



In this issue...

- [An Editorial Note](#)
- ['Gay Fiction Matters'](#)
- [Q&A With KM Soehnlein](#)
- [Thomas Waugh: Cottage-Industry Frottage](#)
- [Justin Chin: Blood On The Shelves](#)
- [44 Labonte Reviews, Linked](#)
- ['Net Notes: Gay Marriage, Boring?](#)
- [Peppy & Profound: Dennis Cooper Blogs](#)
- [Gay For Pay, For Gals, & Other News](#)
- [5 More Of Killian's Divine Reviews](#)
- [From Our Bookstores: Calamus Blurbs](#)
- [InsightOut Bestsellers For July](#)

The Gay Men's Edition

— this issue sponsored by —

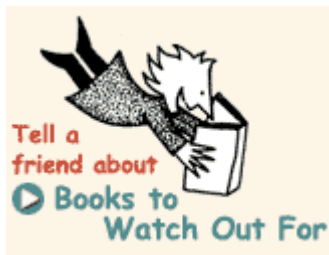
Advocate Books

publisher of

Center Square: The Paul Lynde Story

From *Bewitched* to *Center Square*, funnyman Paul Lynde snuck a daily dose of queerness into Middle America while the fab five and Will and Grace were in diapers! This is his remarkable story.

Volume 2 Number 6



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.

- » [Click here](#) to **subscribe**.
- » [Click here](#) for **more info**.
- » [Click here](#) to **tell a friend** about the Lesbian Edition.

The Gay Men's Edition

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

By **Richard Labonte**

An editorial note:

There are fewer of my on reviews in this installment of **Books To Watch Out For/Gay Men's Edition**, and more by other people. In addition to a third set of Kevin Killian's divine reviews, two regular contributors to *Lambda Book Report* submitted reviews they had written for the magazine before it went on suspension/ hiatus/ whatever: Jim Gladstone writes about a collection of gay erotic underground art compiled by Thomas Waugh, and Tom Cardamone writes about a collection of performance-art prose by Justin Chin. Both will be contributing other reviews in months to come. Meanwhile, **BTWOF** publisher Carol Seajay is in discussion with former *LBR* editor Lisa Moore about - with the writers' OK - sprinkling reviews that had been submitted to the magazine for upcoming issues into future installments of both the *Gay Men's* and the *Lesbian* editions of **BTWOF**; in addition, the final issue of the *Book Report* - the one almost ready for the printers when the plug was pulled - may be distributed as a large PDF file to both *Lambda Book Report* and **BTWOF** subscribers. More news to follow...and more reviews by me next issue.

.....

[back to top](#)

There Was A Time When Gay Fiction Mattered

"There was a time when gay fiction mattered," KM Soehnlein says in the first sentence of his essay "Putting Gay Fiction Back Together," one of two dozen pieces in *Bookmark Now: Writing in Unreaderly Times*, edited by Ken Smokler (Perseus Books, \$14.95). The contributors - one in her early 40s, one just 19, the rest in their 20s and 30s - were asked to "talk about writing and reading in an age where they both seem almost quaint." Soehnlein, the happily gay author of the overtly gay novels *The World of Normal Boys* (Kensington, \$14) and *You Can Say You Knew Me When* (Kensington, \$23, September, reviewed in **BTWOF/GM #17**), focused on the continued need for a distinct gay literature - a perspective diametrically different from the

compiled by Richard Labonte.
 » [Click here](#) to **subscribe**.
 » [Click here](#) for **more info**.
 » [Click here](#) to **tell a friend**
 about the Gay Men's Edition.

More Books for Women
 will launch in 2005.

» [Click here](#) to be notified
 when it launches.



Advertising & Sponsorships

BTWOF is financed by subscriptions, rather than advertising or book sales. Publishers and individuals who wish to help launch BTWOF are invited to sponsor any of the first 12 issues. Write to [Mozelle Mathews](#) for sponsorship information.



Housekeeping

If you want to change your BTWOF email address or other contact information, [click here](#) to update:

- » your subscriber profile
- » whatever has changed.



Finding BTWOF

BTWOF is published by Carol Seajay and Books To Watch Out For.

www.BooksToWatchOutFor.com

Email: Editor@BTWOF.com

PO Box 882554

San Francisco, CA 94131.

415.642.9993.

Send books for review consideration for the **Gay Men's Edition** directly to Richard Labonte at
 7-A Drummond St W
 Perth, ON K7H 2J3
 Canada.

Books for the **Lesbian Edition** should be sent to the San Francisco address.



views expressed by David Leavitt in a controversial *New York Times Book Review* essay in early July. Here are the nut paragraphs from their essays:

Soehnlein: "If worthy novels by gay male writers are still being published, does it matter that the category has lost its prominence? One can argue that such a situation is preferable, a sign of political assimilation. Perhaps we have come full circle to Edward Albee," (a reference to Albee's declaration at the 1991 Outwrite conference in San Francisco that he refused to be labeled as 'a gay writer' -RL) "whose desire to be seen as simply a writer, without the delineating modifier *gay*, no longer seems heretical, but status quo. One thinks of the oft-used construction "so-and-so *happens* to be gay," which treats homosexuality as a trait no more significant than left-handedness. But, of course, left-handers are no longer shamed into altering their natural dexterity; homosexuals still start out their lives presumed by everyone around them not to be homosexual. A minority culture, misunderstood and seen as alien (to say nothing of the rights denied it) needs its own literature. Gay fiction may have lost some of its necessary social function, but what has stepped in to replace it is grossly inadequate."

Leavitt: "A gay bookshop (or a gay shelf in a general bookshop) implies that there is such a thing as a gay book. When I started writing, a gay novel, at least, was fairly easy to define. In it the hero or heroine's homosexuality stood by necessity at the dramatic center of the plot. More than that, such a novel presumed that any gay person's homosexuality stood at the center of the plot; that in the paper-rock-scissors game of identity, gay was always the rock.... Attitudes were changing faster than habits. As they did, the gay novel, along with the gay bookstore, was becoming obsolete. A digging in of heels almost always heralds imminent obsolescence, and now, thanks in great part to the efforts of the men and women who opened the first gay bookshops, a new generation is coming of age for whom the whole matter of homosexuality is just one of a host of different ways of being."

I'm with Soehnlein. As a prolific reader, I can and do relish Leavitt's ideal of the perfect novel for gay readers - novels where queer characters are cleanly integrated into the plot of a novel: Renee Manfredi's shimmering debut novel, *Above the Thunder* (Anchor Books, \$13), falls divinely into this category; Bill Pronzini's *Nightcrawlers* (Forge Books, \$24.95) more creepily has a straight detective tracking down homophobes who are murdering gay street kids. They're both examples of "straight" books that gay readers who like either quirky-life stories or dark-toned mysteries will appreciate - but also the sort of novels that Leavitt would dismiss from the gay canon. From my perspective, they're also both books any self-styled and still surviving queer bookstore ought to have on their shelves - entertainment for discerning gay readers. But I more emphatically agree with Soehnlein - that there is serious gay lit that deserves and demands to be labeled "gay fiction" for young readers, new readers, just-out readers, and any reader (there are many, and they matter) who depend on knowing that a book is gay when it comes to deciding how to spend their entertainment dollars...or who relish the sense of identification and validation that comes from reading a book written by one of their own tribe, about their own tribe.

This question of categorization is itself discussed by Matthew Fox (*Cities of Weather*, Cormorant Books, \$24.95) in an essay in the June/July issue of *Maisonneuve* magazine, a kind of cheeky hybrid of *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Vanity Fair*, *Radar*, *The Onion*... well, it's pretty unique. Here are a few nut paragraphs from the piece, "Useful Ghettos: The Success of Gay Literature Proves that There is Virtue in Categories" (not available on-line, alas):

"We're a long distance from the 1930s and '40s, when W. H. Auden refused the "gay" label, because he did not want his talents to be clouded by his sexuality. We're also a long distance from the post-Stonewall era of the seventies, when gay writing was, as a genre, colored by the political aggressiveness of the gay-rights movement. Nowadays, "gay" books don't necessarily have to deal with issues of discrimination. In fact, as gay themes become less taboo, there is less pressure on homosexual authors to offer explicit scenes of sex, saunas, cottaging, coming out - the literary equivalents of screaming,

“We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” - unless they are creatively useful.... Gone are the poncey, vain, pseudo-effeminate characters of yesteryear, most of whom had fates shaped by an unwritten rule that gay characters must suffer enormously, then die (think Aschenbach of *Death in Venice* or Basil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). Awareness of classic gay narratives has already been established, and clichés about gay life are becoming more complex as homosexuality is further integrated into mainstream culture. Today’s lesbians, for example, are more likely to see their reflection in *The Serpent’s Gift* than in *The Well of Loneliness*.

