

The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction

edited by Edmund White: A Review.

Ernest McLeod

The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction is a recent, voluminous (nearly 600 pages), and worthwhile collection for anyone interested in a broad sampling of gay perspectives by some famous and some not-so-famous twentieth century writers. The stories, selected by Edmund White, vary widely in terms of style, tone, and explicitness. In some, such as the opening story by Henry James, homosexuality is hinted at but certainly never named. In others, generally the more contemporary ones, sexuality and sex is depicted with celebratory frankness. The collection is nothing if not eclectic and offers an overview of the diversity that exists within gay literature and clues as to how it has evolved over the past ninety or so years.

It is satisfying to see a book like this published by a mainstream press. Perhaps it signals that now is the time when the homosexual voice will be recognized by a wider audience. This seems especially significant during a time when an incredible number of gay writers are dying. Several of the stories in the collection deal with the AIDS epidemic. I can't imagine a subject more difficult to write about, especially while we are in the midst of its devastation. On the other hand, it seems nearly impossible not to write about it. The stories

here are quite different from one another, while at the same time, like all of the stories in the book, they are about struggle and hope, humor and sadness, innocence and loss of it, love, lust, pain, and joy. I read one critic who felt the collection was "uneven" and not "definitive" as the publisher promises. This may be true. It is unlikely that anyone would like every story. But it's also hard to imagine anyone interested in investigating gay fiction not being inspired by several writers' work.

Among my discoveries were Denton Welch's "When I Was Thirteen" and Paul Bailey's excerpt from his novel *Trespasses*. Welch's story concerns a boy on a Christmas skiing vacation with his brother. When his brother abandons him to go off with friends, the boy is befriended by and becomes infatuated with Archer, a college student whom his brother knows and says is "not very much liked." What follows is a clumsy skiing and drinking adventure during which the boy is filled with an innocent lust for Archer. The story is both poignant and funny, with an ending that reveals how easily innocence can be tainted by others' (in this case the brother's) ignorance and hatred.

The narrator of Bailey's story has no illusions of innocence. The story opens with the declaration, "Welcome to Auntie Bernard's palatial parlour and mind your head on the chandelier—it hangs low, like all the best things." Bernard predates the gay liberation movement and has little use for it, just as he suspects those liberated have little use for him. He is very witty, self-loathing and loving at the same time, wanting to entertain even as he describes his true but tragic romance and his equally witty but rather monstrous mother. When Bernard comes out to her, she says dismissively, "It's plain as a pikestaff, dear. You were always—what's the expression?—a sensitive plant." Bernard confesses to the reader that he is "very out of date... And anyway, I always did hate my kind en masse." His story is in marked contrast to others in which characters offer no apologies for their sexuality, and marriages can be declared with no qualifying statements.

Among the best known authors represented in the collection are E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, and Tennessee Williams. The Williams story, "Two on a Party," is a hilarious and ultimately sad story of two aging drunks, Cora and Billy, who travel from city to city



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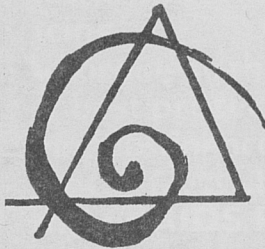
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