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The Gay Men's Edition

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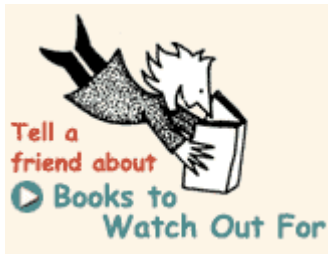
Green Candy Press

Publisher of

Let's Shut Out the World
by Kevin Bentley
&
Six Positions: Sex Writing
by Andy Quan



Volume 2 Number 5



By Richard Labonte

Kensington Books: High Art, Low Art, & Commerce

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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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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The new kid on the (mainstream gay publishing) block this decade is Kensington Books, which with a backlist of more than 50 gay (and a few lesbian) titles has branded itself successfully as a “gay publisher” – though in truth most of its books aren’t gay. Editor John Scognamiglio has accomplished this sleight of hand in about five years, smartly so, by recognizing that many gay readers – pretty much like straight readers – like light reading as well as more serious fare. In a recent email interview, he discussed what kinds of books he likes to read, how the Kensington gay catalog grew, the balance he’s achieved between high art and low art titles, a couple of new niches he’s exploring with erotic and African-American titles, and why the editorial side of an independent publishing house must respond to sales department pressures...

RL: "Beach books," "airplane reading," "fluffy romances," "sexy and sizzling:" in the first few years of Kensington's entry into gay-book publishing, most reviews – from *Publishers Weekly* to *Lambda Book Report* to a bar guide in Palm Springs with a “Books in Brief” section – included some form of those descriptions. This was good, right? That was the market you were aiming for?

JS: Yes, this was the market that I was going for. My goal was to publish fun reads. Books that you could lose yourself in and just have a good time reading. You'd pick it up, read for a couple of hours, put the book down, and then pick it up the next day or the next week or whenever. I've always been a commercial reader, and that's what I wanted to do with my program: publish gay commercial fiction. I grew up reading Jackie Collins, Harold Robbins, Sidney Sheldon, Judith Krantz. Some people would be embarrassed to admit that; I'm not. I also tried to model my program after the early days of Dutton/Plume when they were publishing authors such as Robert Rodi and Christian McLaughlin, two of my favorites.

More Books for Women

will launch in 2005.

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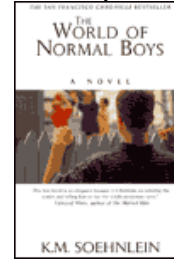
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Canada.

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Despite that "beach read" image, one of the first gay titles in Kensington's catalog was KM Soehnlein's more complex, more literary, less "low art" novel, *The World of Normal Boys*, in 2000. Was it a bother to be pegged as a peddler of fluff based on the books (Dave Benbow, Ben Tyler, Dave Stukas, Jon Jeffrey) that came in the immediate wake of Soehnlein's?

The World of Normal Boys is an amazing book. There are two kinds of books that I publish in my program. The fun, fluffy beach books aimed strictly at a gay readership, and there are the "novels" that have gay protagonists that I feel will appeal to readers across the board, whether they're gay or straight. Would a straight reader or a female reader want to read some of my gay beach reads? Probably not. But they would want to read *The World of Normal Boys* or *Leave Myself Behind*, by Bart Yates. With those types of books, I try to come up with a package – from the art to the cover copy – that has enough "clues" to indicate to a gay reader that this is a book for them, but at the same time, doesn't make a straight male reader or a female reader think, "this isn't a book for me."



I remember when I wanted to buy *The World of Normal Boys*. Our gay beach novels were doing extremely well. When I brought up Karl's book, I was asked, "Why do you want to publish another gay coming-of-age novel?" All I had to say was, "Read this book and you'll know why I want to publish it. This isn't just another gay coming-of-age-novel. This is a novel, and a brilliant one at that.

It is much, much harder for me to find books that are the quality of *The World of Normal Boys* and *Leave Myself Behind*. I'm publishing Karl's second novel, *You Can Say You Knew Me When*, this September, and it took him three years to write it!

In a recent *Publishers Weekly* interview, you said: "We've found that a novel with a gay protagonist will sell better than a book that contains exclusively gay characters." Does this portend fewer *The Winter of Our Discotheques* and *Daytime Dramas*? Or are you looking to balance the low art and the high art with forthcoming titles? And titles for 2005 include new types of books – two black gay novels and two erotica collections; is Kensington moving away from white-boy romps, arch mysteries, and light-hearted sexual romances, or are these books another couple of niches you're aiming to fill (after gay vampire and Hollywood mystery titles, to cite two genres-within-genres)?

When we first started our program, we were having much success with the gay romantic comedies. When something works, the sales department wants more of it. Well, I gave them what they wanted, and it turns out we were publishing too many titles. Or too many of the same kind of book. They're not going to buy everything you offer to them. We were lucky when we first started the program in 1999 – Putnam had just merged with Dutton/Plume/Signet and pulled the plug on their gay program. Alyson wasn't publishing any gay romantic comedies. We had a clear playing field. The first title we published was Orland Outland's *Every Man for Himself*; orders were triple what the sales reps expected. There was a hunger for this type of book. The same thing happened in 2000 with Andy Schell's *My Best Man* and in 2001 with Chris Kenry's *Can't Buy Me Love*.

Our program is relatively young. After a couple of years you start to see the big picture. What's working and not working. And we were publishing too many gay romantic comedies. So I decided to pull back and see what was *not* being published on our list and what we might be able to be successful at. I didn't see a lot of African-American gay fiction in the market; we'd never tried erotica. So we decided to test the waters with both. We'll know after a year how successful we've been.

Speaking of forthcoming: what's scheduled for the next two catalogues, through April of 2006?

Michael Thomas Ford has a new novel coming out in May 2006, *Full Circle*, that I'm very excited about. I like to compare it to Felice Picano's *Like People in History*. It's about three best friends – two gay guys and one straight guy – from the time they were children in the '50s up to today. And I also have a memoir from Patrick Moore called *Tweaked*, about his days as a crystal meth addict, that's coming out in trade paperback next June.

I know every book is any editor's favorite baby - but are there any writers you're pleased to say you "discovered?" And what have been your bestsellers over the years?

The World of Normal Boys is one of the crown jewels of my program, and one of our bestsellers. Also, Bart Yates is another discovery that I'm

extremely proud of. I loved his first novel, but he takes ten giant steps forward with his new novel, *The Brothers Bishop*. I so want this book to sell!

And how can I not mention the wonderfully talented William J. Mann, who I've just signed for another two novels – one of which is the third installment of his Jeff/Lloyd series – and Tom Dolby, author of *The Trouble Boy*? Oh, and Rick Copp, and David Stukas, and Chris Kenry, three very funny writers. No one can write comedy the way they can!

You published the first three of Michael Craft's gay mysteries in the late 1990s – did the gay line grow from there, or does Orland Outland's 1999 title *Every Man for Himself* mark the real beginning of Kensington's entry into the gay market?

The gay program really started with Orland's novel, though I must also give credit to our publisher, Laurie Parkin. When she arrived at Kensington, she'd come from Dutton/Plume/Signet and she knew that there was a market for gay/lesbian fiction. Unlike our previous sales regime, she supported my program one hundred percent, and said, "You don't have to publish these books just in June, you know." (Our previous sales regime would only let me publish my gay titles – the Michael Craft mysteries – in June, 'cause that's the only time gay people read, right? Ditto with our African-American program when it was just getting started – those books could only be published in January. And people wonder why sales and editorial can't get along! Argh!)

Brava, Dafina, Strapless – Kensington's various imprints identify romance, African-American, and erotic books. Was it a conscious marketing decision to not "brand" the gay books with their own imprint?

We didn't want to ghettoize the gay/lesbian program. We wanted to publish these books as single titles, to give an identity to Kensington as a publisher.

And while the *Gay Men's Edition of Books To Watch Out For* focuses on gay books, any comments on the direction you're taking your lesbian titles?

The lesbian market has been really tough for us to break into. I'm not getting the quantity of submissions that I'd like, and when it comes to selling the titles, we're not getting the copies out the door. In this business everything comes down to numbers and making a profit. The books have got to make money for the company. If they don't, I can't buy them. I've drastically cut back on the number of lesbian titles we're publishing, but that's not to say we're not publishing them – I have a great new author coming out this August, Fiona Zedde – her debut novel, *Bliss*, is very erotic!