“This can, of course, be credited to the successes of the gay-rights movement. But just as important, if more superficial, is the *Will & Grace*-ification of mainstream expectations. Gay literature has risen to the challenge of its new, diverse audience. Last year, I contributed a story to a gay anthology, *Fresh Men*, in which editor Don Weise called this a ‘bright new era’ in the genre, which offers ‘new perspectives and refreshing takes on old themes and traditions.’ The book is populated by protagonists that are straight or women, closeted or celibate. Reading through it, I found myself constantly surprised by the kinds of stories now considered ‘gay’, to the point where I felt my own work wasn’t edgy enough.

“I find this freeing. As legendary editor George Stambolian wrote in his 1988 anthology *Men on Men 2*, ‘The term *gay fiction* refers not only to an impressive body of work but to the liberation of a complex subject, and an entire community’s right to free use of its imagination.’ And now, in 2005, gay literature is in the process of that liberation; it can be defined as any writing that draws on homosexual experience—from STDs to drag to stereotypes - to make its literary point.

“Is that it, then? Are we indeed, as author Bert Archer has argued, at the ‘end of gay’ as an identity? If gay literature, circa 2005, can be defined so broadly, then why classify it at all? Should we not chuck aside the categorizing that pigeonholes our books, preventing them from reaching that aforementioned broader audience?

“Absolutely not. Categorizing a book doesn’t necessarily pigeonhole it. Look online: Internet sales are based around the idea that books can be categorized - even the unclassifiable are classified under headings like ‘miscellaneous’ and ‘other.’ Such labels carry denotations of their own, but they exist because they *have to*. One of the quirks - or dare I say advantages - of the virtual marketplace is that although everything is funneled into retail pockets, a book with more than one selling point can appear in numerous places. While the aforementioned anthology only appears under five of amazon.com’s subject headings, (Alan Hollinghurst’s) *The Line of Beauty* finds its way into eleven. The more ways we categorize books, it seems, the more irrelevant the categories become, and *the more readers we can reach*.”

And that seems to me to be the crux of the *gay book/book that is gay* argument – one that’s been nattering on for decades, though Leavitt’s essay certainly re-crystallizes the debate. In the end, what matters most is that writers and their books find the kind of readers and, inversely, that readers find the kind of authors and their books, to please both sides of the equation. Gay, lesbian, queer – in the end, they are labels that still matter.

Or, as Fox further writes in his essay:

“There are other advantages to the genre system. I’ve been advised to avoid being pegged a ‘gay writer’ - not because that’s how I identify myself, but because this can be used as an excuse to criticize me, limit me, or worst of all, ignore me. This is the same concern that parents of gay children have: that their children’s lives will be made harder because of the label. The point is well taken, and no doubt the consequences are real, but the label has also given certain people an excuse to seek me out, to read my work and to include me. Publishers, editors, and publicists all need to find a hook to sell their products, and one of mine is that I am gay.

"My homosexuality, in other words, is now a marketing tactic. This is par for the course today, now that most talk about literature is sparked by marketing tactics. This used to make me uneasy, but I've since recognized that one has to start somewhere. Margaret Atwood's first book, *The Edible Woman*, was labeled 'feminist'; Hunter S. Thompson was branded a 'gonzo journalist'; Thomas Randall's *The Nymph and the Lamp*, which started out as a Harlequin book, is now on Canadian literature syllabi from coast to coast.

"The labeling tactic is just a beginning - rarely do discussions stop there. The ploy itself is to get people to read, and once a book is read, the way it's been superficially branded becomes far less important. Yes, sometimes a label can dictate the context in which a book is approached, though that's not always a bad thing. It may keep some readers away, but if someone is going to read a gay book or none at all, I hope they read the gay book."

That's my hope, too, and Karl Soehnlein's. But not David Leavitt's – who, ironically, was a breakout success at an early age (first short story in *The New Yorker* at age 20) because, gosh, he, and the short story, were gay.

An interview with *Bookmark Now* Editor Ken Smokler:

<http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/smokler.html>

What David Leavitt says, in his assessment that gay bookstores don't much matter any more, starting with an account of his one-day bookselling career as a clerk at Oscar Wilde:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/17/books/review/17LEAVITT.html>

What's a *Maisonneuve*?:

<http://maisonneuve.org/page.php?pagename=about>

A recent review of *Cities of Weather*:

http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2005-07-14/books_reviews2.php

A Matthew Fox short story online:

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

Some other views:

Akashic Press publisher Johnny Temple reflects on Leavitt's premise that gay bookstores are so over: *"I support gay bookstores - the best of them play a vital function in today's relatively sterile retail environment - and I am saddened by the closing of Oscar Wilde.* Progressive communities and subcultures need our institutions now more than ever, what with the Patriot Act, the senseless and tragic war, and Republican political domination. But I do share David Leavitt's skepticism about separate gay shelving in general bookstores. Most of the queer authors I publish choose to leave the words "gay" and "lesbian" off their book jackets. The primary concern isn't that homophobic book-buyers will disregard them - it's that their books will be pigeonholed by booksellers and the media. One author complained that she had found her novel shelved between a gay cookbook and a gay self-help book, while William Burroughs's books were hanging out on the fiction shelf with all the other novelists—in the section Leavitt characterizes as "the alphabetical and promiscuous flow of literature."*

http://www.thebookstandard.com/bookstandard/community/commentary_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000990411

*Temple apparently misread Leavitt's piece, inferring from the first few sentences that Oscar Wilde Bookshop had closed, when in fact it remains open under the aegis of Lambda Rising. That's bad enough; it's so much worse that the editors of *The Book Standard* didn't bother to fact-check – or to even read through the Leavitt piece on which Temple based his commentary!

Academic Nathan Hazard ruminates on "why gay books?" for his creative writing course, "Men on Men: The Depiction of Homosexuality in Contemporary Queer Male Literature" – which includes an impressive bibliography:

"My initial concern on entering the third floor gay and lesbian section of Powell's was simple: Now, why is there a separate gay and lesbian section? Queer studies, sure. But gay and lesbian literature... that was problematic for

me. I wasn't exactly sure why, but I knew it was something I needed to explore – to find out why the segregation itched my conscience, and why everyone else seemed okay with it.”

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~crwrweb/Kidd/hazardloi.htm>

Masha Gutkin of *the SF Bay Guardian* is all for supple identities:

“For many queers, what attracted (and attracts) us in our reading was/is a sense of transgression of visible and invisible bounds of gender, narrative, class, race. Queerness isn't an element so easily isolated from the rest of life's blood. The other day, in *Dog Eared Books*, I saw a little note taped up on the 'Queer Lit' shelf. It read: 'The line between queer and nonqueer lit has blurred...' Yes.”

http://www.sfbg.com/39/38/lit_queer_souls.html

And in a July 27 blog entry, Dennis Cooper (more from his blog, below) writes: “You don't hear the term 'gay literature' that often nowadays. Gay fiction, gay poetry, yeah. But 'gay lit,' coined in the 80s to draw a new kind of boundary around gay-identified authors past, present, and future, is most often invoked to describe the relatively brief moment in time when the notion of a gay-specific serious writing had presence in the cultural discourse. Ideally, this means people have come around to the truth that lit is lit and shit is shit, whatever its themes or author's orientation.”

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

.....

[back to top](#)

“Good Book/Good Gay Book”

A Soehnlein Q&A

BTWOF: The thesis of *Bookmark Now: Writing in Unreaderly Times* is that, against the odds, good books still matter. What's your definition of a good gay book?

KM Soehnlein: Well, the first point I always make on this subject is that, literally, there are no “gay books.” A pile of paper bound together doesn't have a sexuality. But there *are* gay readers, who often look for stories that relate to their lives - and *need* these stories. In this way, we're no different than any reader hoping to find something in a book that he or she can relate to. Usually this is a matter of character or story; sometimes what we want to relate to is an artistic or aesthetic experience. And there are also gay writers, who presumably have the chops to tell the types of stories those gay readers are looking for. The publishing industry creates categories to bring those two together. Thus, “gay fiction.” That's the good news and the bad news. Good because a label like “gay book” or “gay fiction” helps readers find what they're looking for, and helps writers reach a core audience. Bad because, like all labels, these have their limits. David Leavitt spells some of that out in his *New York Times* essay, in particular the way shelving a book in a store under “gay” can seem arbitrary - most usually for the writer, who wants to be free to write any kind of story that sparks his or her imagination, whether or not it fits neatly into a marketing category.

