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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 Suzanne Corson.

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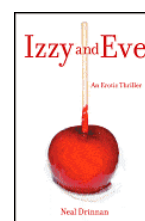
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Publisher of these new titles



50 Ways of Saying Fabulous
by Graeme Aitken
&
Izzy and Eve: An Erotic Thriller
by Neal Drinnan



Volume 3 Number 6

By Richard Labonte

34 Readers Write About The Books They Liked Best In 2006

End of the year. Time for tradition. And here is BTWOF's: the second annual "Favorite Books" compilation, with many dozen queer (and otherwise) books recommended by 29 authors (and otherwise). I was late requesting contributions to this issue; in fact, I've been late for more than half this year with the **Gay Men's Edition**, for which I apologize. Life happened. But I'm planning to be on track in 2007 - starting with another issue days after the start of the new year, which will include more Favorite Books entries from writers who weren't able, quite understandably, to meet a very short deadline, as well as a slew of my own short reviews, catching up to the books that arrived while I was diverted from what I like best: reading good books and sharing the news about them with others.

Many of my own favorites are cited below, Bechdel, Benderson, Bram, Chase, Holleran, Kilmer-Purcell, Weir, and White among them. The Top 10 fiction and nonfiction lists for my Book Marks column contain some of those authors - but it was not easy to narrow those lists down... here are six other books that I really, really liked in 2006, first fiction, then nonfiction:

Martin Hyatt's **A Scarecrow's Bible**, about the romance between a closeted older man who's not sure he's queer and a flamboyant younger man forever on the edge of flaming out. Their story is doomed, desperate, and lyrical.

Joe Keenan's **My Lucky Star**, the long-awaited third in his comic series, is a laugh-out-loud masterpiece.

Jay Quinn's **The Good Neighbor** is deeply intelligent, about how couples can love each other while dealing with imbalance in their lives.

Bernard Cooper's **The Bill from My Father** is a fresh dissection of a common theme in queer memoirs: the chasm separating an aloof, often baffling father from his frustrated but loving gay son.

Stuart Timmons and Lillian Faderman's **Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians** does at last for the queer activist pioneers of Los Angeles what any number of histories have done for the Other Coast: this portrait of a city and its queers is a first-rank achievement of illuminating scholarship and entertaining writing. I must say that I've known Stuart since the early 80s - but I'd like this book even were he a stranger. I lived in L.A. for nine

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years before moving to San Francisco for twelve. Shh. Don't tell anyone. L.A. was the much more intricate, intriguing, and enticing city, and I loved reading about places I'd been and people I'd known, brought back to life quite wondrously.

Rigoberto Gonzalez's **Butterfly Boy: Memoirs of a Chicano Mariposa** tells a story of abuse, recovery, and how a love for reading was the ticket out of a homophobic environment.

And my absolute favorite book? Tom Spanbauer's **Now is the Hour**, better even than his remarkable *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon*. It's 1967, and eternally tumescent 17-year-old Rigby John Klusener is hitchhiking to San Francisco, leaving behind an oppressively religious mother, a bigoted father, and the first man he's ever loved. This alluring story about masturbation, mysticism, and the mystery of life is enchanting.

I'll list a few more favorites in the next issue. Now, from Graeme Aitken to Andy Zeffer, here are many more...

Graeme Aitken

The Whole World Over by Julia Glass

Glass' debut novel *Three Junes* won the 2002 U.S. National Book Award and with its mix of straight and gay characters, managed to succeed brilliantly at a very difficult task - winning over both the general and the gay reader.

The main character in this new book is Greenie, a straight female cake baker, but there are also numerous gay male characters. Greenie has an exuberant gay best friend, Walter; there's a gay couple, Gordie and Stephen, who break up over issues of wanting a child, (though Gordie also has an affair with Walter); and finally, Fenno MacLeod, the gay bookseller character from *Three Junes*, reappears.

There are numerous other central and secondary characters but despite this large cast, Glass has created them with such warmth, empathy, and complexity, they all leap off the page. She also writes so wisely about families - including non-traditional types of families - and their complex relationships. When 9/11 intrudes in the final section of the novel, it clarifies for several of the characters exactly what those familial bonds mean. At over 500 pages, this is a big book, but it is also an absolute treat. For this reader, *The Whole World Over* is my favorite book of 2006 to date.

Graeme is author of 50 Ways of Saying Fabulous (Green Candy Press) and manager of the Bookshop Darlington in Sydney, Australia:

www.thebookshop.com.au.



Noël Alunit



Lesbian writer Cheryl Klein's book **The Commuters** (San Diego City Works Press) is a charming portrait of the diverse city of Los Angeles. It includes the intersection of gay and straight, rich and poor, black and white (and the shades in between).

Noël is author of Letters to Montgomery Clift and the forthcoming Talking to the Moon. He blogs at www.thelastnoel.blogspot.com.

Dennis Altman

In any given year we will read but a tiny handful of potential "best books," so these are no more than a personal selection. Of new books let me suggest two novels that stand out: Stevan Eldred-Grigg's **Shanghai Boy**, and Hari Kunzru's **Transmission**. Both speak of the confusion of identity and emotions caused by rapid displacement across the world. The first is the account of a middle-aged New Zealand teacher who falls disastrously in love while teaching in Shanghai, while *Transmission* takes a naïve young Indian computer programmer to the United States, with remarkable consequences.



From a number of political books let me select two, both from my own publisher, Scribe, who offer, I regret, no kickbacks. One is by George Megalogenis, **The Longest Decade**, the other by James Carroll, **House of War**. Together they provide a depressing but challenging backdrop to understanding the current impasse of the Bush/Howard (Australian PM John Howard) administrations in Iraq.

A P.S. from Richard: here's a publisher synopsis of *Shanghai Boy*, which illuminates Dennis's praise:



Manfred Morse has just hit fifty, and also the wall. Life seems empty. His marriage is long since over, his leathery old father is in his tenth year of dying of cancer, while his colleagues play games of petty politics. Seeking stress leave from his New Zealand university, he takes a job as guest lecturer at a university in Shanghai. Here he suddenly comes face-to-face with raw passion, but in the shape of one of his students, aged only eighteen. He ducks this way and that, fending off love and, when he can no longer hold out, he lashes out. The young male student goes missing. The police come knocking on Manfred's door. Who is the killer? Manfred? Or is he a victim? As the story slips back and forth between the southern and northern hemispheres, Shanghai increasingly takes centre stage: a pulsing city of crowded streets and clouding smog; motley smells and mindless noise; a complex and contradictory place that leaves Manfred both horrified and aroused. This is a clever and compelling novel from a prize-winning author.

Author info for Stevan Eldred-Grigg:

www.eldred-grigg.com/index.html

Shanghai Boy hasn't been published in North America, but it can be ordered from the Woman's Bookshop in Auckland, NZ:

[www.womensbookshop.co.nz/index.php?](http://www.womensbookshop.co.nz/index.php?option=results&type=listCat&category=1307)

[option=results&type=listCat&category=1307](http://www.womensbookshop.co.nz/index.php?option=results&type=listCat&category=1307).

Dennis Altman is head of the School of Politics at La Trobe University in Sydney, Australia; his first two books, *Homosexual: Liberation and Oppression* and *Coming Out in the Seventies* were published, well, in the 70s; more recently he has written extensively on global AIDS. Here he is in conversation with Gore Vidal:

<http://nysoundposse.com/2005/11/event-gore-vidal-and-professor-dennis.html>?

[wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Altman).