Lastly, how does it feel to be running neck-and-neck with Michael Denneny, founder of the Stonewall imprint of gay and lesbian books at St. Martin's almost 20 years ago, for the most number of exuberant thank yous, heartfelt dedications, and grateful acknowledgments in books by queer men?

To be mentioned in the same sentence as Michael, who's a legend in this industry, especially when it comes to gay and lesbian publishing, is an honor. I don't think I have anywhere near the depth of knowledge and experience that he does – hopefully I will someday. As an editor, the fun part of my job is discovering new talent and working with my authors as a team to make their books the best that they can be. The icing on the cake is when they thank me for that, but it's certainly not necessary. All I want is for their books to sell so when their royalty statements arrive, they'll find a check with lots of zeroes!

Publisher info: www.kensingtonbooks.com



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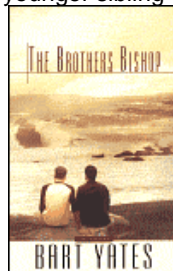
14 From Kensington This Summer and Fall

Two new high-end reads – Yates & Soehnlein:

Two of the authors whose debut novels gave Kensington its literary cachet have second books out now (*The Brothers Bishop*, by Bart Yates, \$23), and in September (*You Can Say You Knew Me When*, by K.M. Soehnlein, \$23). Both are indeed high art; both, as it happens, are fictions about dead mothers, angry fathers, damaged sons, family dysfunction, and searing secrets; both feature a mixed cast of characters, gay and straight; and both are “immersible” reads – books you can lose yourself in. (Also, the novels have this in common: Yates makes clear in his acknowledgment that *his* brothers are not the model for the brothers in his book; Soehnlein makes clear in his acknowledgment that *his* father is not the model for the father in his book; how refreshing to read two books that aren’t payback autobiographies masquerading as fiction!)

The Brothers Bishop centers on the complex, codependent, and ultimately tragic relationship between two brothers: Tommy, the devilishly sexual younger sibling (29) who, as soon as high school was done, headed for the bright lights and beautiful bodies of New York, with a blithe approach to the world and its woes; and Nathan, the moodily self-contained, self-denying older sibling (31), who stayed home, both envious and disdainful of his brother’s libertine freedoms, at times embittered by the choices he has made, and fiercely bonded to Tommy – no matter how egregious his transgressions. Their lives unravel over the course of a train-wreck week while Tommy is vacationing at Nathan’s seacoast cottage (their home as they were growing up), accompanied by his disposable *beau du jour* and by a mismatched married couple – a straight woman and her conflicted, closeted husband. Yates stuffs his saga of the Bishop brothers with a cornucopia of sexual and emotional turbulence: parental abuse, gay-brother incest, sex with minors, suicide attempts.

Author info: www.bartyates.com

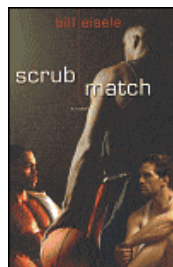


You Can Say You Knew Me When is about a father and a son: Jamie is an underemployed, under-motivated San Francisco semi-slacker, eking out just enough income for rent and weed and long estranged from his homophobic father. Father Teddy, dead as the novel opens, comes to life in the form of letters Jamie unearths in the family attic when he goes home to help his stressed straight sister handle post-funeral affairs. Those letters set Jamie delving, somewhat obsessively, into his dad’s past – a “beat” year he spent in San Francisco in the early 1960s, emulating Jack Kerouac, hanging out with a covey of young writers, artists, and bartenders – and, to Jamie’s amazement, flirting with the homosexuality he so despised in his son. Soehnlein’s novel is splendidly textured: it’s set in those heady couple of years before the dot-com bubble burst, captures nicely the goofy insouciance and insolvency of adults who haven’t quite grown up, and crafts a painful family dynamic that’s probably all too familiar to many gay readers – but that eschews cliché.



Two from the African-American niche:

The first two Kensington novels with an African-American hue are as different as night and day: the first, published in April, is a prototypical Kensington romance, not as fluffy as most, with a mixed-race cast of characters; the second, out this month, is a rough-around-the-writing-edges story of ethnic friends and lovers moving through a Los Angeles most whites don’t see.



Bill Eisele’s debut coming-of-age **Scrub Match** (\$14) is about Paul Carter, buppieish son of a disappointed black father and a supportive white mother, effectively a virgin after one abortive romance and desperate for true love when he flees the East coast for San Francisco. There he falls hard for Twitch, a quietly wealthy white boy who loves basketball with a passion that Paul is ready to share – but who in turn is attracted to another, brawnier, black player. Eisele’s novel – exploring the dynamic of biracial romance

– is essentially about a black boy who loves basketball who loves a white boy who loves basketball (and who writes poetry) who loves another black boy who loves basketball. The ending isn't happy-ever-after; rather, a lot of painful growing up goes on, a tone that adds some welcome heft to the romantic fluff.

Another review:

<http://www.baywindows.com/media/paper328/news/2005/06/30/Arts/He.Got.Game-959607.shtml>

Frederick Smith's **Down for Whatever** is narrated by Keith, a black professional who's not too happy in love or in life, but is sustained by a quarrelsome, cavoring circle of almost-always-loving black and Latino friends – “a picture of gay L.A. we don't see – men of color who like other men of color, and without drama,” as one character remarks at the end of the story. I'd guess that its appeal to white gay readers is less broad than that of *Scrub Match*, where the vernacular is more familiar and the characters are more ethnically mixed. For that very reason, Smith's debut novel ought to be read outside of the audience Kensington is targeting it towards.



Author info:

<http://www.fredericksmith.net>

“Simply Fred's” blog:

http://simplyfredsmith.blogspot.com/2005_06_01_simplyfredsmith_archive.html

Another review:

<http://brotha2brotha.blogspot.com/2005/04/down-for-whatever.html>

Two that turn up the heat:

Scognamiglio's first two forays onto the getting-glutted erotica field collect, in the first instance, almost every short story a newer writer has written, and, in the second, the decade-old oeuvre of an accomplished queer writer who's moved on to more mature work... linked together by their shared marketing-inspired sub-titles, *Tales of Erotica*. Get it?

Boy meets boy. Boy wants boy. Boy satisfies boy. Most every one of the 28 erotic stories in **Close Contact** (\$14) Sean Wolfe's imaginatively monotone



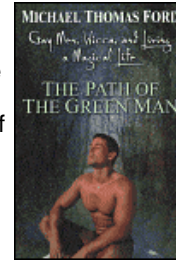
collection follow that predictable sexual arc – imaginatively because the author works plausible settings and varied characters into the sex; monotone because, despite occasionally flashy prose and the odd flash of humor, every story's climax is all about the climax. In the first tale, “Badland's Bad Boy,” a 27-year-old naif from small-town Texas (all the “boys” in story titles are in fact young men) finds, in a sex-soaked Castro Street bar, the man of color he's long had a hankering for; in the last tale, “Next Stop...Paradise,” a college kid from Wichita, on his first visit

to San Francisco, finds the sexual passion he's long dreamed of on the Market Street underground MUNI line. The settings in between vary – a frat house, a bathhouse, a city park, a dinner party, a wedding party, a rodeo – but the formulaic getting-it-on, getting-off riffs are better suited to one-handed pleasure than to literary delight. (From PW's review)

Hands on your boners, boys. “Tom Caffrey,” one of the more popular porn writers of the 1990s, is back in **Tangled Sheets: Tales of Erotica** (\$14). This hefty collection of well-wrought sex tales reprints two entire BadBoy books, *Hitting Home* (1994) and *Tales from the Men's Room* (1996), as well as work that appeared only in magazines, and – best of all – a handful of original stories. As he notes in a generous introduction, Michael Thomas Ford adopted the Caffrey nom de porn because, back when he started his erotica run, he was also writing for a nongay teen market. Since then, he's moved on to seriously hilarious essay collections and queer novels for grownups. But he remains deservedly proud of the 39 stories in *Tangled Sheets*, introducing each one with a pithy sentence or two that personalizes it delightfully. Though much of Ford's erotica appeared in porn glossies like *Blueboy* (his first sale, though he wasn't paid) and *Advocate Men*, the writing is refreshingly devoid of sweaty clichés – a harbinger of the quality of more recent fiction like *Last Summer* and *Looking for It* (coming in paper in December, \$14), two Kensington titles with much merit.