It's easier for me to talk about what makes a good book than a good *gay* book. A good book is one with a level of sophistication in its craft - characters who are complicated, surprising yet believable; language that is clear but not commonplace or clichéd; a narrative that builds a journey for the characters that leads to insight or change (not always for the better). A good book always has a strong voice - one that leaves you believing that *this* story could only be told by *this* writer. I could go on and on about that - it's the creative writing teacher in me - but let's just say it's the intersection of form and content: what you have to say, and how you say it. So any discussion about a good *gay* book for me starts there, with the depth and seriousness of the writing.

What I say in my *Bookmark Now* essay is that gay fiction “holds up a mirror, but at a slant, so that the angle of reflection captures not just the newly visible self but the surrounding world as well.” In this way, I think I differ from Leavitt, who seems to see gay fiction enmeshed in the question of



gay identity: "In such books, homosexuality was a Very Big Deal, and had to be treated as such if it was to be mentioned at all." As I see it, even if homosexuality is not a "very big deal" in a particular book, the *perspective* offered by a gay character and/or writer is, to my thinking, quite a big deal indeed. In gay fiction, a character's sexuality provides the "eye" through which the world is seen. It's a perspective that rises up from being a minority (and often a vilified one, even as things are surely better for us in so many ways than they were half a century ago).



The short answer to this question would have been: a good gay book has something to say about the world that arises from the fact that the character or author is gay. And it's written well.

BTWOF: Your essay, "Putting Gay Fiction Back Together," considers the intractable question: Gay Writer or Writer Who is Gay. Why does it matter?

KMS: Let's be honest here - this is a conundrum. It's one that every single writer I know, gay or not, struggles with. If you see yourself as an artist, you don't want limiting labels. You want freedom, a sense of expansiveness; and you probably hold the view that art crosses boundaries, so who needs labels? I have a friend, a straight woman who writes a lot of stories with women protagonists, who groans when she finds her books called "women's fiction." She asks, "Does that mean only women are supposed to read my stories, that only women can get something out of them?" On that level, straight readers need gay fiction more than gay readers: they need to see the world from our perspective. But that's not really the way reading - or at least book-buying - works. Most of us seek out books that are going to address what's already on our minds.

I think "gay writer" is a label that recognizes the importance of the designation "gay fiction," whereas a "writer who happens to be gay" probably sits more comfortably with a writer who isn't interested in the designation. In my essay I was suggesting that gay writers embrace the category not as a limitation, but as a distinction. Leavitt says the opposite: "Time to retire the category altogether." But I don't think we're there yet.

BTWOF: Elsewhere in your essay, you're somewhat dismissive of gay genre fiction ("gay lit lite") - romance, humor, mystery, horror, and (the most burgeoning of them all) erotica ("gay lit without the lit"). I'd argue that any gay-themed book read is better than no gay-themed book read at all - and that this kind of book keeps the queer publishers you cite for sustaining literature (among them, Cleis and Suspect Thoughts) alive - a form of commercial fiction praised by your own editor at Kensington Books. Is there any genre fiction, or a genre writer, you find pleasure in reading?

KMS: Your point is right on. The guys at Suspect Thoughts, Ian Philips and Greg Wharton, are friends of mine, and I'm thrilled they've found a way to sustain themselves. If publishing *Rode Hard, Put Away Wet: Lesbian Cowboy Erotica*, helps fill their coffers and allows them to also publish a brilliant, subversive book like Ali Liebegott's "novel in verse," *The Beautifully Worthless*, then who am I to point fingers? At the same time, Ian himself (author of *See Dick Deconstruct* and *Satyriasis*) is a smart, funny prose stylist, and when his work gets called "erotica," I think to myself, it's so much more than that - so much better, in other words, than a lot of the soft-core porn that winds up in erotica anthologies. It's gay fiction. That's enough of a label for me.

I took a lot of pleasure in different genres when I was a young reader. I moved along the mystery continuum from the Hardy Boys to Encyclopedia Brown to Agatha Christie. I read horror thrillers by Peter Straub and Stephen King and John Saul. One of the first stories I ever wrote was a weird sci-fi satire called *Invasion of the Zit Monsters*. (I was in the throes of early puberty - and clearly trying to work some shit out!) But at a certain point in my reading I found I wanted books to have something to do with the actual world I lived in. I got hooked on realism. *Salem's Lot* seemed a lot less scary after I read *Lord of the Flies* in the ninth grade. The idea of a predatory vampire couldn't compare to the terror of being stranded on an island of cruel, unsupervised teenage boys.

BTWOF: You quote Edmund White's 1991 *New York Times Magazine* report on the state of gay literature: "The revolution of the gay male novel has seemed breathlessly rapid." You then lament: "Ten years after White's essay appeared, you'd be hard-pressed to find the *Times Magazine* exploring the gay male novel as a cultural topic, much less one in a state of breathless revolution." In June, the same magazine reported breathlessly on the

Romantics line of gay romantic novels, keyed to the fact that Warner Books reissued the self-published romance *Hot Sauce*, by Scott Whittier and Scott Pomfret, in the "Gay Pride" month of June. What do you think of that particular revolution?

KMS: I think it's not a revolution, it's a capitulation: not only to the happy-ending formula, but to the beautiful hunk as the paradigm of what it means to be a gay man. We already get force-fed that idealized male image in our glossy magazines and in advertising aimed at our gay dollars. White's "revolution of the gay male novel" referred to writers telling stories that had never been told before: honest self-expression from a group that has been stifled by society.

The biggest problem with genre, to my mind, is the way it continues to create a sealed world inside of which a particular formula gets to live and recreate itself endlessly. Obviously, a lot of people like living in that sealed world (51 million romance readers a year, says the *Times*). But I don't get it. What is this need to whitewash the complications of love and desire? I take exception to the idea, expressed by one of the Scotts in that article, that gay fiction is all tragedy without optimism and tenderness, and that the antidote to that is hunky guys having hot sex inside of monogamous relationships. Look, I don't begrudge any writer's desire to write anything they want. Scott and Scott know what they want to write, and they seem to be finding an audience and a lot of publicity for their efforts. More power to them. But, again, for me, realism is important. I want gay books to take on as much of our big, messy, unfair world as possible, and to offer some wisdom. If I want a happy ending, I turn on the TV. If I want someone to whisper the complicated truths of the human condition in my ear, I open a book by an author not afraid to grapple with those truths.

BTWOF: And a couple of weeks after the magazine's article heralding gay romances, Leavitt declared that "the gay novel, along with the gay bookstore, was becoming obsolete...a new generation is coming of age for whom the whole matter of homosexuality is just one of a host of different ways of being." His view is at odds with yours - that "a minority culture, misunderstood and seen as alien (to say nothing of the rights denied it), needs its own literature." What influences brought you to your more activist position?

KMS: My early 20s were completely enmeshed in activism. I spent years as part of ACT UP/New York when the group was at its most influential. Queer Nation was born in my living room in the East Village. At a certain point I got burned out and realized that I didn't want to be writing flyers for demonstrations, I wanted to write fiction. But I still hold on to a sense of mission in terms of queer identity. I still believe that one of the things that queer writers can do best is look at the destructive and pervasive force of homophobia in our world and, crucially, in our own psyches. (It's a terribly unfashionable word these days; we're all supposed to be so enlightened, so *over* the idea that homophobia still holds the power to define us.)

Knowing this about myself - that part of me still wants to change the world - requires a kind of diligence on my part not to create situations in my stories that are politically simplistic or characters who are just mouthpieces for positions. That's a dilemma I face again and again: how to have a sense of the political in my work without getting didactic.

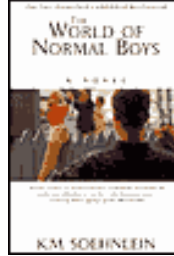
BTWOF: You end your essay with this challenge: "Gay fiction will matter again when our writers see themselves as not only necessary to the articulation of the gay experience, but also necessary to the future of literature." Can you recommend at least five queer novels of recent vintage that have met this challenge?

KMS: The best book I read this year is Richard McCann's *Mother of Sorrows*. Beautiful, insightful prose, unforgettable characters - I hope it finds an audience. I really liked Aaron Krach's *Half Life*, which I recently finished. It's a book with an unlikely romance at the center of it - between a teenage boy and the cop who's called to the scene when this boy's father dies - but Krach makes it believable with a lot of detail and sharp dialogue and the viewpoints of dozens of other characters who hover around these central two and deepen the story. Christopher Bram's *The Notorious Doctor August* has stayed with me in the years since it came out. Bram's such a great writer, and he can take on any subject (in this case, post-Civil War America) and make it his own. I liked Jim Grimsley's *Boulevard* quite a lot, particularly the first third, where we watch a young man find his place in the subculture of gay New Orleans in the 1970s. Grimsley creates this young guy's consciousness so convincingly that he actually made the gay '70s seem like new material for fiction. I thought Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance* was really skillful; he weaves together two completely different situations - pedophilia at

a boy's summer camp, and the way the Amish community shuns its fallen members - and makes the reader work to understand how these connect for the main character (who, by the way, doesn't even define himself as gay). And then there are the books I trumpet in *Bookmark Now*: Allan Gurganus's masterpiece *Plays Well with Others*, Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim Two Boys*, Trebor Healey's *Through it Came Bright Colors*, and anything by Michael Cunningham.