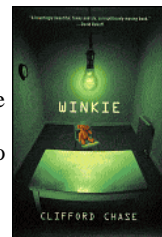
Kevin Bentley

Winkie by Clifford Chase

Once upon a time in a freedom-loving land that had suffered a right-wing junta: as this has been our recent reality, is it any greater leap to accept that a worn teddy bear could become animate and end up on trial for terrorism? The teddy bear first arrived at a time of American imperialism; it's fitting one should rise up now to challenge its resurgence. There are many miracles in this book: yes, a mangy and very observant toy bear becomes alive, but more amazing is the sheer exuberance, bravery, and bold imaginativeness of Cliff Chase's writing and the alchemy by which it pulls the reader in. Can we learn something about consciousness, time, gender, love, pain, hope, and above all, memory, from the progress of a beat-up stuffed bear? Read *Winkie* and find out. It's suspenseful, funny, scathing, oracular, touching, and full of hope. It's also queer on many levels - *Winkie* has been both female and male, and while the latter, gives birth; he's befriended and aided by a lesbian; and the author - and character - Clifford Chase, is gay.

I also had very much looked forward to, and enjoyed when they appeared, three books from favorite writers: Andrew Holleran's **Grief**, John Weir's **What I Did Wrong**, and Stephen McCauley's **Alternatives to Sex**.

Kevin is author of Wild Animals I Have Known and Let's Shut Out the World.



Brian Bouldrey

My favorite of the year? Bruce Benderson's **The Romanian**.

Here's my *Los Angeles Times* review:

The French are "a rhetorical people," writes Bruce Benderson in *The Romanian*, a study in pastoral (and sometimes urban) loneliness. It is no surprise then that he has become the first American writer to receive France's Prix de Flore, because his story rises off the page with the help of every imaginable rhetorical device and stylistic flourish.

This absorbing memoir begins with Benderson researching Eastern Europe's growing sex industry. In Budapest, he meets and falls for Romulus, a male prostitute from Romania with plenty of soccer-star broken dreams and money-making schemes. Benderson travels again and again to be with his beloved, even taking an apartment in the Romanian capital of Bucharest and trying to make a living by writing for magazines and translating biographies from French into English.

His immersion leads him to ponder the lives of some of Romania's distinguished



citizens: sculptor Constantin Brancusi, Magda Lupescu and her husband, Carol II, the king who replaced fame with what looked like promiscuity but which turned out to be an unrequited passion not unlike Benderson's own. One by one, Benderson begins to relate to and even take on the roles of these people.

Meanwhile, his mother and a best friend are dying back home; it is as if the known world were falling away. When in New York, Benderson keeps himself in cash by writing dull technical manuals. His co-workers don't even notice when he's gone for weeks at a time; he begins to take a tad too many codeine tablets to kill a variety of bodily and mental pains; he constructs elaborate plans for bringing Romulus to New York and builds a fantasy world so realistic that the reader sometimes cannot distinguish between what is true and what is idealized. This is where the rhetoric comes in.

The Romanian is not just a book of exemplary thoughts and figures of speech; these artful sentences say something. Benderson's telescoping (and collapsing) use of omniscience, as when he seems able to read Romulus' thoughts one moment but in the next he is dying to know to whom Romulus is talking on the phone. He plays deftly with time: "Several shifts of maids have knocked and gone before we disentangle....Then we hurry." And with irony: "'He's a...' I don't say 'vampire,'" he writes as he starts to describe his new obsession to his editor in New York. "Romulus comes from the land of Dracula, and it would be too much of a cliché to resort to these kinds of metaphors."

French reviewers have found refreshing the directness and innocence with which Benderson relates this love affair. He has a traveler's naiveté, even when speaking of himself. Everything is tried for the first time, and if there's anything shocking here, it seems to rise from an ignorance of local customs and manners rather than morals flouted. His out-on-a-limb efforts to bring Romulus home both romantically and legally may raise eyebrows, as would sopping bread in sauce in Catalonia or blurting, "What happened to him?" on entering a Spanish cathedral and seeing a graphic crucifix.

Perhaps the most perverse moment is when Benderson insists on taking a bath in Romulus' used tub water. Readers can find more shocking confessions from lesser writers, if that's what they are looking for. And the fact is that Romania's troubled economy, like that of many post-Soviet-bloc nations, forces a vast number of its people into prostitution. Such cultural facts are more surprising than personal ones.

As travel literature, *The Romanian* tells plenty about the country's culture without mincing words. There is beauty and there is terror: Husband-hunting women place a bucket upside down outside their homes as an advertisement. At wedding receptions, groomsmen "kidnap" the bride to hilarious or awful result. Bucharest's swampy history, the art of making complex wooden things without nails, and the terrible problem with the dog population are also fully integrated into the story. In a certain way, the author begins to inhabit these traditions: he is a stray dog, he is a Brancusi sculpture, he is Brancusi.

Benderson also excels at portraiture. In an airless rented apartment during a wretched Bucharest heat wave, he meets the landlady's son, a minor character made hard to forget: "[He] looks as if he'd been released from a long sentence on death row - his eyes staringly fish-angry, like pieces of dull green glass in milk. He has a hunched, alcoholic manner and wet tentacles, frustration and defeat pouring out of him like sweat." Imagine Benderson's descriptions of his lover.

The author is good at describing people because he seems to become everybody. And everyone transmogrifies into someone else. Romulus disdainfully watches child beggars extorting money from Benderson with every ruse that might play on his heart. "They hang at the edge of the road and offer a passion play of misery, chanting and whining in an imitation of pitiful piety. 'Ignore them,' Romulus says in a clipped voice." Romulus was once one of these children and still is, we slowly realize (almost as slowly as the writer does). The effect is that of a finite world with a certain number of actors playing multiple roles. One day Benderson is the wife; on another, that role is played by Romulus.

Arguably, the height of their relationship is when the two seem to merge, and Benderson writes, "The inevitability of it makes me feel close to him, fills me with sentimentality. In a small way, I've become part of his curse of limitation. Like him, I'm trapped in Romania." That melding breaks apart fewer than 50 pages later when, "For a split second, I became part of his reality, believed it. Then sadness overwhelmed me, similar to the sadness I'd felt when I'd imagined the girl, sweet and bewildered, and her love for him, at the soccer field.... Affection spread hopelessly through my chest like nausea." The reader feels the breaking apart, the relating and not relating, the beginning of the end.

This marriage of new passion with long experience creates a wisdom Benderson can hardly heed. It is constantly insightful, this pairing of sex and smarts. "Desire glimmers, or should I say glowers, in the eyes of some lumpy older men. I do believe that when one sex desires its own, there's always a touch of envy."

Readers fond of Benderson may recall his powerful manifesto, *Toward the New Degeneracy*, in which he lamented the loss of the once-seedy Times Square, which was arguably one of the few places where rich and poor mingled. As if to prove his own tract true, the author sets out for Romania, which may well be bygone Times

Square on a national scale, so he can mingle with, well, Romulus.

With so many pleasures crammed into one book (travel, philosophy, history, sex, drugs, some pretty crummy rock-and-roll bumping out of shabby Euro trash clubs), it seems ungrateful to suggest that there might be room for a little improvement. Perhaps because the story is nearly seamless, the few seams there are stand out. For example, something feels a bit forced when Benderson shuttles between his story of obsession for Romulus and reflections on Lupescu, Carol II, or his mother, Queen Marie. It is as if Benderson has so successfully cast a spell on the reader that to be crowbarred from it and fed Romanian history feels like taking a dose of cod liver oil during a four-course dinner. Perhaps this is because Benderson cobbled together some sections of the book from pieces he wrote for other publications. Little repetitions of facts show it to be a thing of parts. This also results in occasional over-explaining. For example, there are some lovely, nuanced passages, in which Benderson shows the gradual, subtle switchbacks of husband and wife: "I'm wondering if this abrupt reversal - Romulus as caustic husband contemptuous of feminine foibles - is some kind of revenge for his housewifely luncheon duties." A bit later, he tells us, "Each takes turns at playing 'the man,' while the other temporarily enjoys this sociological projection of masculinity." It is as if Benderson doesn't trust his own marvelous skill as a writer.

But these are tiny gripes. It is a great thing to see a Benderson book on the shelves again, for he is one of the best. And *The Romanian* is the best of the best, all about the lost and found. "But as I think I've already indicated," he writes when contemplating Romulus sprawled naked and asleep, "passion is an emotion that rarely respects its own aftermath."

