

Something Inside

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chronologically in three groups, the first dating from 1987-90, the second from a 1993 radio series, the last from 1994-98. Though a reasonably diverse cross-section is represented, ranging from self-described pornographer John Preston, to Peter Cameron—whose sparely elegant novels and stories often lack gay protagonists, to Randall Kenan—who writes from a Southern African American perspective, it is hardly an exhaustive survey. Gambone admits that the reason certain writers appear and others do not has as much to do with happenstances of availability and promotion as with any careful design on his part. In other words, there was no book in mind originally, which gives the anthology a slightly haphazard quality.

Two of my favorite interviews are with Michael Cunningham and the late Allen Barnett. I knew and admired Barnett's poignant collection of stories, "The Body and Its Dangers," but knew little about him except that it was his only published work and that he died not long afterwards of AIDS. Gambone's talk with Barnett is one of the loosest in the book—chatty and spirited, sexy and profoundly sad. A reminder of how many artists were lost before they had a chance to be found. The 1993 interview with Cunningham, currently at a career high since winning the Pulitzer Prize for "The Hours," should be inspirational for any self-doubting beginning writer (is there any other kind?). Cunningham wittily and humbly chronicles his lean years, when it took absurd bravado to pursue a career he thought comparable to "building a scale model of the Eiffel Tower out of popsicle sticks." Cunningham believes that as time marches on, "gay literature" as a category distinct from other kinds of literature becomes "increasingly less interesting and useful." I agree.

One of the enjoyable things about reading *Something Inside* was seeing how my work-based impression of a writer stacked up against my impression after I'd gleaned a few personality insights. For instance, I was surprised that David Plante, whose work I'd found a bit lofty, comes across as pleasantly down to earth in conversation. David Leavitt, in one of the early interviews, seems defensive and slightly paranoid, which makes sense when you read Dennis Cooper's arrogantly militant bashing of Leavitt. Andrew Holleran's bleak assessment of gay life proves more palatable on the page—where it's rendered in gorgeously accurate language—than in "real-life," where it's just dreary. Then there's the ever-articulate Edmund White, whose fiction I sometimes find mannered, but who has no equals when it comes to interviews.

Robert Giard's black and white photographs (of many, though not all, of the writers) are a nice inclusion. No one matches Mr. Gooch's matinee idol looks, of course, with the possible exception of Scott Heim, who confesses he's always wanted to be famous. Depressingly, writing gay fiction is probably not the way to fame. As someone trying to carve out a such a career, I wonder how many people actually care about gay fiction, or any kind of fiction, these days? Ironically, in a time when more literature by openly gay writers is getting published, interest in this literature seems to be waning. Not so long ago, when there were virtually no portrayals of gay people by gay people except in fiction, each new book was a milestone.

In 1999, with film and TV and journalism thrown into the mix, that's no longer the case. Perhaps efforts like this one can play some small role in bringing attention to deserving new writers and keeping attention on those around long enough to be forgotten. Maybe Oprah should get a copy? ▼

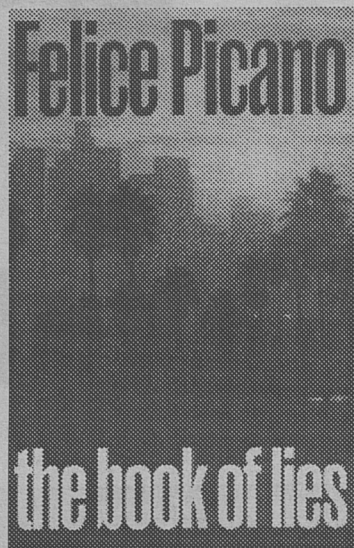
The Book of Lies

By Felice Picano
Published by Alyson Books
420 pages

REVIEWED BY STEPHEN KOPSTEIN

Felice Picano's latest novel, *The Book of Lies*, is an ambitious attempt to combine the suspense, history, and gay culture genres into one neat package. Unfortunately, it fails to deliver a compelling example of any of them. I found this book highly disappointing, especially since I so enjoyed his earlier work, *The Lure*.