BTWOF: *The World of Normal Boys*, like many queer fiction debuts, was a coming-of-age/coming out novel - a literary genre all its own, and one that to your surprise was an impediment in its finding a publisher. I take the opposite view - I think every new generation of readers needs its own generation of coming-out books - in addition to relishing classics like White's *A Boy's Own Story* and John Fox's *Boys on the Rock*. What was the inspiration for your own novel (which you've said elsewhere is not autobiographical)?

KMS: One inspiration was the stories that friends of mine would tell about having sex, and falling in love with other boys, in their early teenage years.



Another inspiration was the idea that a family tragedy can just as easily tear that family apart as bring it more strongly together. Robin MacKenzie was my attempt to embody both of those struggles. The tragedy that hits his family triggers Robin's rebellion, which includes having sex with boys in high school. It was important to me that *The World of Normal Boys* not be a "coming out" novel. In other words, Robin doesn't slip comfortably into a politically-defined gay identity at the end of the book, though he does realize that "normal" is bullshit, and he embraces the rebellious side he's been testing out. My interest was in looking at teenage male sexuality along a continuum - on one end is Robin, who will one day identify as gay; on the other is his neighbor, Todd Spicer, who won't, though he definitely likes to suck dick; and in the middle is my favorite character, Scott Schatz, whose comfort, or lack of comfort, with his sexuality will always be determined by the pressures of a very fractured home life.

BTWOF: *You Can Say You Knew Me When*, your second novel, is hitting the bookshelves in a few weeks. A good part of it is historical, both in its portrayal of an elderly gay couple who lived through the early '60s, and in its depiction of the central character's quest into his father's '60s past. Did anything in particular draw you to that era?

KMS: Most of the novel takes place in San Francisco in the early months of 2000, when the main character, Jamie, is living through the last furious months of the dot-com bubble. I lived through that myself, and wanted to write about it while it was still fresh. The '60s part of the novel emerges through letters and diaries written by Jamie's father, who lived in SF in 1960 and '61. I was drawn to those years because they usually fall through the cracks of history. We hear about the Beats in the '50s and the flower children in the late '60s, but I wondered about what came in between? What I discovered - and what Jamie discovers, as he begins tracking down people his father knew forty years earlier - was that this was a very important time for the gay community, especially in San Francisco. This is when you see the formation of the first gay business organization, the Tavern Guild, and when the Mattachine Society was giving way to the more activist Society for Individual Rights (who abbreviated themselves "SIR"). I actually befriended one of the founders of SIR, an elderly gay man named Bill Plath, who lived with his lover, Dick Rousseau, in an old Victorian house much like the one I put in my novel. Bill and Dick told me stories that I hadn't heard before, stories that punctured the myth that the gay community was born after Stonewall. They had a relatively "out" life for two decades before Stonewall, and in fact San Francisco's queer community was already laying the groundwork for a national movement. Sadly, both Bill and Dick died before I finished writing the book.



The other thing that was interesting to me was looking at the queer side of the Beat generation. This is a subject that's been getting more attention lately; to cite just one recent example, Regina Marler's excellent anthology, *Queer Beats*, came out as I was finishing my novel. I wanted to look at it from the question of how the homoerotic side of Kerouac's work might have been understood (consciously or not) by a young, ostensibly straight, male fan in the late '50s. My challenge was to take all this history, and these inquiries, and find in them a narrative - characters, situations, conflict - and a voice. That came through with the father/son story line, and also with Jamie's

downward spiral.

BTWOF: How far along - I assume there is one - is the third novel? Anything you want to tell readers about it?

KMS: I finished *You Can Say You Knew Me When* late last year, and since then I've been working on short stories. I needed to write something short, because the novel took four years to write and is 400 pages long! I've been playing around with different characters and voices, trying to write complete pieces but also hoping to stumble upon a vision of my next novel. And I have - I've begun the earliest steps at working with material set during the late '80s in New York. I'm finally ready to write about my activist days. I think. I haven't figured out enough to say much more than that, but I'm looking forward to diving in and see what I come up with.

Soehnlein tells why *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, by Edmund White, is the book that matters most to him:

<http://www.powells.com/features/bookmark.html>

Author info: www.kmsoehnlein.com (in August)

.....

[back to top](#)

Playful And Salacious: *Gay Underground Smut*

Vintage Gay Graphics from the DuBek Collection, by Thomas Waugh, with Willie Walker, Arsenal Pulp Press
by Jim Gladstone

Thoroughly enjoyable and utterly unnecessary, editor Thomas Waugh's playful, pulpy follow-up to his revelatory 2002 volume, *OUT/LINES: Gay Underground Graphics from Before Stonewall*, is chock full of more than 250 salacious samples of the gay male porn that passed from hand-to-hand back in the days before downloading. The images here, as in the first book, have a vivacity, warmth and humor that is markedly absent from today's commercially machined pornography. One senses that the pleasure of these drawings – most done in pen or pencil and then circulated (sometimes for free, and sometimes for fee) in photographic reproduction – is a mutual one, shared by the artist as well as viewer. Even the technically cruder work - such as the drawings of priapic British bobbies and their sailor boy pick-ups by the anonymous artist Waugh dubs Happyface (for his subjects' almost imbecilic grins) – expresses a sense of emotional investment and genuine affection for sex that's rarely evinced in contemporary smut. Without an even marginally legitimized mass market for porn at the time they were created, the pieces here emanate an aura of shared secrets as much as peddled flesh.



In his introductory text to what is essentially an erotic coffee table book (*Cream with your coffee, sir?*), Waugh, who teaches film studies at Concordia University in Montreal, reveals himself to be a charmingly angsty academic, dithering over exactly *why* this second collection has come into being. He constantly refers back to the editing, publishing, and public appreciation of *OUT/LINES*, his prior book, marveling at how much better it sold than his earlier scholarly works, reveling in the nominations and awards it accrued, even noting its Amazon sales ranking. Waugh at once takes justified pride in his astute socio-cultural exegesis of previously marginalized hardcore images while acknowledging forthrightly that, "it was not my pontifical musings, but rather those naughty drawings that sold the book."

In bringing those drawings – previously stashed away in private personal collections and San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society – to public light, Waugh really did unearth an underappreciated part of gay history with *OUT/LINES*. He introduced many readers (in easygoing prose that sounds much more like a chatty, erudite friend than a pontiff) to an unexpected side of pre-commercial porn: community-building through visual art. *Lust Unearthed*, ironically, finds Waugh poking his spade around in soil that he's already turned. It is not so much a sequel to the first book as a marketable spin-off. Having begun with a bit of a pop-scholarly breakthrough, Waugh

and Arsenal Pulp Press, are capitalizing on their success, turning hand-drawn mid-20th century porn into a cottage frottage industry for the Internet age. Rest easy, Professor Waugh, it's a little naughty, perhaps, but nothing to be ashamed of.

The images in *Lust Unearthed* are assembled from the archive of a single collector, Ambrose Dubek, a television and stage set designer who traveled in New York bon vivant circles and died at 86 in 2002. Many of the pieces are by artists with similar work in *OUT/LINES*, but there are some fresh surprises here, including some rare collage-like sketches likely penciled by celebrated painter Paul Cadmus, who never allowed imagery quite so explicit onto his canvases. Other gems include a sequence of sprawling orgy scenes by an illustrator who goes by Jean Vincent and suggest something the famed outsider artist Henry Darger might have come up with had he favored hunky sailors to little girls. And there's a comically surreal grouping of monumentally outsized penises – one of which is ridden, chariot-style, by a nude man who stands atop a goliath testicle (ouch), gallantly cracking a whip at the swollen shaft, which is a good thirty times the size of his own wee willy, almost lost in the thicket of pubic hair sprouting from the uber-phallus.

Waugh's choice to organize several sections of the book along the lines of what he characterizes as British, French, German, and American national fantasies seems rather forced, particularly since the provenance of much of the work is unknown. Again, one feels a twinge of over-intellectualization, as if Waugh – despite occasional protestations to the contrary – feels obligated to dress up the fabulously undressed images with heady rationale. On the other hand, many of the individual images throughout the book are genuinely enhanced by Waugh's smart yet casual captions, which mix shrewd readings of the pictures with homoerotic literary quotes from the same period, and a few corny yet collegial double entendres. Waugh adores his subject matter and his captions feel warmly conversational, as if, in turning the pages, the reader is viewing a personal slide show narrated by the editor.