I was also fond of John Weir's **What I Did Wrong** - I had been waiting years for another book from him after *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*, and he delivered. Girl-wise, I'm a sucker for Emma Donoghue's work, and her collection of stories, **Touchy Subjects**, has some great pieces (and a hilarious cover).



If I'm allowed to go on, I will. So stop me here if you don't want to hear, but I also enjoyed Patrick Ryan's **Send Me**, his stories, and a couple of anthologies that I like are the Canadian collection **No Margins**, edited by Catherine Lake and Nairne Holtz, and this thing, perhaps you've heard of it, **The Future is Queer**, edited by some guys named Richard Labonté and Lawrence Schimel. Perhaps you've heard of them? The Rachel Pollack story is a knockout.

Brian is director of the English department's writing program at Northwestern University, author of the novels *Genius of Desire* and *The Boom Economy* and the essay collection *Monster: Adventures in American Machismo*, and editor of the late, lamented *Best American Gay Fiction anthologies*. His new book, *Honorable Bandit: A Walk Across Corsica*, is forthcoming from University of Wisconsin Press.

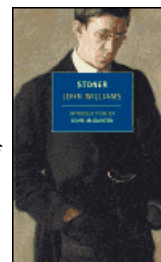
Perry Brass

Two great revelations this year, between slogging away at a next novel, which starts to feel, to quote Audie Murphy, like "to hell and back."

The first, an almost unknown novel from 1965 that New York Review of Books Classics has brought back from oblivion called, of all things, **Stoner**, by John Edward Williams. A young friend of mine wanted to know if it was about wasted young potheads. Nope. It's about Prof. William Stoner, an ignored English teacher in a big midwestern university with a wife out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The novel follows Stoner from his sharecropper parents, who send him off to the Big School to learn agriculture so he won't starve like them; his marriage to a sexually desperate woman, socially a mile above him; the birth of his only daughter, who becomes emotionally estranged from him; his gorgeous and shattering affair with a young female colleague; and finally his death.

Along the way, he makes an enemy of a young talented professor from the East groomed to be the head of his department, who is bitterly, covertly queer. Prof. Lomax is movie-star handsome, and like Byron, crippled. His protégé, also crippled, is a brilliant but lazy PhD candidate named Walker. It's evident that Lomax and Walker are doing a dance that in the 1950s agrarian Midwest was too risky to talk about. But what makes *Stoner* so gorgeously "queer" in its own way is that I have rarely seen male vulnerability so beautifully handled. William Stoner is one of the most open and needy human beings I've ever encountered; and Williams's writing, while clumsy at times (he could have used a better editor) is spare and often laceratingly beautiful.

The second revelation is Harold Bloom's **The Book of J**, with translations by David Rosenberg, which I'd wanted to read for a while. This is the throaty, gutsy, unvarnished Old Testament, with God, or Yahweh, as petulant, wily, horny, and

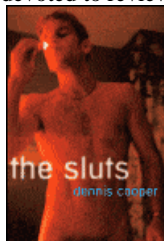


startlingly erotic. Ages before he had his thing with Mary, Yahweh got Abraham's wife pregnant in the patriarch's old age, then went on to Rebecca, and only "he" knows how many in-between. Bloom assures us that Yahweh was in love with David, which is reflected in the story of Jonathan and David, the place where male attraction becomes incendiary, flaring into an aching want. Both of these books bring me back to my favorite queer writer, D. H. Lawrence, who, like Israel, could wrestle beautifully naked with the angels.

Perry is author of the Substance of God, and the forthcoming Carnal Sacraments, A Historical Novel of the Future. Author info: www.perrybrass.com.

Joey Comeau

Dennis Cooper's novel, **The Sluts**, opens with an online review of a hustler named "Brad" who has mental problems. A second review follows, and then a third. The novel is told through these reviews and through emails and posts on a website devoted to reviewing hustlers. The posts by these reviewers mix the empty, repeated, imitative language of pornography with a series of straightforward, honest sounding voices. And they lie. They lie, and they admit to lying when they think it will help you believe their next lie. The saga of "Brad" on this website gets stranger and stranger and it becomes clear that the reviewers are obsessed. They are writing themselves into the story. We only rarely hear from Brad himself, who might have a brain tumor, who might be fourteen or eighteen or something in between, who might be real. The story that you piece together conflicts with itself and sprawls. He's in prison. His



boyfriend has hired him out for violent sex and a man pays to break his legs during the act. Another man pays to cut his face and murder him. Only, maybe not. In the end, what's real is unimportant. This is a novel about the reviewers themselves. It's about their obsessions and about their ability to live inside their own heads. The sex described is brutal and graphic and unreal and maybe none of it ever happens and maybe some of it does. In any case, *The Sluts* is good. It's interesting and perverted and boring and relentless and numbing, and I felt like throwing the book across the room a dozen times in anger. This is a frustrating and worthwhile book about voyeurism and fantasy and you are a pervert for even reading a review about it.

Joey, author of the incendiary and hilarious novel Lockpick Pornography, blogs at <http://untoward.livejournal.com>, and writes the words for the weekly comic A Softer World, www.asofterworld.com.

Scott Cranin

With the pure love of language, Tom Spanbauer's prose in **Now is the Hour** floats and soars. This was my favorite novel from 2006.

Scott is a senior editor at www.flavideo.com, overseeing the gay and lesbian book and film content of the online sales site.

Dan Cullinane

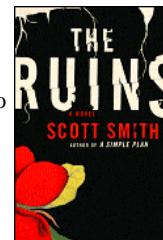
My favorites of the year had nothing in common, other than that each challenged existing structures of storytelling:

The Ruins, by Scott Smith, redesigns the trappings of gothic horror, and then leaves them behind altogether, choosing instead to tell his astonishingly creepy story of terror and isolation through reaction rather than action, as each of his characters has to face down the unimaginable, with little hope of a positive outcome.

Special Topics in Calamity Physics, by Marisha Pessl, manages to almost live up to its overhype (and who is responsible for that anyway) by creating an intellectually driven *Heathers*-esque coming-of-age story, narrated by a too-bright-for-her-own-good teen, so impacted by her academic father that she footnotes her own narration. The fast fast fast *Gilmore Girls* cleverness gets overbearing at times, but is more than saved by dark humor and very real insight.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, by Jonathan Safran Foer, is actually a 2005 title, but I read it this year, so I'm including it. Much has been said about the structure of this novel, which comes at the story from both ends simultaneously, and uses an array of visual aids to augment the words, and I approached it with trepidation, in spite of *Everything is Illuminated* being securely lodged in my top 10 best books ever list. I loved it. That's my review. Loved it. Child prodigy goes searching for the lock that fits the key that belonged to his father who died in the World Trade Center. Marvelously moving and a virtuoso feat of storytelling.

The Pale Blue Eye, by Louis Bayard, is a mystery about a ritualistic killing at

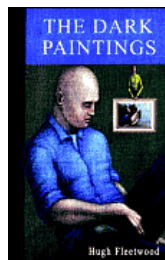


West Point in 1830. Helping the detective solve it is an overly earnest but unruly cadet named Edgar Allen Poe. There's the crux and the hook, but what makes this book is the fact that Louis Bayard possesses an almost terrifying gift for language that flows over the page like a sunrise, making you wish that 90 percent of all authors would stop writing and take a vow of silence. I'm not kidding. He is that good.

Dan worked with Alyson Books for many years; his online profile is here:

<http://dancullinane.zaadz.com>

Blake Fraina



My favorite LGBT book of 2006 - far and away - is **The Dark Paintings** by Hugh Fleetwood. Fleetwood evokes a disturbingly eerie atmosphere that has more in common with two of my all-time favorite, nonqueer authors - Jonathan Carroll and Eric McCormack (the Canadian creep-meister, not the actor from *Will & Grace*) - than with any gay writers whose work I've read. Like Barry McCrea's *The First Verse* in 2005, this book deserves the support of LGBT readers, not only because it's wonderfully written, but because it represents the "new wave" in queer literature - a story with a gay protagonist, not a "gay story." I anticipate big things for

the publisher, Bigfib, as well.

