deserve collections of their own.

**Are you actively seeking submissions, or do you prefer to reach out to writers yourself?**

The majority of my acquisitions are books I've conceived of and developed with an author in mind, who I then approached with a proposal, or projects that came through word of mouth, often un-agented. There's a great deal of myself in the books I publish, and I believe every editor's list to a large degree reflects what he or she really cares about. And I'm not speaking of the old argument about commercial fiction versus literary fiction, say, or the importance of hard-hitting material versus the uselessness of fluff. Those debates are pretty meaningless, I think. Besides, there's some marvelous gay fluff out there and some incredibly dull hard-hitting books that I wish I'd never heard of.

No, what I'm talking about are the ways in which an editor and his or her author approaches a given topic; to me how we approach subject matter is as important as the subject matter itself. I care about gay sex from a sex radical perspective, for example, so I've spoken with a number of authors about writing books in this area. I also care about gay history from a politically radical perspective, so I've talked to people about that, too. From my experience, lesbian and gay editors don't do much of this. It's time-consuming work (especially if you take the task seriously and research your author's work thoroughly before approaching him or her, which I would argue is essential) and most editors don't have ample time or the resources to spare. This style of acquisition also requires imagination and curiosity, which is usually in short supply as well.

**In general, how is the health of queer publishing? Is there a readership for fine gay lit? How can you connect a good book to a good reader?**

I think most of us in gay and lesbian publishing tend to personalize the state of queer books: that is, when we're working full-steam and business is good, we talk about the future of queer lit as being bright; but when we're not and business is not—when we feel as if times are changing, our books are no longer selling, and feel as if the world is leaving us behind—we tell *Publishers Weekly* that gay and lesbian literature has a bleak future. Well, it doesn't.

Thankfully, we seem to hear less and less from burned out book people who announce stupidly that gays have stopped reading; I still have not figured out why gay book people put forth this argument, especially during times like these when booksellers are looking for reasons to make returns. I can't think of many things worse for the health of gay books than helping to convince bookstores that gay men and lesbians don't buy books. Of course, they do, it's just that lesbian and gay people have so many more options, are more selective in their buying habits than they once were, and shop differently today. The Internet alone has opened an enormous bookselling market.

That said, many of us in gay publishing are thriving, bringing out books that are important to us, that challenge what readers expect from lesbian or gay books, and we're doing quite nicely in spite of the shifts in the marketplace. As far as I'm concerned, it's never been easier to publish a lesbian or gay book. Whether this is true at the major publishers, I don't know. Nor do I care. I've never looked to the major houses for guidance. But at the same time those places are doing some terrific gay and lesbian titles (Philip Galanes's *Father's Day*, Alison Smith's *Name All the Animals*, Evelyn C. White's *Alice Walker: A Life*, and on and on) and should be commended for their intelligent choices. I'm tremendously hopeful about the future of our literature.

**And what do you read, if anything, that qualifies as a guilty pleasure (mine are Bella Books lesbian romances that take an hour to read, the new wave of graphic novels and cartoon books with plots, anything by Val McDermid or Ian Rankin, and convoluted courtroom dramas)?**

It's not exactly reading as such, but I have very low-brow taste when it comes to dumb cat books, like *Is Your Cat Gay?*, *Cat Letters to Santa*, and the bestselling *Bad Cat*, which I gave as a Christmas present to James Purdy, another cat lover. I can't help myself.

#### **What's ahead for 2006?**

\**Late and Soon*, my lead fiction title, is an exquisite debut novel that bestselling author Adrianna Trigiani praises as "beautiful and heartfelt." Written by *Wall Street Journal* arts reporter Robert J. Hughes, the book has been compared already to *The Hours*, in terms of its handling of gay themes. Anyone the least bit curious about the New York art world will love it, too.

\*Michelangelo Signorile's first new book since his bestselling *Outing Yourself*, titled *Hitting Hard*, which collects his best journalism over the past 10 years.

\**The Man Who Invented Rock Hudson: The Pretty Boys and Dirty Deals of Henry Willson* by Robert Hoefler, the theater reporter for *Variety*. You must see this one. It's the first biography of the closeted, archconservative who discovered Rock Hudson, Tab Hunter, Troy Donahue, and on and on. More than that, it's a history of how a closeted gay star maker created Hollywood beefcake. And in fact, actually set the model for Bruce Weber and all the rest up to today. It came across my desk a few months back and I read the first 100 pages in a single sitting.

\**Suicide Tuesday: Gay Men and the Crystal Meth Scare* by Duncan Osborne, associate editor at *Gay City News*, contributor to *Out* and *The Advocate* and probably the leading journalist on this topic. This is an example of a book I conceived of and approached the author to write. While I would not deny that crystal is a big problem for many gay men, I think the issue has been talked about almost exclusively in hysterical terms. Much in the manner that the "down low" has been reported on, not to mention this allegedly "new" strain of HIV that's been talked about in the press all week. There's been a real absence of critical discussion, moving beyond the hype to separate myths from facts.

\*And I'm also publishing the paperback edition of *The Unexpurgated Beaton: The Cecil Beaton Diaries as He Wrote Them*, which Knopf published last year. It's very gay but not GAY...

One of Weise's authors (Vidal) profiles and reviews another (Purdy):  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/books/review/27VIDALL.html>

### The Books To Watch Out For (This Year) From C&G:

Now out:

#### **Beneath the Skin: The Collected Essays of John Rechy, \$14.95**

As an editor, Weise has become the go-to guy for venerable homosexualist authors (Vidal on sex, White's arts and letters, a forthcoming collection from Albee). This wide-ranging, free-thinking collection of 45 perceptive essays, pungent reviews, knowing profiles, loving film commentaries, snatches of poignant family sketches, and several opinionated open letters, is a delectable addition to Rechy's 13 previous books. A couple of the pieces – "On Writing: The Terrible Three Rules" and "Our Friend the Comma" (both from 2004) – have the aura of Rechy's acclaimed writing class about them: his singular passion for the craft of writing is genuinely apparent. A couple more – "Lay of the Land: Christopher Isherwood's *Lost Years*" (2000) and "Randy Dandy: Liberace, American Boy" (2001) – are decidedly un-doctrinaire assessments of two very different gay icons. Several are deliciously, angrily political – in "He Hugged Moms and Dads" (2004), he shames George W. Bush for his rich-kid warmongering; "'Conduct Unbecomg...': Lieutenant on the Peace Line" (1966) and "The Army Fights an Idea" (1970) slam the Vietnam-era military. Some are decidedly, even defiantly, contrarian: for example, Rechy defends a movie many angry activists picketed, in "A Case for *Cruising*" (1979). Other pieces discuss his bodybuilding, deride the Catholic Church, and, most lovingly, describe the Los Angeles of yore – "The City of Lost Angeles" (1959). Rechy's journalism has long been scattered over the years and among many magazines. *Beneath the Skin* collects much – but not nearly all – of it for the first time, with additional fresh commentary from the author; it's a book for fans of Rechy's lush, live writing.