Conversation, visual and verbal, is ultimately what both *OUT/LINES* and *Lust Unearthed* are all about. Waugh even solicits readers to contact him if they can help provide information on any of the unknown artists whose work appears in the pages of his books. These volumes represent the reanimation of a lively, intimately personal dialogue about gay sex and fantasy that's been homogenized by contemporary porn. Ironically, the hand-drawn images Waugh presents help decommmodify our sexuality, even as they are packaged and sold to us in an essentially superfluous second collection.

Jim Gladstone is a Philadelphia-based writer whose latest book - as editor - is Skin & Ink: Gay Erotic Fiction. He is the author of a novel, The Big Book of Misunderstanding, and the non-fiction Gladstone's Games to Go. His monthly book column for Passport magazine launches in October.

Waugh on "scholarly/institutional (or pseudo-scholarly) archiving, and lay/private hoarding, as a key and little-understood factor in queer cultural history." (PDF file):

<http://cssc.berkeley.edu/documents/WaughAbstract.pdf>



[back to top](#)

Profuse Bleeding: Chin's Performance Prose

Attack of the Man-Eating Lotus Blossom, by Justin Chin, Suspect Thoughts Press, \$16.95
by Tom Cardamone

After four books, two volumes of poetry and two collections of essays, Justin Chin delivers more of the same in *Attack of the Man-Eating Lotus Blossoms*: incendiary art. This new collection chronologically compiles a decades worth of performance art. The primary question is: can the text of performance communicate as readily on the page as on the stage? Of course it can. Those familiar with Chin's writings know he's visceral and probing; some readers might worry that a performance without the necessary physical

presence (or in Chin's case, visual assault) might necessarily be diluted or sterile. Nope. The prose and poetry here possess a stream-of-conscious quality that makes the political digestible while the personal is revealing, cathartic, and occasionally both funny *and* frightening.

I'm not sure if prospective readers will embrace or cringe over a book of performance art – I've always thought of Chin as a performance artist who wrote, and was surprised to discover here that he's a writer who performs. The distinction is telling. As a writer delving into a different medium, whatever might succeed or fail on a stage, Chin's already past proving he's capable of bringing ideas to a reading audience. Now lets face it, performance art has a bad reputation, so it's worth noting the author's lament over the "media representation of the stereotypical performance artist, either wailing like a banshee and throwing food at the audience or being pretentious and meaning-challenged, scoffing at idiots who did not get The Meaning when there was none." And this isn't Chin being touchy – rather he's simply disarming any preconceived notions readers might bring to the book.



The introduction begins as a humorous family discussion, some 25 years in the future, about his performance art and the '90s in general. Just as I was getting ready to enjoy some cynically faux-hindsight fun, he much too abruptly switches gears, awkwardly jumping into a quick, useful dissertation on the nature of the work to follow. This would have been a great opportunity to channel his wit into an Orwellian vein, but I'm guessing the author was simply in a rush to get on with it and let the performances speak for themselves.

The pieces host a variety of themes: personal and political, the gay community and AIDS, race and nationality, sexuality and being. The hypnotic rhythm of most performances carries the reader along; some portions come across as telling, sing-songy surreal bedtime stories for a community all too ready to nod off when certain issues challenge its all-inclusive self-image. The poems here serve both as his Songs of Innocence (heard through a Walkman) and his Songs of Experience (learned in clubs, clinics and public toilets). On stage, some performances are punctuated by slides; for example, in one live performance, slides coolly dissect the performer-as-go-go boy, a voice-over serving as his subconscious, offering bored, meandering thoughts about shopping for dinner.

Unfortunately, the images are not reproduced in the book, but described; where this must certainly have enhanced live performances, on the printed page it's an unwarranted roadblock, especially when things heat up in Chin's kitchen. And food plays a big role in his performances – it's one of the primary ingredients he uses while boiling away stereotypes. He also uses his own blood. He allows blood to run down his arm as he removes the syringe. He mixes it with rice and eats it. He adds his blood to milk and drinks it. With this focus on the body, some readers will likely invoke Theory to get a handle on Chin's work. Not me. Reading this book resurrected memories of The Dead Kennedy's, Crass and the like, seminal punk bands who made music that was (is) the opposite of pretty because often times that is where the truth lies: just beyond the acceptable. Plus, synchronicity being what it is, I was listening to P.I.L.'s *This Is Not A Love Song* while reading his invective *This Is Not The Joy Luck Club*, though just as I got comfortable with the comparison, he started in on ABBA, reminiscing about '80s pop and coming-out issues painful and hilarious, in a performance that could easily stand with the best parts of his essay collection/memoir, *Burden of Ashes*.

And naturally some pieces work better than others. The book closes with an unfinished work that would have been really intriguing if revisited and fully developed. Certainly there's enough challenging content that some things are as likely to offend as provoke. But if you think Justin Chin's dropped the ball here or there, I can only offer a gentle reminder that he is, after all, juggling hand grenades.

Tom Cardamone eats his vegetables, wears clean underwear, and writes dark, speculative fiction, some of which can be read on his website:
www.pumpkintooth.net

The “cynically faux-hindsight” foreword:

<http://www.suspectthoughts.com/chin3.html>

Chin’s matchmaking questionnaire from a decade ago:

<http://www.suspectthoughts.com/chin2.html>

Graphics from the collection:

<http://www.suspectthoughts.com/pressattack.htm>

.....

[back to top](#)

Genderlicious. Candid. Unsparing. Sweet: 44 reviews

Every second week, Q Syndicate distributes my Book Marks column, with four book reviews, to its subscribers; here are links to recent installments, with reviews of the genderlicious novel *Choir Boy*, by Charlie Anders (Soft Skull Press, \$16.95); the smooth memoir *The Tall Boy*, by Jess Greg (The Permanent Press, \$18); and the what-it’s-like memoir *Just Add Hormones: An Insider’s Guide to the Transsexual Experience*, by Matt Kailey (Beacon Press, \$21.95); and the transcendental novel *Above the Thunder*, by Renee Manfredi (Anchor Books, \$13.95):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050718-bookmarks.html>



Reviews of the brilliant novel *Specimen Days*, by Michael Cunningham (FSG, \$25); the sexy anthology *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels, 1950-1965*, edited by Katherine V. Forrest (Cleis Press, \$18); the candid memoir *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star*, by Rich Merritt (Kensington Books, \$15); and the call to arms *Straightforward: How to Mobilize Heterosexual Support for Gay Rights*, by Ian Ayres and Jennifer Gerarda Brown (Princeton University Press, \$24.95):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050704-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the intricate novel *The Boys in the Brownstone*, by Kevin Scott (Southern Tier Editions \$22.95); the witty young adult novel *Absolutely, Positively Not*, by David Larochele (Scholastic Books, \$16.95); the useful self-help book *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man’s World*, by Alan Downs (Da Capo Press, \$23); and the wacky lesbian romance *All the Bold Days of My Restless Life*, by Sharon Stone (Alyson Books, \$13.95):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050620-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the elegant novel *Mother of Sorrows*, by Richard McCann (Pantheon, \$20); the unsparing memoir *The Tricky Part: One Boy’s Fall from Trespass into Grace*, by Martin Moran (Beacon Press, \$23.95); the tripartite biography *Noble Lives: Biographical Portraits of Three Remarkable Gay Men*, by Marc E. Vargo (Harrington Park Press, \$17.95); and the luscious novel/poem *The Beautifully Worthless*, by Ali Liebegott (Suspect Thoughts Press, \$12.95):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050606-bookmarks.html>



Reviews of the sweet-tempered memoir *Fred in Love*, by Felice Picano (Terrace Books, \$14.95); the fast-paced lesbian thriller *Hunter’s Pursuit*, by Kim Baldwin (Bold Strokes Books, \$15.95); the chipper young adult novel *The Order of the Poison Oak*, by Brent Hartinger (HarperTempest, \$15.99); and the history-of-a-town *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort*, by Karen Christel Krahulik (New York University Press, 256 pages, \$29.95):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050523-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the searing novel *All American Boy*, by William J. Mann (Kensington Books, \$24); the astute sports study *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*, by Eric Anderson (SUNY Press, \$18.95); the high-spirited biography *Charlotte: Being a True Account of an Actress’s Flamboyant Adventures in Eighteenth-Century London’s Wild and Wicked Theatrical World*, by Kathryn Shevelow (Henry Holt, \$27.50); and the

fascinating lesbian novel *Babyji*, by Abha Dawesar (Anchor Books, \$13):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050509-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the imaginative novel *Lighthousekeeping*, by Jeanette Winterson (Harcourt, \$23); the textured thriller *Light Before Day*, by Christopher Rice (Hyperion Books, \$23.95); the chirpy memoir *Starstruck: When a Fan Gets Close to Fame*, by Michael Joseph Gross (Bloomsbury USA, \$23.95); and the solid academic analysis *The Long Arc of Justice: Lesbian and Gay Marriage, Equality, and Rights*, by Richard D. Mohr (Columbia University Press, \$22.95):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050425-bookmarks.html>



