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About BTWOF

Books to Watch Out For publishes monthly e-letters celebrating books on various topics. Each issue includes new book announcements, brief reviews, commentary, news and, yes, good book gossip.

The Lesbian Edition

covers both lesbian books and the whole range of books lesbians like to read. It covers news of both the women in print movement and mainstream publishing. Written and compiled by Carol Seajay.

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The Gay Men's Edition

Premiere Issue

Welcome to the Premiere Issue of **Books To Watch Out For - The Gay Men's Edition**.

Books To Watch Out For (BTWOF) is a new e-letter announcing, reviewing, and celebrating gay books and publishing. It's a bit like visiting the new arrivals table at your favorite bookstore and having a good chat with the staff about the latest news in gay publishing, but without having to leave the comfort of your own computer.

You can subscribe online (or by mail) and a new issue will arrive in your inbox every month. You can read it onscreen or print it out, mark it up, and take it to your favorite bookstore to get the books you want to read. Subscriptions are an affordable \$2.50 per month – cheaper than a bag of movie popcorn – and are billed annually. Five dollars from each subscription goes back to community organizations.

Subscribe by mail or online at www.BooksToWatchOutFor.com/. (Yes, of course there's a print version for libraries and people who don't have email.)

Richard Labonte compiles The Gay Men's Edition. I compile The Lesbian Edition. Our goal is to build a publication that is both a pleasure to read and a useful tool that will help our literature – and our community – thrive and grow. I hope you enjoy the issue. If you like it, tell your friends. If not, email us and tell us what you'd rather see.

And now -- on to the first issue.

Yours in spreading the words,
Carol Seajay

Publisher
Books To Watch Out For

The Gay Men's Edition

announces and reviews new books by and about gay men as well as other books of interest and gay publishing news. Written and compiled by Richard Labonte.

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More Books for Women

will launch in 2004.

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Q. How does BTWOF define "a lesbian book?"

A. We think that any book that belongs to a lesbian is a lesbian book, just as any bike that belongs to a girl is "a girl's bike."

BTWOF: The Lesbian Edition covers a wide range of books likely to be of interest to our readers as well as books with lesbian content and books by lesbian writers.

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The Gay Men's Edition

Premiere Issue

By **Richard Labonte**

Cataracts and corneal transplants do get in the way of reading and writing words. When Carol Seajay contacted me several months ago about working with her on Books to Watch Out For, I intended to offer a sample of the Gay Men's Edition of Books To Watch Out For in June. Suddenly, in the blink of both of my worked-over eyes, it's September.

In this first e-letter, I focus mainly on mysteries - my guilty pleasure. There are also a baker's dozen of Books To Watch Out For - books scheduled for October and beyond which excite me. And in the first installment of a continuing feature, I spotlight a few titles in Canadian Corner; these are books readily available in the United States and elsewhere, but because they're published by smaller Canadian presses, they don't get much promotion or review attention below the border.

As the e-letter evolves, I'll be adding new features: interviews with authors, a look at how best-seller lists differ and overlap, best-of-the-year roundups, more links to queer book news, a summary of other reviewers' picks and pans, publisher profiles, tips on lesbian titles gay men really ought to read, and reprints/plus from the Book Marks column I write for Q Syndicate (www.qsyndicate.com).

Before I moved back to Canada in 2001, I worked with A Different Light Bookstores in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York for more than 20 years. It was a delight to spend my days in large rooms filled with interesting books, to read those books, and to have conversations with like-minded women and men about those books. Books to Watch Out For is an equal delight - a conversation, in the large room of the Internet, with people who are as entertained, excited, and intrigued by queer literature as I am. And to extend that conversation, I've provided contact information for authors with their own web sites, links to specifically queer publishers. Read on!