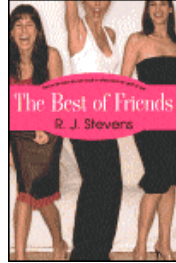
(And in another genre: there's a Michael Thomas Ford title of quite a different sort coming in August from Citadel Press, one of Kensington's many imprints. **The Path of the Green Man: Gay Men, Wicca, and Living a Magical Life** (\$14.95) draws on Ford's own interest in paganism – and of a group he founded, the Green Men, “to forge a rewarding Pagan tradition for gay men” – for a hands-on guide to living a spiritual life.)

Author info: www.michaelthomasford.com



Two (plus one) for the women:

One cop, one firefighter, one paramedic, one... feminist bookseller? That's the primary cast of **Best of Friends** (Kensington, \$14), by R.J. Stevens (author of *Becoming Bobbie*, also from Kensington), one of just a couple of the publisher's lesbian titles for 2005. It's a story cast very much from the Naiad Press/Bella Books mold: the loving couple survives a crisis and stays together, the bawdy dame who beds every babe finally settles down with the love of her life; there's a tickle of hot sex, melodramatic moments of emotion, and just a bit of blood. If this were a Bella Books title, it would no doubt sell as well as most of that publisher's books; that Kensington's not quite as lean an operation as Bella may be one reason that lesbian titles aren't doing as well for the larger publisher; it's also likely that lesbians don't see Kensington as a “lesbian publisher” the same way gay readers have identified the publisher as “gay” – or at least gay enough. One plus for me: Stevens' inclusion of well-rounded male characters, both gay and straight.



Author info: www.rjstevens.com

The second lesbian title, **Bliss**, by Fiona Zedde (\$14) is not yet received (or read) – and it straddles the genre divide by being both by a woman, and about a black woman. Here's what the publisher has to say:

“In her incendiary first novel, up-and-coming author Fiona Zedde has crafted a sizzling and insightful story about a young Jamaican-American career woman who discovers that there's much more to life than work – and much more to love than meets the eye. From the outside, Bliss Sinclair's life seems very glamorous – a high-profile job with a publishing house, a fashionable boyfriend who looks good on her arm, and ultra-chic parties where the come-ons are as hot and thrilling at night as they are empty as an air-kiss greeting the next day. Suddenly, she finds (love) in the most unlikely of places. Embarking on a series of carnal adventures with a notorious bad girl as her guide, Bliss opens herself to every new experience and every taboo. In abandoned warehouses, private fetish clubs, even her own office, Bliss is skating on the thin ice of desire – until her world comes crashing in.”



There's a third lesbian-interest title, from Kensington's Genesis Press “contemporary romance” imprint: **Across**, by Blue Dawson (\$15.95). Coming in December, it's about lovers Martha and Claudia, who book passage on a Turkey-bound freighter in order to carve out some time together from their busy careers. The relaxing days and exquisitely romantic nights are a tonic – until the freighter makes an unscheduled stop in Algeria, and Claudia is kidnapped. Dawson, says the publisher, “has traveled throughout the world and plans a series of adventures depicting strong women in perilous, faraway places.”

A few more books forthcoming:

September: **The Actor's Guide to Adultery**, by Rick Copp, \$14 – The second in Copp's series (after *The Actor's Guide to Murder*), about a former child actor and his beefy cop boyfriend, is new in paper; it's about the stalker who's bedeviled Jarrod Jarvis's life since his first Oscar Meyer commercial. Author info: <http://www.rickcopp.com>

October: **Male Model**, by Dave Benbow, \$14 – Benbow's second novel (after *Daytime Drama*, also new in paper), is a romantic romp about a lusty window designer and a married fashion designer who find themselves madly in love – though one is a married man. I peg this one as rough, fun fluff. Author info: <http://www.davebenbow.com>

November: **The Actor's Guide to Greed**, by Rick Copp, \$23 – LA was the setting for Copp's first, *Murder*; much of *Adultery* was set on a movie set in

Florida; in *Greed* the scene shifts to London's West End theatre district, where child actor Jarvis has flown to play a part written just for him by an old friend – and where he finds himself accused of poisoning a venomous costar while coping “with a British legend who’s a lush, a Bollywood beefcake actor who’s hot for Jarrod’s boyfriend, (and) an out of the closet Sir with a penchant for young actors.”

And already available: **Trust Fund Boys**, by Rob Byrnes, \$14 – This is the paper edition of Byrnes’ second romp (after *The Night We Met*); it may well be the kind of light fiction that Kensington editor Scognamiglio says might have been overdone – but the story of two young men reinventing themselves as the kind who fit in to New York’s wealthy (and snobbish) A-gay circle of sugar daddies and social achievers has a charming, bubbly class-consciousness that makes it quite endearing.



The Rob Blog: <http://robnyc.blogspot.com/>

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Five Books of Very Varied Sorts

A Slight Trick of the Mind, by Mitch Cullin, *Doubleday*, \$23.95

One could count on the fingers of a hundred hands the number of novels that have appropriated Arthur Conan Doyle's legendary sleuth Sherlock Holmes. One could count on the fingers of one hand a novel as fine as Mitch Cullin's. His is a Holmes in the twilight years, still alive in 1947, enfeebled by age, his amazing mind dulled by the passing of years, depending on the ministrations of a housekeeper and her young son. Cullin, a lyrical writer who is gay, hints at a strong bond of affection between the aged detective and his young beekeeping acolyte – a lavender tint that adds texture to this original portrait of a mythical literary character.



Author info:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/nanatalese/mitchcullin/home.html>

Another review:

http://www.freep.com/features/books/salij24e_20050424.htm

Six Positions: Sex Writing, by Andy Quan, *Green Candy Press*, \$14.95

Though several of these stories first appeared in such erotica collections as *Quickies*, *Best Gay Erotica*, and *Best American Erotica*, it's fitting, and not at



all precious, that Quan's prose be thought of as “sex writing.” These pieces are hot, to be sure, whether fictional or autobiographical. But the title story, for one – with its lyrically incantatory “I'm making love to the oldest man... fattest man...most exotic man...smallest man...thinnest man...myself” first sentences – is raw emotional poetry. “Something About Muscle” is, powerfully, all about that; “Positive” is, luminously, about sex and AIDS; “Surf” and “Shoes” are, simply, all about sex. Not too many years ago,

there was porn and there was literature. The current abundance of quality erotic writing has blunted that specious dichotomy; this collection erases it entirely.

Author info:

www.andyquan.com

An interview:

<http://www.mcv.net.au/frameset/default.htm>

Lunar Park, by Bret Easton Ellis, *Alfred A. Knopf*, \$25

“Every word is true,” declares Bret Easton Ellis, the bad-boy character, in this fifth novel by Bret Easton Ellis, the bad-boy author – but, then again, a writer's life is “a maelstrom of lying.” So though this lubriciously hyperactive fiction is blatantly autobiographical, facts have certainly been skewed. Its first half details the downward emotional spiral of “Ellis,” who has forsaken his high-living, drug- and alcohol-soaked Manhattan haunts for married domesticity in the ‘burbs with an old flame – a movie actress who once loved him hard – whose alienated son may or may not be his. About midway, though, *Lunar Park* veers deliciously into Stephen King territory: his

stepdaughter's animatronic toy bird comes viciously to life, his house is haunted by horrific apparitions and then morphs into the California home of his youth, and his email inbox is flooded with messages from his dead daddy dearest. Eek. Spooky. And almost, but not quite ever, out of control. At heart, this is a novel about handling stress and loss and accepting love and truth, a cautionary tale about the ideal anti-hero – the author himself.

From a 2003 interview: "Ellis is working on a new book that, he says, 'is a very long, involved novel about a marriage and my family. It's very autobiographical. And it has no gay content.' No gay content? But isn't Ellis gay? Isn't he one of our gay authors? 'I definitely don't identify as gay,' he says, his tone slightly cagey. 'So I can't commit an answer.'"

The full interview: <http://www.metroweekly.com/feature/?ak=126>

Let's Shut Out the World, by Kevin Bentley, *Green Candy Press*, \$14.95
These are the stories – less sexual but no less engrossing – that didn't make it into the Lammy-finalist *Wild Animals I Have Known*, Bentley's 2002 memoir

that, as I said in a review at the time, gave promiscuity and sleaze a good name. Some are set, hilariously as often as grimly, in the El Paso of Bentley's youth, where he confronted fierce fundamentalists on one side and closeted "fauxmossexuals" on the other. A few cover the same heady, sexually liberated 1970s-San Francisco as the earlier book, sometimes just as raunchily, sometimes more introspectively. And the rest take Bentley into the 80s and 90s and beyond, into a contented but never complacent middle-age monogamy. *Let's Shut Out the World* demonstrates, without pretension, that the most honest, most telling, history is the most personal.