Reviews of the fabulous biography *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco*, by Joshua Gamson (Henry Holt, \$26); the tender novel *The German Officer's Boy*, by Harlan Greene (Terrace Books, \$26.95); the jaunty *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics*, by Paul Robinson (University of Chicago Press, \$24); and the relentless "whydunit" *With or Without You*, by Lauren Sanders (Akashic Books, \$14.95):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050412-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the mordant monologue *The Underminer: Or, the Best Friend Who Casually Destroys Your Life*, by Mike Albo with Virginia Heffernan (Bloomsbury USA, \$19.95); the wry novel *Acqua Calda*, by Keith McDermott (Carroll & Graf, \$24); the military memoir *Major Conflict: One Gay Man's Life in the Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell Military*, by Jeffrey McGowan (Broadway Books, \$24.95); and the amiable autobiography *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse: My Life in Comedy*, by Phyllis Diller (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, \$24.95):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050330-bookmarks.html>

Reviews of the forthright memoir *Luncheonette: A Memoir*, by Steven Sorrentino (ReganBooks, \$24.95); the genre-straddling *The Blood of Kings*, by John Michael Curlovich (Alyson Books, \$14.95); the commonsense study *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, by Judith Halberstam (NYU Press, \$19); and the psychological whodunit *Son of a Gun*, by Randye Lordon (St. Martin's Minotaur, 288 pages, \$23.95):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050302-bookmarks.html>

And reviews of the fluid biographical history *February House*, by Sherill Tippins (Houghton Mifflin, \$24); the refreshing erotic collection *Tangled Sheets: Tales of Erotica*, by Michael Thomas Ford (Kensington Books, \$14); the soulful poetry collection *Nothin' Ugly Fly*, by Marvin K. White (Redbone Press, \$14); and the heartfelt *Side by Side: On Having a Gay or Lesbian Sibling*, by Andrew R. Gottlieb (Harrington Park Press, \$16.95):
<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050214-bookmarks.html>



(The Feminist Press has just reissued burlesque queen Gypsy Rose Lee's witty whodunit *The G-String Murders*, most of which was written in the house Lee shared with WH Auden, Chester Kahlman, Paul and Jane Bowles, Benjamin Britten and others:
<http://www.feministpress.org/Book/index.cfm?GCOI=55861100305440>



[back to top](#)

'Net Notes: New From E. Lynn, Manic D Profiled

E. Lynn Harris talks about his next novel, coming in January, in this interview with the *Indianapolis Star*. **"Tell me about your new book. It's called I Say a Little Prayer, and it's taking on the African-American church and their attitudes toward gay people. That should stir up some controversy. Why that topic? I think they send out mixed messages, which is very, very sad, especially in dealing with AIDS and other things in our community. It should**

be a place where anybody can seek refuge. Instead, I think a lot of people have a lot of problems reconciling their homosexuality and their Christianity:"
<http://www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050711/LIVING/507110303/1007>

The *SF Bay Guardian's* annual Pride issue featured Mattilda a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore lauding Gregg Bordowitz's "touching, nuanced, and critical explorations of intergenerational yearning and learning" in *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings 1986-2003* (The MIT Press, \$35), and his mauling of Larry Kramer's "misdirected rage" in *The Tragedy of Today's Gays* (Penguin/Tarcher, \$9.95):
http://www.sfbg.com/39/38/lit_aids.html

Michelle Tea profiles San Francisco's Manic D Press:
http://www.sfbg.com/39/38/x_lit_house_hunter.html

Paul Reidinger has a soft spot for the word gay. "Gay was no better than an awkward word even at the height of its usage and influence 20 years ago, and – at least as an aesthetic matter – one did not mind its being superseded by such livelier terms as queer and homo, or folded into acronyms like the graceless-though-inclusive LGBT, as the 1980s melted into the 1990s. Still, gay meant and continues to mean something those other formulations do not, and when the word is used naturally and without apology or qualification, as in Alan Downs's excellent new book *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World* (Da Capo, \$23), we are reminded that gay tells a story of identity that rises like a rock from the sloshing, misty bogs of moment-to-moment sex acts." The full essay:
http://www.sfbg.com/39/38/x_lit_marginalia.html

Troy Gaspard likes the libertine spirit of *Song of the Loon*, by Richard Amory (Arsenal Pulp Press, \$14.95). "The novel is virtually plotless, and the erotic passages are quite tame by today's standards. What remains revolutionary is the notion that intense and affectionate sex can be shared with many men without detracting from the relationship with the man you have chosen as your partner. In an age of gay marriage, the message that enforced monogamy is slavery remains remarkably refreshing".
http://www.sfbg.com/39/38/x_lit_reviews.html

Mike Albo, author of *The Underminers: The Best Friend Who Destroys Your Life* (Bloomsbury USA, \$19.95), discusses being "fatigue-gay" about pride and parades:
<http://www.villagevoice.com/people/0525.qalbo,65134,24.html>

Opponents of marriage for gays will be bored into submission, says Kenji Yoshino, in his lengthy survey of queer-marriage books. "The coming-out story is now a cliché, and we should celebrate that politically, if not aesthetically. Marriage is headed in the same direction, and we should celebrate that as well. For if we cannot persuade our opponents with high-minded argument, we can still bore them into submission with wedding pictures".
<http://villagevoice.com/people/0525.qyoshino1,65131,24.html>
 The 10 books he mentions:
<http://villagevoice.com/people/0525.qyoshino2,65132,24.html>

Speaking of gay weddings - at great good length (more than 3,000 words), classics scholar James Davidson praises Alan Bray's *The Friend* (University of Chicago Press, \$40), a 2003 book on the history of same-sex unions: "With its un-provocative title, its brass-rubbings and its frequent dippings into the nitty-gritty of Christian rites, Alan Bray's last book, *The Friend*, might not seem terribly exciting at first glance. And yet it is written in part as a defense of John Boswell's *Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, and in part as sequel to his own *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. Both were considered exciting events at the time. Boswell's book... was headline-grabbing... reviewers, myself included, generally gave it a fairly hard time, and its central claim – that these same-sex unions sanctioned by the Church were analogous to heterosexual marriage rituals – had few takers among churchmen, historians or students of sexuality.... There is irony, therefore, in the late, cool Alan Bray riding, not without risk to his own reputation, to defend the late, uncool John Boswell.... Which is a way of saying that I have changed my mind about Boswell's thesis, and that it is Bray's subtlety that converted me. Boswell... was on the right track; his

overly gay interpretation of same-sex unions is less misleading than the loveless 'anti-gay' alternatives offered by his critics. For a very long period, formal amatory unions, conjugal, elective and indissoluble, between two members of the same sex were made in Europe, publicly recognized and consecrated in churches through Christian ritual."

http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n11/davi02_.html



[back to top](#)

Peppy, introspective, profound: Dennis Cooper blogs

Dennis Cooper's candid and generous blog – plenty of interaction with his readers – is rich with introspection, revelation, and peppy, profound commentary on music, art, and books; for the next six weeks, at least, he'll be posting from Paris, where he recently landed in order to meet up with his lover, a young Russian who's having no luck acquiring an American visa. By the time BTWOF subscribers receive this issue, expect new postings; meanwhile, from July 19: *"Well, today my boyfriend and I had our first instance of good luck in as long as I can remember - he was granted a six week French tourist visa. We'd hoped for longer, but it's a start, and we'll see if we can keep him in France for a lengthier time once we're there. So I'll be in France with my beloved for at least six weeks, which feels pretty good. Also, I found out that the two theater pieces I wrote in the Festival d'Avignon got great reviews and that all the performances of both pieces sold out in under an hour. So, nice. Now I'm off to the airport. I should be able to post something new here in the blog within a few days, and, with any luck, I'll be back on track and posting regularly before long. Thanks a lot for your good wishes, and I wish all of you the very same. See you again after a very short hiatus. Take care of yourselves until then."*

Here's what he says in a July 18 entry about how his work is perceived: *"I don't in any way make a living from my novels in the U.S. In fact that money's pretty paltry. Most of the money I make is from my books being published in other countries where generally my books are more respected and sell better. I think my books are published in something like 16 countries last I checked. So it was nice today to hear that The Sluts was just bought by a Portuguese publisher, and My Loose Thread was just bought by a Spanish publisher. I'm really lucky because these things happen pretty regularly for me, and, if they didn't, I'd be living on the street or whatever."*

