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The Gay Men's Edition

May 2004

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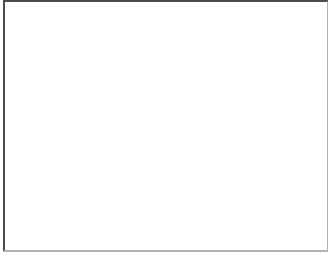
By Richard Labonte

They Did It Their Way

More and more, authors are doing it themselves - publishing their own books. It's not a particularly new trend, of course, just an accelerated one. Gay writers, denied access to commercial publishers (and sometimes even printers spooked by homosexuality) have long produced their own volumes of prose and poetry. But as the 20th century morphed into the 21st, as mainstream publishers shrank their gay lists, and as desktop publishing and on-demand printing matured, the gay-lit boom of the late 1980s was resuscitated. The scale is smaller - but there are as many new gay titles popping up every year now as at the height of the boom of yore ... those good old days.

There are drawbacks. Too many books are edited ineptly, if at all. Spell-check programs will never replace a good proofreading - in just the books I read from these self-publishers, I spotted dozens of wrong-word irritants (and many dozens of typos) - "two" for "too" and "disbursal" for "dispersal" and "base" for "bass" and "addition" for "edition." All I can say is, Eke! Sorry. I mean, Eek! And books from iUniverse, Xlibris, Booksurge and other print-on-demand (PoD) services are even worse.

Distribution is another problem. The rule of thumb for *Book Marks*, the review column I write for Q Syndicate, is that books must be reviewed within three months after publication. Earnest, hopeful authors - who have to buy their own books from PoD outlets - always, always sent me their novels too many months after publication.



But **Books To Watch Out For/The Gay Edition** gives me room to stretch; if a PoD title catches my fancy, I'll write about it whenever I hear about it. Meanwhile, the five publishers surveyed in this issue are in a different class - either they publish their own books, or they know how to promote them, and in some cases they know both (though they still don't proofread enough).

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

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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After reading their books, I contacted **Perry Brass** of Belhue Press, **Joe Babcock** of Closet Case Books, **Ken Harrison** of Seventh Window Publications, **Scott Whittier** and **Scott Pomfret** of Romentics, and **Clint Seiter** of Quarter Moon Press; I asked some questions; some of them answered at length, others in just a few words; their responses, edited for length and flow - not every publisher answered every question - follow. For readers: it's a behind-the-scenes look at how sausage is made, from five inventive, accomplished writer-publishers of nourishing sausage ... er, books. For prospective self-publishers: here are five how-to scenarios from folks whose different paths got them to the same place - their words, as they shaped them, in the hands of readers.

The questions, summarized: *What got you started, what's your production process, who is your audience, how are sales, and what's the future of queer publishing?*

Perry Brass

Very simple: although by the mid-80s, I was considered a "classic writer from the Gay Liberation period" - that is, I'd written some widely published poetry, articles, and stories that were very much a part of the early, radical gay movement; had been involved with glossy gay journalism for years; was in about a dozen anthologies, etc., I could not penetrate book publishing for anything. Part of this, I learned later, was because I was too far ahead of it. For instance, in 1979, I tried to publish a gay novel set in the American military overseas. All the main characters worked for the Army. The response from editors who kept the manuscript for ages was good. But the general feeling was that gay men were not interested, at all, in the military. One very powerful gay editor told me, flat out, "I'm not sure what gay literature is, but this isn't it!" It did not deal with the Three D's from the '70s: drugs, dick, and disco, which editors then felt gay literature was all about. So, for eight years I wrote plays, poetry, short stories - anything but go through the heartbreak of dealing with book publishing. Friends like the late T.R. Witomski said, "Why not publish your books yourself?" I was not ready.

What made me ready was the realization, when I tried (in 1991)

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to publish my first book of poetry, *Sex-charge*, that gay presses at that point knew nothing about book marketing. I had an idea how the book should look, that it should have some hot pictures in it (unheard of for a book of poetry then) and I had a great deal of support from the gay visual arts world. *Sex-charge*, which sold well, still sells. My second book, a novel, *Mirage*, came out in the same year, and they were both named Lammy finalists: something that had never happened before, or since, to have two books, in two different categories, named finalists in the same year. I realized later I could never have done what I did if I had approached another publisher to do it. So I got bitten by book publishing, and have been putting out my own books since then.

As for sales: that is a hard question to answer now because there are so many ways to print/produce a book. I am now going with an initial PoD run of 500 books, then I go into a conventional "webfed" run of several thousand. After that, I can go back into PoD printing. In the old days, before PoD, my print run was usually 4,000-7,000 books.

Three of my 13 books have sold about 7,000 copies, which is great sales for a micro-press (especially one that does not do flat-out porn, or guide books). Several other titles have done 4,000 copy sales, again a good figure, and some, like my poetry books, have only done a few thousand copies, which for poetry ain't bad. The important thing is that the books always sell, and that some of my readers have read five or six of my books, and order books in multiple titles.

Joe Babcock

"Self-publishing is not glamorous, and I've never been so in debt. But it's a high like none other, and I'm doing it again this summer," Joe Babcock wrote, briefly, in response to my queries - he financed his first book with his credit cards. To a follow-up e-mail, he said: "You expressed curiosity in how many of the 2,500 copies of *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* have been sold. About half. My income comes from waiting tables. When I wait tables I'm an actor. Then the audience matters, and I'll do whatever it takes to please them. I spend my tips on writing. At this year's Gay Pride in Minneapolis I'll be giving away the remaining copies of *Tragedy*. After that I'll probably contract a PoD publisher to take over and to publish my second novel, *What Voice is Mr. Rogers*."

(Babcock's book is the oldest of the editions covered, though he's the youngest publisher - it came out in June, 2002; Harrison published *Bad Behavior* through iUniverse in 2001 and reprinted it himself in October, 2003; Brass's book was published in November, 2003; the first Romantic romances

appeared in November, 2003; and Seiter's Bob Vickery book hit stores in March).

As of May 19, 2004, Babcock's sales ranking at a certain online bookseller was number 627,295, two years after publication; *Play Buddies*, after two months, was at 22,286; both Brass and Harrison, after six months, were somewhere over 1,000,000; and the Scotts weren't listed. By comparison, my own *Best Gay Erotica 2004* was at 361,591 (you know, it's the first time I've checked!) after six months. Given that a sale of two copies or so can jump a title several tens of thousands in the ranking, *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* is doing relatively well.

Babcock's book, incidentally, won a well-deserved special award from the Lambda Literary Foundation in 2003 for best self-published book - not quite a Lambda Literary Award, but an honor nonetheless.

