

Closet

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excruciating. What did Ellen or Anne tell us that we didn't already know? Not that it isn't important to talk about discrimination, homophobia, hate crimes, marriage, and babies, but are Ellen and Anne really the best ones to do it? Midway through the Q & A period, sweating with discomfort, we fled in search of quiet and alcohol.

It's not that Ellen shouldn't be out. It's just that at UVM, her talent — being funny — the reason she became a star, was irrelevant. Might Ellen actually have been a better role model if she'd been less out and more funny? If she'd inspired us through her art rather than preaching Gay Rights 101 to the converted?

I don't want Ellen to validate my homosexuality or solve my personal problems; I want her to make me laugh. I want Ricky to make me shake my bon-bon. I want Kevin to make me contemplate human emotions in a new way. What the Star says about him is just trashy gossip — not that there's anything wrong with that.

Speaking of which, before he was officially outed in his

bathroom bust, George Michael released a CD called "Older." Nowhere in its ambiguously pronounced lyrics does he say "I'm gay!" Consequently, it could be considered a product of the closet. Yet any careful (i.e. gay) listener will hear same-sex love and loss between the lines. For me (a former Michael loather), this made the music more special and meaningful. I — unlike the average straight listener — understood without being told.

In bygone days, understanding without being told was the norm. Gayness existed mostly between the lines — an exclusive secret. In the closet, the secret brought me more pain than pleasure. Now, the farther out of the closet I roam, the more intrigued I am by the human complexities wedged inside that cramped little space.

My favorite movie last year, *American Beauty*, was a closet flick. In the gay press many reviewers noted that the only "normal" characters in *American Beauty* were Jim & Jim, the openly-gay-couple-next-door. To me, they were

the movie's only boring characters. As a parody of the dangers of assimilation and "Martha Stewart Living," maybe. As illuminators of the human condition, no way. Leave that to the homophobe closet-case, or any of the other characters, each of whom was living inside one kind of closet or another.

The day after *American Beauty* swept the Oscars, mainstream America discovered that most of the guys clutching the gold boy were fags. You mean those homo moments weren't just aberrations? How shocking! That the movie was made by queers and is dripping with queer sensibility eluded them. A gay film had been shoved down their throats and they'd barely gagged (except during that icky garage kiss). The closet has the power to seduce and disturb the masses in a way that openly gay does not.

Last fall, to research a potential fiction project, I lurked on an on-line support group for Catholics conflicted by SSA (same-sex attraction, I finally figured out, not ASS backwards). Reading their closeted stories was sad and

fascinating. One posting was from a man who had seen *American Beauty* and was so agitated by its "lust and homoerotic imagery," he found himself wandering the streets at 1am, hoping to run into an acquaintance who he knew had a porn "problem." Reaffirming what my own life has told me: the closet is more pleasurable from a safe distance.

For people struggling with their sexuality, I'm glad Ellen did her creatively funny "puppy" episode. I'm glad "Will and Grace" exists and

packs an increasingly sharp satirical bite. But I'm also glad that the closet — much maligned in these proudly out times — is back in vogue: witness Matt Damon's exquisitely furtive lust for Jude Law in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Some day the closet may be a meaningless cultural artifact. Until then, it's an alluring place to revisit even if you don't plan to live there again, ever. ▼

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bian imagery that does exist was created by men for men (a continuing phenomenon, of course) until the 19th century, when, finally, French animal painter Rosa Bonheur portrayed lesbian life from the inside. Things pick up by 1900, when Paris is described as "Lesbian Heaven."

Saslow covers not only gay men and lesbians, and all time periods, but various world cultures as well. He has a chapter on Asia and Islam that includes discussion of the Kama Sutra, rampant male prostitution during the Song dynasty, Japanese "pillow books," and the proliferation of erotica during the late Ming period. Saslow admits that he's barely scratched the surface there, that more "fossils remain to be excavated."

The need for further excavation is evident throughout

the book; considering he covers three millennia in three hundred pages, there's not much room for in-depth discussion of any one artist or period (though he does provide a good "further reading" list). The closer he gets to the present — when film, magazines, television, comics, advertisements etc. enter the mix — the more scattered things become. Transitions get a bit awkward when Julia Morgan, who designed San Simeon for William Randolph Hearst, appears within paragraphs of the "Arrow Collar Man" and a Nazi traveling exhibit. Likewise, Tom of Finland segues dizzily into David Hockney into Andy Warhol into Philip Johnson into the founding of the "Advocate." But these are quibbles.

In these days when history

is being made right here in Vermont, and when, because the gay movement has changed so much in the past 30 years, Stonewall can seem like the ancient past, it's refreshing to place ourselves and our art within a much larger framework. Considering that the United States' first real contribution to male sexuality in art, Thomas Eakins's "The Swimming Hole," didn't come until the 1880s, to say there's a world out there beyond us is ludicrous understatement. *Pictures and Passions* goes a long way toward reclaiming the images that many have tried to keep buried, the images that, together, form the picture of who we are today. ▼

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