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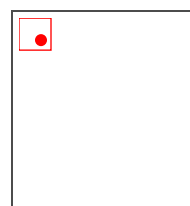
A Summer (And Fall) of Mysteries

I blame lesbians for transmuted my guilty-pleasure reading from the science fiction novels of Poul Anderson, Robert Silverberg, and Anne McCaffrey of my youth, into mysteries with cheerfully deviant characters. Damn you, Mary Wings; curses, Katherine V. Forrest! I have to confess that I hadn't even read Joseph Hansen's early Dave Brandstetter Books until I became a bookseller and discovered that the mystery section (then almost entirely stocked with the work of lesbian and a few queer-friendly straight writers) was one of the most popular in the store; so I didn't start to explore sleuths until a while into the 1980s.

For much of this summer, while I was acquiring bionic eyes, reading was not easy. But read I must, and your average mystery is generally an easy read. And a guilt-free pleasure - though the term "guilty pleasure" has many levels: I can't forgive illogical plotting, but my 20 years as a bookseller taught me that there's an audience for most any books, including those with what I would consider inept writing. And when it comes to mysteries, well, a sense of humor, a dash of originality, and offbeat personality traits on the part of the P.I. all go a long way toward forgiving bad sentence structure.

The existence, and the persistence, of the "comic mystery" is all Nathan Aldyne's fault. (Aldyne, by the way, was the pseudonym for the collaborative writing of Michael McDowell and Dennis Schuetz, who both died of AIDS, a decade apart. Alyson has reprinted a couple of the books from the series. On his own, McDowell also wrote the six-volume Blackwater horror series, an Avon mass market original in the 1980s, and among the scariest novels I've ever read. Though the horror was mainstream, queer threads and characters cropped up everywhere. Highly recommended if you can find used copies.) Aldyne's quirky bartender character Daniel Valentine, paired with fag hag realtor Clarissa Lovelace, bumbled through four hilarious novels (**Slate**, **Vermillion**, **Cobalt**, **Canary**) starting in 1980, giving birth to a hybrid that's much more common from gay writers than from lesbian writers - and certainly makes up a higher proportion of gay mysteries than of straight mysteries.

With You in Spirit, by first-time novelist Steven Cooper, is silly fun - "Love, murder, and ghosts performing I Will Survive," is how Alyson Books appropriately tags the title, featuring gay Jewish Native American



parking-meter-empire heir Graydove Hoffenstein, whose mission is to absolve his mother of the Chappaquiddick murder of his father. Cooper writes with punchy directness, and his characters are preposterous but, in their particular oddball world, almost believable. The ratio of "comic" to "mystery" here is about 3:1 - in other words, the farce is dominant, the deductive elements overshadowed by the brisk repartee. Publisher info: www.alyson.com.



The Actor's Guide to Murder, published by Kensington, is both sillier and more accomplished fun, as over the top as the Cooper mystery, but less surreal. Though this is Rick Copp's first novel, he's done plenty of TV (*The Golden Girls*, *Wings*) and film (*The Brady Bunch Movie*, *Centerfold*) work; that entertainment background is source for oodles

of juice, dish, and over-the-fence gossip about what it's like to be a child star now grown up (his character Jarrod Jarvis actually turned out quite well), and an actor hitting the auditions for sitcom work. But that's just the atmosphere; the witty, occasionally gritty plot, infused with delightful pop culture references, has Jarrod - against the advice of his lover, conveniently but convincingly a cop - nosing around in an attempt to uncover the killer of a fellow actor. Was it the hustler? The twin? The stepfather? The mother? To Copp's credit, he kept me guessing - and entertained - to the end. And the comic/mystery ratio here is a more adult 2:1.

Dungeons and Drag Queens: A Tony Allegro Mystery is a bitch to read - not because it's busting its bra with characters like Eartha Quake, Amber Dextrous, and Dame Fe Fe, but because the book is woefully under-edited and, worse, oddly formatted: it's unusual, and disconcerting, to wade through pages of text in which characters talk to each other without paragraph breaks. But if you're not a stickler for the rules of grammar and the elements of style, author Thomas R. Filippi's campy romp (from the print-on-demand publisher iUniverse) may well entertain - it has the virtues of nonstop banter and whirlwind plotting, to say nothing of the splendid Miss Gay Royale Pageant - a scene that makes me wonder if the author has tucked away the jewels, donned heels, wig, and silk stockings, and lip-synched a diva tune or two himself. Comedy 5:mystery .5.