Kenneth Harrison

After having published two books with Leyland Publications, I was curious about publishing myself. It was a money thing, really. I wrote *Lies and Deceptions*, then put together Seventh Window Publications. *Lies and Deceptions* had a print run of 1,000 copies. That's very low, but it was all I could afford. Once I had enough money from sales, I put together *Ten Thick Inches*, which is more the type of thing I'm known for. It had a print run of 2,000, which is the norm for me now. The money to start this up came out of my own pocket, so I had to start slow. I'm hoping to go up to a print run of 3,000 with my next title.

Publishing is something I enjoy, right down to cover design and page layout. I was lucky enough to get pointed to Mark Lynch for cover photographs. Mark did the cover photographs for *Ten Thick Inches* and *Bad Behavior*. Once I have the picture, I try to work on the cover layout, then the page design. I don't like reading a book that has words crammed onto a page. When doing the inside layout, I looked at what other presses did with page layout to get ideas. It's exciting to be able to put the entire project together and to see it from start to finish.

For advertising, I'm not as crazy as I used to be. When *Daddy's Boys* (Leyland Publications) came out, I printed up cards and sent them to every leather bar across the country. My readers go to bars and a good many of them like to look at dirty pictures. I also send out review copies to appropriate publications. These days I've been playing with magazine ads. I had an ad for *Ten Thick Inches* in *Bay Windows* for a month in the summer last year. This year I'm thinking of trying *The Advocate*. I also do an occasional reading, which is fun. I did

an event for *Ten Thick Inches* at The Open Book in Sacramento, CA. Some of the people who had dropped into the store to buy books stopped and listened as I read "Masetto." Of the events I've done, that one was the most memorable. It's also a great feeling when someone asks you to sign an obviously read copy of one of your books. It's best to avoid any stains.

I'm looking to expand Seventh Window Publications as a small press. It's going to take some time, but with a few good titles, I'll get there. Later this year I'll have a lesbian collection called *Control*, to be edited by Natalia Starr. I've also been writing some dirty tales for a new collection of short stories. If all goes well, I'll be looking for novel length manuscripts by 2005.

When I first started publishing heavily, Masquerade Books was still around. They had a wonderful imprint, Bad Boy, which had some of the best titles. I loved *Wet Dreams* by Jay Shafer, *Mr. Benson* by John Preston, and any book by Aaron Travis. Bad Boy also had the classic *Run Little Leather Boy*, by Larry Townsend. Back then it seemed as if gay publishing was flourishing. OutWrite was in Boston back then, too. Both are now gone and there seems to be a lull. Fewer gay books are coming out of the big houses.

These days, every author needs to be seen. A lot of people talk doom and gloom about gay publishing, but I don't believe it. Sometimes authors and publishers need to go a little further to sell their titles. That's one of the reasons I'm putting together an author series for the Rhode Island Men of Phoenix. For me this lecture series is one more way for an author to gain some exposure. I think it's time we got the author out of the bookstore. It's easy to do - just find a gay group willing to sponsor an author series.

One of the keys to the success of gay publishing is to get more people to read. The only way to get people to read is to generate interest. Authors need to go to gay events and carry copies of their latest books when on vacation. I like to leave a copy of my latest title with the tip for the cleaning boy when visiting P-town or Ogunquit. If authors and publishers don't become visible, how will people know to read our books? It might also get someone to turn off the television and cozy up with a good book. It's time for gay publishing to become more sociable outside of the publishing world.

Scott & Scott

We've had the idea for years that gay men need a line of romance novels. It came from all the pulpy romances my mother and grandmother read constantly. They said it was light, entertaining and happy reading. And couldn't gay men use a

little of that? Then we researched the straight romance and gay book markets and saw that our idea was a logical next step in both the evolution of gay literature and the sub-specialization of romance novels. There really is nothing out there like it. So we saw it as a great opportunity and a fun business venture. It didn't hurt to have two writers dating one another. Now that's motivation for romance novels.

Since we're both writers, we review and edit each other's work. Prepress is handled through our print-on-demand publisher, Booksurge. And all logo, corporate, cover and Web design was done by some great, talented friends who cut us a real deal.

Between distribution, online retail sales and review copies, we have almost broken the 200 mark. However, we just launched in November with two titles and our main concern initially was to demonstrate interest and build a strong brand identity around our concept.

Our audience? I would have said gay men 20-50 who believe in true love and enjoy fun, exciting books. But we have discovered quite a few women who are some of our biggest fans.

We launched Romentics in November, 2003. And our main goal was to reach our audience and build a brand. We did this in many ways. We have a great Web site, supported by a three-month Internet ad campaign on major gay sites and major search engines. In our first three months, we had over 7,000 unique visitors and reached hundreds of thousands with banner ads. We also sent over 400 press releases to national gay and mainstream media. We sent almost 100 letters to bookstores throughout the country. And we sent hundreds of announcements via e-mail. We've gotten media coverage and a lot of interest. It's been a great start. We also continue correspondence with fans through a newsletter they sign up for on the site.

We recently signed on with a national distributor, Alamo Square, to distribute to gay bookstores throughout the country. And we also have an agent at the Peter Rubie Literary Agency who is really excited about Romentics and selling it to a mainstream press. So we're hoping to move beyond the financial limitations of PoD and self-distribution soon.

I have heard from both agents and bookstore owners that queer presses are cutting way back on the acceptance of new fiction. And from what we've seen, that's true. It's easy enough to get published in any number of the many, many erotica anthologies. But I think investing in a new niche market within gay lit, like romance, is a gamble for them. And overall, queer

presses don't seem to be taking a lot of gambles today. I hope this changes so authors and readers have more options through gay companies.

This just in: the Spring Romantics newsletter, distributed May 17, brings news that Scott and Scott have sold reprint rights to *Hot Sauce* to Warner Books, for publication in 2005. Here's the info:

www.romantics.com/news/newsspring.htm

And here's what the *Boston Globe* had to say:

www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2004/05/22/the_new_romantics

Clint Seiter

As a writer of gay erotica under the pen name Bob Vickery, I've had plenty of experience getting my stories published. I enjoy seeing my work in print, but I've gotten to the point where I want to have more control over the whole creative process, not just writing the material, but everything else that is involved in putting out a book. Typically, once a writer turns his manuscript over to the publisher, he's lost all control of the project and can only wait passively while the book people make all the rest of the decisions about cover and text design, release date, publicity, etc. My last book, *Cocksure* (put out by Alyson) has been very successful, and because of this, I figured that there would be a good market for another anthology of stories by Bob Vickery.

I walked into this project with this naive attitude that it shouldn't be that big a deal to self-publish a book. Instead, it's turned out to be a huge project, much bigger than I ever imagined it'd be. I started my publishing company, Quarter Moon Press, and began compiling the stories that I wanted to be in my Bob Vickery anthology, *Play Buddies*. The learning curve has been steep, and I've pretty much had to scramble to figure out how to do this. I've read books about self-publishing, surfed the net, talked to people in the business, hired a publicist, and pretty much just figured it out as each new problem came up.

