

## a·e BOOKS

# Harvard's Secret Court

## A Book Review

BY ROBERT WILLIAM WOLFF

William Wright's book about the long-hidden dastardly deeds of Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell and his deans comes under the category of "aren't we fortunate, even blessed, not to have been born 100 years earlier!" Some pretty ugly things happened to our queer sisters and brothers in the supposedly strong-on-human-rights United States of America during the 20th century. But this group of administrators holding court in secret following a complaint about homosexual activities at the nation's first and most prestigious educational institution must rank among the most damaging sequence of events of that century. The Harvard story as told by Wright is riveting, affecting, and impossible to put down.

Wright looks at the events and the people who caused them from many vantage points. This helps the reader grasp the era, the society, the institution, and the motivations and concerns of the men trapped in the web spun by Lowell and his colleagues. Thankfully there has been significant progress since 1920.

I'll leave the nuanced telling of this intriguing tale to Wright. But to encourage readers to pick up the book, I will sketch out the beginning of the tale. Cyril Wilcox, a sophomore in the class of 1922, has a lover, Harry Dreyfus. Dreyfus is a townie who operates a tavern in Boston. Like most gay men of the era, Cyril is not out to his family. The Wilcox family wakes one morning to find that Cyril has used gas to kill himself. After his death, two letters arriving from friends of Cyril out him to his family. The letters are written in such a way that it is immediately clear that Cyril understands gay life and would enjoy receiving letters from the obviously homosexual men who wrote them.

The Wilcox family was in shock and was grieving deeply. Lester Wilcox, who had tried for 45 minutes to resuscitate his younger brother, becomes convinced that Harvard and Harry Dreyfus are responsible for placing Cyril in a situation for which suicide was his only solution. With a trusted member of the Harvard faculty of his previous acquaintance, Lester Wilcox goes to President Lowell's office, finds him away, engaged in high level diplomatic endeavors with President Coolidge. Lester meets with Acting Dean of Harvard College Chester Greenough, who later becomes a key member of the secret court. Wilcox, having confronted at the funeral the student who hosted gay parties at the college, gets this young man to identify his brother's lover.

After accusing Harvard of his brother's calamity, Lester goes to Harry Dreyfus' home. He accuses Dreyfus and beats him up. He insists that Dreyfus make a list of homosexuals at Harvard. After the list is made, he snatches it and takes these names to Dean Greenough. This

action kicks off a court that made secret, quick, decisive and unconditional decisions about the guilt or innocence of each man, and then brought down a sentence on each designed to make it impossible for each to become educated or to be employed anywhere.

Inspector Javert of *Les Misérables* had nothing on this group of Harvard administrators.

There is much more to the story of *Harvard's Secret Court*. I'll leave that to the reader's experience with Wright's book.

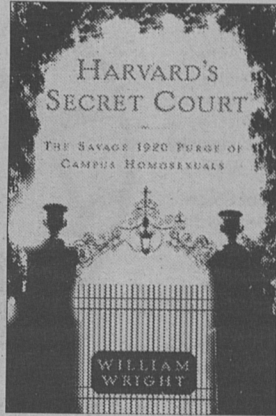
Opportunities presented themselves for the members of the court to offer clemency, for forgiveness, for understanding extenuating circumstances. It is clear from the actions of these powerful men that they had no ability to forgive what these young men, in their formative years, had done. Although it certainly should not have mattered, the men who married and lived apparently heterosexual lives were treated the same as the men who continued to demonstrate primary focus on other men.

Instead, these college administrators vindictively set out procedures in the offices of Harvard to ensure that the presumed guilt of the parties brought before their court would haunt and inhibit the men throughout their lives. For example, any educational institutions requesting information about a man found guilty by this court was to be told that the man would never be readmitted to Harvard and that Harvard recommended against them being admitted to any other institution. And, the deans gave instructions to the appropriate offices so that the rules stuck for decades.

Several of the men accused by the court did, however, go on to achieve major prominence; among them two who became a federal judge and a Broadway producer, respectively. But most achieved much less during their lives than was anticipated when they were admitted to Harvard, and several, like Wilcox, committed suicide.