Author info: <http://www.johnrechy.com/>

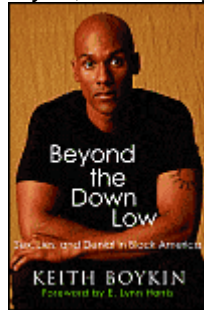
Rechy doesn't shirk from "reviewing" his reviewers; his "Letter to Gore Vidal" (1993) and "Letter to the *New York Review of Books*" (1996) are here, along with many more:

[http://www.johnrechy.com/so\\_protest.htm](http://www.johnrechy.com/so_protest.htm)

This fine shredding of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* isn't in the collection:

[http://www.johnrechy.com/so\\_gaymammies.htm](http://www.johnrechy.com/so_gaymammies.htm)

#### **Beyond the Down Low: Sex and Denial and Black America, by Keith Boykin, foreword by E. Lynn Harris, \$25**



JL King's 2004 book, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, was a trashy, badly written bit of inflammatory rhetoric – and, because of its sensationalism, a *New York Times* bestseller (an appearance on *Oprah* didn't hurt).

Boykin's exploration of the same topic is a vast improvement: it's written by a writer who knows good prose; it's written by a man not ashamed to be gay; it's written by a thinker who buttresses superficial anecdote with perceptive (and often deeply personal) analysis of black gay male sexuality; and it's written by a black gay man with the perspective to analyze how the black religious (and sometimes cultural) community demonizes bisexual or homosexual behavior. Instead of merely decrying the "down low" life – black men, often married or self-identified as straight, who seek out sex with other men without acknowledging the risks of HIV transmission – and putting all the blame on his brothers, Boykin details how a barrage of media racism and homophobia impacts their thinking, and their behavior - without making excuses for it. (*Beyond the Down Low*, after a second printing, now has 30,000 copies in print; it's Weise's best-selling queer-interest title to date, and recently made it to number 31 on the *NY Times* extended nonfiction bestseller list.)

Author info: <http://www.keithboykin.com/>

In April:

#### **The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers, by Joe Babcock, \$13.95**

Self-publishing wonder kid Babcock was profiled last year in **BTWOF** for this book about teen coming out, written when he was himself barely out of his teens. He paid for the printing with his credit card and paid that off working as a waiter, polished it through several drafts without any editorial advice, and won both a *Literary Digest* and a Lambda Literary self-publishing award. "From the constant Tori Amos references to the delicacies of rolling a joint, all aspects of the twink experience are covered," said Alexander Rowilson in

FAB Magazine. Carroll & Graf has faith in the book - they're springing for readings in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.  
 Author info: <http://www.closetcasebooks.com/>

Here's an excerpt:

"When you're building a pyramid you have to start at the base," Chloe said, fanning himself with a pair of red Calvin Klein briefs. "And now we shop," he declared, crossing the six-foot aisle and entering the women's section. I felt apprehensive about it, to say the least. But Chloe pointed out that if I wanted metallic-blue flared pants or red cords or anything silver and glittery that wasn't as baggy as a damn trash bag, I certainly wasn't going to find it in the men's section of the store.



The trick, Chloe explained urgently, to finding a good pair of women's pants when you're a man is to get them tight, low cut at the waist, and try on at least one hundred pairs. The problem with women's pants is that they give you a hoochie mama look if you're not careful. Generally, the hips in women's pants are wider than the waist, so if you're not careful, they make your ass look huge and your package appear small, which is the opposite effect to go for; unless, of course, you want to do drag. Before even trying them on, you should check for belt loops, back pockets, and deep front pockets. We went to three stores before finding a pair of black leather hip-huggers at Express that satisfied Chloe.

"I don't look like a girl?" I asked, standing under an arbor of light bulbs, staring at myself in my pants and platforms as Chloe admired the results of the makeover. I knew that the women in Express were all gawking at us and whispering, but by this time I had grown used to the attention and had even begun to relish it. Being with Chloe made me feel unstoppable.

"You look fabulous!" Chloe declared. "Goddamn, I'm jealous, girl! I can never pull off black leather as good as you can!" He was talking loud enough for our audience to hear. Meanwhile, I was basking in his compliments like a starlet during her encore.

"Okay, I'll take 'em."

"Divine! They'll be perfect with a big, fat leather belt. Preferably one with a big, huge silver belt buckle! I saw one the other day at Urban Outfitters that said 'Acid Bitch.'" He shouted extra loud when he said "Acid Bitch." "Let's go try that one on." So after purchasing the pants we went and bought the belt. But suddenly I found I'd run out of money and hadn't yet bought a shirt. Chloe said I couldn't possibly wait until next week to buy a shirt, so he offered to take me to his apartment to try on clothes he didn't wear anymore. I was so excited I thought I might die.

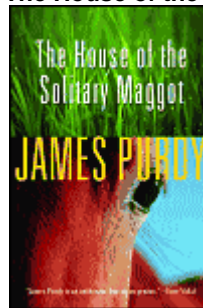
*In May:*

**Whores of Lost Atlantis**, by Charles Busch, \$14.95

New edition of the playwright's hilarious send-up of love affair with Off-Broadway's peculiar people, including a new intro and, best of all, a new ending.

Author info: <http://www.charlesbusch.com/>

**The House of the Solitary Maggot**, by James Purdy, \$15.95



Purdy's most recent short story collection, *Moe's Villa*, was a C&G title last year; this reprint of a 1986 novel, about three very different sons drawn back to the family manse, is among his most harrowing.

An audio interview:

<http://wiredforbooks.org/jamespurdy/>

*Eustace Chisolm and the Works*, another Carroll & Graf title, reviewed (with pics of its three very different covers):

<http://www.echomag.com/site/news/booked.html>

The James Purdy Society:

<http://www.wright.edu/~martin.kich/PurdySoc/Index.htm>

*In June:*

**What the L?**, by Kate Clinton, \$14.95

A long-overdue new collection of Clinton's published and unpublished writing; it's been a long wait since 1998's *Don't Get Me Started*. Like any good comedian, of course, Clinton *does* recycle her material - the "product descriptions" for both books refer to her depiction of gay marriage as Gay Vow Disease... presumably, given that we're really getting married these days, with a different punch line.