Blake is author of the witty, smart novel *King of Cats*. Author info:

www.blakefraina.com.

BigFib info:

www.bigfib.com/submissions.html.

Stephen Greco

I'm going to pull the same excuse I used last year: since my judges and I are in the process of reviewing nominees for the Ferro-Grumley Awards, I probably shouldn't comment on any LGBT titles published in 2006. But since you're allowing 2005 titles, let me tell you how much I loved a book published late last year that wasn't included in your last round-up: **Late and Soon**, by Robert J. Hughes (Carroll & Graf). Set in the rarefied atmosphere of high-end New York auction houses, the novel centers on a quartet of very adult characters, three men and a woman - two of whom have been married, two who are ex-lovers, and two who are brothers.

Hughes give tons of interior to all four of these characters - which, given the sharp observations, telling language, and real heart he accords each of them, makes for a really emotional read - and toward the end he spins the most engaging auction scene I've ever read. Amazingly - because the book is so wise and accomplished - *Late and Soon* is a first novel; I hear the author is working on a second.

Stephen is author of *The Sperm Engine* (nominated for a 2002 Lambda Literary Award) and of "The Demographer" and other stories from his *Dreadnought* series, available for direct download on Amazon Shorts.

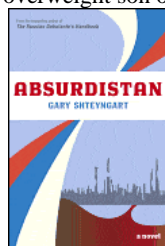


Aaron Hamburger

One of my favorite books from last year was **Absurdistan** by Gary Shteyngart, which might not seem like a queer book at first glance, and yet as I wrote in my review of the novel for *The Moscow Times*, there's a clearly queer subtheme that runs through both Shteyngart's novels but is never explained.

Absurdistan is the darkly comic story of Misha Vainberg, the massively overweight son of a dead Russian mob boss who's trying everything he can to get to America, despite being on a State Department blacklist because of his Dad's crime ties. Though much of the book is devoted to Vainberg's pining for his Latina girlfriend in New York, there are several curious descriptions of Vainberg's relationship with his best friend, "Alyosha-Bob," an extremely touchy-feely relationship rife with sexual tension. This tension reaches its climax when the two embrace, sing a rap lyric that goes "Lemme see yoah dick work" and exchange vows to the tune of "'You're my nigga,' 'And you are mine.'" Misha plants a kiss on his friend's cheek and thinks, "I felt something bright and piercing at the tip of my belly. Could rap be any more empowering?" But suddenly a helicopter appears like a *deus ex machina*, and Alyosha-Bob is transported out of the scene, and out of the book, too.

Shteyngart has an amazing gift for language, comedy, and outrageously imaginative plots. All of that talent is on high display in *Absurdistan*, a great novel that should be on the top of any reading list for lovers of contemporary fiction. He



also has this penchant for making a large number of references to homosexuality that never seem to go anywhere, a penchant that is rarely addressed in any reviews of his work but is loud, clear, and strangely discordant to this reader. I'm intrigued, though I don't know if I'm supposed to be.

Aaron is author of Faith for Beginners and The View from Stalin's Head. Author info: www.aaronhamburger.com.

Brent Hartinger

I Am Not Myself These Days, a memoir by Josh Kilmer-Purcell about his days as a drag queen and his ill-fated affair with a high-priced hustler, has absolutely all the things I hate about some gay fiction: a cast of self-destructive, sex-obsessed, oh-so-cool urbanites apparently determined to drink and drug their way into oblivion. At first glance, I can't imagine people I have less in common with or who I would less want to spend any time with. I loved this book!



Why? It's partly because Josh, the writer and main character, is a hilarious and very shrewd observer of human behavior, not to mention a terrific writer. But mostly it was the unlikeliest of love stories at the heart of this book: I laughed, I cried, and then I went out and bought copies for just about everyone I know.

Brent's latest book, Split Screen: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies, the latest sequel to Geography Club, is out in January. It's two complete books published as one. Author info: www.brenthartinger.com.

Trebor Healey

Now Is the Hour by Tom Spanbauer (Houghton Mifflin). Another great book by one of my favorite writers, Spanbauer has such a huge heart, without ever veering into sentimentality. He's smart and quirky, and I think this book more than any of his



others is his own story fictionalized. Rigby John is a totally believable awkward teenage queer boy, and he's the ideal vehicle for Spanbauer to express his truly amazing understanding of human relationships and family love in all their warmth, dysfunction, sweetness, and horror. The chapter on Flaco and Acho ("Gringa Loca") is something I'll probably read over and over again. It's a perfect rendering of male love in all its many aspects (not just queer), and if you don't read the book, at least read this chapter and weep at the beauty of it. It will change your life, or affirm it, or reveal something precious you didn't know was

in your heart.

Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians by Stuart Timmons and Lillian Faderman (Basic Books). Los Angeles has such a fascinating history, and this book covers so much of it, reminding us that queers have always been present in large numbers and thus a huge part of that history. I love all the little personal anecdotal stories in this book - the early native tales of two-spirited children, the one-legged hustler boy of Main St., the tale of Ah Fook in Chinatown, the mystique of Captain Jinx, the lesbian cowboy who passed for a dude, and the numerous twisted Hollywood tales. You realize in reading this book that though L.A. is often popularly eclipsed by SF and NYC when it comes to queer history, it seems likely that a lot more actually happened in L.A. than either of those cities and challenges you to consider that L.A. may in fact be the queerest town on the planet in the final analysis.

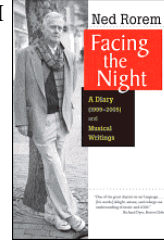
35 Cents by Matty Lee (Suspect Thoughts). This is one of the finest, most frank memoirs I've read in years. Hustling since he was a kid, (Lee got 35 cents for his first trick, thus the title), Matty recounts a harrowing tale of growing up on the street, in juvenile hall, and at various other unsavory addresses, relying always on his own wit, an amazing ability to remain self-reflective and hopeful when most people would simply shut down for good, and ultimately his belief in the kindness of strangers. What is most incredible about this book is Matty's unwavering faith in the goodness of people, and his gratefulness for those who helped him out, even in the smallest ways. Lee made me think a little more highly of people, and not because he was in any way Pollyanna about his description or assessment of them. He just has an amazing ability to appreciate. Lee's humor and candor made me feel like I was just sitting in a bar with him, and I read the whole book in one sitting. A really good, authentic book from someone who's been there and who clearly has no desire to exploit himself or the reader.

Trebor is author of the poetry collection Sweet Son of Pan and the novel Through It Came Bright Colors; he's co-editing an anthology, Queer & Catholic, with Amie Evans. Author info: www.treborhealey.com.

Martin Hyatt

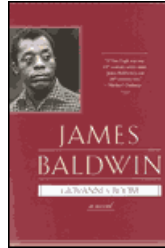
The Book I Loved This Past Year

I've been very into the lives of musicians as of late. This past year I found myself reading country music biographies, drawing on them for inspiration for the characters in my new novel. I've been reading biographies of Steve Earle, Ernest Tubb, Merle Haggard, and Dottie West. And I've been closely reading the lyrics of Gram Parsons and Townes Van Zant. Since I'm so into music right now, I've become completely immersed in the works of Ned Rorem. He is so under-appreciated as a writer. His latest book is the continuation of his memoirs/diaries, entitled **Facing the Night: A Diary (1999-2005) and Musical Writings**. It is poetic, inventive, edgy, and completely sophisticated. His ruminations, candid takes on life, and his delicate appreciation of edgy honesty is very cool. He rocks.



Martin is author of A Scarecrow's Bible. Author info: www.martinhyatt.net.