For those who want to know our history and those who enjoy the telling of a fascinating story, this book is for you. ▼

➔ Robert William Wolff is a scenery and lighting designer who lives in Randolph. He serves on the R.U.1.2? board and volunteers for OITM.



*Harvard's Secret Court: The Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals* William Wright 2005, New York, St. Martin's Press

# Birds in Fall: An Interview with Author Brad Kessler

BY TIM MILLER

**B**irds in Fall, the amazing new novel from Brad Kessler, is a beautiful, profoundly moving story that explores a group of human beings who gather at the inn of a gay couple after a terrible crash of a passenger jet into the sea nearby. The book takes on the deepest mysteries of death and love and offers such a wise and rooted way of being with these ancient mysteries in all their splendor and sorrow. The emotional wallop of the loss sneaks up on us throughout the whole book as the gay men at the center of the inn, which has welcomed the loved ones of the passengers who died in the crash, are changed and challenged by the enormity of this event.

I read *Birds in Fall* with that totally bonding, obsessed, feverish urgency that I seek out - where the world of the book becomes so compelling I can't stop being with the characters and the spaces they inhabit. The book deepened my sense of life and death and love. There is no higher praise I could imagine. I spoke with Brad Kessler recently at his home in Sandgate, Vermont, about his remarkable new novel.

TM: You begin your novel with an airplane disaster killing all on board - based on the 1998 crash of SwissAir flight #111 off the coast of Nova Scotia. This leads the family and loved ones of the lost passengers to the inn of a gay couple near the crash site. How did the real air tragedy inform your novel?

BK: I had a friend who died on that SwissAir flight. For months they searched the sea for him, until they found a fragment large enough for a positively identification. There was something terrible and haunting about that waiting period, that limbo state before they could officially pronounce him dead. A lot of people lived through that harrowing time. During it, everyone in Nova Scotia dropped what they were doing to help these families. That's what partly inspired the novel, complete strangers assisting other strangers from around the world.

TM: Why choose to have a gay character/couple at the center of the novel, the keepers of this charged space?

BK: It was never a conscious decision to have a gay protagonist. Kevin, the innkeeper, was initially a rather minor character. But as the novel evolved, he quickly became the pole star around which all the others orbited. His sexuality was never a big deal to me. The fact that he and Douglas were gay seemed secondary to who they were as people - straight or gay, or in between. That said, Kevin is an outsider; he's a philosopher; he gardens and he likes to cook. As such I identified with him. What Flaubert said of his *Emma Bovary*, I could say of Kevin Kearns - *Kevin c'est moi*.

TM: But you are a straight man married to a woman.

BK: Yes. And I wouldn't pretend to be anything otherwise. But how stifling these categories can be! How they narrow us to near nothing! The wonderful thing about writing fiction is that, if you are honest enough, and empathetic enough, you can slip into the skins of people who are not you.

TM: And yet there are things that Kevin Kearns knows because he is a gay man.

BK: That's true. My Kevin lived through the AIDS epidemic in the 80s in New York City and many of his friends died alone in rooms, shunned by the larger culture. The reason he's moved to this isolated island off Nova Scotia is partly to forget all the death he's experienced. And yet, death follows him in the guise of this plane crash. So as a gay man who cared for the dying, he knows first of all how to care for people. He knows how to deal with tragic death; he also knows how to survive.

TM: I was so moved by the rich space of love and loss the novel draws us into. I was pulled deeply into my own memories of loss of loved ones to AIDS. I suppose from the ancient myths of

Brad Kessler Reading  
April 29, 2006  
Northshire Bookstore  
Manchester, Vermont

Orpheus right up to the movie *Titanic*, this is the core subject of our human tribe. What paths and lessons does your

book offer us about living and dying?

BK: Wow. That's a big one. What I can talk about is mythology, because there's a lot of storytelling and mythology that happens in the heart of this novel. The lesson we learn from much of classical myth and the classicists themselves is that nothing really dies - it just changes into something else. That though the form of things changes, the essential spirit or "soul" or essence doesn't really die. Everything is always in a state of "becoming" - even our selves. As Walt Whitman wrote, "If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles." ▼

➔ Tim Miller is a solo performer and the author of the books "Shirts & Skin," "Body Blows" and "1001 Beds." He can be reached at his website <http://hometown.aol.com/millertale/>

