

arts

From Art to Smut, with a Laugh in the Middle

three books reviewed by Scott Sherman

Last month, after I broke my foot, a friend brought over three books to entertain me in my convalescence: one literary collection of short stories, one funny compilation of brief essays, and one trashy compendium of no socially redeeming value whatsoever. The perfect prescription for a long recuperation.

The Music of Your Life
By John Rowell
Simon and Schuster
258 pages, hardcover
ISBN: 0-7432-3695-5

In John Rowell's lushly written *The Music of Your Life*, the author shares seven short stories about boys and men either discovering their sexuality, or learning how to live with it.

In the first and best story, the ten-year-old protagonist is a little queen in the making – although he doesn't know it yet. "You are," the omniscient narrator tells him, "in fact, America's biggest little fan of *The Lawrence Welk Show*. You can't get enough of him and his weekly television variety hour."

Just in case a love of music-variety shows isn't enough to clue you in to the boy's burgeoning sexuality, here's his reaction to another television show, which the narrator finds the boy watching with his father, Ray: "Watching *Batman* is a different experience altogether: no one sings from the American Popular Songbook, no one dances in chiffon dresses and high heels. But *Batman* has something *Lawrence Welk* could never even begin to supply: men – handsome, grown-up men who live together in the same house, men who are each other's best friends, men who look out for each other in all sorts of strange circumstances. Also: men who wear tights. *Men in tights!* So why do the other boys in your class love the *Batman* show, too? They certainly don't like *Lawrence Welk*. But you're aware that they watch *Batman* – you've heard them talking about it in groups on the playground – and they watch it with their dads, too. You don't usually have that much in common with the other boys in your class, and, for that matter, not much in common with Ray, either. So why *Batman?*"

This story is almost perfect in scope and tone. That it ends sadly, with the boy learning a hard lesson about how much it can hurt to be a sissy in the 1950s, is painful to read. But it rings true.

Unfortunately, all of Rowell's protagonists seem to have an awfully hard time of it. You won't meet any content, well-adjusted or happily-coupled guys in these tales. All these men are single and somewhat depressed.

In "The Mother-Of-the-Groom-and-I," a man accompanies his mother on a shopping expedition. In one of the book's most charming exchanges, the narrator parries with his mother when she refers to something happening "so many years ago."

"It wasn't that long ago, Mother. I'm only thirty-three."
"I know," she says, buckling up. "As old as Jesus when he died."

"Yes," I say, "as old as Jesus, but not nearly as accomplished."

"Well, my heavens," she says. "Who is?"

Later, the narrator tries vainly to catch the eye of the probably-straight guy in the mall who just might have looked at him:

And like a Three Stooge, I wheel around and knock over the entire standing rack of cushy belts. Oh, this is a disaster. Because what if I'm wrong and what if he actually was going to come over to talk to me because he was interested, what if he was an unmoored person like myself, looking for someone to share his life with, to set up house with, to love forever, to have to hold till death do us part?

Rowell has the gift of making his characters likable, but it's difficult to watch people you like turn desperate and pathetic.

Read *The Music of Your*

Life if you like beautifully written, well-told stories that transport you into their characters' lives. The author is especially good at invoking the ambivalence and alienation of coming into your sexuality, and the awkwardness of gay youth. But avoid it if you're looking for something to make you feel good about being gay. Rowell's book seems almost nostalgic in its portrayal of homosexuality as a bittersweet business that lacks much possibility for long-term love. This is Rowell's first book – let's hope the next gives us a little less bitter and a little more sweet.

Let Me Kiss It Better, Elixirs for the Not So Straight and Narrow
By Billeh Nickerson
Arsenal Pulp Press
130 pages; Paperback
ISBN: 1-55152-125-3

To call the essays in *Let Me Kiss It Better* slight would be an understatement: this collection is to books what whipped cream is to food: Frothy, sweet, and not terribly filling. Still, if you're looking for a light read to make you chuckle, you'll enjoy this book.

Let Me Kiss It Better is composed of almost fifty very short essays – each about two, maybe three pages long. Nickerson is funny, observing the small details of everyday life with a sharp and sex-obsessed mind. In one essay, a friend's admission that he microwaves the vegetables he uses as sex toys leads Nickerson to marvel "that he had found a way to overcome the perils of cold carrots reaffirmed my belief that the gay community had some of the most creative and resourceful individuals in the world."

In another essay, Nickerson outs the Rice Krispies Snap, Crackle and Pop characters as "fudgepackers," imagining that their noisy ruckus was "really the sound of three miniature gay men having an orgy inside my bowl."

In my favorite piece, Nickerson recalls the terror of his

first orgasm, the messy outpouring of which had him thinking he was dying. "If only *Sesame Street* had prepared me for such a moment," he writes, "instead of teaching me how to say 'water' in Spanish, I wouldn't have spent the next few days believing that I was slowly deflating like a balloon.

If you're the type who likes reading fripperies like these – and you know who you are – check out Nickerson's book.

Manhandled, Gripping Tales of Gay Erotic Fiction
Edited by Austin Foxxe
Warner Books
352 pages; Paperback
ISBN: 0-4466-7999-2

In this beautifully written, moving collection of short stories, Austin Foxxe has collected some of the finest and most subtle celebrations of male sexuality ever committed to paper. Um, no.

Manhandled is a collection of short stories that originally appeared in *Mandate*, *Men Magazine*, and on a website called amateurstraightguys.com. If you have ever skipped past the pictures in a dirty magazine to read the stories, then this book might be for you. Be aware: all of the stories feature some sort of dominance, often brutal and violent. If you like your loving sweet and romantic, look elsewhere.

Whether or not you'll find these stories hot is up to you. Still, sexiness is not enhanced by writing like, "It was sticky-humid, and my pants felt like they were glued to the hairy, sweaty crack of my perfect white ass," or "The beer pours down my throat like the jizz of God," or "You have no right to use that name, Corydon slime!" The erotic is rarely enhanced by the risible. ▼

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