Fenton Johnson



I taught a graduate course this past fall called "On Moral Fiction," in which the goal was to expand the students' horizons as to what constituted "moral fiction." Readings ranged from the Gospel of Luke and St. Augustine's Confessions (a must read for any literate person who hasn't encountered its strange, marvelous window into the psyche of the man who single-handedly shaped what passes for civilization in the West) to Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, both superb books offering a glimpse of the tragedy we call Africa at two very different points in its evolution. I taught James Baldwin's **Giovanni's Room**, which I hadn't read since I was 22, and it was very likely the first gay novel I cracked. It absolutely holds up - anyone who hasn't revisited it in many years should do so - but this time I was overwhelmed, almost to tears, by its combination of commensurate mastery of prose and the most intense self-loathing. I followed that with Matthew Stadler's **Allan Stein**, partly to offer a contrasting view of Paris after 30-plus years but also to provoke a riot in the classroom (it worked). Jeannette Winterson's **Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles** did not hold up under close examination, but I liked it much more than the graduate students, maybe because I was more open to its blend of fiction with nonfiction. Today's grad students are always surprising me by how prudish and conventional they are. We finish up tomorrow with the inimitable Flannery O'Connor (several short stories) and Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, which never fails to calm and teach. In retrospect I kick myself for not including Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* on this list, but I'm teaching the latter next semester and there are always more classes. Jim Crace's *Quarantine*, which I also taught, is a pretty interesting read - an atheist writer (Crace) sets himself the challenge of telling the story of Jesus' 40 days fast in the desert.

Fenton is author of the novel Scissors Paper Rock and of the contemplative spiritual memoir Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey.

Josh Kilmer-Purcell

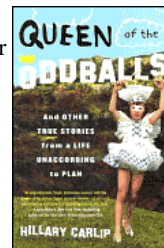
Tho' Hillary Carlip (**Queen of the Oddballs: And Other True Stories from a Life Unaccording to Plan**) is a lesbian, I found her book to be inspiring for all of us queers who were oddballs growing up. Here's a review I wrote on Amazon:

There need to be more Hillarys in this world. Then again, if we were all Hillarys, she'd no longer be the hilariously heartwarming oddball that she is. She'd be the norm. But what a wonderful norm that would be. I could live with it.

Too often reviewers confuse accessibility with simplicity. Hillary's book is written with a deceptively conversational voice. It's wonderfully friendly. She's your best grade-school friend by the end of chapter one. It's uplifting. I've carried the mood around with me for days.

But there are some remarkably important insights as well. Insights of the best kind... the ones that don't whack you over the head with overwrought metaphors. The kind that are actually applicable to the way in which you approach the rest of your life. The kind that linger, prod, and hug. Read it. Make your friends read it. Most importantly, make your kids read it. It's time we populate the world with oddballs. The squares in charge should obviously be trusted no longer.

Josh is author of the memoir I Am Not Myself These Days: "My story is simply your typical boy-meets-boy-dressed-as-girl-who-accessorizes-with-goldfish love story.



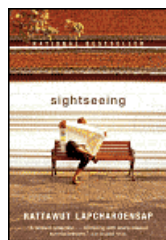
(Only with booze and crack.) Author info: www.iamnotmyselfthesedays.com.

Stewart Lewis

Rockstarlet!!!

Stewart, a writer who knows what he likes, is the author of *Rockstarlet*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a rock star (and one of your BTWOF editor's favorite easy-read debuts of the year). He studied at USC with John Rechy, is working on a second novel, *Fluke*, and has a whole other career as a musician. Author info: www.stewartlewis.com; listen to a couple of his songs.

Brian J. Leung



I've just returned from New York City, where I presented the Asian American Literary Award for Fiction to **Sightseeing** by Rattawut Lapcharoensap, from Grove Press, which is a powerful short story collection mainly centered on contemporary Thailand. It is brave work in that it refused to treat culture like a flavor, giving the reader, instead, not exoticism, but a mirror no matter what country you're from.

I'd also recommend the spectacular **Atomik Aztex**, by Sheshu Foster, from City Lights. Here, writers and readers *must* set aside all preconceived notions of story and structure. And yet, like all great experimental writing, the book is not a bag of tricks, but truly probing narrative.

Brian is author of the short story collection *World Famous Love Acts* and the forthcoming novel, *Lost Men*.

Michael Lowenthal

I toppled into love with Deborah Eisenberg's 2006 story collection, **Twilight of the Superheroes**. (For those who need a reading on the gay-o-meter: Eisenberg is straight, and married to the actor Wallace Shawn, but many of her stories include gay characters, and one of the best in this collection, "Some Other, Better Otto" - isn't just that title delicious?! - is told from the point of view of a gay man.) Eisenberg's stories make me cock my head and listen with an off-kilter delight, like music from a far-off continent, performed in tones we're not accustomed to hearing. How can you not love a writer who comes up with similes like: "Nonie had a laugh like little colored blocks of wood toppling" and "...the sweet air pouring by and the sun ringing through the sky like trumpets."



Michael is author of the novels *The Same Embrace*, *Avoidance*, and *Charity Girl*.

Doug McKeown

One terrific book: **Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic** by Alison Bechdel. Doug facilitates the *Queer Stories* workshops in NYC, and edited *Queer Stories for Boys: True Stories from the Gay Men's Storytelling Workshop*. Info: www.queerstories.org.

Carlos Mock

Here is my list:

Sor Juana's Second Dream by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

The World is Flat by Thomas L. Friedman.

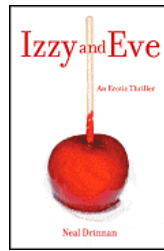
China, Inc. by Ted C. Fishman.

La Catedral del Mar by Ildefonso Falcones (I don't know if the English translation is available yet. Strongly recommend you get it when it comes out).

And my personal favorite, which is about to be released, so I'm one of the few who read it in 2006: **Mosaic Virus** by Carlos Mock.

Carlos is author of the aforementioned *Mosaic Virus* and of *Borrowing Time: A Latino Sexual Odyssey*. Author info: www.carlostmock.com.

Marshall Moore



Izzy and Eve by Neal Drinnan. This is Neal's fourth novel, and it was worth the wait. By far his best book, it's scary and provocative and scandalous and sad and funny and a whole lot of other things. When I turn the last page and blurt "Damn!" out loud, whether there are other people in earshot or not, the author has done something right. I'm very much looking forward to his fifth.

The Scene Stealer by Warren Dunford. Ever since the first volume in this series, *Soon to Be a Major Motion Picture*, was published, I've been a fan. I was excited to get a copy of this; it was great to revisit these characters. There's a warm, good-natured

quality to his writing that never becomes saccharine or doting. It's fun but it's not fluff. And he writes so well.

Lisey's Story by Stephen King. This is a story about a very, very unusual marriage. This is King's best book in years, arguably his best since *The Stand*, and I got choked up on the subway when I turned the last page. It's devastating and brilliant. Some of his more recent books like *Bag of Bones* have hinted that he had a story like this inside of him, but I was still taken off-guard. I read it slowly on purpose, which I never do.

Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman by Haruki Murakami. Murakami is a genius. I have deliberately left the last story unread so that I won't have to finish the book. *Marshall is author of* *The Concrete Sky*, *Black Shapes in a Darkened Room*, and *An Ideal for Living* (coming from *Suspect Thoughts Press* in 2008). He blogs from Korea at <http://articulate-ink.livejournal.com> and about his writing, and writing as a craft, at <http://msminpdx.livejournal.com>.

Felice Picano

Brokeback Mountain by Diana Osana/Larry McMurtry. In many ways, the screenplay was richer and deeper than Annie Proulx's novella. Lovely on the page and on the screen.

Loose End by Ivan E. Coyote. This Canadian writer's stories are written to be performed, which may explain why they seem so artless. Craftily so, as they're extremely well crafted.

Still Life With June by Darren Greer (2003). Another Canadian's gay novel was different, interestingly Gothic and eventually quite moving.