Publisher info: www.greencandypress.com

Lazarus, by Rashid Darden, *Old Gold Soul Press*, \$14.95

Black activist and college NAACP leader Adrian Collins is a 19-year-old sophomore who knows he's gay. In fact, he's in a relationship with a senior, Savion Cortez, an acclaimed campus poet. But he's also eager to pledge Beta Chi Phi, the fiercest black frat there is. Darden's debut novel is a bit ragged – copy editor, where art thou? – but it nonetheless captures the antsy angst of finding a first boyfriend, then being drawn from him by a desire that's even greater than the physical experience and emotional satisfaction of love for one man – the need to belong, to fit in, to be accepted by peers, despite being a gay man in a newfound family uneasy with queers in its midst. Darden's description of the frat's initiation and hazing process is skilled and unsettling, and his focus on the camaraderie of the pledges is deft and compelling – it's apparent that he writes from experience. And that he isn't daunted by self-publishing: *Covenant*, the sequel to *Lazarus*, is scheduled for 2006 – when Isaiah, a lanky easygoing basketball player who was a minor character in the first book, takes on a major role...

Publisher info: www.oldgoldsoul.com



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12 Books To Watch Out For as Summer Fades to Fall

In September:

Canadian novelist Darren Greer (**Still Life With June**, St. Martin's Press, \$13.95) ponders Picasso and post-modernism, baseball and American foreign policy, Williams and Wilde in his first essay collection – a mix of travel writing, political polemics, memoir, and lit crit. (Cormorant Books, \$24.95)... Daniel Gawthrop's **The Rice Queen Diaries: A Memoir** gets white on rice in this candid and self-critical autobiography about being a gay man attracted to Asian men – it all started with Bruce Lee (Arsenal Pulp Press, \$16.95)... In **Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, the Torments of Low Thread Count, the Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems** (a subtitle that cannot be resisted!), satirical essayist David Rakoff takes on greed, selfishness, vapidness, vanity, and the culture of excess (Doubleday, \$23.95)... Douglas A. Martin's short story

collection **They Change the Subject** focuses on a young-man-on-the-make whose goal is to become the purest object of other men's desire (University of Wisconsin Press, \$17.95).

In October:

You read the stories; now curl up with the novel – Douglas A. Martin's **Bronte Boy** merges the possible and the real in this lyrical story about Branwell Bronte, the gifted artist and writer – and possible homosexual – brother of the better-remembered Bronte sisters, dead at 31 from alcohol and opium abuse (Soft Skull Press, \$13.95)... In **Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963**, Gavin Butt assesses the role gossip and innuendo played in shaping the careers of Larry Rivers, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and other emerging artists of the period (Duke University Press, \$21.95)... Poet and novelist Edward Field's chatty memoir ("After reading a chapter, I feel like I've just had a martini with Edward..." says Brian Bouldrey) opens the closet door – really, really wide – in **The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag, and Other Intimate Literary Portraits of the Bohemian Era** (University of Wisconsin Press, \$29.95)... Last year, Richard Chamberlain; this year, Tab Hunter – it's raining pretty men; pinup boy Hunter tells how he survived the Hollywood closet, in **Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star** (Algonquin Books, \$24.95).

In November:

In the biography **The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer**, David Leavitt illuminates the life of the persecuted homosexual English genius who, by clarifying the concept of what a computer can do, cracked the Nazi's wartime Enigma code and hastened the end of World War II (Atlas/WW Norton, \$22.95)... Out of their suits and into the dresses: the 90-year history of men donning the garb of dames is discussed by Jean-Louis Ginibre in **Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-Dressing in the Cinema** (Filipacchi Publishing, \$65)... **Best Gay Erotica 2006**, edited by Richard Labonte, ahem, selected by Mattilda a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore (Cleis Press, \$14.95)... Rough trade, rent boys, and the occasional queer young man posed for David Hurles' still, super 8, and video cameras for more than 40 years, images of raw maleness collected in **Speeding: The Old Reliable Photos of David Hurles**, written and designed by homoerotic artist and designer Rex (Green Candy Press, \$26.95).



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Niche survival, writer's block, a gay uncle, Larry for President

Ed Hermance of Giovanni's Room is profiled in "Survival of the Niches," an article from Philadelphia's City Paper: "Most of our customers live in the region and make a visit to the store one of their ordinary activities when they come to Center City. We have an international reputation, thanks in large part to our wholesaling GLBT books and films to bookstores overseas, so we have quite a few foreigners coming to shop. In the past year or two, we have noticed an increase in the number of New Yorkers coming to town."

Full article: <http://citypaper.net/articles/2005-06-23/cover2.shtml>

Inspired by director Gregg Araki's screenplay for his debut novel *Mysterious Skin*, novelist Scott Heim broke out of a six-year writing slump – and sold his third novel (after *In Awe*) to HarperCollins; the manuscript for **We Disappear**, based on the years Heim spent caring for his ill mother in Kansas, is due in December. In a *Boston Globe* interview, Heim discusses bleak years, what he wrote for money, and his 10 year relationship with editor and novelist Michael Lowenthal: "I was so disillusioned with the publishing business that it had clouded my confidence in my ability to write," said Heim. "I had said, 'I hate this business, and I don't care.' But something that I had created had inspired the director and producer. They did such a wonderful job, with a difficult subject, with so little money, that it made me realize, 'I created this, and this is something I loved doing.' It made me go back to my third novel, which I had abandoned."

Full interview: www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2005/06/27/film_gets_into_this_novelists_skin/?page=2

In his third book, **Nasty: My Family and Other Glamorous Varmints** (Simon & Schuster, \$24) famed Barney's window-dresser Simon Doonan "drolly recounts his experiences growing up gay in Reading, England, in the '50s with a glamour-puss mother, an amateur winemaker father, his sister, a random collection of other eccentric 'lodgers and mentally ill relatives' and his self-described 'demented quest' to find the Beautiful People and live the Beautiful Life," says *San Francisco Chronicle* writer Anastasia Hendrix in her Five Questions interview:

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/06/19/LVGNOD6RJ91.DTL>

Agitprop fashion designer Periel Aschenbrand (**The Only Bush I Trust is My Own**, Penguin/Tarcher, \$9.95) talks about her love for gay men, describes herself as post-gender, and thinks Larry Kramer should be president. From her interview with Ken Siman (author of the smart comic novel *Pizza Face*):

Q: You made a name for yourself by designing a "the only bush i trust is my own" clothing line, and in your book you write about making "Larry Kramer for president" T-shirts. What draws you to him?

A: He's the Martin Luther King of gay culture. I really believe that. He did what everyone else was afraid to do. He was a fucking visionary. He not only saw what was going to happen, which was pretty remarkable given the lack of data then, but he said it, he stood by it, and he kept saying it.

The full interview: www.advocate.com/exclusive_detail.asp?id=18379

Curtis Brown agent Edwin John Wintle discusses **Breakfast With Tiffany: An Uncle's Memoir** (Miramax Books, \$24.95), about raising his niece when her mother couldn't cope. From the interview: Gay parenting and marriages are currently hot buttons. I'd like this book to fit into this discussion in this way: it's not about gay parenting, it's not about gay marriage, it's about the integral roles gay people play in the families they already have. With all this discussion about should gay people be allowed to marry, it never comes up, especially in the conservative side, how often gay men and maybe lesbians as well, have the money that helps put nieces and nephews through college because they themselves aren't married or have children. I can't tell you how many gay men I know who take their widowed mothers to Europe, how many are the supervisor for the elderly parent's medical care. That's not discussed in the context of us trying to start our families. The full interview:

www.bookslut.com/features/2005_07_005949.php

What Walt Whitman had to say to aspiring writers, in an 1888 student-newspaper interview: "Don't become a poet."