Author info: <http://www.kateclinton.com/>

Also coming in June (but not a Weise-edited book):

**The First Verse**, by Barry McCrea, \$14.95

Says the publisher: "When (gay) freshman Niall Lenihan moves to Trinity College, he dives into unfamiliar social scenes, quickly becoming fascinated by a reclusive pair of students—literary 'mystics' who let signs and symbols from books determine their actions. Reluctantly, they admit him to their private sessions, and what begins as an intriguing game for Niall becomes increasingly esoteric, dramatic, and addictive. As Niall discovers the true nature of the pursuits in which he has become entangled, *The First Verse* traces a young man's search for identity, companionship, and a cult's shadowy origins in the pages of literature and the people of a city. Fans of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* or Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* will be mesmerized by the strange, page-turning world of this astonishing first novel from a dazzling new literary voice." What Edmund White says: "For a hundred years, Ireland has provided the English-speaking world with its most eloquent writers... McCrea joins this illustrious company."

In August:

**Diary of a Drag Queen**, by Daniel Harris, \$14.95

*The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* was serious stuff indeed. Now Harris is doing it again, in this highly sexed and humorous memoir - exploring a (sub) culture. But this time it's in high heels and a bra. His lover left him, his best friend died, depression set in, cyberspace offered solace, and soon he was making much whoopee with straight men that wanted sex with men who dressed like women. Harris wanted sex, so he learned to dress the part. Author info: From a 1997 web page, Harris's first extant writing - a letter to his sister when he was six... there doesn't seem to be a current website: <http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/4130/>

Harris' past work:

From Da Capo in 2001: *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* - Harris' invigorating "encyclopaedia of low-brow culture," a collection of wisdom and whimsy that explores "how the aesthetics of consumerism are the lies we tell ourselves to preserve our individuality." And from Basic Books in 2002: *A Memoir of No One in Particular: In Which Our Author Indulges in Naïve Indiscretions, a Self-Aggrandizing Solipsism, and an Off-Putting Infatuation with His Own Bodily Functions* - Harris's parody of the memoir genre instructs, among other things, that because jockey shorts last longer than most love affairs, a fetish for underwear can be rewarding.

Later this year:

Controversy looms: in early March, Weise bought the rights to reprint the Dennis Cooper novel *The Sluts*, which was published in January in a high-priced hardcover limited edition (\$50; 550 copies) by Void Press. I opened my review for **Book Marks** by writing, "Sex and boys, sex and fear, sex and pain, sex and blood, sex and death - Cooper has long dabbled with unsettling themes. That fascination with dark desire is distilled, intelligently and deliciously, in *The Sluts*, a sickly hilarious fictional excursion into the depths of hustler desire" where whipping and fisting count for vanilla. Author info (with links to *The Sluts* news and interviews):

<http://www.denniscooper.net/>

And the deadline is May 1 for *Fresh Men 2*, the second anthology of new queer voices: [http://www.queerwriters.com/mt/archives/2005/01/fresh\\_men\\_2\\_new.html](http://www.queerwriters.com/mt/archives/2005/01/fresh_men_2_new.html)

A rave for the first *Fresh Men*:

[http://www.gaycitynews.com/gcn\\_408/reclaiminggayfiction.html](http://www.gaycitynews.com/gcn_408/reclaiminggayfiction.html)

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### More Queer Books From the Avalon Family

Carroll & Graf is but one imprint of the Avalon Publishing Group. And the other imprints publish queer books, too:

From Marlowe & Company:

**Families of Value: Intimate Profiles of Pioneering Lesbian and Gay Parents**, by Robert A. Bernstein, \$14.95

From the author of *Straight Parents, Gay Children*, this truly "invert" title addresses the politics and passion around same-sex parenting drawing on real-life experiences to demonstrate that queer values are a legitimate component of the fabric of America's families. (May)

An excerpt from *Straight Parents*:

<http://www.pflagdc.org/education/griffith.php>

From Shoemaker & Hoard Publishers:

**Wings of Friendship: Selected Letters, 1944-2003**, by Ned Rorem, \$30

Rorem continues to mine his life for our reading pleasure, as he has in five powerfully honest diaries over the last several decades, in this collection of intimate, gossipy, and reflective letters to family and an astonishing circle of friends that includes Virgil Thomson, Reynolds Price, Angela Lansbury, Judy Collins, and Gore Vidal. (July)

Author info, with comprehensive bibliographies of his books and music (but, sadly, no MP3 samples): <http://www.nedrorem.com/>

**Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev**, by Robert Dessaix, \$24

In *Night Letters*, Australian author Dessaix delivered some of the most beautifully wrenching writing about AIDS, an "epistolary reflection on the meaning of life, love, and time" from a literary author making what he presumes will be one last joyous journey through Europe before dying. This is quite a different book - weaving together literary biography, personal memoir, and travel writing, it uses the life of Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev as a springboard for exploring love and obsession... but it's also an excuse to champion *Night Letters*. (August)

An interview about *Night Letters*:

<http://www.thei.aust.com/sydney/interviews/dessaixint.html>

"Johnny Depp stirs my passions because of the whole package, really," says the author: <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/liaisons/dessaix.htm>

From Thunder's Mouth Press:

**Queer Stories for Boys: True Stories from the Gay Men's Storytelling Workshop**, edited by Douglas McKeown, \$15.95

For anyone who doubts we are a tribe of many voices, there is this generous, amiable anthology of first-person storytelling. More anecdotal than literary, the 47 tales, most under five pages long, grew out of a long-running storytelling workshop at the Gay & Lesbian Center in NYC; what they occasionally lack in polish they more than make up for with passion, immediacy, and personality. AIDS seeps into many of the tales ("Saying Goodbye to Howard," by Dennis Green). Several are sexual, though not in a steamy *First Hand* confessional style; there are more first crushes and emotional yearning ("Maybe Then," by Tom Ledcke) than actual cum-spilled consummation. Many are romantic, some with happy endings, some not ("My Dancer and My Doctor," by James Whelan). Family figures prominently in many ("The Hug," by Robin Goldfin; "My Brother," by Ronald Gold). The best stories are simply about life: not gay life as much as about life itself. In "Kiss Today Goodbye," Andy Baker writes about entangled friendships; in "Teddy," Neil James writes about charity given and taken; in "Liza With a Kiss," collection editor McKeown writes about the night he gave his younger brother the gift - of a kiss from Liza Minnelli. Every queer boy has a story to tell, about growing up different, alone, special, and *Queer Stories for Boys* tells those boys' stories well. (March)



