

## A List of Literary Ideas For the Gay Gift-Giver

by Hugh Coyle

There can be no mistaking that when it comes to gift-giving during the holiday season, the world of gay literature offers a bounty of lasting and diverse suggestions. Books are a wonderful way for those just coming out to explore their newly-understood sexuality, just as they offer those already out in the open an enjoyable means of celebrating and expanding on their freedom. Gay literature also serves to increase understanding and awareness beyond the non-heterosexual community, and thus can be a meaningful gift to straight friends and family members as well.

The titles mentioned below are in no way a complete inventory of books available on the gay experience (gay gothics and pornography, for example, are admittedly not represented). Discerning readers will also see that the list focuses on male-related literature; I leave the compilation of the equally rich world of lesbian writing to someone more knowledgeable than myself. (OITM also welcomes readers to write in with their own insights and recommendations concerning available books by and about gays.)

Gay literature in general has been enjoying a significant increase in popularity over the past decade as new writers like David Leavitt and Michael Chabon earn high praise from the critics and enjoy substantial promotion across the nation. The onslaught of AIDS in the eighties has inspired a significant amount of work as writers share their grief and loss through words on the page (the short story collection The Darker Proof by Edmund White and Adam Mars-Jones in particular

focuses on the impact of AIDS). With this upswing in gay writing has come a broadening of the range of such fiction; the homosexuality of one or more characters in the book no longer necessarily constitutes the central theme in the book.

Still, there are the classics of gay literature, and these go all the way back to the ancient Greeks and works such as the Symposium. One can browse through any fiction shelf in any bookstore and find classics of another kind, all of them gay: Marcel Proust, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Christopher Isherwood and, of course, Oscar Wilde, just to name a few.

Gay writers today, however, have been enjoying a freedom unlike anything known in previous centuries. The publication of E.M. Forster's Maurice in 1971 can perhaps serve as a landmark, as Forster himself had significant doubts which prevented him from publishing the book on its completion in 1914. The book is as insightful and illuminating today as it must have been to Forster when he wrote it, and it merits as much attention as Forster's other, more popular classics.

Of course, even the world of gay literature has its own popular classics, and one such enduring figure is Edmund White, whose forthright presentation of the gay world has established him as one of the prominent critics of gay culture. White is perhaps best known for his work with Dr. Charles Silverstein on The Joy of Gay Sex. All the same, his novel A Boy's Own Story is vital reading for anyone interested in the matter of growing up gay, and the recent follow-up to that book, the Beautiful Room is Empty, continues beyond the main

character's sexual awakening. White has also published States of Desire: Travels in Gay America, a book which, true to its title, explores what it means to be gay in various parts of the United States.

In his book, White naturally describes San Francisco as "Our Town," and that feeling prevails in Armistead Maupin's best-selling series, Tales of the City. Maupin uses the West Coast mecca as a steady source of material for his only-somewhat-fictionalized work. The latest installment, Sure of You, was recently released in hardcover, while the earlier books (all in paperback now) have received facelifts in the form of new covers.

Though out on the stands for some time now, David Leavitt's Equal Affections continues to be a popular seller, as do his earlier works, The Lost Language of Cranes and the short story collection Family Dancing. All of them portray a profound sensitivity to a number of gay issues on a number of generational levels and have thus set something of a standard for contemporary gay writing.

Following on the heels of Leavitt come works such as Michael Cabon's The Mysteries of Pittsburgh, Christopher Bram's Surprising Myself, and David Feinberg's Eighty-Sixed. For those wishing to know something more of the English gay world, past and present, Alan Hollinghurst's recent novel The Swimming-Pool Library has just been released in paperback.

If you're unsure of where to start, or if you're just looking to expand your horizons. George Stambolian has edited two excellent and comprehensive collections of short stories, both entitled Men on Men. These follow in the tradition of some of the earlier Christopher Street anthologies and offer the reader a sampling of a number of gay voices, new and old alike.


For those looking for something other than fiction, Neil Miller's In Search of Gay America expands on the study initiated by White in his Travels in Gay America and explores how issues such as AIDS have affected contemporary gay culture. Though AIDS is certainly not the cheeriest of topics to bring into the holiday season, it is nonetheless an important one, and there is perhaps no more comprehensive overview of the epidemic than that portrayed in Randy Shiltz's controversial And the Band Played On. As a matter of fact, rumor has it that the book is currently being considered for a television miniseries.

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