The First Verse by Barry McCrea (2005). This Irishman's first published novel was stunning and different: a corrective to all those who think gay novels must be coming out or young lover tales. Compulsive reading.

Lighthousekeeping by Jeanette Winterson. This is the first book by this well-known British author that I ever took to. She abandons her usual bells and whistles style and tricks to tell two beautiful stories beautifully.

Brian in Three Seasons by Patricia Grossman. Proof that a woman can write about a gay man from the inside with knowledge, force, and honesty. This Ferro-Grumley Award novel shows how *off* Truong's *Book of Salt* last year was, attempting the same thing.

The Historian by Elizabeth Kostova. Too long, too repetitious, and not even fully satisfying, this is still the first vampire book since Anne Rice's sensational debut, and Jewelle Gomez's *Gilda Stories* to consistently hold my interest to the end.

Seventy Times Seventy by Sal Sapienza. He's my second cousin and unlike me was brought up very, very Catholic, so this story of a gay man wrestling with religion was intriguing and nicely written, too. If he goes on to write more, there may be a dynasty in the making.

Tweaked by Patrick Moore. This study/autobiography is his best book yet and all about what it means to be a Crystal Meth addict; required reading for anyone gay and aware of this scourge.

Grief by Andrew Holleran. This perfect little novella is a book I heard him kvetching about for several years while he was writing it - a surefire recipe for hating the final product, right? Wrong! It's probably the best piece of gay writing this year.

The Sea by John Banville. I've been reading this British novelist for years, but for my money this Booker Prize novel is the first time he ever managed to pull off a complex, serious, and emotionally full work

Sweet Son of Pan by Trebor Healey. His wackily wonderful and out-of-the-ballpark poetry is gay-erotic-narrative-etc. and pretty much everything we don't read poetry for. I'm waiting for his short story collection now!

Felice is the author of many, many books, including *The Lure*, *Like People in History*, *The Book of Lies*, and *the forthcoming* *Art and Sex in Greenwich Village: A Memoir of Gay Literary Life after Stonewall*. Author info: www.felicepicano.com.



Matt Rauscher

Though I've been big on mysteries this year (now I'm reading *Third Man Out* by Richard Stevenson) I've found two interesting titles that I really liked. The first, **Troll: A Love Story**, by Johanna Sinislaio, is an import from Finland, and it is not about a 'troll' in the gay sense, but an actual troll that a young, gay photographer finds on the street behind some garbage cans. He takes it home and tries to nurse it back to health, and as the troll becomes healthier and harder to manage, complications arise with neighbors, work, and boyfriends. Excerpts from an old Finnish wildlife book are interspersed in between the narrative. The author is a popular comic artist in Finland, where this book was a hit, and the writing is spare and visual. A great supporting cast includes a Filipina mail-order bride downstairs. Having a gay main character did not hold this book back in Europe, whereas I think a similar book in the United States would have struggled to get noticed.



Also, I like **The Yacoubian Building** by Alaa Al Aswany, an Egyptian novel that was a monstrous hit in the Arab world. The author writes for an opposition paper in Egypt, and the novel longs for the days before the extreme Saudi-style Islam spread throughout North Africa. The novel's story revolves around a building with a lot of diverse residents, including a gay character who is in a relationship with a neighborhood family man. The book takes on a lot of social problems, and as a social commentary it de-romanticizes that part of the world in a nice way. Highly recommended!

Matt is the author of The Unborn Spouse Situation.

Author info:

www.mattrauscher.com.

He likes uncut penises:

www.mattrauscher.com/article_uncut.htm.

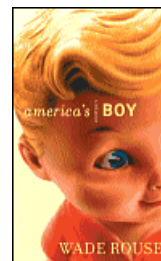
Sal Sapienza

Thanks for including me among those you asked to contribute to the favorite books of 2006. One of my favorites was **America's Boy** by Wade Rouse. Here's my review:

A good memoir brings the reader into another's world, having them walk in someone else's shoes for a while, and does so in an entertaining fashion. A great memoir does the same but goes beyond, bringing the reader to examine his/her own life in the process. *America's Boy* is a great memoir. Although Rouse and I were raised in vastly different manners - he in the rural Ozarks, and I in Queens, New York - I came away with a better understanding of my own life's journey by reading his. Like many popular recent memoirs, Rouse's book is an easy read, full of witty pop culture references and funny tales of quirky family members and an unconventional childhood. What sets it apart is its sweetness and poignancy. The book caused me to reflect on my own losses in life and examine how they've shaped me. I came away with a greater appreciation of my own parents who - though very different from Rouse's - also did the best they knew how with the cards life dealt them. The, at times, shockingly honest Rouse reflects on the mistakes he has made and the people he's hurt, and I become inspired to examine my own weaknesses. Rouse's aunt tells young Wade how she hopes his life will be filled with many chapters. I know that I look forward to reading his next memoir and discovering more about myself in the process.

Sal's debut novel is Seventy Times Seven, from Harrington Park Press. Author info:

www.70x7book.com.



Lawrence Schimel

Spin Control by Chris Moriarty.

I was pleasantly surprised to find myself liking this sequel even more than her first novel, *Spin State*. She tackles incredibly complex topics (quantum physics, the volatile political situation in the Middle East projected into the near-future, etc.) and handles them with grace and skill, and in such a way that she invites the reader along with her to explore these interesting convolutions without getting bogged down in infodumps of either the science or the politics. It moves at the fast-pace of a thriller, while continuing to explore the bisexual politics of the human-AI love story from the first book. This book also explores the complexities of same-sex love in a world of clones and comes up with (I thought) lots of interesting and relevant



things to say. I found it a very rewarding and enriching read that gave me lots of "crunchy" things to think about during and afterward.

Roy & Al by Ralf König.

I was very glad to see Arsenal Pulp Press bring out an English edition of this, which I think is one of König's funniest graphic novels. König is tremendously popular throughout Europe, but has been very under-published in English (whereas over 20 of his graphic novels have been translated into Spanish, for instance). *Roy & Al* is a dog's eye view on gay life, as a pampered purebred and a mutt are thrown together when their owners hook up.

Lawrence has edited dozens of books, written many (including a series of Spanish-language children's books with Sara Roja, and published a slew's slew of short stories, poems, and essays. He's also co-editor, with me, of The Future is Queer.

Here's a bibliography of many of his books:

www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/s/lawrence-schimmel.

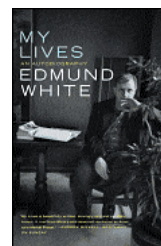
He blogs here:

<http://desayunoencama.livejournal.com>.

Don Shewey

I'm delighted to be asked for my favorite books of 2006. I wish I had more time to describe them thoughtfully, but here goes:

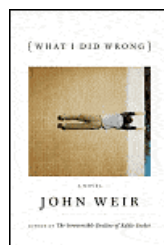
Nonfiction: Any year that Edmund White publishes a book is a good year for readers like me, and his **My Lives** tops my list this year. Considering how quasi-autobiographical his novels are - at least the sequence that goes from *A Boy's Own Story* to *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* to *The Farewell Symphony* - you would think there's nothing White hasn't told about his life. But in *My Lives* he's broken it down into separate subjects: My Father, My Mother, My Friends, My Hustlers, etc. This structure breaks the back of the usual boring chronology and inspires a chapter called "My Master" that may be the single best story he's ever written - a bravura act of self-revelation that is funny, pathetic, and ultimately very moving in its portrait of obsessive attachment.



Fiction: Wayne Hoffman made his debut as a novelist with **Hard**, a funny, fun, and sexy roman a clef about the gay sexual subculture in New York during the Giuliani years. It's fiction as social history, capturing the peculiarly 21st century hyperactive world of online cruising and the variety of forms that drive the desire and bodies of gay men today.

Don is editor of Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays and author of Sam Shepard. Read his articles and essays here: www.donshewey.com.