**Shock Value & Trash Trio**, by John Waters, \$14.95 each

The rest of America found out who John Waters was when *Hairspray* hit the Broadway stage, and some of America knows Waters through his dozen movies from *Pink Flamingos* to, more recently, *Pecker* and *A Dirty Shame*. But real fans know him through *Shock Value*, his long out-of-print manifesto/memoir of a trashy life lived with campy gusto. Also back in print: *Trash Trio*, collecting the screenplays for three of Waters' pre-respectability films - *Pink Flamingos*, *Desperate Living*, and *Flamingos Forever* (the un-produced sequel, never made because by the time it was written, too many of the original cast had died. Both were Thunder's Mouth titles about a decade ago. (April)

Who knew? Waters (and Judith Butler!) is a Professor of Film and Subculture at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland:

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/waters.html>

Waters the shutterbug:

[http://www.newmuseum.org/more\\_exh\\_j\\_waters.php](http://www.newmuseum.org/more_exh_j_waters.php)

Waters ruffled NPR feathers with his pre-Christmas interview:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4465822>

Download and listen to the interview – and the music:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4234836>

### **Bad Republicans: The Unholy Alliance Between the Republican Party and the Extreme Right**, by Chris Bull, \$14.95

Broadening his political writing beyond a gay perspective (*Perfect Enemies: The Battle Between the Religious Right and the Gay Movement*), the Planet Out commentator and former political correspondent for *The Advocate* exposes how the Rethuglicans have sold their soul to white supremacists, neo-segregationists, religious bigots, and antigay crusaders. Bull is also coauthor, with out former baseball pro Billy Bean, of *Going the Other Way*, a 2003 title from Marlowe & Company.

Bull's Blog: <http://www.planetout.com/news/feature.html?sernum=995>

*From Seal Press:*

The venerable feminist press was folded into the Avalon Publishing Group a few years ago; two June titles of interest - even to gay men - are a second edition of Susan Fox Rogers' collection *Solo: On Her Own Adventures* (\$15.95), travel narratives by women; and Inga Muscio's *Autobiography of a Blue-Eyed Devil: My Life and Times in a Racist, Imperialist Society* (\$15.95), by the author of *Cunt*.

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### **None Like the Other at Wilde About Sappho**

Every year for the past 14 - and for the last few years, through the freezing cold of February - lesbian and gay readers have trekked to the auditorium of the National Library of Canada to fete lesbian and gay writers (often, but not always, Canadian) at Wilde About Sappho (WAS). In recent years the event has broadened beyond Ottawa (Canada's capital, in the province of Ontario) to schedule readings in Montreal and Toronto and, this year, Guelph, Ontario, and Vancouver, British Columbia. For information on who reads where in 2005, along with pics of the authors (and one of me, looking startled while chatting with the fellow who manages Ottawa's large queer lending library):

<http://www.lambdafoundation.com/wascurrent.htm>

The gay readers this year were Warren Dunford, RM Vaughan, and Matthew Fox - and three more variant queer voices there could not be; each in his own way is worth reading, for campy comedy entertainment, mischievous dazzling insight, and sensitive intelligent craft, respectively.

### **The Scene Stealer**, by Warren Dunford, Cormorant Books, \$19.95

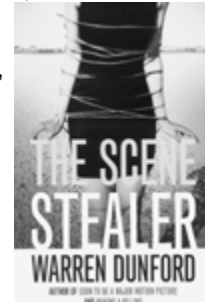
This is the third in Dunford's series of "comic thrillers."

The first, *Soon To Be a Major Motion Picture*, was published in Canada in 1998; book two, *Making a Killing*, came out in 2000 (the Alyson editions of both are now out of print). Comic thrillers? That's what Dunford calls them; they're also deft parodies of both genres, and steeped affectionately in the lore of Hollywood. *The Scene Stealer*, like the first two books, features hapless, sort-of-sexy, amusingly endearing screenwriter Mitch Draper, here hired by a fading soap star, B-movie actress, and failed cosmetic entrepreneur to write the script for a TV docudrama about her experience years

earlier - when she was kidnapped (or was she?) by stalker fans. Just before filming starts, she's kidnapped again (or is she?) by perps reciting lines from the script for the docudrama. Many red herrings later... well, the ending is, surprisingly, not evident before the end. Dunford's books are light on actual thrills, and his plot's twists and turns aren't always totally logical, but when it comes to the "comic," he's an engaging hoot.

An interview:

<http://www.xtra.ca/site/toronto2/news/body1.shtm>



**Ruined Stars: Poems**, by RM Vaughan, ECW Press, \$16.95

Poems, prose, whatever: Vaughan's writing crosses boundaries with glee. For example, here's a very prosy excerpt from the performance poem "7 Books Every Male Homosexual Must Read":

"The Terrible Girls, *Rebecca Brown*. *Fags like to make fun of lesbian melodrama - because, of course, fag dramas are all high operas - but isn't it better to learn than to jeer? A tough dyke leant me this book and offered to sever my arms from my shoulders if I lost it. An apt threat 'cause these stories frequently describe acts of dismemberment, disfiguration, dyspepsia, and disembowelment. I now understand why women in love often torture each other - because it's fun and they don't have cable. Sisters and brothers, unite!"*

You'll have to buy the book - and you really, really should - to read why *The Fall of the House of Usher* (EA Poe), *The Artificial Kingdom* (Celeste Olalquiaga), *The Manual of Ornament* (Richard Glazier), *One Lifetime Is Not Enough* (Zsa Zsa Gabor), and *The Complete Saki* (HH Munro) are must-reads. So is Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*: "Everybody is greedy and everybody is mean and everybody lies about everything all of the time. Sound familiar?" In the "London After Midnight" series, Vaughan waxes erotic and touristic; in the "An Herbal for Men Who Live Alone" series, he waxes erotic and tender; other poems capture a trip to Palm Springs, chronicle conversation with a friend, and conjure the life of Aleister Crowley; and everywhere Vaughan is mischievous, lyrical, extravagant, precise, crass, and dazzling.