Putting out a book is like caring for a newborn baby. As soon as I turn my back on it, it starts screaming for more attention. There have been moments of high stress, but overall I've loved doing this. I really like being completely in control of the project, not only of the written material, but everything else, from the initial design of the cover to the final promotion of the book. For my first run, I've had 3,500 copies printed, and now I'm hustling like a son of a bitch to promote the book and get bookstores to carry it.

The up side is tremendous. Really tremendous. I love having

control of the whole project, and seeing it evolve from just an idea to a final book sold in bookstores. Also, having my own publishing company gives me the freedom to not have to depend on anybody else to get my work published. When I do get to start writing again, I hope to be able to explore where I can go with my writing, maybe get more experimental and out there, try new things. I'm already well into my next project: an audio book of some of my favorite Bob Vickery stories. I have a friend who's a music producer with a full sound studio up in the Berkeley hills who I'm collaborating with. I've put together a group of kick-ass actors with voice work experience, and I've already recorded nearly enough stories for a three-CD book. I hope to have the book out by late summer, with Quarter Moon Press as the publisher.

And now, back to Perry Brass, the most loquacious - and the most experienced - of the respondents:

On process - I try to give my books all the advantages that other commercial books have. I believe deeply in the value, the necessity, of good editing, as well as good book design. I have been working with the same designer for 13 years. She came in on *Mirage*, and wonderfully has stayed with me. I've used editors like Jerry Roscoe, Carol Spearin McCauley, Patrick Merla, and Helen Eisenbach. In the beginning, I used an editor mostly for copy editing, and now realize that I was lucky to be able to get away with that. I have learned huge things working with good editors, and it is marvelous to be in a position to hire them. Now that book publishing is, as a whole, on such skids, there are a number of good editors around who freelance with smaller publishers. I've been lucky that an editor like Patrick Merla has taken an interest in my books. He should be canonized. I used to put out about a book a year, with occasionally two books coming out. But that was when I had a much more aggressive distributor. Then the production process, from idea to finished book might take as little as 10 months. I no longer do that - I have to spend too much time promoting books to write them; so now I'm putting out a book every two years or a little less.

On audience - Readers who are adventurous, who are tired of the fluff that comes from commercial publishing. One of the themes in my books has always been how we survive in the world. Really - *How to Survive Your Own Gay Life*, is one of my best-selling titles; but my fiction deals with this constantly too. How do we pay the rent, deal with jobs, find love, keep from killing ourselves, keep from dying, etc. My readers like the fact that I am sexually frank, but still realize that not all of us live like the characters on *Will & Grace* who never seem to have money problems. Even Jack, who never works, never has

rent problems. So I deal with that, and I think my readers like that. I know, however, that even though much of my fiction is shelved with science fiction and fantasy, I don't have a SF/F readership. I am a SF/F writer the way Robert Louis Stevenson was a horror writer. I am simply a gay/Southern/Jewish storyteller, and my readers like that.

What's next - You mean, can Perry Brass survive his own gay life as a gay writer? I question that myself. I am crazy about putting out books, so I'll continue doing that. But it is getting much harder: we no longer live in a book culture, with a really supportive literate community behind us. There is a terrible shortening of imaginative power in the gay world, and more reliance on "marketing power" and "corporativity." One way I really see this is that being, basically, self published, the onus on this, the limitations of this, have become worse, not better, because I'm now up against more corporate promotional money. This is extremely frustrating, but luckily the readers still care about my books, and I'm also fortunate to have support from my distributors, bookstores, and other book venues. I always say that in this business you have only two friends: the people who read your books, and the people who sell them. All the others disappear very fast. But the readers and, hopefully, the booksellers, remain.

Queer publishing has not even scratched the surface of the "gay story" the way that, say, Jewish publishing has understood what it means to be a controversial outsider, like a Jew, in this world. There is also a huge lack of marketing understanding, and fear of trying new things - caused mostly by the lack of money. I see this from the presses, the bookstores, and gay lit groups like the Publishing Triangle and Lambda Literary Foundation - two groups that I am close to. What really thrills me is that self-published books are coming up: they are getting better and more professional. And I feel very good that people like myself and Patricia Nell Warren, who has her own press, Wildcat Press, have been in the first wave of this.

Their Books, In Brief

The Substance of God: A Spiritual Thriller, by Perry Brass
(Belhuc Press, \$13.95)

With its mad scientists, murderous fundamentalists, steamy Istanbul bathhouses, and queers who rise Christ-like from the dead, this is quite the blend of genre fictions - part "noir" mystery, part erotic odyssey, part political manifesto, part Michael Crichton-like science thriller. The plot concerns a kinky bio-researcher heavy into cloning (not clones, though he is a queer), who receives in the mail what may be a slice of the body of Christ, unearthed in an archeological dig. This is good news for the scientist who grafted the strip of flesh to his calf

before anticlone religious radicals bludgeoned him to death; and three days later, in the morgue, he resurrects. On this imaginative hook, Brass hangs a sizzling exploration of the connections among spirituality, carnality, and love - meatier subject matter than most genre fiction deals with, though not unusual in this author's imaginative work. *The Substance of God* is a deft consideration of the philosophical need for a good God, of the physical lust for good sex, and of the emotional need for real love - a lot of heft, but it's also good, light reading.

Author info: www.perrybrass.com

Bad Behavior, by Kenneth Harrison (*Seventh Window*, \$13.95)

I suspect that Harrison's erotic collection *Ten Thick Inches*, one of three Seventh Window titles, has outsold *Bad Behavior* - "thick" is certainly more provocative than "bad." This novel - about young adults, gay and straight, slip sliding self-destructively in the mid-80s through a Manhattan swirl of ambition, AIDS, desire, and despair - has its erotic moments, to be sure. But that's just frosting on the cake: Harrison captures the ennui of post-college, pre-career, lusting-for-love life with incisive writing and sharp perception. Hovering over his slice-of-life story, of course, is the specter of the plague, at a time when the virus was still a mystery, when drugs did little to stave off the disease, and when funerals were where friends who had lost touch too often reconnected. Sounds bleak. But at its core this is a satisfying novel of redemption.

