

and bar to bar in a scarlet '47 Buick Roadmaster convertible. Billy and Cora have lots of what are described as "evenings that gradually wear out the exhilaration you start with... evenings when lady luck showed the bitchy streak in her nature." Together, though, they often have success in their pursuit of "the lyric quarry," and along the way insecurities and alcohol are shared and spilled with increasing abandon. When their cruising nets only one man, permission is given for the other to take possession with the coded statement, "Excuse me people, ...I just remembered I promised to make a long-distance call to Atlanta." The story is full of great lines you could picture Elizabeth Taylor (25 years ago) drawling with a glass of bourbon in hand.

Repression figures into several stories, among them Paul Bowles's haunting "Pages from Cold Point," in which a father's devotion to and desire for his son are described with an understated elegance that underscores the sexual tension. The tension is increased when the son gets in trouble for becoming involved with native boys, and the father struggles to confront the issue and his feelings for his son. Similarly, in "Native," by William Haywood Henderson, the suppression of sexuality between two men in a decidedly non-gay bar serves to inject every word and gesture between them with a sexual energy that Henderson skillfully choreographs.

In James Baldwin's "Just Above My Head," a repression is released as the two main characters, Crunch and Arthur, discover each other's bodies for the first time. The story is both tender and erotic, marred only by a silly train metaphor that works against the directness of the rest of the story. Another erotic story, "Forced Use," by Alan Gurganus (who describes it as a "naughty story"), has a generic plot with a "happily" married professor lusting after a scantily clad young man at a rest area. After calling his wife from the pay phone and assuming as much guilt as possible, the professor follows the young man into the woods where sex turns to violence, and the professor gets basically what he wants. What is unique about the story is the language. Gurganus writes about cruising in a way that seems both pornographic and literary, and he cleverly avoids the clichés the plot would suggest.

The stories about AIDS are notable for their differences and for the way they make

an overwhelming subject small and personal. "The Changes of Those Terrible Years," by Adam Mars-Jones, concerns a man who decides to sell the house he has made into a sort of informal hospice. He realizes he has neglected his own needs to care for the sick, and he is forced to examine his motives when a man in the final stages of the disease accuses him of growing "fat on other people's misery." Andrew Holleran's "Sunday Morning: Key West" is about a man who comes to the realization that he has become a recluse and has subconsciously shut off his desire after a decade of caring for his sick father. It is not until he visits a friend whose estranged lover is dying of AIDS that he recognizes that caring for his father was in part a way to protect himself from dealing with gay life in the eighties. The steps he takes at the end of the story to rebuild his identity seem both small and monumental. In contrast, the narrator of Edmund White's "Skinned Alive" refuses to sacrifice his sexuality because he is HIV positive. White's writing seems almost defiantly sexual, an attempt to expand narrow views of what literature and safe sex should be.

There were several other stories in the book I enjoyed, among them David Malouf's "Southern Skies" and David Leavitt's "When You Grow to Adultery." Writers like Leavitt are criticized by some for their "erotic conservatism." White notes in his introduction that it is part of the "conflict between gay assimilationists and gay militants." It seems to me that it's also a stylistic choice, and in Leavitt's case it seems entirely appropriate.

I felt that a few of the contemporary stories didn't measure up to the classics. They seemed more notable for their boldness than for literary value. Also, two brief stories with lesbian characters (written by men) seemed included more for diversity's sake than for excellence. And though I get a kick out of lines like "Snake boys in fish-skin jockstraps wade out of the bay," I enjoy William Burroughs more as a concept than as a writer. For someone else, though, Burroughs may be just the ticket, and that's what is enjoyable about this collection.

I wonder whether there will come a day when gay literature (like literature by other minorities) becomes mainstream? And if this were to happen, would it involve compromises that may not be good? On the other hand, should gay literature strive to distinguish itself from what is considered mainstream? After reading this collection, I don't have answers to these questions. But it's made me want to think about them in relation to my own identity, and it's deepened my understanding of how different and alike we all are. ▼

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