Vaughan's fear and loathing (a headline too obviously inspired by the death of Hunter S. Thompson) on his various book tours:

<http://www.xtra.ca/site/toronto2/capxnews/body1.shtm>

A review of Vaughan's second novel, *Spells*:

<http://www.danforthreview.com/reviews/fiction/vaughan.htm>

He makes films, too (among them, *Tubbe*):

<http://www.pressplayvideo.org/previous02.html>

And commits smart journalism:

[http://www.friends.ca/News/Friends\\_News/archives/articles06280304.asp](http://www.friends.ca/News/Friends_News/archives/articles06280304.asp)

**Cities of Weather**, by Matthew Fox, Cormorant Books, \$22.95

For good reason, Matthew Fox was one of the new gay voices showcased in *Fresh Men* (with "Advanced Soaring"), the Carroll & Graf anthology edited by Don Weise and selected by Edmund White: he's a gifted young writer who has already transcended the obligatory sobriquet "promising" (though when Aaron Hamburger - author of the short story collection *The View from Stalin's Head* - buffs "promise" with "genuine" and "intelligence" and "warmth," it doesn't seem so condescending). Gay is almost everywhere in the 11 short stories in the collection, but it isn't everything - some of the stories are quite, quite queer, some are only incidentally so, and the melancholy title story is about a woman bored by her day job who lies for months about a boyfriend long gone. Unlike many first-novel (or first-collection) authors, Fox draws imaginatively - and creatively - on much more than his own life to craft his nicely textured tales; he's reflectively confident about his characters and their lives, investing them with a smart range of tone and type - dying grandmothers are as resonant as sexy rockers, ambivalent lovers are as complex as lonely boys. Several of the stories are set in Montreal, and American readers are in for something of a travel-story treat: Fox conveys atmosphere of place with as much style as he does shade of character (though the "Canadian-ness" of the collection was, for some agents, a drawback, Fox has written about selling the collection: "Like the letters I get back from publishers telling me why they don't want to publish my book. 'It's too Canadian.' 'It's too quiet.'"). He's working on a novel now: huzzah.



"The Tests are More Detrimental Than the Disease Itself" appeared in *Cities of Weather* as "Prove That You're Infected":

<http://www.lapetitezine.org/MatthewFox.htm>

Fox, too, commits smart journalism; for *Maisonneuve*, the Canadian magazine where he's an associate editor, Margaret Atwood tells him how to avoid colds on a book tour in this out-of-control "interview":

[http://www.maisonneuve.org/article.php?article\\_id=415](http://www.maisonneuve.org/article.php?article_id=415)

And he makes the history of rings interesting here:

[http://www.maisonneuve.org/article.php?article\\_id=385](http://www.maisonneuve.org/article.php?article_id=385)

The other two writers at Wilde About Sappho/Ottawa 2005 were Helen Humphreys reading from *Wild Dogs* (\$22.95, WW Norton, April), a haunting novel about six wounded souls who gather every evening at the edge of a park, calling for dogs gone wild to come back to them; among them are Lily, scarred both physically and emotionally; Rachel, the wildlife biologist whose wolf leads the pack; and narrator Alice, afraid to love who she needs to love; and Anna Camilleri, reading from *I Am a Red Dress: Incantations on a Grandmother, a Mother, and a Daughter* (Arsenal Pulp Press, \$16.95), a searing, candid collection of personal essays using the abuse she received by her grandfather as a touchstone for considering what her grandmother and her mother knew, and didn't know, didn't do, and did do.

Humphreys interviewed:

[http://www.harpercollins.ca/catalog/guide\\_xml.asp?isbn=0002005123](http://www.harpercollins.ca/catalog/guide_xml.asp?isbn=0002005123)

An excerpt from *I Am a Red Dress*:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20041217.bkchp1218/BNStory/SpecialEvents/>



### **Cher's Ex Foils Proust, Gay Malaysia, Sexy Covers**

It's Sonny Bono's fault that the last three volumes of the new translation of Marcel Proust can't be bought in America:

<http://www.slate.com/id/2114257/>

*Wilayah KUTU* is a Malaysian collection of 22 short stories and poems from eight writers; one contributor, Amri Ruhayat, "writes about incest and transsexuals, the nebulous issues that society skirts around." Another, Nizam Zakaria, says, "My stories are generally about the lives of gay men in Kuala Lumpur. Their experience living in the city, being gay and all that..."

The full interview:

[http://www.nst.com.my/Current\\_News/NST/Saturday/Features/20050225173900/Article/indexb.html](http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Saturday/Features/20050225173900/Article/indexb.html)

Zakaria's fiction is also blogged (in Malay, but click around for some fine photos and assorted English-language diary entries):

<http://nizamzakaria.blogspot.com/>

Novelists Brent Hartinger (*The Geography Club*) and Michael Jensen (*Firelands*) chat - at length (this is just part one) about the state of gay fiction:

<http://www.afterelton.com/print/2005/2/brent-michael.html>

Splashy new color covers sex up three Romantics novels:

[http://romantics.com/non\\_flash/newcovers.html](http://romantics.com/non_flash/newcovers.html)

The Christian Science Monitor likes three queer-interest books nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award (March 18):

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0222/p20s01-bogn.html>

Dennis Hensley (*Misadventures in the 213*) discusses collaborating on the screenplay for James Robert Baker's novel *Testosterone*:

<http://www.afterelton.com/movies/2005/2/testosterone.html>

The James Robert Baker site:

<http://jamesrobertbaker.com/>

Hans Christian Anderson was "a gay virgin," says a new Danish biography, coming in translation in April from Overlook Press:

[http://www.expatica.com/source/site\\_article.asp?channel\\_id=2&story\\_id=16788](http://www.expatica.com/source/site_article.asp?channel_id=2&story_id=16788)

Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* is all grown up:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/23/books/23bloc.html>

Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan undermine Valentine's Day:

<http://www.slate.com/id/2113350/>

Albo in performance:

<http://img.slate.msn.com/media/66/>

SlateMagazine\_Valentines\_Underminer.mp3

They're not a book, but I'm a big fan: The Scissor Sisters wow queer Sydney:

<http://www.ssonet.com.au/display.asp?ArticleID=4104>

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### Jay Quinn: *Back Where He Started*

In an Alyson interview, Southern Tier editor Jay Quinn talks about family, faith, gay marriage, his North Carolina roots, and why America is ready for its first "grown up" gay novel, *Back Where He Started* (April, \$24.95) – which is already high on my list of Best Books of 2005. "At its heart is Chris Thayer, who has spent most of his adult life as a house husband to Zack Ronan, and as mother to Zack's children Trey, Schooner, and Andrea. When Zack leaves him (for his female secretary), Chris packs up the dog and moves to the beach community of Emerald Isle, North Carolina, where he discovers that starting life over at 48 is just as complicated, frustrating, and thrilling as the first time around. As he becomes involved in the patchwork lives of his new neighbors - a young husband-and-wife psychiatric couple expecting their first child, the local Catholic Church priest, an on-the-prowl town veterinarian, and a rowdy jack-of-all-trades with an unnervingly direct stare - Chris begins to enjoy his new status as a man who is valued for his own contributions to his community."