K.M. Soehnlein



John Weir's **What I Did Wrong** is to my mind the most profound and unforgettable book of 2006. Weir's narrator speaks heartbreakingly to a generation of gay men who came out when AIDS was at its most furious and unrelenting, and who find themselves, decades later, still rather stunned to be alive and without the companionship of much needed, long-ago-lost friends. I was also exhilarated by Michelle Tea's **Rose of No Man's Land**, one of the funniest novels I've ever read, and the one I recommend to anyone wondering what to read next.

Karl is the author of The World of Normal Boys and You Can Say You Knew Me When. Author info: www.kmsoehnlein.com.

Stuart Timmons

I've had my head up my city this past year; little more than clippings, transcripts, and L.A. books have leaked in. One of the exceptions is **Sweet Son of Pan** by Trebor Healey (\$12.95, Suspect Thoughts Press.) In sixty-seven delectable, reverent, and horny-as-hell poems, Healey shows more about gay sexuality and emotion than many full-blown novels. Riffing on Whitman ("I Sing the Dick Crooked"), Genet ("Our Lady of Fresh Produce"), Ginsberg, ("Dick Prayer") and others, Healey's own voice always comes through, bestowing an integrity on sexuality. Poetry that makes you laugh aloud and maybe jerk off is rare, but here it is; just read the last line of "The Aristocracy of the Scrotum."



Two L.A. books are worth reading entirely. Moody and thoughtful is **Under the**

Rainbow: An Intimate Memoir of Judy Garland, Rock Hudson, & My Life in Old Hollywood, by 1950s actor John Carlyle, edited by Chris Freeman (Carroll & Graf, \$26.95). The handsome and talented Carlyle dishes the dirt on 50s Hollywood with rare first-person honesty; more of a "never-was" than a "has-been," he was handsome, cultured, and talented enough to have seen and done it all (including doing Judy on amphetamines). His story is that of thousands of Hollywood hopefuls who auditioned, partied, and waited, all endlessly, falling into anonymity. How lucky that someone broke the code of silence.

Another is 2005's **Nasty: My Family and other Glamorous Varmints** (Simon & Schuster, \$24). Simon Doonan, a Brit, began dressing windows in West Hollywood and rose to be creative director of Barney's in New York - as well as a popular columnist and author. This book begins with his English childhood, but its heart is in L.A., recounting 80s clubland in Hollywood, meeting his East L.A. lover, the thrill of making art and success out of nothing but creativity and ambition, the siege of AIDS, and ultimately, finding happiness in a "Twinkie-Troll" romance. Full disclosure: in my own clubbing days I used to see Doonan done up in fancy jackets with overdressed friends (overdressed as in wearing entire aviaries in their mile-high wigs). He seemed an emotionless high-flier. It's nice of him to share the private side - and why that public face was such an achievement.

Stuart's 1990 biography, *The Trouble With Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement, was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and an American Library Association Award; he's co-author this year, with Lillian Faderman, of Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians. Author info: <http://stuarttimmons.com>.*

Jim Tushinski



I didn't get much chance to read many new books this year, but I thought **Fun Home** by Alison Bechdel was wonderful - as good as any "non-graphic" novel out there and in fact better than most. Her mix of pain and humor and her intricate, realistic artwork came together to tell a beautiful autobiographical story with no simple answers. I've always enjoyed her work, but *Fun Home* was an enormous leap forward for her and for the so-called "graphic novel."

One of the best non-2006 novels I read this year is **Air** by Geoff Ryman. It was published in 2004, though it managed to be pretty much ignored in the States. Ryman's story of what happens to a Central Asian village when the entire world goes online using a new wireless technology is everything you would think a book centering on technology shouldn't be - full of emotion and insight, with wonderful characters and great writing. Ryman's best known for his *Wizard of Oz* novel *Was* (still one of my favorite novels of all time), but he has continued to create amazing works of fiction that usually don't get a lot of attention (at least here in the U.S. of A). He has a new novel available in the UK (*The King's Last Song*) that I hope a U.S. publisher will bring out soon.

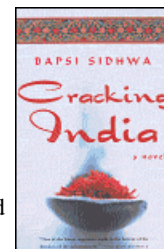
I did have the special treat of reading two books for review that won't be coming out until January or so, but I really enjoyed them both. And they couldn't be more different. Stephen Beachy's two novellas **Some Phantom/No Time Flat** (Suspect Thoughts Press) is literary fiction at its most demanding - a gorgeously poetic look at lost dreams, loose ends, and life on the margin. It's disturbing, difficult, and a little dangerous. I also loved Max Pierce's gay gothic romance **The Master of Seaciff** (Harrington Park Press). It's sheer entertainment from start to finish, a well-plotted mélange of everything from *Jane Eyre* to *Dark Shadows* that never feels warmed over or cloying.

Jim wrote the novel Van Allen's Ecstasy, *directed the documentary* That Man: Peter Berlin, *and is co-editor with Jim Van Buskirk of the forthcoming anthology* Identity Envy: Wanting to be Who We're Not: Creative Nonfiction by Queer Writers. *He's working on a biography of filmmaker Tom Graeff (auteur behind the cult classic Teenagers from Outer Space). Author info: www.jimtushinski.com.*

John Weir

I spent last summer not exactly reading, but avoiding reading - or rather, avoiding finishing reading - Charles Dickens's **Dombey and Son**. I got halfway through! I thought that was an accomplishment. It's 800 pages long and it repeats itself, so I felt like 400 pages were enough.

In order to avoid Dickens, I read a lot of other stuff: Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, and several of her political tracts. I like her politics! Also Bapsi Sidhwa's **Cracking India** and Amitav Ghosh's **The Shadowlines**. They were swell books. Not "queer," really, but odd, in a fun way. What else? I discovered a



passion for Mike Davis's nonfiction, which I don't know how to classify, exactly: urban-historical-geo- political-unionizing-environmental-disaster epics like **City of Quartz**, about many of the most enjoyable and problematic aspects of Los Angeles.

I wanted to read the new graphic novel by Alison Bechdel (love her!), **Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic**, but I couldn't find it in Houston! (I've been teaching here at the University of Houston's MFA Creative Writing program.) I'll track it down when I get back to New York. In the meantime, I hope it isn't nepotistic to mention a book written by a friend of mine, Edmund White. His memoir, **My Lives: An Autobiography**, is wonderfully evocative of so many sights and sounds, especially the landscape of White's midwestern childhood. I think White is in the great tradition of American Midwestern writers, including big names like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and lesser known - but gay! - writers like Glenway Wescott.

Another book I deeply admired, published by a gay writer last year, was Andrew Holleran's **Grief**. What a perfect book, a 150-page sustained narrative that meditates on change, loss, grief, of course, and the history and geography of Washington, D.C. You can take *Grief* to Washington the way you'd take *Ulysses* to Dublin and trace the novel's movements around town.

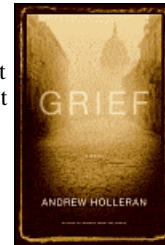
There has been a lot of noise over the past couple years about well-known (heterosexual) American writers currently in their 70s whose latest books try to come to terms with terror and death - Philip Roth's *Everyman*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and John Updike's *Terrorist* - but it seems to me Holleran's *Grief* manages, much more directly and profoundly than any of these books, to convey something of the texture of a life that has been cast, almost on a daily basis, in the shadow of present loss, and the expectation of losses to come. That makes it sound like a dirge! It's not. It's beautifully written, subtle, direct, observant, and imaginative.

Reviewers have called Holleran's sentences and tone reminiscent of Henry James, and I see the comparison to stories like James's "The Beast in the Jungle." Still, what I most enjoy about Holleran's writing - in this book and others - is his, what do I call it, "'actualist?'" voice. I mean he is a realist writer, but his realism feels documentary. There isn't a moment in *Grief* that doesn't strike you as if an acquaintance had suddenly taken you, quietly and with simple honesty, into his confidence. Yet the book has clearly been very carefully crafted. It's fiction, but it feels like a chronicle of anyone's real-life. And I found it in Houston!