<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=734232>

Despite what Walt said, Ragan Fox (*Heterophobia*, Lethe Press, \$12) writes poetry. His influences? From Melanie Reason's interview in *getunderground.com* ("creative resistance designed for the emancipation of the human soul"): I have a few poetic heroes: Justin Chin, Diane Fleming, Genevieve Van Cleve, Buddy Wakefield, Rachel Kann, Jeremy Richards, and Morris Stegosaurus, among others. I tend to latch onto writers and performers who aren't regurgitating the same old tired diatribes. I mean, how many times can I sit through a poet talking about "revolutions" that they never clearly define? As I say in "Angry Poet!", "No revolution was ever fought in Dockers." At any rate, Justin Chin's work has been inspirational; he's such a powerful gay male voice. Morris and Buddy are two gay poets who don't spend that much time about being gay, and it works for them. Hell, I'm sold!

Gay & Lesbian Washington, D.C. by Frank Muzzy (Arcadia Publishing, \$19.99), in words and pictures, reviewed by Brian Moylan:

"The 128-page paperback is filled with images of gay D.C., but contains far too many details about individuals believed to be gay without offering any concrete evidence. Nonetheless, the photos D.C. resident Frank Muzzy collected, from various sources, of people and places sketch an intriguing portrait of gay life in Washington during the past 200 years."

The full review:

<http://www.washblade.com/2005/5-13/arts/feature/picture.cfm>

Publisher info:

<http://www.arcadiapublishing.com> (the opening page plays some lovely old-timey music)

Steve Kluger, author of the Lammy Romance winner **Almost Like Being in Love** (HarperCollins, \$13.95), discusses the process of writing a non-linear novel:

<http://www.afterelton.com/print/2005/6/kluger.html>

Ah, networking: scroll to the very end to read former San Franciscan David Bonetti's praise for Richard McCann's **Mother of Sorrows** (Pantheon, \$20) and Aaron Hamburger's **The View from Stalin's Head**, (Vintage, \$12.95) – “two books by acquaintances from earlier stages of my life.” His praise appears in a roundup of summer pleasures in St. Louis, where Bonetti is now the visual arts critic for the *Post-Dispatch*.

At Blogcritics.com, poster swingingpuss extols the virtues of **How the Homosexuals Saved Civilization: The True and Heroic Story of How Gay Men Shaped the Modern World** (Penguin/Tarcher, \$14.95), a hop-skip-jump survey of queers and history by self-described fag hag (she also wrote *The Gay Man's Guide to Heterosexuality*) Cathy Crimmins:

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2005/06/17/213608.php>

Editor and novelist Jay Quinn is profiled in *Southern Voice*: Being hit by a car is what motivated him to write, it seems:

www.sovo.com/2005/6-17/locallife/pastout/artist.cfm



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A Store Closes, a Cover Changes, a Contest Starts

Seattle's Beyond the Closet, opened in 1988 by former A Different Light/Silverlake (L.A.) manager Ron Whiteaker, is closing its doors on July 28 – the third queer bookstore to go out of business this year, after Sacramento's The Open Book and Tampa Bay's Tomes & Treasures. “We’re closing after 17 years due to competition from the Internet and declining sales. Independent bookstores are in a crisis, and it has finally caught up with us, despite our niche market,” said Whiteaker, echoing a lament articulated by the owners of Tomes and Open Book. “If the gay community doesn't support its own bookstores, who will?”

It's lost behind the archive barrier by now, but Romentics writers Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier scored a PR coup in mid-June when staff writer Alex Wachtel featured their line of gay romances in a *New York Times Magazine* article that hardly sniggered at all. The hook was the novel *Hot Sauce*, self-published last year and then picked up by Warner Books for a June 15 publication date – timed no doubt to coincide with Gay Pride month. One interesting nugget revealed in the 3000-word profile: the cover on the advance reader copy shipped to reviewers earlier this year was dropped, apparently under pressure from the buyer at Barnes & Noble, who thought a muscular torso with prominent pecs and perky nipples – and a bare crotch suggestively veiled by a whipped meringue-like froth in a bowl – was too much for the faint hearts that shop at the superstore's less Big City stores. The cover for the finished book, coy and cartoonish, depicts a couple in the foreground and a flirtatious fellow in the background – an image drawn from the plot, but it's far too fey. There is also a change from the original self-published text and the storyline in this edition: the book is set in Massachusetts, so the happy-ever-after tale ends with a real wedding, not just a commitment ceremony. (Three other Scott & Scott novels – *Razor Burn*, *Spare Parts*, *Nick of Time* – are available from gay bookstores or from here):

http://www.romentics.com/non_flash/buy.html



The article for sale:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30F11FC395C0C718DDDAF0894DD404482>

But this Boston Herald story is free:

<http://theedge.bostonherald.com/bookNews/view.bg?articleid=92809>

Suspect Thoughts Press has announced a second Project: QueerLit contest for first-time LGBTQ novelists; submissions will be accepted – one novel per author – starting Sept. 1 through Dec. 31. “The Project: QueerLit contest celebrates and brings media attention to unpublished authors of queer writing and opens doors for publication of their work. The Project: QueerLit contest is open to any unpublished author of an English-language novel with queer and/or bent content,” say organizers Greg Wharton, Sean Meriwether, and Ian Philips. For details on how to submit entries:

<http://www.projectqueerlit.com>



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Publisher Profiles:

Turtle Point Press/Helen Marx Books

One of the Turtle Point titles won a Lambda Literary Award in 2000 – Richard Howard’s poetry collection, *Trappings*. Turtle Point is essentially a one-person press run by publisher Jonathan D. Rabinowitz. Both Turtle Point and Helen Marx Books (another one-person press, run by Helen Marx) – which share a catalogue and a distributor – proudly proclaim a “concern for the art of literature.” Their innovative offering of “on-demand curiosities” includes Paul Lisicky’s 1999 coming-out novel *Lawnboy*, a book that would make my top 10 if I were ever asked for a list of the best books of that particular genre. And its 2005 catalogue of new and backlist titles (which also includes a handful of titles from Books & Co.) is rich with gay-interest writing – not always out and “out” gay fiction, to be sure, but work that discerning queer readers ought to savor. Publisher info: www.turtlepoint.com



Such as:

Other People’s Letters, by Mina Curtiss, Helen Marx/Books & Co., \$17.50
Curtiss, sister of ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein, lit out for the City of Lights in 1947 to put together a collection of the letters of Marcel Proust. In the process she interviewed in person most of his correspondents; this brisk memoir draws on the journal she kept. “...uniquely informative, especially about Proust, whom she knew intimately without ever knowing,” said Ned Rorem of this book.

The Curtiss translations crop up in a testy exchange between Richard Ellmann and Susan Sontag over a... cigar:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/8365>

Downstream, by JK Huysman, Turtle Point Press, \$10.95

From the author of the decadent classic of aesthetic ennui, *Against Nature*, this slight (80 pages) and overtly autobiographical novel is a masterpiece of pessimism, about a Parisian clerk’s little miseries. (An aside: critic Peter Hoare included Huysman in his list of writers regrettably missing from The Publishing Triangle’s 1999 list of The 100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels: “The ‘po-faced’ list was an ‘exercise in reinventing literature in the American name’. He added: ‘Overlooking EF Benson, Lytton Strachey (<http://myweb.lsbu.ac.uk/~stafflag/lyttonstrachey.html>), Joe Orton (<http://myweb.lsbu.ac.uk/~stafflag/joeorton.html>), Denton Welch (<http://myweb.lsbu.ac.uk/~stafflag/dentonwelch.html>) and JK Huysman’s seminal *Against Nature* is quite woeful, especially when they have included Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. It smacks more of queer politics than literary judgement.” Harumph.

The Publishing Triangle Bests (and 88 other suggestions):

<http://www.publishingtriangle.org/100best.asp>

Notes on Andre Gide, by Roger Martin du Gard, Helen Marx Books, \$17.50
Gide’s friend for almost 40 years wrote a quirky, intimate, and engrossing

mini-portrait of the author, perhaps most notably, of the book *Corydon*, four dialogues on the subject of homosexuality and its place in society. In his forward to the new edition of his translation John Russell writes, "This book is not long, and everything in it is stylishly put and absolutely to the point... To a large public of Left Bank literati, he was the gifted and influential writer who had 'come out' as a homosexual. To a less enlightened public, he was iniquitous." (September)

The Silent Treatment: New Poems, by Richard Howard, Turtle Point Press, \$16.95

"I don't like direct self-expression. All the work that I do is some kind of invocation of or transaction with others, whether it's criticism, translation, or poetry." So says the poet of his work in this book; among the speakers in the collection are Hannah Arendt, George Eliot, Cosima Wagner, and a boy in a photograph.