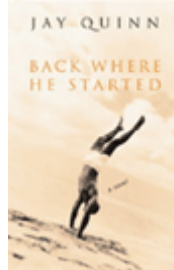
**Q: *Back Where He Started*, on the surface feels familiar, almost traditional. Then you realize you are reading about the breakup of a gay marriage, a gay family.**

JQ: My earliest notions of this book came about as the nation was hearing its first news of the coming realities of gay marriage, I'd say more than two years ago. I asked myself: if gay marriage becomes a fact, will it follow that half of them will not survive, as is the reality for straight marriages?

**Q: And it happens at the exact point many heterosexual relationships break down as well. Approaching 50, the kids are starting their own lives; the husband takes up with a younger woman.**

JQ: The impact of the "mid-life crisis" which many driven career men face. I suppose my own fears came into play as well as I am partnered with a very driven Type-A career man. The great thing about being an author is that you can turn your own anxieties into a controllable world and work them out that way before they can touch you.

**Q: Of course Chris is not "truly" the children's parent, Zack is. Chris married into the family when the children were very young and Zack was recently widowed. And yet as *Back Where He Started* progresses, the children's loyalty remains deeply tied to Chris.**



JQ: It was my contention that as the kisser of skinned-knees and the confidant of skinned-hearts, Chris would retain the lion's share of the children's loyalty at the demise of their parents' marriage. The family construct in the book was in every way a "traditional" family in that the father is primarily responsible for earning the financial wherewithal to keep the family going and the mother is the one who works in the home, providing the emotional succor for the children. At one point, the youngest son Schooner tells Chris that his father is "just a checkbook" to him. Zack, the father, is a driven career man who places the responsibility for the rearing of his children on Chris - his gay partner. Zack is mainly concerned with himself and his own ambitions. His family is a reflection of his success in the world's eyes. His children are accessories. For Chris, his children are his own life's work.

**Q: It's a messy, sprawling family you have created in this book. Wonderful to read about and spend time with. But unusual for a gay novel. What drove you to make the family such a driving part of this**

**story?**

JQ: I had some larger points to make about parenting and family. Ever since writers rejected the saccharine portrayals of the great American middle-class of the 1950s, what has sold books is a sort of psychological scab picking when it comes to portraying "family." I was frankly sick of it. In gay literature the portrayal of family is even worse. Usually it's discounted altogether as if gay men appeared fully adult in 2Xist briefs in Chelsea or West Hollywood with no past. Or, gay men write of family as if they were so embittered by their early upbringing and environments that they are portrayed as a literal hellhole that one must endure as one would torture. I am frankly bored by books that treat family as something to be scoffed at, rebelled against, and discarded rapidly.

**Q: Well, many gay people do have struggles with their families.**

JQ: For good or ill, family forms us all, gay and straight, and I think genuine and authentic human experience allows for forgiveness, accommodation and continuity within the family context. That is my experience. I do not think I am alone. The family I created in *Back Where He Started* is hardly a pristine, Ozzie and Harriet manqué. They are contentious, they harbor hurts and bad memories, they have pet resentments. But they fundamentally love each other. Their loyalties are protean trines that vary, as their emotional needs shift and change. I think they are most real in that sense. But at its heart, the Ronan family is a reflection of the sort of rough-handed affection that Chris, at its center, has made and nurtured.

**Q: The irony of this conversation is that we are talking about a very traditional human story here, and yet it is absolutely groundbreaking. This particular story, a gay family, has never been told. Why?**

JQ: It is only in the beginning of this century that gay lit has evolved to the point where gay writers are seeing themselves in a return to "traditional" family structures without a sense of abashment for being so mundane and conventional. I think the time for gay authors to create gay characters in such mundane settings as a marriage with grown children has only just come. At the birth of what we consider to be contemporary gay lit - in the 1970s - the authors were far too preoccupied with breaking down the walls of sexual and social circumspection that had shadowed gay lives up until then. The world of the disco and the efforts to conceive gay lives outside of hetero-normative strictures was too alluring.

In the 80s, gay authors were trying their damndest to relate the searing realities of HIV/AIDS and its impact on individuals' lives and the evolving gay social structure. In the 90s there emerged a growing group of gay voices who had come of age after Stonewall and were self-absorbed to the point of navel-gazing with their own takes on coming out and making a place in a world that was simultaneously plagued and permissive.

**Q: There also have not been a lot of books about gay men past the age of 40!**

JQ: What I most wanted to do with *Back Where He Started* was present a story for, by and about grown-ups. I wanted to explore what it meant for a gay man to be middle aged and rolling with the punches - damn the wrinkles or the softening gut, full speed ahead! I don't think gay literature has had room to accommodate a fair notion of aging to the middle part of life. Middle-age has always been when gay people retired from "the life" in the face of a brutally ageist absorption with youth and beauty. I can think of two of our "masters" who have dealt in meaningful ways with the surrender to middle-age, but those works were elegiac and sad.

**Q: As long as we're on the topic of things not usually covered in gay literature, let's talk about faith. Religion. Chris is a devout Catholic, but you don't present this in any conflicted way.**

JQ: I was astounded at how much I made of Chris's on-going relationship with his Catholic faith. Living in a world and culture that seems to have as many problems with traditional expressions of faith as it does with traditional family constructs, I didn't want to make him a pious fool, but rather a reflection of a great many people I know who have not abandoned the faith of their background, but rather have engaged it from remaining in it. I know of many intellectually athletic people - including myself, I hope - who continue to seek a place in that faith for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with a sort of willful ignorance, but rather as a kind of elemental part of their nature. I saw Chris as this kind of man. Neither is he blindly

accepting of the Church's many flaws, nor is he radicalized out of his connection to it, but rather he is searching within it. I don't believe this is uncommon for many of my age and life's context.