John is author of What We Did Wrong and The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Sockett, and doesn't have an author's website that I could find.

Don Weise

At the top of my list is the book everyone close to me read - well, everyone gay anyway - and loved as much as I did, **Grief** by Andrew Holleran. It's unnecessary by this point to say he's brilliant but I'll say it anyway. Plus *Grief* has some of the best writing about AIDS I've ever come across:



"You don't know what D.C. was like in the eighties. Funerals, funerals, funerals! I got my suntan one summer from just standing in Rock Creek Cemetery. It was a nightmare. I used to think the eighties were like a very nice dinner party with friends, except some of them were taken out and shot while the rest of us were expected to go on eating."

And he keeps *doing* that, as Franny would say.

Another book people around me loved was **Fun Home** by Alison Bechdel. Years of reading her incredibly original work as a cartoonist should have told me she had the goods to deliver an incredibly original memoir. I just didn't expect anything so complex or surprising. The story of Alison's strange father and her relationship with him fascinated me in particular - though that may be due in no small part to having a strange father of my own.

I read Christopher Bram's **Exiles in America** with real pleasure as well. I have terrific admiration for Chris and was impressed by the ease with which he takes gay literature into the bigger world we all live in.

You know I adore Edmund White so it will come as no surprise to hear me praise his marvelous autobiography, **My Lives**. Aside from the wonderfully touching portrait of his mother, I got a kick out of the S/M chapter:

"I subscribed to a website called slaves4masters.com on which lonely, pudgy middle-aged men in remote towns in Kansas advertised for slaves who were seeking pain and torture; the masters looked like Rotarians. For me, illogically, being suburban was a fatal flaw in a master. On my first day listed on the site a medical worker in Cleveland ordered me to relocate there

and live in a cage the rest of my life. When I thought, 'But I must finish my semester at Princeton, then there's Rome in June and Provence in July,' I failed to reply, and he wrote, 'You should be grateful for my offer at your age. You're old and overweight - no master would have you. You will obey me, boy. Now!' He was forty-one."

I have a fondness for this chapter not just because it's so much fun, but because it takes guts for an author of Ed's international renown to be *that* revealing in print.

I finally got around to the second volume of Blanche Wiesen Cook's extraordinary biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, **Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume 2, The Defining Years, 1933-1938**. No stranger to having guts herself, Roosevelt (Blanche, too, for that matter) makes you want to run out and save the world the minute you're finished with the book.

I've not yet read Gore Vidal's *Point to Point Navigation* or Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmon's *Gay L.A.* but can't wait to get around to them, and am curious to read Matty Lee's *35 Cents*, which I've seen around town. I'm also looking forward to the marvelous Michael Lowenthal's new novel, *Charity Girl*, in January.

Not exactly gay but probably fruitier than anything I've already named, Kaye Ballard's **How I Lost 10 Pounds in 53 Years** is all the things I like about Ballard herself, while Marni Nixon's wonderfully bitter autobiography **I Could Have Sung All Night** takes the prize for sour grapes. She just can't stop beating Natalie Wood over the head for being the real star of *West Side Story*. My favorite moment may be at the premiere of *The Sound of Music*, in which she played a small onscreen role as a nun. Nixon, who resembles Julie Andrews, is mistaken for Andrews by a group of fans outside the theater. "Look, there's Julie," someone shouts, and the bunch rushes towards her. Once up close, however, they realize their error: "That's not Julie," one of the fans moans, "That's nobody," and they turn away as quickly as they'd descended. Of course I have a weakness for this kind of thing. You can't be a movie musical queen and *not* enjoy it.

While I read plenty of good books by heterosexuals, we have the whole *world* cheering them on, not to mention the *New York Times* naming their work the "100 Notable Books of the Year," (see, the sour grapes have rubbed off) so they hardly need a plug from me in a gay book review.

Don is an editor at Carroll & Graf, which publishes great queer books every season.

Andy Zeffer

The books I read this past year run the gamut.

Among the standouts, the first was **Veronica**, by Mary Gaitskill. A gripping and stark read, Gaitskill weaves together the story of an unlikely friendship in a structure that flows effortlessly between the past and present. She also brings the 70s and 80s alive through the rise and fall of a beautiful model. Gay themes, specifically a complex bisexual relationship, come into play. And gay readers will also identify with the intoxicating, but ultimately fleeting charm of youth and beauty.

I also visited a classic, Emily Bronte's **Wuthering Heights**. Though obviously not a gay book, many gays can sympathize with the theme of unrequited, tragic love.

Finally, to even things out and take a break from all the heavy, depressing stuff. I loved **Skinny Dip** by Carl Hiaasan. The hilarious, suspenseful, and clever thought that unfolded was so good I could hardly put it down. Sorry guys, no gay characters here, but readers will love seeing a prick of a guy get his payback at the end. After all, haven't we all been with a real jerk at one time or another?

The next book on my list is **Paws & Reflect: Exploring the Bond Between Gay Men and Their Dogs**. Included in this beautiful book are conversations with Edward Albee and Charles Busch, and pieces by favorite gay authors like Jay Quinn and Neil Plakcy. I should also mention I have a story included as well, and get in a shameless plug while I'm at it!

Andy is author of the spirited novel Going Down in La-La Land. Author info:

<http://andyzeffer.com>.

Look for a few more Favorites in the next edition of the **Gay Men's Edition** of Books To Watch Out For.



November Bestsellers from Giovanni's Room, Philadelphia

Gay Men's Books

1. *Exiles in America*, by Christopher Bram (Morrow, \$24.95)
The author of *Gods and Monsters* probes the lives of a gay couple together for 21 years as they collide with a "straight" couple from Iran.
2. *Seventy Times Seven*, by Salvatore Sapienza (Harrington Park, \$15.95)
A call to religious life is never easy - especially when you're 27 and gorgeous!
3. *Three Sides to Every Story*, by Clarence Nero (Broadway, \$12.95)
Nero creates an utterly compelling narrative while illuminating the social and sexual challenges young urban black people face.
4. *How's Your Romance?*, by Ethan Mordden (St. Martin's, \$14.95)
Blending the comic, the sexy, the tragic, and the at once realistic and idealistic, these stories are Mordden at his very best.
5. *Grief: A Novel*, by Andrew Holleran (Hyperion, \$19.95)
Reeling from the death of his invalid mother, a gay professor comes to the nation's capital to recuperate from his loss.
6. *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son: A Memoir*, by Kevin Jennings (Beacon, \$24.95)
Jennings's poignant, razor-sharp memoir describes growing up in poverty in the South, the death of his fundamentalist preacher father when he was eight, and his discovery of a world beyond poverty.
7. *The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage, and My Family*, by Dan Savage (New American Library, \$15)
Savage, a syndicated sex-advice columnist, takes on the issue of gay marriage and makes it personal.
8. *Gay and Single...Forever?*, by Steven Berezna (Marlowe, \$15.95)
Berezna compellingly investigates the basic question of whether there is room for him, and other single gay men, in a post-Stonewall era.
9. *Getting It*, by Alex Sanchez (Simon & Schuster, \$16.95)
This young adult novel features a straight boy who hopes a gay friend can improve & his attractiveness to girls.

The well-crafted book descriptions are from Giovanni's Room,
www.giovanisroom.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.



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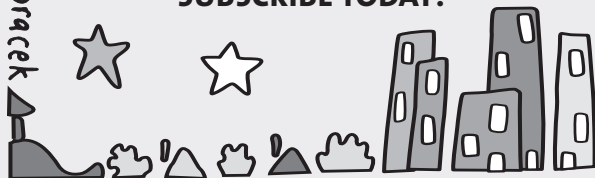
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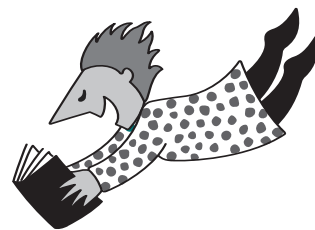
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