Author info: <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/howard.html>

From the backlist:

Bertram Cope's Year, by Henry Blake Fuller, Turtle Point Press, \$14.95
And quite a year it was for Bertram Cope, his live-in "companion" Arthur Lemoyne, and the residents of a small Illinois town – including a clearly gay older man. Fuller self-published this witty novel about gay domesticity in 1919 after every possible New York publisher turned it down; it received a career-chilling reception. What's most remarkable about the novel is that the same-sex love it depicts is never tortured or horrific. In fact, it's rather charmingly sedate and, oddball moments aside, refreshingly normal. You can't be a well-read literary queer until you've pleased yourself with this one.

Author info:

<http://www.online-literature.com/henry-fuller>

Read 33 excerpts:

<http://www.online-literature.com/henry-fuller/bertram-cope-year/>



The Scapegoat, by Jocelyn Brooke, Turtle Point Press, \$12.95

Originally published in 1948, this dramatic literary novel, by the biographer of John Betjeman and Ronald Firbank, is about a sensitive young boy forced to live with his retired soldier uncle - and to follow a strict regimen designed to make him a man. The stringent lifestyle, however, soon takes a psychological and an emotional toll. Any young queer with an emotionally hostile father will...well, perhaps not enjoy it – but certainly identify with its intensity.



Water From a Bucket: A Diary 1948-1957, by Charles-Henri Ford, Turtle Point Press, \$16.95

Jean Cocteau, Paul Bowles, Gertrude Stein, Jean Genet, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams – a few of the fabled names who pass through the pages of poet Ford's diary, pages that, says Edmund White, "show a golden moment before art surrendered to commerce, before gay life became brainless and ghettoized, and before America turned its back on Europe."

Author info and online interviews:

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ford/ford.htm

A Small Boy and Others, by Henry James, Turtle Point Press, \$16.95

"Written when James was 70, this is an exquisitely artful dramatic monologue on a young boy's search for 'the aesthetic clue.' James finds his evidence in the refined reconstructions of his family life, his imagination, his travel, and his memories of the streets and neighborhoods of 19th-century New York – a very personal study of fate, memory, and the wonder of youthful consciousness and curiosity."

Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler, edited by William Corbett, Turtle Point Press, \$21.95

Poet Schuyler wrote a lot of letters – at least 480 pages of them. "I love being in love with you," Schuyler writes to John Button, adding that "it makes even unhappiness seem no bigger than a pin, even at the times when I wish so violently that I could give my heart to science and be rid of it." After their affair has ended, he writes that Button's "is in many little ways, a curious apartment to stay in. Anything I open, out falls a half-consumed tube of lubricating jelly or else a crucifix." That tone, sardonic but not severe, runs through this collection.

Author info: http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jcont/James_Schuyler_DLB.htm

Phoebe 2000: An Essay in Verse, by Jeffery Conway, Lynn Crosbie, & David Trinidad, Turtle Point Press, \$21.95

Three poets, 650 pages, and, voila, the 1950 film classic *All About Eve* has been assessed, dissected, deconstructed, and obsessively connected to the world of popular culture. "An utter triumph, a contemporary Satyricon," wrote poet DA Powell.

Plasticville, by David Trinidad, Turtle Point Press, \$14.95

Some of the poems in this intelligent assessment of popular culture deal with serious topics – AIDS, the loss of friends, gay love. But for the most part, Trinidad's voice – expressed variously through couplets, terza rima, villanelles, prose poems, and sonnets – is playful, whether considering Marilyn Monroe's psyche, the yen to collect, the world of Barbie and Ken, or Greta Garbo's troll collection.

The author interviewed (with a 1978 snapshot):

<http://www.mipoesias.com/September2003/davidinterview.htm>

Author info (with a 2005 head shot):

<http://www.colum.edu/undergraduate/english/facul/full/trinidad.html>

Books-on-demand:

These titles are printed, as demanded, one at a time, by Lightning Source, a subsidiary of Ingram Distribution. So you won't likely find them on your local independent bookseller's shelves. But ask and ye shall receive – I'm not sure whether many other publishers are promoting backlist titles in this manner, but at least this kind of potential availability keeps books alive. In addition to the aforementioned *Lawnboy* by Paul Lisicky (\$14.95), which Michael Cunningham calls "a novel of mystery and great beauty," the other Turtle Point title of interest is *Two Prefaces*, by Walt Whitman, \$16.95 (the poet's prefaces to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and to *November Boughs*).

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Capote, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Brainard, and Some Easy Porn

Issue 16 of *Books To Watch Out For: Gay Men's Edition* featured the debut of an accidental columnist – San Francisco author and editor Kevin Killian, who over the past several years has written hundreds and hundreds of informed, conversational, and totally entertaining reviews – of books, movies, music, jewelry, perfume, even a picnic basket – for amazon.com. We don't think much of the messenger (that would be the online behemoth vendor of books and such) but we love the message (those would be Kevin's wonderful reviews). It's hard to keep up with him: he's writing a couple of dozen reviews every month, a handful of them of specifically gay titles. But I've culled a few more of the queer-interest (and nonfiction) titles for this issue...including one review of a porn-lite DVD.

Author info:

<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/killian/>

Kevin interviewed, a couple of years ago:

<http://home.jps.net/~nada/killian.htm>

You Are Here: A Memoir of Arrival, by Wesley Gibson, Back Bay Books, \$13.95

"I'll Have A Gibson," June 6, 2005

I didn't really think I'd enjoy this book because it was advertised in *The New Yorker*. Shallow reasoning eh? But anyhow a very good friend gave me a copy of Gibson's book for my birthday, and so I felt I had to read it. Well, let that be a lesson to me; from now on I will scour *The New Yorker* looking at all its ads, for this particular book, a cross between a memoir and a novel, turned out to be very good. I could not put it down, even though I had a zillion other things to do. I just kept reading as the day wore on, and the sun went down, and I had to fumble with the lamp to switch it on without diverting my attention from the page.

I felt I had to know what was happening with John, and what was up with Alan, and what was going to happen to Wesley once the full dimensions of John's illness became obvious. It isn't that the plot is so strong, indeed, hardly anything happens, so don't come to this book looking for Clive Cussler-style action. No, it is Gibson's wonderful insight into all the little crazy things we humans do, that make the book so compelling. I feel not so



much as that after reading his book I know Wesley Gibson, but rather that through some magical gift of X-ray vision into the heart, he knows me.

I used to live in New York, so I'm familiar with the rat race of trying to find somewhere decent to rent. And who hasn't lived through the misery of having someone die on you; even if you aren't in love with them, it still knocks you on your ass. With his love of language and his discernment and humility, Wesley Gibson brings all these things right to the surface, the place where the reader and writer extend hands and touch fingertips.

Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote, edited by Gerald Clarke, Random House, \$27.95

Too Much Of A Good Thing, June 20, 2005

I always loved Truman Capote's writing and looked forward to this book oh, so much, especially when I saw it was edited by the estimable Gerald Clarke, who has written so brilliantly on Capote in his biography (and who also wrote *Get Happy*, a terrific life of Judy Garland). (Hmmm, he must specialize in the tiny.)

But alas Capote's letters just aren't as good as his fiction. They seem hurried, scattered, as though he were writing too fast to revise, everything exactly the opposite of what one likes about the stories and film scripts. I will say you do get a different side of him, and the outlines of his social world become clearer, so view this compilation as an addendum to the biography, and you won't go far wrong.

I was surprised to see him make so much of (i.e. flatter) Cecil Beaton; it sounded phony. It seems that he treated Newton Arvin pretty well, all things put together. Some have said that he "used" Arvin to get ahead and then dumped him once he had found a measure of his own success. But Arvin can't have been an easy guy to live with IMHO. Another interesting correspondent is William Goyen. I think the best letter in all of *Too Brief a Treat* is Capote's letter congratulating Goyen on the achievement of *The House of Breath*. That letter, in the perfection of its phrases and the conviction of its rapture, is alone worth the price of the book. It's a shame that Goyen later turned on Capote and treated him so shabbily. Good for Gerald Clarke for pointing this out.

Meanwhile the good news for Capote fans is that his novel *Summer Crossing*, about which many of the letters to Bob Linscott are devoted, has been recovered and now, fifty-plus years later, it might be seeing the light of day. In the interim we will re-read these letters, hoping to scan in more data on the terrific catastrophe that was Truman Capote's life.