**Q: Why were you astounded?**

JQ: The only possible answer to that question lies in the final chapter of the book. It was a chapter I wrote in a kind of fever. It came to me as if it was writing itself. Suffice it to say that the final chapter of *Back Where He Started* is titled "Epiphany" which in its case means more than the actual time of year when it takes place. If I discussed that here, it would be cheating the reader out of discovering personally what is the essential meaning of what I am trying to say about Chris, family, and what it means to be a mother.

**Q: And Chris is very much the maternal figure in this family. You portray that very convincingly, but were you concerned that in maternalizing Chris you would also feminize him?**

JQ: Not really. From the beginning, I saw Chris as very male albeit slight in build and height. I really saw him as cat-like but fierce, rather more feline than feminine. Because of Chris's upbringing and background, which is quite clear, he is from the start a figure of resourcefulness and resilience. In terms of my leading him to motherhood, this stands him in good stead. There is a void in Chris's background that makes him hungry for a family, as he is genuinely a loving person - and has a need to give love with few expectations of receiving it in return. He becomes a mother that is much more male in practice than in presumption.

**Q: Let's talk a little bit about the setting of this novel and its characters. Both are vividly portrayed, the characters are very real, sometimes heroic, sometimes infuriating, endearing and hardheaded, just very, very real.**

JQ: (Laughs) I either have a very firm grip on reality or a very tenuous grasp of it that alternates with astonishing frequency. It speaks very much to my process of writing. When I am not writing, I have an almost frightening sense of people who I might see in the grocery store or on the street. I intuit so much of their internal lives that it's exhausting for me. When it comes time to create my characters, I have a rich vein of perception to draw on. This recall of minutiae comes together as my people. They become hyper-real to me. The day after I sent the finished manuscript of *Back Where He Started* to my editor, I left on a much-needed trip to Maine, where I usually spend some time each summer. In a journal I kept during my time there, I wrote of how bereft I was without my characters. It was almost as if they had closed the door to their ongoing lives behind them as I wrote the last sentence and shut me out of their lives. I spent my first days in Maine living in a sort of split existence in the "there" of the book and the "there" of where I actually found myself. It was difficult leaving their world behind. I'm a little crazy that way. I miss them still.

**Q: You grew up in Eastern North Carolina, went to school at East Carolina in Greenville, obviously spent a lot of time on the coast there, and set most of *Back Where He Started* in Emerald Isle which I believe is on the Outer Banks. Was that a homecoming for you?**

JQ: (Laughs). I have been a beach boy of the Outer Banks since I could toddle. Emerald Isle - which is on Bogue Banks, one of North Carolina's Outer Banks - is the ur-landscape of my imagination. I grew up in a small town about 90 minutes west of the island and have visited there since I was a small child. I have a picture, taken at one of the boardwalk picture vendors, that is of me at age two, sitting on my father's lap in front of a large cutout of a Carolina Moon that was taken at the beach. For me, that island represents in all its spare landscape of dunes and live oaks, the absolute last edge of my world. At my back is all the richness of my heritage and the despair of my background that propels me there. In front of me are only the open sea and the boundless horizon. On that island, everything is possible. It was there I learned to surf, where I had my first gay kiss, where I fled to playing hooky and where I intend to die. I own a lot on Bogue Banks, and some day I will build my home there.

**Q: The South is certainly a fertile ground for literature, but is often seen as very unfriendly to any non-conforming way of life, particularly gays.**

JQ: The beaches of North Carolina are a place where old social and religious conventions of a very Red State have always loosened their grip on its residents. There is an air of permissiveness and acceptance there that you

won't find anywhere else in the state in that form. When I lived up on the northern Banks when I was in my twenties, my surfer buddies used to call the beach "the island of misfit toys" like the one in the TV Christmas special of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." No matter how weird or broken or fucked up you were, eventually you'd hit the beach, and the beach would take you in and give you a home. It is a very rich place to draw information and inspiration from. The dying Old South, the religious narrowness, the gentility and volatility, the old class and racial hatreds and accommodations... the people are very vivid and real. I am not alone in mining this territory. My generation of fellow authors who are from within a hundred-mile radius of my hometown include Allan Gurganus, Jim Grimsley, Jill McCorkle, Kaye Gibbons, Clyde Edgerton as well as the august Reynolds Price.

**Q: Perfect lead in for the last question then. Who are your major literary influences or did you just list them?**

JQ: (Laughs). I have a well-worn T-shirt that has the following statement emblazoned across the chest: "I do exactly what the voices in my head tell me to." I think my personal voices are so strong that they allow for little intrusion from other influences. Still, I am a voracious reader. I devour books in my down time between projects.

I can honestly say there are three authors whose work gave me certain insights into creating the otherness of the world Chris and the Ronan clan inhabit. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita In Teheran* had a profound impact on me when I first read it. In fact, I pay her a bit of homage in *Back Where He Started* by having Chris reading it or making mention of it at two critical plot junctures. What I took away from Nafisi's fine work is that sense of remaining an individual and creating a satisfying world for oneself in the face of brutal, overt oppression. I found Nafisi's personal and intellectual resilience in the face of the anti-feminist Sharia laws of Post-Revolutionary Iran to be utterly inspiring.

Jhumpa Lahiri's work also informed my sense of being of two places simultaneously. Of being at once part of the dominate culture and also of another alien place, much beloved in some ways, but a whip at your back in the face of the life you are compelled to live. Our culture is becoming so fractured and fragmented that even native-born Americans are displaced from a type of past and family ties that are familiar.

Annie Proulx is one of my heroes despite the fact I believe one should live without heroes. Her work is mesmerizing for me, and she is a magician as far as I am concerned. Her treatment of place as an equal character with the persons who people her novels and short fiction, and her willingness to allow her people to be as complex and quirky as people actually are in small spots and places makes her my great teacher. She is a master. In many instances, her work is about starting over, about beginning again after you've been bitch-slapped by life. That is certainly the case in Chris's existence as I have written him. And, as she has shown me, the kinks and dark quirks of a character's soul can give way to deep veins of authenticity in their relationships. She is a stingy writer when it comes to romance, but her romances have the rough paws and ragged claws of a real life, the uncompromising aspects of need and hurt that I think run through life as an unvarnished seam. Those contentions have informed the relationships I have created between Chris and the other characters - and the landscape - of *Back Where He Started*.