The comic dial is turned much lower in two larky Australian mysteries from Phillip Scott. Both are Alyson reprints: **One Dead Diva** hearkens back to 1995, when it was published by Black Wattle; and **Gay Resort Murder Shock** was originally

a 1998 Penguin Australia title. The odd detective duo is Marc, a well-aged opera queen, and his party-boy sidekick Paul, not even half his age, with all the ditzy attributes of golden youth. In **One Dead Diva**, they set out to prove that opera sensation Jennifer Burke was murdered, and not a suicide; the opera lore is rich, the interaction always amusing. **Gay Resort Murder Shock** - such an odd title - is less interesting, though more wacky, as elder Marc and young Paul stumble their way through a fandango of nefarious deaths and spooky religious sects. Well-written, but not chuckle-licious. Comedy: mystery, 2:1 - there's some intrigue here.



I really didn't like the two previous comic mysteries by David Stukas, from Kensington Books (which has nearly cornered the market on fag-lit fluff): **Someone Killed His Boyfriend** and **Going Down for the Count**. They irritated me. I didn't even finish the second. Who knows? I may have been in a wicked bad mood both times. Or the quality of

the prose - though not always important to me - may have improved in **Wearing Black to the White Party**. Whatever the case, the antics of lovelorn Robert, his manic female sidekick Monette, and their sexually insatiable buddy Michael clicked this time. I laughed, I ... well, I didn't actually laugh, or cry, but I did smile some. The setting is Palm Springs, where the sarcastic trio is enmeshed in murder in the midst of feuding circuit parties. Just like real life. Sure! Rank this one comedy 4: mystery 1.

The writing is more hardboiled - almost classic noir - in **The Bottle Ghosts**, sixth in the pseudonymous Dorien Grey's Dick Hardesty series, from GLB Publishers. I don't know anything about the author, but from the "voice" of his books, I'd bet he's an elderly gent: there's a strong gay-lib-60s feel to the stories, which are set in a town that's not any particular place, with no special attachment to an era. Hardesty is a sardonic, ironic fellow with strong morals, a stronger sex-drive, and an endearing world-weary wisdom - a standup guy. Most of Grey's novels tackle a particular topic; **The Bottle Ghosts'** plot centers on alcoholism in the gay community. Earlier books touched on the corruption of the closet, the lives of sex workers, and body image - important issues that Grey weaves into his series with amiable wisdom and intensity. Other books in the series are **The Butcher's Son**, **The 9th Man**, **The Bar Watcher**, **The Hired Man**, and **The Good Cop**. The first couple of titles are heavier on erotic elements, but by book three, the series turns gently reflective. And the ratio is reversed here; this is 3:1, mystery: comedy. Author contact: doriengrey@hotmail.com. Publisher info:

www.glbpubs.com

It Takes Two is a wonderful hybrid - not at all a comic novel, but rather a blend of homo history, sexual awakening, and bruised-knuckle police work. Alyson has published a number of new writers this year (see Cooper above); Elliott Mackle is a real find. His novel is set, atmospherically, in Fort Meyer, Florida, in 1949, where two ex-servicemen, hotel manager Dan Ewing and police detective Bud Wright confront the Klu Klux Klan, police corruption, drag-queen bashing, and their undeniable lust - eventually love - for each other. Mackle captures the hypocrisies of a small Southern town with vivid detail, and he evokes an era of veiled lives with sympathetic understanding. This one transcends the mystery genre; it's satisfying in so many other ways. And there's no ratio - this one is all mystery.