And here's what Cooper said in May about *"the weird scrapbook I'm keeping in the blog"* - a series of images of young men. *"When I'm writing something, I almost always keep a related scrapbook. I've done that since I was a teenager. It's a way for me to think things out, develop characters, daydream around a writing project, experiment, etc. Normally they involve scissors, glue, and paper, but I decided to make this scrapbook using the blog format just to try something new. This scrapbook relates to a story I've been commissioned to write by a German magazine. They read in one of my interviews that I've barely ever written about cannibalism. So they asked me to write an erotic fiction piece about cannibalism. So I've taken up the challenge, and you're seeing me think 'aloud' while I work on it. So there's the context for those (photo) entries, if you're curious."*

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

Cooper's official website, where my early review of his new novel, *God Jr.*, is posted:

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

Cooper has his own message board, too, with "quite a cool looking and intelligent bunch":

<http://groups.myspace.com/denniscooper>

And my review of *The Sluts* is here (along with reviews of books about the Dinah Shore golf weekend, about the history of blood, and about sailing and loving and loss and recovery):

<http://www.gmax.co.za/feel/books05/050314-bookmarks.html>

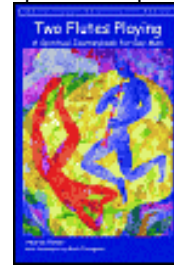


[back to top](#)

Gay For Gals. Classic Spirituality. Our God, Too.

Calling queer men who want to unleash their inner saucy, naughty, Harlequin-with-a-hard-on personas: The largest U.S. publisher of "yaoi" fiction is looking for writers. "Yaoi Press publishes graphic novels - thick, soft-cover, digest-sized comic books, drawn in the Japanese "manga" style. Our stories all fall into a niche Japanese genre called 'yaoi' - romantic stories about guys in love with other guys, for women readers. A full-length graphic novel of 100-120 pages will have 2-4 erotic homosexual scenes. It's not the same as gay fiction. We need talent badly, but all we seem to get are submissions from folks who expect our editor to teach them Writing 101. Submissions from polished, professional writers who've studied the craft of good writing would be a welcome change. Payment for scripting 20 pages of sequential art is \$200-\$250 depending on your published credits. Submission info: <http://www.yaoipress.com/info.htm> A look at the books: <http://www.yaoipress.com>

Lethe Press and the White Crane Institute, publisher of the *White Crane Journal* - a magazine about gay spirituality - have announced plans to reprint up to 10 queer nonfiction classics, using print-on-demand technology. The first title, Andrew Ramer's *Two Flutes Playing*, is now available. Future books in the White Crane Spirituality Editions series will include Mark Thompson's *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*; the collected works of Edward Carpenter, a champion of both women's and homosexual liberation at the turn of the 20th century; and previously unpublished writing by the late fairy poet and avant-garde filmmaker James Broughton.



For book orders: www.whitecranejournal.com
 Publisher info: www.steveberman.com/lethe.htm
 Andrew Ramer on crafting a satisfying life: www.whitecranejournal.com/65/art6520.asp
 A taste of Broughton; an interview and an appreciation: www.archipelago.org/vol4-1/broughton.htm
 Links to Broughton's poetry online: www.geocities.com/Paris/Metro/1170/broughton.html

Twenty-year-old French and religion major Justin Cannon has published a 36-page study refuting the use of Leviticus to Bible-bash queers – a defense of gays that, as he was researching and writing it, made him realize that he was gay himself. The first printing of 1,000 copies (priced at \$1) sold out in just a few months; a new printing of *The Bible, Christianity, and Homosexuality* will be available in August – or can be downloaded in several formats from his website. Meanwhile, he's aiming to be ordained as an Episcopal priest when his studies at Earlham College, a Quaker school, are complete.

<http://www.truthsetsfree.net/index-2.html>

"A combatant in the Christian culture wars" – Cannon in the *Los Angeles Times*: www.truthsetsfree.net/la.html

.....

[back to top](#)

Kevin Killian's Savvy Online Reviews: 5 More

This is the third and last – for now – installment of San Francisco author and editor Kevin Killian's queer-interest reviews, culled from about 700 he has written for amazon.com in the past four years.

Bottoms Up: Writing About Sex, edited by Diana Cage, Soft Skull Press, \$14
 Knock Yourself Out, January 10, 2005

"My dreams are small," said Olly. "They can only scratch."

"Well, cheers to that," said Mr. Devine. "To scratchy dreams! A house specialty. Bottoms up."

This pair of paragraphs from Jess Arndt's lovely story "The Unheard Arms of Olly Malone" suggests some of the extra-literary quality of this collection of 21st Century erotica, ably assisted by San Francisco editor Diana Cage, herself a very fine writer who shouldn't have been so demure, she should have included some of her own work. But that's just my peeve. Outside of

that, I think you will find *Bottoms Up* a provocative and intriguing collection, one that includes some of today's best and well-respected authors, as well as a bevy of young talent with lots and lots of skill.

"Robin" by Eileen Myles is a story that has been around for some time, but still overpowers one with the specificity and the brilliance of Myles' powers of description and connotation (i.e., she pulls you into the story with image) - "I call her Robin because she is red and black and angular and resembles a bird in her speed and her cruelty. I fell in love with her briefly, last year. I'm just not in love with her anymore but there's this residue."



Similarly Robert Gluck's account of the Folsom Street Fair has some of the haunting quality of folk fairy tale material and was originally written for an anthology of fairy tales rewritten and made up-to-date by gay male authors. It is called, "The Glass Mountain" and its sparkle and its sheer impassability call to mind the mountain of its title. Haven't we all been in love a little bit like that. You can't go up, you can only go around. "I can reach myself only through the medium of a brittle young man whose shadow touches what it falls on, the grass rising again after it passes."

Among the writers who are newer to me I will evince "Cruising" by Myriam Gurba as a tiny masterpiece of danger, psychic pain, and physical fulfillment. The young woman who tells us this tale brings to mind poor Elizabeth Short, the "Black Dahlia" who, we hear, once cruised these same tawdry beaches and amusement galleries in a slickly drawn Long Beach. Shoshanna Von Blankensee brings us "Billy," a story of multiple sexualities and multiple paragraphs, each one outlining an erotic possibility that should, but cannot, cancel the other out. She is like a Julio Cortazar except with, well, much more sex LOL.

Tennessee Jones' story is very tangibly an excerpt and thus leaves you longing for more, for its grittiness and sheer perversity brings to mind the near-Gothic Southern writing of William Goyen or Flannery O'Connor. It is a story of boxcar sex and prison longing, redolent of scents and stench. I look forward to hearing more from Mr. Jones.

I could tell you a little bit about each story, but I don't have the time or space, so I should close by citing the unusually structured, and enchanting "Knockout" by San Francisco's Sarah Fran Wisby. "Knockout" perceptively tells the story of a young sex worker whose knowledge of being seen, of the male gaze, increases her power over men and her own inner desire to bring into clearer focus the nexus of her family. It has a final line that will make the hair stand up at the back of your neck à la Emily Dickinson.

Here's to all the dynamite writers who have come together for this splendid occasion, in *Bottoms Up*. I hope it's a great success.

"To scratchy dreams!"

The Rest of Love: Poems, by Carl Phillips, FSG, \$11
[Enjoyable even where Phillips has done better earlier](#)
 January 10, 2005

The Rest of Love is the work of a man possessed, a man who literally cannot stop writing. Now the famous Pulitzer Prize author describes and outlines a whole new set of tests and questions, kind of like a proctor of poetry, sitting up at the front of the class with an all-watchful eye. For nothing escape the notice of Carl Phillips.

Here he is on the pilgrimage of St. James of Spain, "where we/ stopped to bathe, and/ / for the first time/ saw him naked - / one tattoo: a deer, gutted, / pinned in what he called/ your standard/ Christ-on-the-cross position, / / by which, it seems now, he meant in/ no way a thing/ unholy." By the time I get to the end of that I'm all sixes and sevens and wondering if "meant" is a transitive verb or not. "By which he meant in no way a thing unholy." I take it that the man's naked body reveals something of the godlike about it, even with its ugly tattoo of a gutted deer. Perhaps these tattoos are bigger in the high Castilian Spain of Compostela than they are in PETA-friendly California where I read the poem? Or does the poem indicate that the nude man has not been blasphemous about Christ on the cross? It's a fabulous riddle, and it's thrust into the middle of a poem in which the donkey is shot and a spray of indigo and sweet leaf is thrust into the bullet hole - again, as if to say, my life is a bit more brutal than yours and I am far from an academic poet but almost a big game hunter of barnyard animals.

So it's confusing.