In the Hub of the Fiery Force: Collected Poems of Harold Norse 1934-2003, by Harold Norse, Thunder's Mouth Press, \$19.95

As many as there are stars in the sky, April 15, 2004

If he lived anywhere else but in America, he would have received the Nobel Prize by now. But we in the USA have a way of depreciating our best writers, especially if they do not fit into one or another accepted movement, or if they do not conform to government-approved standards of patriotism and "decency."

Harold Norse has the enormous range of his mentor, William Carlos Williams, and the verbal dexterity and flip amiability of his compadre, Allen Ginsberg. But in spirit he is perhaps closer to the world poets rather than to any particular American model – poets like Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Reverdy, Ungaretti, Marina Tsvetayeva. Only among these international figures, whose work argues with and deranges the ideological concerns that pre-occupy our best writers, can we finally rank Norse.

Many have spoken of his facility and technical mastery, but I think, after reading the whole of this volume, spanning an incredible seventy years, that the impression you come away with is not primarily admiration for a squeaky-clean "line," but you're blown away by the vision – of language and society – displayed by this unique poet. If we can't get him the Nobel Prize, at the very least we could try to secure him the Poet Laureateship of his adopted city – San Francisco. He's already the Pope of Albion Street.

Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard, by Ron Padgett, Coffee House Press, \$17.95

Excellent Memoir, April 11, 2005

Poet Ron Padgett is also an interesting biographer and knows how to tell a good story. In *Joe* he does a fine job in recounting the basic facts of Joe Brainard's life, and his arrangements and paragraphs are written with a poet's eye to detail and piquancy.

Everyone loves Brainard's art and his writing, and the difficulty insofar as I can see it is that the book loses a little something after Joe meets Kenward Elmslie and his career moves into high gear. As Padgett admits, his closeness to Joe began to unravel slightly at this juncture. (The two had

been high school pals in Oklahoma and had moved to New York together, with the poets Dick Gallup and Ted Berrigan, from Tulsa very early in the 1960s.)

Once Joe stops worrying about money, a little of the tension disappears from the story. Until then it has the high drama of a Dickens tale, even down to the story of Joe reduced to begging in the Boston streets and being too embarrassed actually to ask people for money. After his success, he goes to Vermont every summer, he can afford tables at the finest restaurants, he meets Jackie Onassis and Willem De Kooning, the whole nine yards of NY social success and eventually he stops painting.

His death from AIDS is briefly discussed. I have the feeling that Padgett did not want to make this into an AIDS story and wanted instead to celebrate his gay friend's life and work, but as he admits many aspects of Joe's sexuality were occluded from himself and from Pat (Padgett's wife). Whenever Joe gets close to a woman he has fantasies about taking the next step into having sex with her, but this seems to have occurred seldomly if at all. In the meantime he continues writing his book *I Remember* and its many sequels and extensions, and launches into a long-running affair with the actor Keith McDermott.

Many other figures grace the book, including Andy Warhol and Frank O'Hara. Through every detail Padgett retains his equanimity, never letting the bathwater drown the baby. I wish he would write a memoir of all his friends (and relations, having enjoyed his book about his own father, a bootlegger and a real Oklahoma "character" like Curly or Jud.)

Many anecdotes, many insights, in *Joe*. I love the tale of Padgett asking Joe, a notoriously hard person to shop for, what he would like for Christmas. Joe says, "Stairs. I don't like sitting in chairs, but I always like sitting on stairs, and I'd buy some, only I never see them for sale in shops." That would be charming enough, but then amazingly Padgett gets out his carpenters' tools and builds Joe a set of four stairs each about thirty inches wide and hauls them over to Joe's loft a few days before Christmas. It is this kind of affection and amazement that pervades this book and indeed, pervades our reading of Ron Padgett, no matter what he writes, poetry, memoir, translation.

It seems that on every page Joe is expressing his love for Pat and Ron by giving them painting after painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, you name it; they must have the world's biggest art collection. Good for them!

American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and the Making of the Beat Generation, by Jonah Raskin, University of California Press, \$24.95

[Raskin Uncovers Some Remarkable Information](#), July 23, 2004

American Scream is a well-done précis of everything that was happening in American culture at the time Ginsberg wrote *Howl* and in the months that succeeded his breakthrough.

Better yet, Raskin has had quite a coup, and he has persuaded Ginsberg's psychoanalyst (Dr. Hicks) to talk about the mental and emotional torments Ginsberg had first to overcome before he could begin the writing proper, and he has ventured into the dusty file bins and uncovered for us the actual records of Ginsberg's stays in mental hospitals and psychiatric facilities. Heretofore such records were only vaguely guessed at. Raskin uses the new information wisely, much as Diane Wood Middlebrook was able to use the testimony of Anne Sexton's analyst when writing her biography some years ago of Sexton.

There are a few places where I disagree with Raskin's implications. Regarding the now-notorious "6 Gallery" reading in San Francisco where AG premiered *Howl*, Raskin states, "Many of the notable local poets – Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser – were not included in the program, and so the gala event at the Six Gallery was a cultural snub of sorts to the poets who thought they embodied the best of Bay Area poetry." This is disingenuous, as Raskin knows: neither Duncan, Spicer, nor Blaser was living in the Bay Area at the time. Duncan was at Black Mountain College, Spicer living in NYC, and Blaser in Boston. How is this a "cultural snub"? It's also a shame that such a classy book should be spoiled by the numerous typos. On one page alone the names of two poets who spoke at Ginsberg's funeral are misspelled, so we have Andrew "Shilling" instead of Schelling, and Robert "Haas" instead of Hass. They show up in the index thus abused as well.

The Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954, by Jack Kerouac, edited by Douglas Brinkley, Viking, \$25.95

[Comedown, Sorrow, and Truest Love](#), December 23, 2004

Two of Kerouac's journals, published together and finally available for the lay reader to pick up and delve into. Editor Douglas Brinkley does a fine job putting this material into context, even if he makes overstated claims for it,

and even if he seems so needlessly to kiss John Sampas' ass, even dedicating this book to him among others of his cohort.

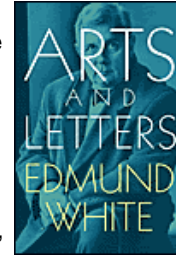
We learn a lot about Kerouac from these journals, a lot that's valuable and a lot that shows us just why so many fell in love with his mind and his thoughtful, sometimes halting way of proceeding, always trying to do the right thing despite innumerable obstacles. I think also he had a natural inclination to be sort of the bad boy, and then he had the specter of his dead brother acting on him as a kind of good angel always steering him right. With utmost seriousness he tried to plot out his life and his course of spiritual action; of course, as we see, women, booze, guys, and wanderlust got in his way, caused him to stray from the path.

His very earnestness however is endearing: "This is why life is holy," he states on pg. 211 (think of the irony on top of which such a statement would be laden today by Kerouac's so-called successors), "Because it is not a lonely accident. Therefore, again, we must love and be reverent of one another, till the day when we are all angels looking back." He sounds an apocalyptic note: "Those who are not reverent now may be the most reverent then (in their other, electrical, spiritual form.) Will there be a Judgment Day? No need to judge the living or the dead: only the happy and the unhappy with tears of pity." Kerouac seems to have seen clearly what escapes all of us but the most enlightened, that we are all creatures of sorrow and of what he calls "electricity," the charge that makes us human.

But not all of *Windblown World* is so solemn; there are some hilarious tidbits and routines, such as the curriculum JK develops in October 1949 (pp. 226-28) for a kind of "New College for Comedians," with imaginary courses that might be given by Burroughs: "How to Play the Horses" and Huncke: "Modern Drugs." His own courses were more poetic: "Riddles and Roses" and "The Myth of the Rainy Night." The requirements to get into the school? "Sixty points in elementary realization, largesse, comedown, sorrow, and truest love."

Arts and Letters, by Edmund White, Cleis Press, \$24.95
A Treasure Trove, October 18, 2004

In *Arts and Letters* veteran novelist Edmund White shows again why he is one of the most inventive English language writers. It's a salmagundi of commissioned pieces and articles that originally appeared in a variety of slick and gay magazines. Take them all together, and you get a lot of insight into White's own irresistible personality, even more so than in some of his celebrated autobiographical novels and memoirs. Plus, it's like being at the same party with some of the most intriguing personalities in the world today, as well as some dead immortals.



