

# You Always Remember Your First

a book review by Barbara Dozetos

When a fiction writer or poet writes, her own experiences and relationships are often woven into the story or poem she spins. Sometimes it's obvious, and sometimes only the author knows for sure; sometimes it's deliberate, and other times the author is the last to know.

Give those same writers an assignment to tell their own stories and often you'll find the most prolific artist complaining of writer's block or producing material fit only for personal journals.

Nisa Donnelly proffered just that assignment to a talented group of lesbian writers for Alyson Books' *Mom: Candid Memoirs by Lesbians About the First Woman in Their Life*. According to the authors themselves, the essays and poems that appear in the final product represent some of the most difficult work they have ever done — and some of the best. These women surmounted intense emotions to produce an immensely satisfying collection.

There is pain in these pages,

but little bitterness. The majority of the writers chose to examine the trials of their relationships with their mothers in the light of how they grew through them. G.L. Morrison's "Whose Little Girl Are You?" could have been filled with blame and accusations. Instead, it is a bittersweet collection of contradictory emotions: love for a father who abused her, empathy for the mother who thanked her "for never telling her things she was too weak to hear," and a forgiveness for both of them that reflects Morrison's maturity, not to mention her own recovery.

Judith Witherow's "Columbus Day Revisited" is also rife with pain — and not a little sentiment — but it stops short of gratuitous tugs at the heart strings. It's the story of the apology she demanded of her elderly mother's doctor, who asked why her patient, as poor as she was, would bring so many children into the world. "Mom looked like she had been physically hit. I spoke softly and carefully replied, 'Whatever would make you think that

because someone was poor, they would not make love?" The closing paragraphs of this piece, in which the author addresses her mother directly, reduced me to tears every time I read them. "What happened?... You always got better... Each morning when I awake, I'm happy. Then I remember you died, and my breath won't allow my lungs to expand."

Esteemed novelist Katherine V. Forrest shares the story of her relationship with a non-biological mother figure in "Jeanie," and Shelly Roberts sets aside her *Rules of Order* humor for irony in "The Way to Barstow." Roberts claims to have eliminated her mother years ago: "I keep waiting for the phone telling me that her body finally figured out that I killed her." Chocolate Waters'

"There's No Place Like Home (Thank God)" hits home with the humor we've come to expect from the woman dubbed the 'Poet Laureate of Hell's Kitchen.'

In "Solstice," Jess Wells confronts her own maternal leanings as she finds a clearer view of her relationship with her newly sober mother. "Today my mother is moving in and out of me, I am my mother... I am not a mother, but I have two daughters... and

while she never really left, my mother has returned."

I must confess that I picked up this volume expecting to wade through relentless psychoanalysis and dripping sentiment. Instead, I found beautiful, if often painful, reality. "We are the women our mothers warned us about and, at the same time, the women they made us," notes Donnelly in her introduction, providing a superb synopsis of the stories to come.

I couldn't pick a favorite from this collection if I tried. But I will be sending a copy to my mother. ▼



**Mom: Candid Memoirs by Lesbians About the First Woman in Their Life**  
 Edited by Nisa Donnelly  
 Alyson Publications  
 302 pages, \$12.95

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## A Passionate Heart

a review by Elena Taylor-Garcia

Directed by Middlebury College senior Matthew Groud, a student cast did justice and then some to Larry Kramer's powerful drama about anger, AIDS, activism, love, and loss. Their passionate and sensitive performance played to sold-out audiences all three nights of its recent run.

The play is set in New York City during the first years of the AIDS epidemic, 1981-1984. The story unfolds as out gay writer Ned Weeks, played by talented freshman Joe Varca, watches many of his friends and acquaintances grow sick and die. In desperation, Ned and his friends form an organization to educate the gay community and advocate for government support and funding.

Meanwhile, Ned's new lover, Felix (Nick Olson) reveals that he, too, is sick. The group elects a closeted bank executive, Bruce Niles (Peter Schmitz) as its president; tensions mount as Bruce shies away from the public eye. Ned seeks free legal representation for the organization from his brother, Ben (Tom Reece) in a painful and all-too-familiar scene; at home, Felix's condition worsens. Like Kramer himself, Ned's angry, in-your-face demands of the mayor's office eventually get him kicked out of the organization he founded, and he is left alone to face his own failures and mass death all around him.

The Middlebury cast gave Kramer's heartbreaking script the weight it demands, with tender, sometimes playful scenes between lovers Felix and Ned and an excellent performance by Lindsay Haynes as the outraged and generous Dr. Emma Bookner. Peter Schmitz's Bruce Niles showed the powerlessness of even the most powerful and the brutality of societal neglect. One memorable scene, in which he described the inhumanity with which his dying lover was treated, left most of the audience sobbing. Philip Dean Walker as Tommy Boatwright and Frank Labowitz as Mickey Marcus gave touching and real performances as very different gay men witnessing some of the darkest times in our history.

Matthew Groud's direction showed artistic maturity and a great deal of empathy. He treated specific and politically challenging material with commitment and careful attention. I recently heard a gay writer suggest that perhaps one of the most exciting and important functions of writing was to create the beginnings of empathy in the reader through a process of identification. Judging by the number of dry eyes in the audience during the final scenes, Groud and his cast accomplished the same function with an excellent performance of this poignant play. ▼

**The Normal Heart**  
 Written by Larry Kramer  
 Performed by Theater 705  
 Hepburn Zoo Theater, Middlebury College  
 April 16-18