Jake Arnott made major waves a few years with his first novel, **The Long Firm**, a 1999 harsh and gritty British underworld novel hailed, somewhat hyperbolically, as the second coming of a queer Ernest Hemingway, a gay Dashiell Hammett, and a fag Graham Greene. **He Kills Coppers**, his second novel (2001), is set in the same criminal underworld, and like the first is loosely, grimly based on real-life events. It's told through the shifting perspectives of three central characters, including a closeted homosexual tabloid journalist, Thomas Meehan, who returns in **truecrime** (Sceptre Books), the third installment in Arnott's unrelenting, mesmerizing criminal trilogy. These aren't mysteries as much as they're monumental collisions of reality and fiction, often shocking collisions of truth and crime. And there's nothing comic about them.



The Canadian Corner

For a lad not yet 30, Celtic-punk fiddle player Ashley MacIsaac has burned through several lifetimes, and he writes about them all with ebullient regret, ruthless honesty, bewitching black humor, and not much apology, in **Fiddling With Disaster (Clearing the Past)**, co-authored by Francis Condron (Warwick Publishing). Alert American fans of NPR's Weekend Edition/Sunday might have heard a low-key interview a few months ago with the Cape Breton-born fiddler, which unfortunately didn't mention his compelling memoir of a life in progress; and Advocate readers with good memories might recall a profile several years ago, geared more to his bad-boy personality (he discussed pissing on his 16-year-old boyfriend of the moment) than to his music. That

music is a righteous synthesis of his Nova Scotia music roots and his kilt-wearing punk-sound persona. He's grown up now, eschews daily intimacies with crack cocaine, and has settled into a more comfortable queer skin, all of which he writes about with breezy, believable colloquialism - **Fiddling With Disaster** has the feel of a book dictated by MacIsaac and transcribed by Condron. But what it lacks in literary panache it makes up for with heartfelt immediacy. And the lad sure can fiddle.

Author info: www.ashley-macisaac.com

Publisher info: www.warwickgp.com

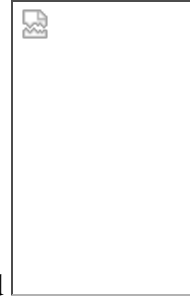


Darren Greer's second novel, **Still Life With June**, was published in Canada this summer; his first, **Tyler's Cape**, self-published a couple of years earlier (friends chipped in funds to print it), was also reissued in trade paper; both are from Cormorant Books. And both are wonderful - and wonderfully different. In **Tyler's Cape**, Greer writes with passion about

the messy secrets of a family eking out hardscrabble lives in a very rural Nova Scotia fishing village, and about Luke, the queer one of three sons, who comes home after escaping his family, to care for his mother from hell, and in the process rediscover the beauty of the harsh land that shaped him. The theme of ghastly secrets, family horrors, and failed dreams is common enough; what gives **Tyler's Cape** its power is Greer's sensational sense of the emotion of geography - his tucked-out-of-time village is as much a character in the novel as any of the people. (By the way, that distinctive sense of place marks MacIsaac's memoir, too - he's also from a small town in a small province on the east coast of Canada.)

Still Life With June is entirely different in voice, style, subject, tone - all those writerly attributes - and that's rare for queer writers, whose first books often mine their own queer lives and community for material. Here, Greer writes with mordant intensity about a world of fascinating losers, most particularly Cameron Dodds, a gay freelance writer who works nights at a Salvation Army shelter for drug addicts and ex-convicts. Several stories wind around each other: there's the sad sack writers group he attends but never participates in; there's the hunky piano-playing loner who moves into the apartment above him; there's the loner's sister, desperate to know how he is without his knowing she cares; and there's his spooky relationship with the institutionalized sister of an ex-con who kills himself in the shelter. This is a novel with edge and energy, astounding style and substance to spare (and 217 chapters that will test your ability to count in Roman Numerals). Author info: www.darrengreer.com

Greer's publisher, Cormorant Books, has a number of gay-interest titles tucked into its catalogue; another I recommend is Michael V. Smith's **Cumberland**, about which The Vancouver Sun said: "... skillfully captures the close emotional ties between those who live in the industrial town, facing the closure of its mills and factories in the wake of NAFTA, and he demonstrates a keen awareness of the rhythms of economic downturn and alcoholism." Author info: www.michaelvsmith.com