Author info: www.seventhwindow.com

The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers, by Joe Babcock (*Closet Case Books*, \$15.95)

"Like many gay 16-year-olds, Erick Taylor dreams of being a star. The only problem is that he's unpopular, stuck in Catholic school, and has parents who, in their own desperate search for sainthood, fail to see that their son is on a path toward self-destruction. Unable to face his tormentors at school, unsure of whether he wants to live or not, Erick meets Chloe, a 26-year-old self-proclaimed 'grandiloquist' drag queen. With a glam rock makeover and a pair of platform shoes, Erick finally finds the courage to out himself, erasing his former identity and leaping blindly into Minneapolis' gay nightlife.... With exhilarating style and dark wit, Babcock paints a provocative, devastating portrait of what it's like to grow up queer in America." (I didn't write that: Babcock did - and the prose in his novel is as precise and seductive as his press-release *precis*. *Geneva Flowers* is a remarkably accomplished debut.)

Author info: www.closetcasebooks.com

The first three chapters, and an interview with the Twink columnist of Toronto's *Fab* magazine:

www.closetcasebooks.com/pages/879662/index.htm

And a *Writer's Digest* story on beating out 2,000 entries to win the magazine's Self-Published Book Award in 2003:

www.writersdigest.com/contests/self_published_winners02.asp

Razor Burn, by Scott & Scott / **Hot Sauce**, by Scott & Scott
(Romentics, \$13.99)

Razor Burn, *Hot Sauce*, *Spare Parts* - there's a rhythm to the titles of the first three books from Scott (Pomfret) & Scott (Whittier). A formula, too: these are old-fashioned romances about sweet love, some sex, and scattered moments of uncertainty. In *Hot Sauce*, Troy is a devilishly handsome scion of a wealthy designer-clothes family and Brad is a hunky blue-collar-made-good master chef; Troy's snooty mother looks down on poor-bred Brad and does everything she can to rupture their love, but, hey, she comes around, because love conquers all. In *Razor Burn*, Blayne is a closeted workaholic and Ben is an unemployed coffee shop addict; Blayne's tight-ass father hates that his son is really a homosexual, and does everything he can to sabotage their love - then Ben does a brilliant redesign on a new razor line after he's hired by the cosmetic company run by father and son and, guess what - love conquers all. But what's excellent about these breezy love stories is this: the Scotts are a lean, clean writing machine, their plots are imaginatively implausible but impeccably logical, and they pull off simpleminded, goodhearted entertainment without exploding into queeny camp (think: most of the mysteries and romances from Kensington).

Author info: www.romentics.com

Play Buddies, by Bob Vickery (Quarter Moon Press, \$15.95)

I read a lot of queer erotica (see Books to Watch Out For/April), mostly in the course of looking for fine writing for the best Gay Erotica series I edit but, in recent years, because that's where plenty of credible literary short fiction lies. What I've found is that a majority of really hot-scene porn is ineptly written (the pleasure is physical) and that the best-written sex-charged stories often simmer rather than sizzle (the pleasure is intellectual, or at best emotional). Bob Vickery's stories combine the best of the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual - they're real reads wherein real characters have real sex with real men. Heightened-reality, hyper-masculine elements are always at work in the sexplay; that's the porn part. But Vickery invests his fiction with the special quality of depth and dimension - his studs aren't clones of each other. It's difficult to single out any of the 31 stories in *Play Buddies* for particular praise - but "Queer Survivor" is a witty riff on one of America's favorite reality TV shows, "Gamblers" is a nifty turn-the-tables tale, and "Elephant Men" is an unsettling story about self-esteem.

Author info: www.quartermoonpress.com

In this essay, Vickery applies Buddhist dharma to casual sex:

www.nightcharm.com/artspirit/features/vickery/

Perry Brass led a self-publishing workshop last year at the Lambda Literary Foundation's gay writers conference in Provincetown; in this commentary (scroll down) he discusses *Play Buddies*, one of the books that benefited from the session:

www.perrybrass.com/news.html

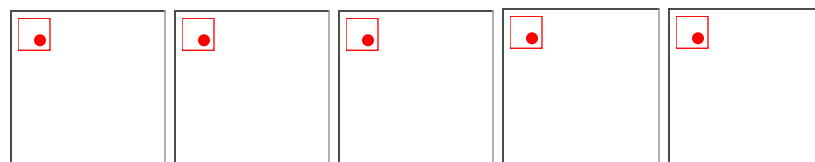


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Covering the Covers

A good cover will always help sell a book. It might not sell a great book better, but it can almost always boost a bad book's sales. A book might sell with a bad cover if it gets enough review coverage and reader buzz - but, particularly with self-published titles where the promotion push is scant, and where it's hard to get stacks of books into a bookstore, a catchy cover is vital: readers can't buy what they don't pick up. How did Brass, Babcock, Harrison, the Scotts, and Vickery do?

The Substance of God: A Spiritual Thriller - Brass's many books normally feature strong covers, bright and, when appropriate, sexy. This one's murky - an attempt to get across the concept of "spiritual," perhaps - the author's name is lost in the wash of color at the top of the cover, and the cover image isn't especially sensual. The title does stand out, though.



Bad Behavior - Harrison's cover suggests a sexier book than he delivers; this is a more serious novel than his erotica collections. But the beefy fellow posed provocatively on the cover might get the book into a prospective reader's hand - that's half the battle - and the back cover blurb is clear about the plot. Dropping the title and author's name in yellow type on bands of black compensates for their relatively small size.

The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers - Art (especially by a friend) is often the wrong choice for cover illustration. But this one works splendidly: the title and author name stand out clearly despite the use of unorthodox type, and the chaotic but colorful motif of the artwork expresses Erick's character perfectly - even though the reader won't know this until he's finished the book.

Razor Burn / Hot Sauce - About as generic, bland, and invisible as covers can get, in terms of leaping off a crowded bookstore display table. That said, the chaps at Romentics launched their novels from a vibrant web site, and early sales were driven through the Internet. Their titles have only recently reached bookstores through Alamo Square Distribution, and second printings - from other than the online publisher booksurge.com, perhaps - might up the eyecatching oomph somewhat.

Play Buddies - Exactly what the cover of a collection of erotic gay fiction ought to be - eye candy. The title jumps out, the author's name - already an established brand - is obvious, and the cover screams SEX: those muscles, those nipples, the word "erotic" right under the bellybutton.



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More Writers Who Published Themselves

The Cutbank Path: A Nathan Reed Novel, by Joseph Hansen (*Xlibris*, \$21.99)

Hansen is best known for a dozen classic Dave Brandstetter novels, though only *Troublemaker* is readily available in an Alyson reprint. But the now 82-year-old author has also written a number of non-mysteries, among them *Jack of Hearts* (1989) and the Lambda Award-winning *Living Upstairs* (1993), which recount the early gay days of the very Hansen-like writer-to-be Nathan Reed. It's taken more than a decade for the third book in this historical (and heroic) trilogy to appear - and, to gay-publishing shame - Hansen had to publish it himself through a print-on-demand service. Young Reed is now living a hardscrabble but mostly happy homo life with his schoolteacher-lover. But it's 1952, the era of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's relentless anti-commie and anti-queer witch-hunts. The pressure to climb back into the closet is unceasing - a reality through which Hansen lived, and which he recreates with wondrous resonance in *The Cutback Path*. This is a solidly crafted story from an elegant prose stylist, rich in Hollywood gossip, slyly evocative of the earliest days of Mattachine activism, and as vivid a lesson in queer ancestry as any nonfiction work by Eric Marcus, Martin Duberman, or John D'Emilio. And with way better plotting.

