

Testosterone on Tape

REVIEWED BY JOEL NICHOLS

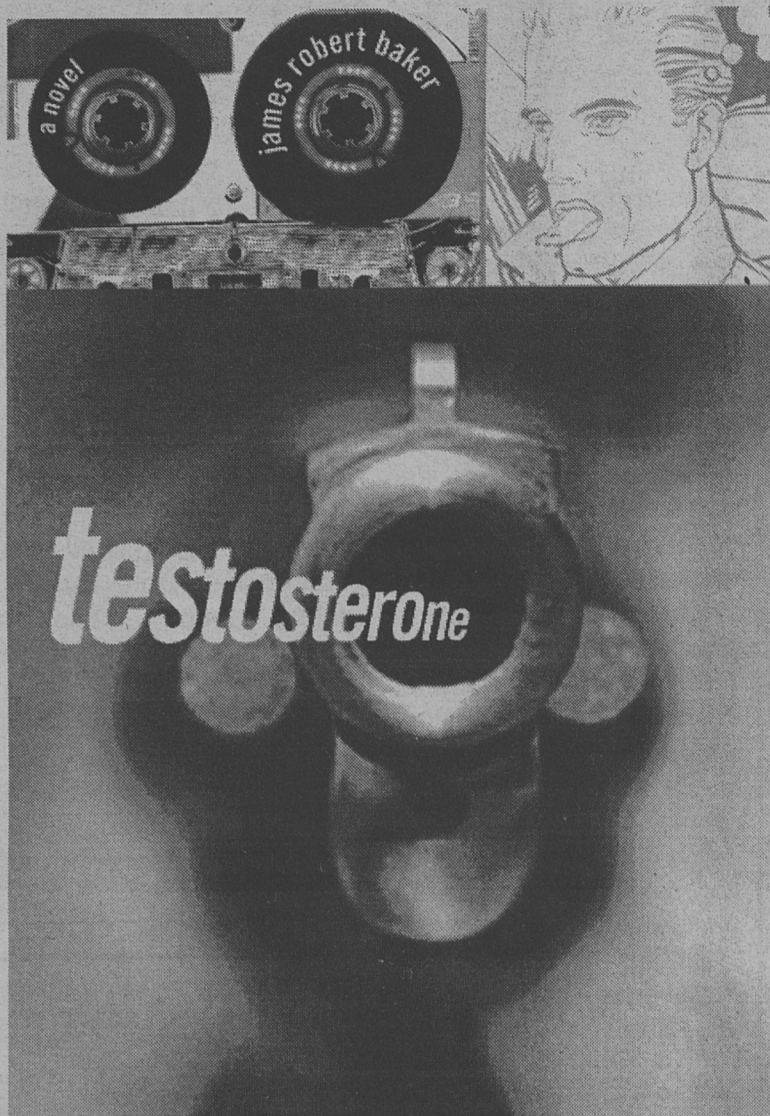
Novelist and screenwriter James Robert Baker died in November of 1997. In October of 2000, Alyson Publications published his final work, *Testosterone*. It is a novel in the experimental form of a "book on tape," recorded straight from the mouth of Dean Seagrave, as he makes his way around L.A. and loses control. The form of the novel is a direct "spoken" letter from Seagrave to Baker, "a living novel, spoken directly onto tape. Without all the tedious typing and editing, and agents, publishers, printers, before the book-on-tape version."

Seagrave tells the story of his relationship with Pablo Ortega, a man whose existence forces Seagrave's life into disaster. Pablo's characterization is one of the complicated and intricate structures that Baker builds in this book. All the reader knows about Pablo is from Seagrave. Even what the other characters say is mitigated through him, so it is not possible to separate delusion from reality. Because Pablo is of Chilean descent, Baker explores racial pretenses and conflicts of late 20th century Los Angeles.

The first description of Pablo is from Seagrave driving down a dark road, recalling wrapping his "lips around his fat brown uncut cock." The reader sees the impact that Pablo has on the narrator: in the next line Seagrave's "lips became my car and his cock became the sycamore tree" that he crashes into. Further description tells how Seagrave explained Pablo to his Anglo friends: no accent, born in "Eurocentric Chile," and a doctor. Interestingly, he is first situated in the text by his "brown cock."

The racial tension continues throughout the book as Seagrave becomes convinced that Pablo is in a South American cult and has an altercation with his mother, providing Baker with the opportunity to talk about the stereotypical relationship between Latinos and their mothers. Curiously enough, there is a level of self-reflection by Seagrave that denies that his stereotypes are racist. He notes that not all Latinos, the writer Gabriel García Marquez for example, would not respond that way. This racial investigation is carefully implemented, although complicated.

Testosterone is bold and fast. At 200 pages, it is an intense read that almost gives the feeling of having sat down and listened to the five cassette tapes themselves. The design of the jacket perfectly encloses the



ticking time bomb of text – its center is the barrel of a gun with the words coming out. The top of the cover is an enhanced photo of a cassette; the actual tape inside looks as much like the wheels of the car that Seagrave is in throughout the whole book as it does like tape. The third image on the cover, to the left of the tape, is a yellow and red graphic of a man sticking his tongue out. The color is sick and the man is disgusted. It is an appropriate representation of both Seagrave, a graphic artist, and the reader during the more gruesome parts.

The whole story is set in L.A., framed by its beaches, streets, and freeways. It might have been useful to have a *Thompson's Street Atlas* to refer to while reading. Baker creates a picture of a post-ACT-UP gay community, where the attitude towards AIDS is terrifying: Seagrave resists getting tested out of fear, Pablo says he is negative, but may be lying, and men in sex clubs seem not to care at all. As a cultural history, the text serves as evidence of what happens when AIDS is no longer seen as imminent death, but instead, as Seagrave disparages, "a gift."

The gay culture displayed in *Testosterone* straddles two diverging lives – the characters, for the most part, are sex addicts who frequent tea rooms, but they also want boyfriends. Through Seagrave's entire narration, he is repulsed by what Pablo does, but wants to be able to make it all better again, kiss him and be

a couple again. Turned on by the idea of anonymous sex in the various cruising locales he went to before Pablo, Seagrave tries to initiate a casual encounter with a UCLA graduate student. What really makes the student attractive to the narrator is that he is boyfriend material: intelligent (he is reading Rimbaud's collected works), a good body (tight, but not too-perfect like the muscle queens), and not obviously dying from AIDS or strung out on heroin. The encounter fails because Seagrave tries to bring too much emotion into it, attempting to explain his obsession with Pablo while the other guy just wants to trade blowjobs. In the end, Seagrave cannot lose his fantasy of the perfect tomorrow, living with a Nobel prize-winning boyfriend in a futuristic solar-plated house in New Mexico, where cultural differences do not matter and there is no AIDS.

As a queer voice without apology, Seagrave insults "breeders," the religious and political right, assimilation from both the Latino and gay communities into straight, white America, and even shoots up a Taco Bell with a bunch of anti-abortion Christians. James Robert Baker's final novel is excellent as a sort of fictional ethnography of late 1990's gay life in L.A., as a work of careful, pop-culture intertextuality, and as a queer first person narrative. For more information, see www.jamesrobertbaker.com or www.alyson.com, the website of the publisher.

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