And a Cormorant Book to Watch Out For is Sky Gilbert's **An English Gentleman**. Says the publisher: "Manny Masters, a failed graduate student of English Literature, is bequeathed a collection of letters stolen from the home of Nicholas Llewelyn Davies, the only surviving adopted son of J. M. Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*. The letters are what

survive of a correspondence that included up to 2,000 exchanges between adoptive father and son. In Manny's hands, they become academic fodder - the basis for a dissertation that examines the romantic relationship between Barrie and his charge. Set against the backdrop of New York City after the worst of the AIDS crisis has passed, the novel explores the relationship between the suppression of sexual desire and the development of a kind of death wish for the beloved." Author info: <http://home.istar.ca/~anita/>

Publisher info: www.cormorantbooks.com



Books To Watch Out For: A dozen I'm looking forward to reading

1. **Cleopatra's Wedding Present**, by Robert Tewdwr Moss - This tragic memoir of travel through Syria, published five years ago in England, was completed the very day its openly gay author was murdered in his London apartment. (University of Wisconsin, Sept.)

2. **The First Time I Met Frank O'Hara: Reading Gay American Writers**, by Rick Whitaker - Discusses the gay sensibilities of the author's favorite writers, including O'Hara, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson - an interesting topic for the author of *Assuming the Position: A Memoir of Hustling*. (Four Walls Eight Windows, Oct.)

3. **Original Youth: The Real Story of Edmund White's Boyhood**, by Keith Fleming - Fleming, White's nephew, wrote a charming, moving memoir about growing through his teen years as a ward of his uncle; here, he writes a (presumably authorized) account of his famous queer relative's intensely sexual and often confused younger years. (Green Candy Press, Nov.)

4. **Fanny: A Fiction**, by Edmund White - And there's also White's newest novel, pronounced "one of the funniest books I've read in a long time," by Norman Laurila, one of the founders of A Different Light Bookstores, who wouldn't part with the galley he was reading on a vacation visit. (Ecco Press, Oct.)

5. **Lives of the Circus Animals**, by Christopher Bram - Contemporary New York theater is the setting for Bram's eighth novel, the story of several days and nights in the lives of a diverse cast of characters, queer and otherwise. (William Morrow, Oct.)

6. **What We Lost: Based on a True Story**, by Dale Peck - The author of *Martin and John* and *The Law of Enclosures* turns from fiction to memoir in this searing account of his own father's fractured boyhood. (Houghton Mifflin, Nov.)

7. **Kinkorama: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Perversion**, by Simon Sheppard - In cheerful essays exploring kink from tickling to wrestling and beyond, this erotic writer is witty, profound, and hot, often on the same page. (Alyson Books, Dec.)

8. **The Unexpurgated Beaton: The Cecil Beaton Diaries as He Wrote Them, 1970-1980**, intro. by Hugo Vickers - All the bitchy asides, snide observations, and cruelly honest assessments of numerous celebrities, from the Queen Mother and Truman Capote to Marlene Dietrich and assorted Rothschilds. (Knopf, Oct.)

9. **Queer Street: The Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947-1985**, by James McCourt - The focus is mainly on gay culture in New York during the second half of the 20th century, but novelist McCourt zaps all over the geographical and cultural map. (WW Norton, Nov.)

10. **Outbursts! A Queer Erotic Thesaurus**, by A.D. Peterkin - It's been a long while since *The Queen's Vernacular* went out of print; at last, a partial replacement compiles English slang terms that describe the sexual activities of gays and lesbians. (Arsenal Pulp Press, Nov.)

11. **Betty & Pansy's Severe Queer Review of San Francisco, Seventh Edition** and **Betty & Pansy's Severe Queer Review of New York, Third Edition**, by Betty Pearl and Pansy - Truth is, Betty does most of the writing in these hilarious, exacting updates to the weird queer scenes in two major cities, though she gets lots help from friends. (Cleis Press, Nov.)