For an appreciation of the Brandstetter mysteries:

<http://trashotron.com/agonycolumns/2003/11-20-03.htm>

And for a complete Hansen bibliography:

<http://homepage.mac.com/ctgrant/HIC/bibliog/Authors>



Monkey Suits, by Jim Provenzano (*iUniverse*, \$15.95)

Lives there a gay man in his early 20s with good looks, black trousers, and a white shirt who hasn't waited a table while awaiting his big acting break? Well, some - but not the sexy lads of *Monkey Suits*, a nostalgic Manhattan-set novel about unfocused youth, mercurial boyfriends, and the early days of ACT UP anger. The characters are all cater waiters - thus, the "monkey suits." Their underclass perspective on the upper class they serve at society functions is part sneering and part servile, a nervy imbalance that gives this novel a subversive, comic clout. If Provenzano wasn't himself a waiter, he must have slept with some - his behind-the-scenes details are a hoot. The novel's realistic energy is further heightened by the author's invocation of thinly veiled facts: there really was a mayor accused of being in the closet - think Ed Koch. And there really was a conservative editor who demanded the HIV-infected be tattooed - think William F. Buckley, who is further fictionalized, provocatively, as a perv who gets off by pouring blood on blindfolded hustlers.

Author info: <http://members.tripod.com/~myrmidude/warmup.html>

For a review of Provenzano's first novel, *Pins*:

www.ehrensteinland.com/htmls/g004/jimprovenzano.html

King of Cats: A Life in Five Novellas, by Blake Fraina (*iUniverse*, \$16.95)

This first fiction effort rocks, and not just because its central character is a darkly handsome, profoundly talented, and emotionally enigmatic rock guitarist - which adds up to sexy. The life of Jimmy Strange - born Jimmy Lyons - is central to the five long stories in *King of Cats*, but Fraina comes at his character from several challenging directions: in the first story, "King of the Cats," he's a shadowy presence; in "Hidden History," the trauma of his teen years in North London takes center stage; and in "My Father's House," the lives of Jimmy, of fellow Mogs band member Adam, and of the eternal adolescent Elliott - whose lies, secrets, and sexual compulsions ensnare them all - intersect with wrenching heartbreak. The novellas (each story runs between 40 and 55 pages) can be read as separate short stories, and in fact Fraina says the first was meant to be the only story - until he got caught up in the lives of his characters, and was compelled to explore them more. A good thing - this is an intelligent, seductive book, several cuts above the typical unedited, self-published norm.

The Peculiar History of Oliver Trent, by Peter Mitchell (*Brownlow Company*, \$9)

Peculiar, indeed. And inspired. And original. And

hard to find - but make the effort (see links below). In part, this is a book about the thirty-year struggle for gay rights in England - and much of it has to do with arcane British parliamentary procedures, opaque election campaigns, and obscure internecine left-wing politics of the 1960s. But it's also a marvelous novel in which time tracks backwards - we meet Oliver Trent as a befuddled, near-dead old man, and leave him as... well, let's not give it all away. Just think *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but without the self-delusion. Mitchell handles the paradoxical peculiarities of his narrative with fairly sound logic; he almost makes the politics entertaining; and there's a truly sensual sexual thread running through the years of gentle Oliver's inverse history. This is one book I'm delighted came my way.

Author info: <http://elcastillon.com/eng/book.htm>

An interview with the author, and why this book is so hard to find:

www.rldbooks.com/Newsletter/IGW-V2-Issue2/IGW-v2-2p7.html



Cicatrix, by Edward Wilson (Xlibris, \$20.99)

Hmm: a professional paleontologist self-publishes a picaresque novel, set in Baja, California, whose interwoven cast of sexually active characters includes a fossil-collecting professor. Perhaps that's why a good chunk of *Cicatrix* reads like notes from a scientific field trip - interesting, actually, but not always integral to the story. Except that it starts as its several characters cross into Mexico at Tijuana, and ends when they reach Cabo San Lucas, there's no real beginning, middle, or end to this read. Its appeal comes from its cultural atmosphere, sexual vignettes, and quirky cast: the randy, heterosexual professor and his student acolytes; two leather-clad bikers racing after another biker to, well, cut off his cock; nonsexual pedophile Gerald, searching for a nubile Mexican lad to take home to America and nurture, and his traveling companion Earl, eager to bed every hunky waiter and bartender he encounters; Brad, running from his mansion on the golf course and his rocky marriage ... indeed, an odd lot. At 120 pages, this book can be read in a few deep breaths. It's well written, if somewhat rambling, infused with a cocked-eyebrow sensibility that's quite endearing. And according to the dedication, it's an "Homage to William Carney" - presumably the author of the 1968 leather novel *The Real Thing*... an honor that, oddly, adds depth to the book.

There's no author web site - but here's Pat Califia writing about Carney: www.alyson.com/html/00_files/00_ednote/0300/0300roughstuff_int.html

Spewing Pulp, or, If I Write With My Eyes Closed, It Can't Hurt Me, by Gregory Blair (*InfinityPublishing.com*, \$13.95)

More than a dozen typefaces. Almost as many type sizes. Asterisks (large ones!) all over the place. Some narrative writing, some screenplay text, some performance art riffs, even some poetry. *Spewing Pulp* is a bit of design-disaster-in-progress, but it's also quirky, if undisciplined, fun, about a 20-something Los Angeles gay adolescent, Dale Scribner, desperate to grow up, find work, and fall in love. Which he does, quite sweetly. Sometimes Blair's novella (the book is 136 pages, but with big type and scads of white space) lapses into traditional narrative - omniscient author relating story to unknown audience; every so often, Blair-as-author bypasses his character Dale and speaks to the reader directly. There's a reason this one is self-published - it's too unorthodox for a traditional publisher. But you can't deny its exuberance, and its irreverent charm.