White's style when he profiles these luminaries is never fawning – well, maybe once or twice, but he does it so well you forgive him anything. He's fearless, and asks the people in question exactly the kind of questions you think you'd ask yourself, if you were there on the scene, and you had balls of brass. Cleis Press is to be commended for bringing out this jumbo volume. I only wish there were more.

There's just enough of a selection of White's writing about art to make you wish he'd jump in and write a whole book about the art and artists he admires. It's hard to find anything new to say about (for example) Jasper Johns or Robert Mapplethorpe, but after reading White's articles on both you will be viewing their work with new eyes. And he provides wonderful introductions to artists whose profiles may not be quite as high as these guys – Rebecca Horn, perhaps, or Steve Wolfe.

One after another of these articles are stunners – there's a fine piece on the half-forgotten French New Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, which takes you back to the day in which he was regarded as a wunderkind of depthless talent, and then shows today why he is still a writer worth studying.

White is not always Mr. Goody Two Shoes either. In one case, the Ned Rorem profile, you watch in helpless delight as Rorem gets skewered on the high kebab spears of White's erudition and wit. I also thought that printing a brief review of James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* and labeling it "James Baldwin" leads the reader to think JB will be getting the full-blown profile treatment and instead it rebounds and just makes the review seem skimpy. And in some cases the reader will disagree, perhaps violently, with White's assessment of this or that subject, and you will still feel he has won the right to deliver it. I don't believe for an instant that James Merrill is the equivalent of Cavalcanti crossed with Noel Coward, but it's amusing to hear someone say so.

By and large these essays are compelling, entertaining, and wise. It's a

book that deserves all the praise it will doubtless receive.

Freddie Mercury: An Intimate Memoir by the Man Who Knew Him Best,
by Peter Freestone, Omnibus Press, \$18

Peter Freestone traveled over hill and dale with Freddie, and holds very little back in his account of life with one of rock's most "mercurial" stars.

Was he the man who knew Freddie best? He claims to be, and yet there are a number of fans and other authorities who feel he has claimed this intimate title without the backstory to back it up. He knew the tragic star for eleven years, the last years before his death from AIDS, and he even became kind of a nurse to him, so there were elements of Freddie's life he had an eyewitness view of, and saw things no other mortal was ever privileged to see.

The music, the madness, the mirth, all are aspects that Peter isn't so hip on, but I dare any reader to go through this book right to the end and fail to shed a tear as the implications of Freddie's diagnosis begin to take root, and people begin to realize what this will mean to Freddie himself and to all those who loved Queen and rock music, too. Peter F. was there, and he writes sensitively about a difficult issue. Elsewhere his writing is humorous and sparkly, with a bit of an outsider edge, when he describes the ingenious ways he thought of to protect Freddie from the punters and paparazzi, but at the end you will feel your heart in your throat.

Guys Gone Wild, DVD, \$14.99

To sum it up for next time, June 10, 2005

While we wait for the sequel, *Spring Break Explosion*, here's my impression of the first *Guys Gone Wild* disc. And maybe a lesson or two for the makers of the first one, because it let us down quite a bit and maybe with *Spring Break* they will make some reparations. First, the plusses. For the most part the *GGW* guys are great looking, with a few duds sprinkled in here or there to keep us grounded. It's true after awhile they all begin to look alike. They have the same body type, the same haircut, the same goofy expressions frozen on their faces as their jaws try to speak in words after twelve tequilas; they shrug, they give up speaking, they concentrate hard on opening the drawstring to their pants. The sound equipment the interviewers use is horrible, and this is one DVD that might be better viewed with the mute button completely off. The interviewers can be heard screeching extremely loud, but the boys' answers are pretty mumbled, and it's not only the liquor that makes them sound underwater, it's the lack of attention placed on getting the audio right. To a lesser degree the same is true of the video. These girls can get a guy to strip off his boxers and get down to nothing at all in ten seconds flat, but they can't photograph him worth a darn.

Hire someone who can work both ends of a camera, is what I say. The camera's bobbing up and down like it's on a buoy out in a storm, it's like *The Blair Witch Project*, and when you can see anything, it's just for a flash. The other problem is, the running time is under an hour. I guess a fool and his money are soon parted but in this day of six-hour porn DVDS, who is going to be fooled twice with a 50 minute short? Get some extra footage in there pronto.

I can't wait until these guys, who have all presumably signed releases, try to get work as adults. Hopefully they won't be running as congressmen or anything that would require full disclosure. Granted we all go a little crazy when we're juiced up, but doing it for video, that's a lapse in judgment – however it's one I'm glad they made. It will give a picture of what American youth thought appropriate in the year of our Lord 2005. Now let's just have more of it, and I will rest happy. Oh, and to really add a star, girls, get them to have sex with each other on camera. How hard could that be?

The Life of Helen Stephens: The Fulton Flash, by Sharon Kinney Hanson,
Southern Illinois University Press, \$29.95

Impressive Account of One of America's Finest Athletes, July 2, 2005

Wow, before opening this book I had never heard of Helen Stephens, and now that I've finished Sharon Kinney Hanson's fine book about her life, I feel as though I have known her forever! They called her the Fulton Flash because of her great speed, and her ability to sprint took her out of Missouri and catapulted her to the great stages of the world. Like a comet streaking across the sky she represented the United States in the now legendary Berlin Olympics of 1936, where she appeared in front of Adolf Hitler and, no doubt, gave him a few ruminations about the power and speed of America. The Olympics were actually far from a rout for Germany, as Kinney Hanson reminds us. Nowadays we think that because of Jesse Owens and other great American performances, Germany had its ass handed to it at the games, but far from it; they actually did very well and Hitler must have been quite proud! In women's track events, Germany won seven medals, the US

only two – both courtesy of Helen Stephens. Conceivably she could have won more medals, but some events, opened to women competitors in later Olympics, were closed to her in 1936 (like shotput, at which she was a great champ).

Photos show she was an astonishing beauty, with great bones, perhaps a little Amazonian and androgynous. Some people thought she was a man, and this irked her no end. She sued *LOOK* magazine and as funny comeuppance for *LOOK* she went out on a date with one of *LOOK*'s lawyers. After several drinks things got hot and heavy. As the author reports, "Helen told her friend Gertrude Webb, 'I had a sense he was trying to find something. So this ole country girl let him roam around awhile 'til he found what he was lookin' for. I just wanted to settle it then and there!'"

Nevertheless, Stephens was a lesbian in a homophobic society and stood her ground with dignity and courage. It was hard for such a woman to 'come out' but inevitably she did, or almost did. The whole tragedy of women's sports in the twentieth century is a story that Sharon Kinney Hanson tells with distinction and clarity. She brings all her skills to her on-point account of the apparently intersex sprinter Stella Walsh, who was killed by a robber's gunfire in 1980. Because of the violent death she was subject to an autopsy in Cleveland of all places, which revealed her ambiguous genitalia. Stella Walsh, one of the greatest Olympic heroines, was one of the closest friends of the Fulton Flash, and her death apparently had great impact on Helen. I won't reveal any more of the story, except to say, it is an amazing one, the kind that makes you put down the book and just say, "Holy Moly."

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Bestsellers from Our Bookstores

The top five at Bookshop Darlingurst, Australia

1. *Running With Scissors*, by Augusten Burroughs – Gay memoir
2. *The Line of Beauty*, by Alan Hollinghurst – Gay novel
3. *Dead Europe*, by Christos Tsiolkas – Isaac is a photographer in his mid-30s, travelling through Europe. As he travels, he discovers that ghosts keep appearing in the photographs he takes, providing clues to a family secret and tragedy. Parallel to Isaac's story is a narrative set in the Greece of World War II. Advance readers report this long awaited new novel by the author of *Loaded* to be a bold and confronting read with a lot of (gay) sex.
4. *Six Positions: Sex Writing*, by Andy Quan – Short story collection (the author, a Canadian, has worked in Sydney for six years).
5. *The Diaries of Donald Friend, Volume 3*, by Donald Friend – Covering the period from March 1949 to December 1966, volume three of the extraordinary diaries of Donald Friend sees Friend travel to Italy, London, France, Spain and Sri Lanka before eventually returning to Sydney. During this period he is also producing art (winning the Blake Prize in 1955), writing books, absorbing the influences of various cultures, and meeting a fascinating range of people, including Attilio Guarracino, Peter Sculthorpe, Patrick White, Robert Hughes and Ian Fairweather.

Bookstore info: <http://www.thebookshop.com.au/home.php>

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