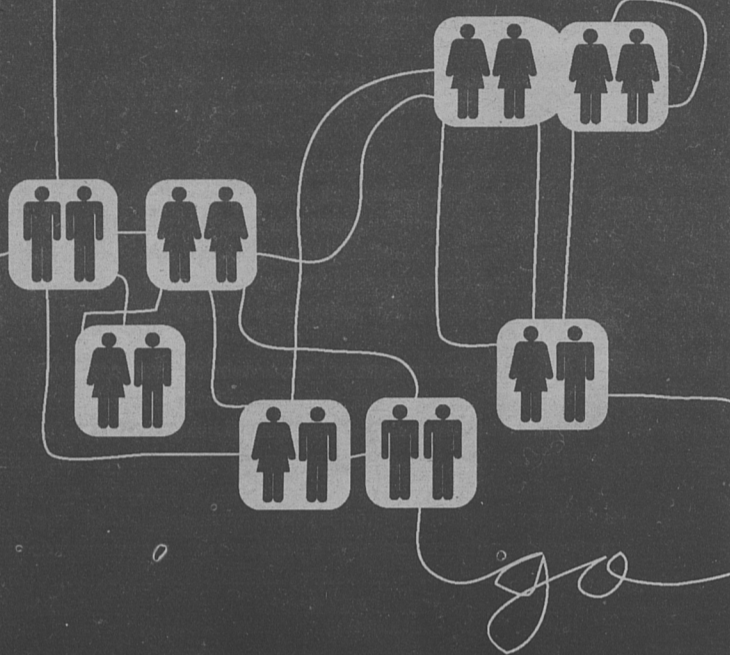


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## Coming Out Is In The Details

BY CYNTHIA POTTS

**O**n the odd chance that nobody's noticed, let me be the first to tell you: sometimes it's hard to decide if you're gay or not. Being 18 and a freshman at Columbia University isn't exactly a piece of cake, either. Throw in some tough questions about finances, friendships, and parental relationships, not to mention a hefty dose of Jewish-tinged introspection, and you've got Stanley Ely's coming-of-age novel, *In the Steps of Mister Proust*.

This novel, Ely's second, is set in the early days of the AIDS era. It centers on the interaction between our protagonist, Josh, his roommate, Richard, and his on-again, off-again lover, Dean. Tangential, yet still important, are Josh's relationships with his brothers and with his father, who had left the family four years earlier to move in with his lover, Hugh.

Still stung by his father's abandonment, Josh finds an unlikely solace in studying the works of Marcel Proust. Renowned for his exacting descriptions of everyday life, Proust seems an unlikely model for a college freshman. Yet it is this academic pursuit that helps Josh parse his feelings to the nth degree, as well as earn praise from Professor Hungerford. Ely does an admirable job of keeping Josh's relationship with Hungerford a mix of professionalism and intimacy — the hints are there, but the actions are never taken.

It's a motif that repeats throughout the book. Josh's interactions with an attractive hustler named Al create a time-line of self-acceptance, almost as clearly as the awkward development of

### In the Steps of Mister Proust

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his relationship with Dean.

Dean is an incredibly patient lover, apparently smitten with Josh at first sight, and willing to wait through Josh's orientation difficulties. A larger issue is Dean's misshapen leg, a birth defect that Josh has a hard time going to bed with. Dean is unnaturally complacent about Josh's attitude, a jarring break with reality in an otherwise well-written novel. The only scene where Dean even confronts Josh about his leg comes across flat and devoid of any real emotion.

On the other hand, the scene where Josh accompanies his roommate home is exceptionally done. We stand awkwardly with the young man in the kitchen as he hears Richard tell his parents that not only is he gay, but he's also HIV-positive. They're not sure which is the bigger tragedy — an interaction that forces Josh to reconsider his relationship with his own father.


Josh comes across as incredibly self-obsessed in his dealings with his father, which is a fairly accurate picture of most 18-year-olds. Even though his father is involved in the lawsuit of his life, Josh's concerns center on whether or not his tuition will be paid without tapping into his trust fund. He does make some inquiries into financial aid, only to bring down dad's wrath. Dad's resistance to financial aid is another jarring tidbit — does any family put a child through university without incurring some debt? — but reveals a great deal about this complex, under-developed character. Over the course of the novel, we get a tantalizing

glimpse of a relationship in flux, the subtle dance that occurs when the child becomes adult.

Like Proust, Ely takes his time working through the minutia of life. We know all about Josh's meal plans, his class work, and a thousand other details that in themselves are wholly without significance. The artistry lies in tying these tiny points together to create a coherent whole, one that captures all of the subtle nuances of a life in transition. Proust was a great observer, and Ely follows in that tradition.

The novel is aimed at a young adult audience, but would resonate better with readers old enough to remember the times being described. Today's teens have encountered AIDS prevention information as early as elementary school. As a result, Josh's naiveté throughout the book would seem affected at best, willful ignorance at worst. Viewed with knowledge of the early 1980's, this book becomes an insightful companion on Josh's journey into life as an adult gay man. ▼

*Cynthia Potts lives with her family and an ever-growing collection of animals in Plattsburgh, NY. She welcomes reader comments and can be reached at [ctpotts@juno.com](mailto:ctpotts@juno.com)*

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