Author info: www.2writers.com

Borrowing Time: A Latino Sexual Odyssey, by Carlos T. Monk (*Floricanto Press*, \$35)

Mock's novel isn't truly self-published: Floricanto Press (www.floricantopress.com) does several books a year, and of several sorts - but doesn't do much more than print them, I imagine; the clunky design and odd paragraph layout work against what is otherwise a rather vivid read - and though an editor from the University of California is credited for work on the book, there are some odd stylistic and grammatical choices. That said, there's not a lot of gay storytelling from the Puerto Rican community, and that's partially the appeal of this heartfelt work, with its roots in Catholic doctrine, macho attitudes, and cultural differences. That's also the filter through which Monk addresses coming out, yearning for love, settling into a relationship, and - most viscerally - living with AIDS. It's probably no accident that Monk's title, *Borrowing Time*, echoes that of Paul Monette's monumental AIDS memoir, *Borrowed Time*: both focus on the excitement of living and the struggle to die with dignity.

An author interview:

www.pridesource.com/article.shtml?article=7538

Spank the Monkey: Reports from the Front Lines of Our Quirky Culture, by Rik Isensee (*Unlimited Publishing*, \$13.99)

A laugh guaranteed on every page? Not quite - but it's a good bet most of the 76 mini-essays in this irreverent collection of rants and follies will garner at least a grin. The author, a San Francisco psychotherapist, has written some profoundly serious books, among them the how-to classic, *Love Between Men*, the



thoughtful young adult novel, *We're Not Alone*, and *The God Squad*, a relentless spoof of ex-gay ministries. *Spank the Monkey's* gleefully warped worldview makes this a much weirder book, but in a good way - potent satire always has intelligent purpose. "Man Kills Gay Dog" is a smart slap at the ugliness of prejudice; "The Summer My Cousin Turned Mormon" is a nifty inversion of a gay porn stereotype; "Botticelli Nabbed in Child Porno Bust" is a wry gaze at the religious right's hysteria around art. This is something of a popcorn book - it won't be easy to stop nibbling once you've started. But Isensee's kinetic humor works best in small doses, the better to absorb the originality underlying the oddness.

Author info: www.rikisensee.com

Road Grace: Essays for a New Renaissance, by John Newmeyer (Bright Noon Press, \$13.75)

Everything about this beguiling collection of oddball polemics and off-the-wall reflections on the human condition, queer and otherwise, is quirky. Examples: Newmeyer's witty statistical analysis of the veracity of claimed average cock size of models/masseurs/escorts, based on data gleaned from gay personals; his perceptive expansion on the concept of well-groomed, well-bred A-gays ("aspiring aristocrats") into a pantheon that includes R-gay "regular guys," T-gay "Twinkies," P-gay "political punks," E-gay "exceptional eccentrics," and several more; or a tongue-in-cheeky (but astutely reasoned) assertion that the social costs of sugar, caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco abuse are far higher than the costs of marijuana, cocaine, speed, and heroin abuse. Other essays consider the perils of religion, the foibles of the workplace, and the inequities of the American class system; one even asks, in a delightful parody of *My Fair Lady*, why can't a dog be more like a cat? Newmeyer's writing, a contrarian's mix of cool insights and confident absurdities, manages to engage, infuriate, confuse, and amuse - but never bore.



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A Few More Self-Published Titles, Linked

Ten novels and counting, and I've read none of them; Mark Roeder's iUniverse books (including nine in the Gay Youth Chronicles series) are described here - many are available to read free online (and I'll sample a few soon):

www.markroeder.com/novels.htm

Christopher David's *I'm On My Way* (Author House/1st Books)

is about a young black man's yearning for love, friendship, and a way out of the closet: www.christopherscypher.com

Visiting Grandma (www.booklocker.com) a book about a gay teen escaping from an abusive family relationship:
www.midwesttimes.com/ae/books.html

Info on *The Desert Sons* and *Into This World We're Thrown*, a teen tale and its sequel about coming out; and from the same author, Mark Kendrick, a gay SF trilogy, *Stealing Some Time* (all iUniverse): www.mark-kendrick.com/Into%20This%20World.htm

Bought and Paid For (iUniverse) is Michael Halfhill's first novel about 18-year-old Jan Phillip's coming-out odyssey:
www.michaelhalfhill.com/michaelhalfhillcom_002.htm

It gets tense when a closeted NBA star falls in love with a crusading gay activist/journalist anxious to out everyone - that's the essence of *Out of Bounds* (Xlibris) by Fred Shank and Chris Fisher: <http://www.stepoutofbounds.com/>

Ronald L. Donaghe's *Common Sons* was first published in the 1980s; it came back into print a few years ago from iUniverse, followed by the sequels *The Blind Season* (2001), *The Salvation Mongers* (2000) and, forthcoming this year, *The Gathering* - the story of Joel and Tom, who meet in high school and go on to forge a union and start a family. Also available from Donaghe - three novels in the "Continuing Journals of Will Barnett," and a couple of SF/F series: www.rldbooks.com/



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A Dozen Books To Shake The Sand Out Of

Summer is sneaking up on us - though, for parts of the West Coast, it's been sizzling for weeks already. Does anyone actually read a book on the beach? If so, here are a few to tote along through June, July, and August.

Bandbox, by Thomas Mallon (Random House, \$24.95)

Any gay man caught up in the editorial evolutions of such gentleman mags as *GQ* and *Esquire* and their dumbed-down progeny *Details* and (shudder: dumber) *Maxim* - that's a few dozen of us, maybe - will be charmed by *Bandbox*. So, too, should all of you who never even glance (sure) at the male torsos scattered across the covers of such magazines - the Ashton Kutchners, Justin Timberlakes,



Tom Cruises, or Ethan Hawkes of recent issues. Mallon's supple Jazz Age novel, with a few fey fags woven through its breezy plot, captures with an arched eyebrow the shenanigans of *Bandbox Magazine's* cast of masthead oddballs - ambitious copyboys, drunken editors, lovelorn writers, creepy crime writers, mannered fashion writers. Sheer fun: that's the wonderful payoff of reading this exuberant novel's mix of fastidious historical detail and madcap Prohibition mayhem. Mallon doesn't write gay novels; better, he populates his imaginative fiction with gay characters as memorable as his straight characters. And after you've read this giddy delight, reach back to 1996 for *Dewey Defeats Truman*, set in that fabled election year (and Dewey's home town), with its witty boy-boy-girl love triangle.

Surprise: In this 2000 interview with the conservative *American Enterprise* magazine, Mallon outs himself as the ghost writer for Dan Quayle's memoir, and identifies himself as a man who finds Barry Goldwater, both the man and his politics, quite attractive: www.findarticles.com/

Troll: A Love Story, by Johanna Sinisalo (*Grove Press*, \$12)

Angel is an impossibly handsome gay fashion photographer who, despite his blond mane and lithe bod, can't land the man of his dreams - or, at least, lusts. But his life changes, not for the better, when one night he rescues a young "cub" troll from a bunch of drunken teens - not "troll" as the opposite of "twink," silly, but "troll" as creature of Norse mythology. Trolls are rare, and Angel tries to raise him in secret, while scouring the Internet for as much information as he can find on his new charge; meanwhile, their interspecies interaction is affecting both of them - for one thing, the maturing troll is emitting pheromones that enhance Angel's sexual allure. Fantasy writer Sinisalo's book - at once droll and dark, entertaining and unsettling - was named Finland's best novel in 2000, for good reason: it's a fascinating blend of black comedy and insightful writing. (Published in Finland as *Not Before Sundown*.)