**Alexander Chee, Thoughtful Blog-A-Lot**

I keep coming across links to blogs by writers I admire, though entries often peter out after a few weeks, or sputter into intermittent activity. Alexander Chee (*Edinburgh*)'s blog is an organic delight, though - near-daily entries, private thoughts made public, a fount of busy, stream-of information. He's smiting USA Next for appropriating the image of two men kissing after their wedding for their attack on the AARP, baking an orange pound cake, applying Jane Smiley's words on inner calling to people he knows, reading Sylvia Plath, cruising the cable networks for Buffy and Angel reruns, and praising "this year's only adorable pornstar," Hunter James.

<http://notthatboy.blogspot.com/>

Add Chee to your bookmarks, or set up an RSS feed:

<http://truenorth.typepad.com/>



## Bestsellers From Our (Non-)Bookstores

### InsightOut Book Club

**Best Gay Love Stories 2005**, edited by Nick Street, Alyson

The best sex and love stories by today's favorite gay authors: romance in a cemetery, the consummation of a longtime crush, a Christmas surprise, finding a soul mate abroad, and more.

**Tangled Sheets**, by Michael Thomas Ford, Kensington Publishing

ISO favorite author Michael Thomas Ford does erotica right - and describes how each story came about, from an aggressive police officer looking for a confession to sweaty punks pounding each other in the mosh pit...

**One Night Stand**, by Ben Tyler, Kensington Publishing

Out-of-work actor Derek Bracken starts at "One Night Stand," where, for the right price, the richest gay men in Hollywood can fulfill their fantasies. But Derek's competition isn't happy....

**Moth and Flame**, by John Morgan Wilson, St. Martin's Press

Ex-L.A. journalist Benjamin Justice, writing a booklet commemorating West Hollywood after the original writer is killed, uncovers a web of jealousy, greed, and deceit involving the deceased writer.

**Murder in the Rue St. Ann**, by Greg Herren, Alyson

Sexy gay detective Chanse MacLeod's investigation of sabotage at a New Orleans nightclub turns personal. Chanse's lover Paul has ties to the prime suspect... and has now disappeared!

**Magical Thinking**, by Augusten Burroughs, Penguin

The author of *Running with Scissors* fills in the gaps in his tragic-comic life with more hilariously insane experiences.

**The Line of Beauty**, by Alan Hollinghurst, Bloomsbury USA

In this erotically charged novel, Nick Guest moves in with a conservative British family and is soon juggling elitist political affairs by day and London's gay scene at night.

**Confessions of a Casanova**, by Chris Kenry, Kensington Publishing

In this romantic novel, sexy and studly Tony Romero's days of loving and leaving men seem about ready to come to an end. Has he found the one at last?

**Fresh Men**, edited by Donald Wiese, selected by Edmund White, Carroll & Graf

This collection gathers the best new writing by emerging gay authors, touching upon our ever-changing landscape of gay lives: cultural differences, sexual desires, coming out, the down low, and more.

**Bitch Slap**, by Michael Craft, St. Martins Press

When a business meeting ends with a reporter slapping a prospective partner, the partner is soon found dead. Newspaper owner Mark Manning must clear his reporter of murder.

**Clay's Way**, by Blair Mastbaum, Alyson

This is a stunning debut about two teens - a surfer and a skateboarder - who realize their bond runs much deeper than friendship.

**Looking for It**, by Michael Thomas Ford, Kensington Publishing

In this powerful, passionate novel, gay men of very different backgrounds search for happiness at a gay bar in a small upstate town.

**Why Marriage?**, by George Chauncey, Basic Books/Perseus Books

Chauncey maps out our history over the past few decades, and why even a more accepting America is fighting for a constitutional amendment.

**A Seahorse Year**, by Stacey D'Erasmus, Houghton Mifflin

This lyrical novel looks at the intimate lives of a San Francisco family - lesbian mother, Nan, her lover, Marina, and gay father, Hal - when their adolescent son runs away.

**As I Lay Frying**, by Fay Jacobs, A&M Books

In 1995, author Fay Jacobs and her partner, Bonnie, visited the gay community in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware - and never left. Here, she recounts their hilarious exploits as a couple and as locals.

*Publishers whose books appear on the InsightOut online bestseller list are, of course, those who sell book club rights.*

<http://www.insightoutbooks.com/>

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### Letters: Title Change/Many Thanks/You Must Read.../Passion

Dear BTWOF:

Thanks so much for alerting us to this piece (on Desmond Hogan, BTWOF 13); our forthcoming book of new and selected stories by Des is now titled *Larks' Eggs* (not *Winter Swimmers*).

-Antony Farrell/Publisher/The Lilliput Press/<http://www.lilliputpress.ie/>

Dear BTWOF:

Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU so much for all your kind words about *Mondo Homo*. You truly made my year with your thoughtful writing and analysis... you "got it" and understood what we were trying to do. So thank you again... I didn't know I'd been passed up for a Lammy until I read your article, but it was a true gift to find out through your work than through some other means.

-Richard Andreoli

Dear BTWOF:

What a fantastic new issue. As far as I'm concerned, you've officially surpassed *LBR* as the gay bibliophile's "paper" of record. So much great stuff covered, and in such a lively fashion. Damn! I can't remember whether you've already reviewed *Haunted Hillbilly* (by Derek McCormack) - I just read it and think it's fantastic; I've been recommending it to gay and straight coolsters (it's a beautiful object as well as a terrific read). I want to recommend a not particularly gay (there are touches), but truly remarkable undersold memoir that I devoured last week - *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, by Nick Flynn (Norton) - it is (in way too tidy of a nutshell) the story of a young man who is working in a homeless shelter, and one of the homeless men turns out to be his father. It's sad, funny, incredibly easy to read and never maudlin. For gay readers who are interested in male-male relationships of all sorts, this is a must.

-Jim Gladstone

*Thanks, but nothing replaces Lambda Book Report; I'm one voice, and it's many... and we're both recognizing good gay writing as best we can.* -RL

Dear BTWOF:

I just saw your review of the John Morgan Wilson book, *Moth and Flame*. You used the expression "murderous passion for preservation," and I wondered if you were consciously or subconsciously alluding to Will Fellows' book, *A Passion to Preserve*, which you had reviewed earlier.

Curiously...

-Dee Michel

*My word choice was purely unconscious, though now that it's pointed out to me, A Passion to Preserve may have been lurking in the unconscious - it's such a delicious phrase, even if I was defining "passion" with "murderous" rather than "preservation" with "passion."* -RL

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Books for review, author news, interesting links - all appreciated.

