

# queer classics: edmund white's "a boy's own story"

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

**E**dmund White (b. 1940) is arguably our most important living gay writer. Though his often ornate style can be an acquired taste, and his unapologetically sexual sensibility has been criticized by the likes of Larry Kramer, it's hard to come up with another writer whose combined body of work has had a greater impact on how gay literature is viewed.

White's autobiographical novel trilogy — *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony* — provides a rich chronicle of gay life from the 1950s through the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. He's also written a pre-AIDS sex manual (*The Joy of Gay Sex* with Dr. Charles Silverstein), a nonfiction travelogue of gay life in late-1970s America (*States of Desire*), a book of essays, two respected literary biographies (on Genet and Proust), two idiosyncratic books on Paris, numerous stories, and other stylistically varied works too significant for the mainstream press to ignore. His most recent novel, *The Married Man* — set in the early 1990s, was a brutally honest yet rarely depressing tribute to his French lover, Hubert Sorin, who died of AIDS.

White also happens to be a wonderfully charming and unflappable interview subject.

One of the delights of researching this article was stumbling across the audio of an interview (wiredforbooks.org / edmundwhite) he did after the publication of his breakthrough novel, *A Boy's Own Story*, in 1982. It's hard not to feel sorry for the interviewer, whose wits are clearly no match for White's.

*A Boy's Own Story* (a twentieth anniversary Modern Library edition has just been published) was one of those novels I read years ago when I was struggling with coming out, desperate for any representation of the aloneness I'd felt as a closeted adolescent. My most vivid memory of it was the book jacket which, if I recall correctly, featured a sensitive boy-next-door type in a tank-top. No doubt I feared the cover would uncover me to the librarian, who'd easily recognize that boy's own story as my story, too.

Of the novel's text itself I remembered little beyond the fact it involved a teenager — based on White himself — coming to terms with his sexuality in the 1950's, two unenlightened decades before my own teen years. Because the novel is considered a prototype for the now familiar (not to say clichéd) coming-out story, I recollected it as such, with the standard rites of gay passage rendered in White's lush prose. What I'd forgotten is what a peculiar novel it actually is.

The story's centered

around the fifteenth year of a precociously self-aware nameless narrator in the Midwest who knows he desires men as clearly as he knows he doesn't want to become a homosexual. Hoping all the while he might outgrow his homo tendencies, he blunders through a series of erotic encounters (some realized, some not), copes with self-loathing and the rather wacky adults who dominate his existence at home and in boarding school, is painfully rejected by the girl he mistakenly believes will be his heterosexual savior, and, eventually, seeks a cure at the hands of a famous and quite unhinged analyst.

*A Boy's Own Story* concludes with the narrator emerging on the other side of illusion and disillusion to discover not so much self-acceptance as the self-satisfaction that comes from understanding the adult power of sex. It's a bold, true, thoroughly unromantic ending, one that involves seduction and betrayal and which casts the narrator (and, by proximity, the author) in a less-than-heroic light.

Comparing the erotic adventures of *A Boy's Own Story* to those of my own adolescence, I felt sheltered indeed. For instance, I'd hardly have had the wherewithal — as the novel's narrator does — to buy myself a male hustler with my summer job earnings. (Interestingly, the hustler encounter is referred to but never described.) Nor did I go

to bed with any school leader (along with his wife!) or come across any naked boy waiting in a tree to hypnotize me into action with more than a bright smile.

White, on the other hand, recently wrote in *Out* magazine that the novel contains far fewer sexcapades than he'd had in real life by age sixteen, and he notes the paradox of trying to be true to his own unique experience while making the character representative enough to resonate with a wide cross-section of readers. He reigned in the narrator's artistic and erotic precociousness so that he could become, as White puts it, "a Representative Freak." I wonder, though, how representative this character could be nearly a half-century later? I'd be interested to know if a teenager today could relate to him.

I found myself feeling somewhat outside the world of *A Boy's Own Story*, though I'm uncertain whether this was due to the novel being less universal than White had hoped or to an aloofness marking my own passage through time. I do think the elaborate (okay, overwrought) nature of White's imagery sometimes works against the frenetic immediacy of adolescence, even if said adolescence is being viewed through a retrospective lens. Fortunately, White's Proustian flourishes have become more controlled over the years and better complement his later work, including some of the

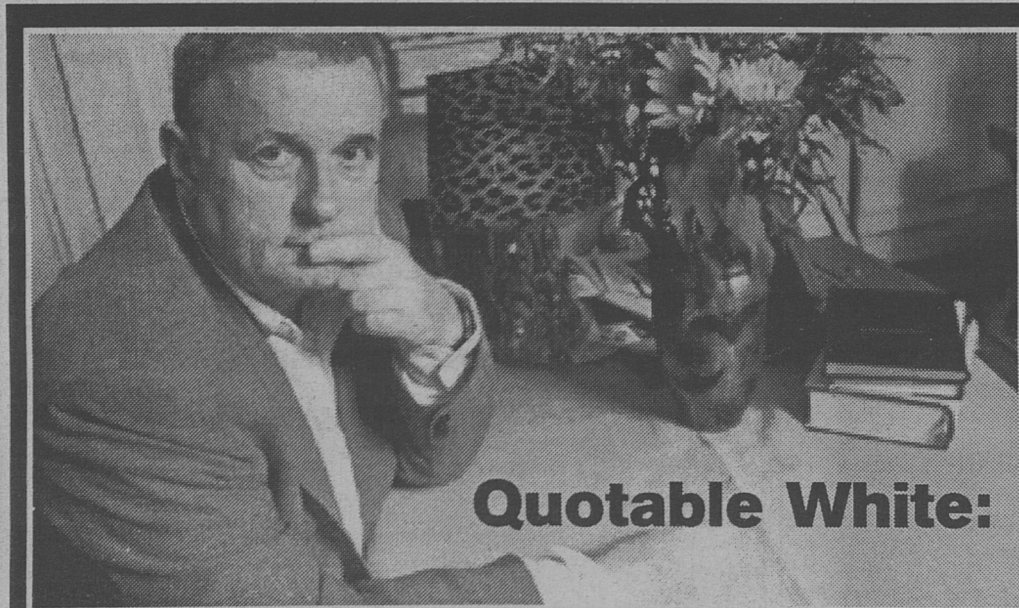
beautifully wrenching yet unsentimental stories in his *Skinned Alive* collection.

Not that *A Boy's Own Story* doesn't have some stunning, timeless passages:

"Or was I simply at fifteen learning to love myself at four as now so many years later I like the fifteen-year-old (even desire him), self-approval never accompanying but always trailing experience, retrospection three parts sentimental and one part erotic?" I can't imagine a more eloquent commentary on how intervening years can, thank heavens, kindly influence our assessment of our younger selves.

White speculates that while many facets of gay experience have yet to be explored in literature, the "ardent, involved, often contentious" audience that greeted *A Boy's Own Story* is disappearing. I fear he's right, but hope he isn't. Considering how many artists of White's generation were lost to AIDS (including most of the Violet Quill, the group of emerging gay writers to which he belonged in the mid-1970's), I — for one — am eagerly awaiting what our subversively eloquent Representative Freak has to say about old age. ▼

Ernie McLeod is Vermont's own boy, now living in Montreal. Contact him at [mcleod@middlebury.edu](mailto:mcleod@middlebury.edu)



Quotable White:

"I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual. For I was possessed with a yearning for the company of men, for their look, touch and smell, and nothing transfixed me more than the sight of a man shaving and dressing, sumptuous rites."