Author info: <http://dbgw.finlit.fi/fili/eng/kirjailijat/jsi.html>

Rendezvous in Black, by Cornell Woolrich (*Modern Library*, \$12.95)

In April's BTWOF, I championed a collection of Woolrich's uncollected fiction. Now the cachet of the Modern Library imprint falls on this quintessential noir novel of brutal revenge, the last of the Black Series that started with *The Bride Wore Black*. So dark and chill it'll make you shiver on a hot summer day.

The GLBTQ Encyclopedia entry on Woolrich:

www.glbtc.com/literature/woolrich_c.html

But Darling, I'm Your Auntie Mame! The Amazing History

of the World's Favorite Madcap Aunt, by Richard Tyler Jordan (Kensington, \$14 - but first published in 1998 by Capra Press, though I think the Jerry Herman introduction is new)



Quite a dame, that Auntie Mame, and her story is told with style in Jordan's lavishly illustrated, intensely researched, and wittily written biography of - not a person, but a classic character, created by Patrick Dennis for a book that sat at number

one on the New York Times bestseller list for 112 weeks.

Jordan's entertaining book is based on interviews with the gay Dennis's surviving widow and son, who also provided him with a trove of private correspondence. Here's what the author said in an April interview with *Publishers Weekly Daily* about Mame as a gay icon:

"It's way too simplistic to say that Auntie Mame is a gay icon just because her personality is larger than life or that she likes to party, has a quick wit and wears great clothes. She is all of that. But maybe what people recognize in Mame is that although it's damn hard to be a square peg in a round hole, it's even more difficult to recognize that you're a square peg but to keep forcing yourself to fit in that hole. She demonstrates that it's not worth it to sacrifice one's identity, no matter what that identity is. Gay or straight, we can all see Auntie Mame as a heroine with personal integrity and a penchant for justice."

Author info: And as Ben Tyler, Jordan, a publicist for Disney, has written three steamy romps for Kensington - *Hunk House*, *Tricks of the Trade*, and *Gay Blades*; here's a 2002 interview:

www.publishersweekly.com/article

Have You Heard, by Anderson Ferrell (Bloomsbury USA, \$23.95)

Jerry Chiffon (apt surname) wears a red ladies' suit and a startling wig, and clutches a fake Chanel purse when he tries to assassinate the homophobic right-wing North Carolina senator, modeled with exquisite venom after Jesse Helms. This outrageous act by a beloved if somewhat flamboyant florist sets tongues to wagging in his backwater hometown of Branch Creek - three of them, at least, who separately narrate their versions of what set Jerry off. Ferrell's first novel, *Where She Was* (1985), hinted at homo; his second, *Home for the Day* (mid-90s), was quite queer; this third novel from an author who writes slowly but beautifully, is filled with fabulous - and some angry - faggy-ness.

Another review: www.nytimes.com/2004/04/25/books/review

You Are Here, by Wesley Gibson (Back Bay Books, \$13.95)

"If Gibson can survive the comparisons to David Sedaris and Augusten Burroughs that plague almost every gay memoirist these days," writes Robert L. Pela in *The Advocate*, "*You Are*

Here should turn up a winner." Gee. I wasn't going to make that comparison. It's appropriate, but too simplistic. Gibson moves to Manhattan to escape a relationship and to work on his writing; his first novel, *Shelter*, was published back in 1992 to reviews best termed encouraging - "often depressing when it means to amuse; still, a brave and intriguing debut," wrote the anonymous critic at Kirkus. Out of that move comes this enigmatic mix of powerful wit and acute observation, a book that is to the riotous writing of Sedaris and Burroughs as paddling a canoe is to whitewater rafting (if either paddling or rafting made us laugh out loud).

No Sedaris/Burroughs comparisons in this essay on the memoir: www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v3n1/nonfiction/marshall_r/gibson.htm

Liquor, by Poppy Z. Brite (*Three Rivers*, \$13.95)

Brite introduced Gary Stubbs and John Rickey in 2002 in *The Value of X*, a gay coming-of-age novel about two New Orleans teens, described in one review as "clumsy feel-good pulp ... its artless sweetness is a welcome respite from more jaded gay genre fiction." The boys are back in this slightly depraved look behind the scenes of the world of chefs; they're older, not much wiser, still best friends, and seriously out of work after being fired from their jobs as line cooks. What to do? Open a restaurant. But New Orleans has so many! They need a hook. So they come up with *Liquor* - a restaurant where every dish is infused with alcohol. There's none of the horror/goth/angst of Brite's earlier gay-friendly writing in this romp of a novel - but the sumptuous descriptions of rich sauces are pretty scary.

Author info (and an excerpt): www.poppyzbrite.com/news.html

The Music of Your Life, by John Rowell (*Simon and Schuster*, \$13)

Compassionate comedy is born of imperfection, heartbreak, regret - the survivable failures of our lives. That's certainly how it goes in *The Music of Your Life*, a remarkable debut collection of seven well-polished stories. There is in every one an authentic balance between wishing for a magic future and settling for a prosaic present, a wry, poignant assertion that dreams don't always come true. There's also a charming trace of old-school gay DNA in every sweetly melancholic story - a passion for show tunes and Julie Andrews, an eye for just the right color, a career as a florist. In the title tale, a 10-year-old adores both Lawrence Welk's "champagne music" and Batman's suggestive tights, avoids schoolyard bullies when he can, and is a disappointment to his confused, ashamed father - the classic gay tropes, always honored with gentle, unembarrassed respect. Rowell's stylish fiction is infused with the manners and

memories of his North Carolina roots, a tone that probably prompted his publisher's press-release comparisons to the early writing of Truman Capote. The parallel is appropriate. (June) Interview with the author: www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/ (And here's what he has to say about a Patrick Dennis - see above - novel he loves: "*The Joyous Season* is a hilarious sketch of precocious New York children in the late 1950s. Dennis was both a major stylist and a fabulous storyteller. This is a little-known gem, and an obscenely entertaining read.")