Lies follows the twisted tale (and tail) of protagonist Ross Ohrenstedt's attempt to uncover a mystery surrounding a group of gay writers from late 20th-century America who came to be known as The Purple Circle. The novel is set in the future, primarily in Los Angeles with side trips to Truro, Mass and the Bay Area. While some of Picano's descriptions of life in post-millennial America are amusing I found the tact of setting the novel in the future doesn't add much to the overall readability of the story. In most cases, it actually seems rather silly and frivolous



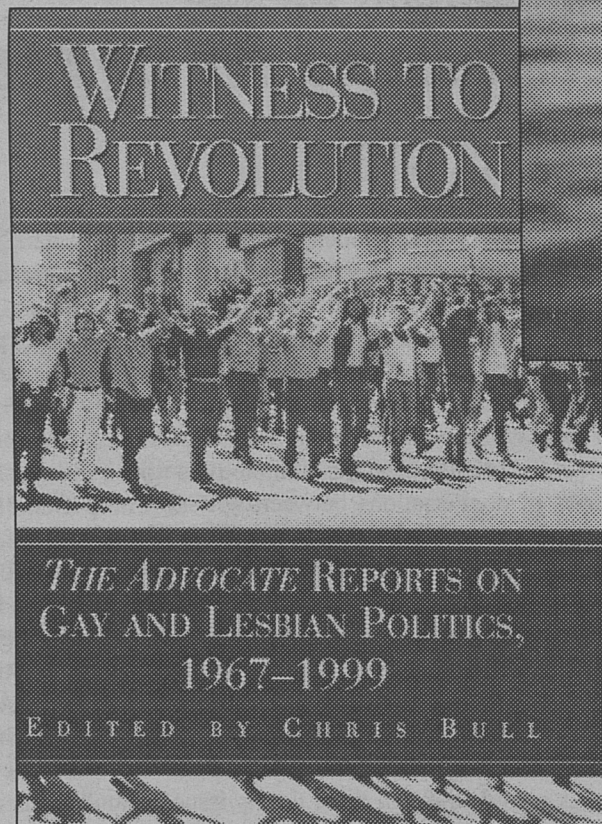
especially in his detailed descriptions of email and Instant Messages.

Divided into 10 books and clocking in at 420 pages, *Lies* takes far too long to rope the reader in. Which is sad, because it is obvious from the text that Picano can write. The novel might have worked if Ohrenstedt had been a more interesting character. He is neither sweet enough to win the reader's heart or wicked enough to win her contempt. Perhaps it was his vacillation between these two traits that I found most tedious. As if that weren't enough, Picano creates far too many characters for the reader to be able to get to know any of them - so many, in fact, that the plot

gets lost (perhaps this was his intent) in myriad confusing identities. This would almost be excusable if the plot were one worth following; unfortunately, this way-too-long book lacks a hook.

Honestly, I can't understand how Picano expects us to stay with him for more than 400 pages while a confused - but only marginally sinister - main character drives all over California to discover who the author of a couple of pages of not-very-interesting text is. One can only assume that the author likes his characters enough to keep on telling us more about them. Reminds me of a boring accountant at a work-related function who insists on telling you all about the antics of his seven-year-old and then goes on to describe in painful detail the child's performance in the school play. Too much information about people you just don't give a damn about.

Picano's fall from literary grace is like the plight of poor Sally Struthers, reduced from her role as a brilliant comic character actress in *All in the Family* to appearing on ads for truck driver's schools on late night TV. One can only hope that Picano regains his focus and provides us with some of the brilliance he has



Witness to Revolution: The Advocate Reports on Gay and Lesbian Politics, 1967-1999

Alyson Books \$16.95

Witness to Revolution showcases the best political reporting over the life of *The Advocate*. Stories of police harassment and bar raids, the Stonewall riots, the birth of the Metropolitan Community Church, the election of Elaine Noble, the first battles over media portrayals of gays, the election and subsequent assassination of Harvey Milk, the AIDS crisis and its galvanizing of the movement, the battle over gays in the military, and all the way to the tragic murder of Matthew Shepard—these stories all bring to breathing, bleeding, shouting, cheering life the best and worst moments in the history of a movement.

Set against the backdrop of the tremendous cultural changes sweeping America at the time, *Witness to Revolution* shows just how far this movement has come, and eerily, how little has changed. It showcases some of the earliest writing by people such as Randy Shilts, Eric Rofes, John Rechy, Doug Sadownick, and John Weir. It provides insights into the minds of gay and lesbian allies through interviews with Jesse Jackson, Barry Goldwater, Barney Frank, Judy Shepard, and Steve Gunderson.

The book's editor, Chris Bull, has been a senior political writer for *The Advocate* since 1989. ▼



Sites Unseen

Verve Editions \$39.95

Sites Unseen is a collection of six moving photography and public art projects from different European cities merging images of the Holocaust with the present day scenes and places by photographer and installation artist Simon Attie. It is the companion to an art exhibit of the same name that will be opening in Boston at the Institute of Contemporary Art on November 10.

Using a variety of media, from on-location slide projection in Berlin's former Jewish quarter to underwater light boxes in a Copenhagen canal, Attie's installation art reanimate sites with images of their own lost histories of the Holocaust and World War II. It is Attie's own photographs of his work that make up the book. ▼