12. **Homosexuality and Civilization**, by Louis Crompton - A rich, exhaustive, and contrarian examination of the ways in which major civilizations in the last two millennia treated same-sex attractions. (Harvard University, Oct.)

And for a Baker's Dozen: Best Gay Erotica 2004, edited by Richard Labonte, selected by Kirk Read - This is one book I have already read. And proofread. And edited. There are 21 stories, two featuring farting, and a number of exquisite first-time authors. (Cleis Press, Nov.) www.cleis.com



News, Notes & Web Connections

The Aug. 25 issue of the trade magazine *Publishers Weekly* focused on queer publishing, with short interviews with eight assorted authors, publishers, booksellers, editors, and publicists. Follow this link, and then search by date for the article (and a lengthier interview with Deacon McCubbin of the Lambda Rising/Oscar Wilde Bookstores):

<http://publishersweekly.reviewsnews.com>

Suspect Thoughts Press has established a writing contest for first-time novelists, with publication promised for the winner, and exposure to agents and other publishers for the runners-up. You have until Dec. 31 to get your work in to Project: QueerLit. A history note: it's somewhat like a novel contest sponsored a decade ago by Alyson Books, back when it was still owned by founder Sasha Alyson; he enlisted gay bookstores as judges. A Different Light staff in San Francisco read through almost 100 manuscripts - we were printing inventory reports on the back of submissions for years after - and chose **Steam**, a horror novel by Jay B. Laws that hit bestseller lists in 1991. Jay died before his second novel, **The Unfinished**, came out, in 1993 and also from Alyson.

www.projectqueerlit.com

There are plenty of queer writers at this annual Bay Area literary event:

<http://www.litquake.org/2003/EventAuthors.html>

It's not available on the web, but the September issue of *Out* has a short, revealing interview by Bruce Shenitz with 80-year-old Joseph Hansen, who retired the Dave Brandstetter mystery series a decade ago, but is working on a 12-novel (!) arc of autobiographical fiction featuring the character Nathan Reed. The first books in the series, **Living Upstairs** and **Jack of Hearts**, are out of print, but the third, **The Cutbank Path**, was self-published through XLibris in January 2002. Note to InsightOut Books - seems a likely three-books-in-one project!

There must be something about turning living beyond 70 years of age that liberates the soul: Richard Chamberlain came out this summer in **Shattered Love** (HarperCollins), a sweetly spiritual memoir about his TV and theatre career, and his long partnership with companion Martin. And now teen heartthrob Tab Hunter, still sporting a bewitching beachboy look, has signed with Simon & Schuster to out himself in a 2004 autobiography. Like we didn't know about either of them...

www.nytimes.com/2003/09/09/movies/09TAB.html

Robert Patrick, hailed as a founding father of gay theatre in America, has written a massive (near-900 pages, hundreds of illustrations) reflection on film and its influence on his life, aptly titled **Film Moi: Narcissus in the Dark**. It's smart, funny, and cheap - \$10 from the author. See his site for information:

<http://hometown.aol.com/rbrtptreck/myhomepage/newsletter.html>

Bloom, a new triquarterly for lesbian and gay writers and artists, debuts in October 2003. The first issue includes a new story by Andrew Holleran, new poems by Adrienne Rich and Jaime Manrique, a Bernard Cooper essay, and much more. Editors are Charles Flowers, Joan Larkin (poetry), Wesley Gibson (fiction), and Jeffrey Lependorf (art). Its advisory board includes Dorothy Allison, Carol Anshaw, Quang Bao, Michael Denny, Mark Doty, E. Lynn Harris, Barbara Smith, and Edmund White.

www.bloommagazine.org



Richard reviews 104 books a year in his biweekly Book Marks column for Q Syndicate, reads several hundred short stories as he edits the annual Best Gay Erotica anthology for Cleis Press, and provides editorial services to authors and project consultation for publishers. He can be reached at tattyhill@sympatico.ca, or by mail at 7-A Drummond St W, Perth, Ontario K7H 2J3, Canada.



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