Nevertheless you come away from the book wondering if perhaps we are getting pummeled, as though with BB shot, by these powerful poems too often nowadays and maybe Mr. Phillips should take a break and not release so many books, though I understand the impulse to strike while the iron is

hot for tomorrow, you may be outdated like John Masefield or someone, and ditto the impulse to take down what the Vates dictate to you. For if you are not receptive to the words of the poem, they will go somewhere else entirely.

Night and Fear: A Centenary Collection of Stories, by Cornell Woolrich, Carroll & Graf, \$15.95

A master, even when not at his best, July 17, 2004

When I was a boy I loved Cornell Woolrich and I'm old enough to remember *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* publishing "For the Rest of Her Life" and "New York Blues." I was shocked when he died, straight off the twin triumphs of "The Dark Side of Love" and "Ten Faces of Cornell Woolrich." Now as I read the stories Mr. Nevins has collected for *Night and Fear*, I'm a little puzzled as to why I loved him so much as a youngster, but out of respect to my memories I give this book five stars.

I think frankly the collections CW published while he was alive have a bit more authenticity, even if the biography explains how different editors and publishers chose the arrangement of those books even more than did Woolrich himself. And then again Nevins really wants to sell the "Noir" angle on Woolrich, and thus downplaying the gay pastoral fabulist of something like "Strangers Serenade" or "The Black Path of Fear." Indeed no one but a gay man could have written the famous "Black Curtain," nor the fragment of a novel that Lawrence Sanders later completed, *Into the Night*. However that's just my two cents and reflects probably my own dark vision as much as anything of Woolrich's.

Night and Fear collects a whole bunch of pulp fiction that truly has some serious ups and downs, but when Woolrich is hot (as in "Cigarette" or the aforementioned "New York Blues", he is smoking! Good work to all concerned. I hope there are further collections, for the barrel hasn't been bottomed out yet.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde, Modern Library, \$7.95

What Wilde Did To Us, March 31, 2005

John Singer Sargent, when Max Beerbohm asked him his opinion of portraiture, sighed and replied, "A portrait is a painting where there is always something not quite right about the mouth."

Wilde's novel (1890) tells the story of a gay painter whose portrait of an innocuous Adonis wreaks a magical spell; while the face in the painting ages, Adonis afterwards retains his glorious youth. Unfortunately youth's preservation comes accompanied by a growing moral decrepitude, which manifests itself only on the canvas, which Dorian stows away behind a curtain, while killing everyone who guesses its secret, including the painter. Basil's sin is not, perhaps, in painting the maniacal portrait, but in his failure to acknowledge the implications of its creation. Grasping at straws, he blames everything else, even nature and even weather:

"The thing is impossible. The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible [. . .] You told me you had destroyed it."

"I was wrong. it has destroyed me."

"I don't believe it is my picture."

"Can't you see your ideal in it?" said Dorian, bitterly.

Whatever else it is, the portrait - like any other work of art - is a social contract between two human beings - and thus is often said to return the humanism that Modernism systematically removed from art. But what if it's precisely the opposite? The fantasy of the living portrait, whose surfaces shift irrevocably towards decay, has correspondingly crept into our feelings about art, altered their structure, thanks largely to Oscar Wilde. The portrait emanates anxiety, its aura a menace of malevolent will. Dorian Gray throws a mocking salute to Basil Hallward. "There is something fatal about a portrait," says Dorian. "It has a life of its own."

Candles to the Sun, by Thomas Lanier Williams, New Directions, \$12.95

What a beginning, March 20, 2005

Tennessee Williams wrote *Candles to the Sun* in 1937 at Washington University in St. Louis, for a "semi-amateur" theater group called the Mummies. Now, nearly seventy years later it is in print in a lovely edition from New Directions, his longtime publisher. This was his first play to receive a production; he hadn't even adopted the sobriquet "Tennessee" yet. It's a piece of social realism, relatively speaking, and the main characters are coal miners and the activists who seek to unionize them. Underneath it all you

can see the outlines for the play of power and greed that became *Sweet Bird of Youth* several decades in the future.

A bleak chorus of coal miners speaks in poignant Walker Evans terms about the terrible lives they are forced to live in the Depression. "My kids are swole up in the belly from not gettin' fed." Another agrees, "Yestiddy I caught my youngest puttin' dirt in her mouth." Third Miner: "Hell, mine eat grass for supper." Against the darkness a tremulous love story between "Star" and "Red" struggles to see expression. Star: "I didn't want to be tied down with Jake Walland or any of his kind. That's what I meant by wanting freedom. Now I don't want it any more. I want the kind of life that you could give me and if I can't have that kind of life, Red? I don't want any kind of life at all. Yeah. That's how gone I am!"

You'll be "gone" too when you read *Candles to the Sun*. Just close your eyes and you're a mile underground with coal dust in your lashes.

PS: When will we get a reading edition of *The Magic Tower*, the play he wrote just around the same time for the same group?

I don't even know if *The Magic Tower* is a fantasy or a realistic play.

.....

[back to top](#)

"Walt Whitman, our great national poet"

Almost weekly, Calamus Bookstore owner/manager John Mitzel of Boston sends to subscribers his chatty, succinct, and always well-informed newsletter about new books. In The July 16 installment: commentary on *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*, edited by Katherine V. Forrest (Cleis Press, \$18.95); *Why We Never Danced the Charleston*, by Harlan Greene (a reprint, from History Books, \$12.99); *Breakfast With Tiffany: An Uncle's Memoir*, by Edwin John Wintle (Hyperion, \$24.95); *Nothing Is True Everything Is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*, by John Geiger (Disinformation Company, \$27.95); *Freshmen: The Best Erotic Fiction*, edited by Jesse Grant (Alyson Books, \$14.95); *Hot Sauce*, by Scott Pomfret & Scott Whittier (Warner Books, \$12.95); *What God Has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, edited by David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni (HarperSanFrancisco, \$17.95); *Third & Heaven*, by Ben Patrick Johnson (Alyson Books, \$14.95); *Cruise Control: Understanding Sex Addiction in Gay Men*, by Robert Weiss (Alyson Books, \$14.95); *A Gay Man's Guide to Prostate Cancer*, by Gerald Perlman & Jack Drescher (Harrington Park Press, \$19.95); and *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman (Modern Library, \$13.95) – about which he writes: "This year we observe the sesquicentennial of the publication of the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Walt lives! Who knew that Walt, whose verses were considered controversial and whose public persona got reformatted over the decades, but is probably restored to its actual gift thanks to the work by Charley Shively and others, would become our great national poet? And that he would have highways and shopping malls and high schools named after him. Fine by me."

<http://www.calamusbooks.com/newsletters/5/13>

.....

[back to top](#)

Our Bestsellers: July at InsightOut Book Club

For Men:

1. *Specimen Days*, by Michael Cunningham
2. *The Fabulous Sylvester*, by Joshua Gamson
3. *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*, by C.A. Tripp
4. *All American Boy*, by William J. Mann
5. *Stallions: Photography*, by Kristen Bjorn
6. *Light Before Day*, by Christopher Rice
7. *Jesus and the Shamanistic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*, by Will Roscoe
8. *Idol Worship*, by Michael Ferguson
9. *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, by Greg Fox
10. *Built*, by Ron Lloyd



For Women:

1. *The Rivals*, by Johnette Howard
2. *What the L?* by Kate Clinton
3. *Sugar*, by Karin Kallmaker
4. *The Intersection of Law and Desire*, by J.M. Redmann
5. *Daughters of an Emerald Dusk*, by Katherine V. Forrest
6. *Wizard of Isis*, by Jean Stewart
7. *True Secrets of Lesbian Desire*, by Renate Stendhal
8. *Dinah!* by Michele Kort
9. *The Blue Scorpion*, by Julia Lieber
10. *Secret Service: Untold Stories of Women in the Military*, by Zsa Zsa Gershick

**Staff Picks:**

ISO copywriter recommends *Edge* by Jeff Mann (Southern Tier, \$16.95):
 "Jeff Mann is the man. I could totally relate: hairy men, gothic horror, teaching... this is my kind of memoir."

ISO title manager David Tapias recommends *The Order of the Poison Oak*, by Brent Hartinger (HarperTempest, \$15.99):
 "I found this sequel to *Geography Club* funny and emotional... As a summer camp counselor, Russel (a gay teen) has one unforgettable summer adventure enmeshed in a conspiracy."

InsightOut Book Club info: <http://www.insightoutbooks.com>



Richard can be reached at tattyhill@gmail.com, at 613 264 5409, or at 7-A Drummond St W, Perth, ON K7H 2J3 Canada. Books for review, author news, interesting links - all appreciated.



© 2005 Books to Watch Out For
 Graphics © [Judy Horacek](#)