The Enemy, by Lee Child (Delacorte Press, \$25)

How odd: none of the reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, or *Kirkus Reviews*, and none of the eight reader reviews at bn.com (there were none on amazon.com as of May 14) mention that central to this eighth book in Child's popular Jack Reacher series is its implied criticism of the American military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. For folks who don't devour thrillers: in previous books, Reacher is an ex-military cop whose roguish ways solve horrible crimes others can't figure out. This one, however, is a prequel, set before the other seven, where Reacher is still in the service - and in the course of investigating the murder of a general and the theft of his briefcase containing post-Cold War deployment secrets, he uncovers a cabal of officer queers. The device of injecting a gay subplot is as common as corn on a pig's breath these days, and more often than not vaguely - at the least - insulting. It's handled well here, and the combination of brisk writing, complex plotting, and rich back story makes this a great time-waster. (June)

Trust Fund Boys, by Rob Byrnes & **Male Model**, by Dave Benbow (Kensington Books, \$23 each)

Is it too trite to label these the real beach books of the bunch? Nope. *Trust Fund Boys* (June) is set in the Hamptons; *Male Model* (July) is set in Los Angeles. Both are about buff gays-on-the-make: Jamie and Brett, the "boys," are two queers who really, really want to live beyond their means, so they set out to integrate themselves into New York's world of socialites and sugar daddies who appreciate the allure of buff youth; and Blake, the "model," is catapulted to fame, fortune, and mayhem when he's plucked from shop clerk obscurity to become the poster-god face (and body) of Pacific Coast Highway, a hot new cologne. Byrnes is the author of *The Night We Met*, a 2002 charmer which drew these words in assorted reviews: "Hilarious, steamy, delightful, crowd-pleasing, frantic, wild" Benbow is the author of the 2003 sort-of-mystery *Daytime Drama*, about which was written: "A great heaping of sex, a great insider's look, frothy, racy, enjoyable summer read, guilty pleasure." So: you know what to expect. Don't forget the sunscreen and the wine coolers. (June/July)

Author info: www.davebenbow.com & www.robbyrnes.com

Timoleon Vieta, Come Home: A Sentimental Journey, by Dan Rhodes (*Harvest Books*, \$13)

Rhodes, anointed by Granta as one of Britain's Top 20 Writers



Under 40, has written an irresistibly repellent fairy tale for grown-ups with a yen for stylish writing and perverse wit. His hero, Carthusians Cockroft, is no queer role model. The aging British

musician, living off meager royalties in a decaying Italian farmhouse, is often drunk, always oversexed, and prone to baroque suicide fantasies. His only true companion in this riotously appalling, lubriciously appealing novel - a series of interconnected vignettes, really - is his faithful mongrel, Timoleon Vieta. Cockroft's income affords him one night of debauchery a month in Florence, where he propositions young men. Most reject him with snippy cruelty; a few live with him briefly before fleeing, aghast. When a mean - but so very sexy - hunk moves in, the protective pooch takes an instant dislike to him, so the louche interloper demands that Cockroft dump the dog. That's when the second half of this unforgiving tale of charismatic heartlessness kicks in, as loyal Timoleon makes a loopy "Lassie Come Home" trek back to the master who abandoned him. (September)

Author info: www.danrhodes.co.uk (being renovated May 15)

A scrappy interview: www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/jul/interview_dan_rhodes.html



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Anyone for Gravilex? Bongo? Hinky Pinky?

Jim Gladstone is the author of the well-reviewed first novel, *The Big Book of Misunderstanding*, and a frequent reviewer of gay books. His latest work, however, is *Gladstone's Games to Go: More than 50 Games You Can Play Anytime, Anywhere - No Board Required!* How queer! What's up with that? Why the leap from fiction to a book bought mostly (according to online booksellers) by people who also buy Scrabble cheat books and *New York Times* crossword books?

"It's funny, I don't think of it as a leap at all. They're very complimentary to each other. In fact, I've been working away at a new novel all through the writing of *Gladstone's Games To Go*. One of the biggest challenges of fiction writing is that your imagination has free reign and your mind can really go wild; that's rewarding, but it can also feel a little out of control. So when I'm working on fiction, I often play games as a break,


they provide a sense of structure and orderliness that I sometimes crave when I've been spending hours out in the unruly wilderness of my imagination. For me, fiction writing is a very slow, long-range activity, and the games also provide a nice counterpoint to that. You can play a game in 20 minutes, knowing exactly what happened and how it worked... Writing a novel is pretty much the opposite of that! And writing the rules for games is a very precise activity; you can formally test whether you've done it well or not, whereas judging one's success at fiction is a very fuzzy realm. So it's a very happy balance for me." - From an interview with Gladstone, probably by Gladstone; to read the rest:

www.GoGladstone.com/go_games.html



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modern words: Thoroughly Queer Quality

 A couple of months back, I celebrated the debut of *Bloom*, a queer literary journal crafted with exquisite care by Charles Flowers. Days later, I received Issue 8 of *modern words: a thoroughly queer literary journal* - a San Francisco occasional/annual back after a three year hiatus, but as excellent as ever. Like *Bloom*, *modern words* mixes prose and poetry (unlike Flowers' *Bloom*, however, there is no art, except for artful pics of most contributors); standouts in this issue include fiction by Roberto Friedman, Wendell Ricketts, and Toni Mirosevich, and poems by Gary Kong, Jim Nawrocki, Gerry Gomez Pearlberg, and Yvonne Zipter. Editor Garland Richard Kyle opens the issue with a warm remembrance of Adrienne Louise Fuzee, with whom he edited an earlier literary/political magazine. He is a gentleman of the old school and eschews such vulgarities as email or websites - so you can send a check for \$12 for issue 8 to POB 330400, SF, CA 94133 (and \$25 will get you issues 5, 6, and 7 as well); or you can order from Suspect Thoughts Press, here (scroll down):

www.suspectthoughts.com/store.html



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Staying in Touch with the Universe

*Queer *Star Trek* fans complain about the lack of gay characters in the TV/film universe Gene Roddenberry wrought:

www.azcentral.com/ent/pop/articles/0507gaystartrek07-CR.html

*But Andy Mangels has already written a novel with a queer Trek character, *Section 31: Rogue* (Pocket Books, \$6.99), based on the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* characters:

www.andymangels.com/

*The *L.A. Weekly* remembers Hubert Selby who wrote with dark style about the trannies and drag queens of his midnight underworld: www.laweekly.com/ink/04/24/books-stahl.php

*Allan Hollinghurst's next novel, *The Line of Beauty*, is coming from Bloomsbury USA in November; it's out in England already, though, and here's an interview with the author of *The Swimming Pool Library*, *The Folding Star*, and *The Spell*:

www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/

*Before Martha Stewart, before the *Queer Eye* guys, and well before *Restoration Hardware*, gay men had a passion for decoration, restoration, and preservation; here's an interview with Will Fellows, author of *Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (University of Wisconsin Press, \$30):

www.madison.com/captimes/features/stories/73070.php

*More from U. Wisconsin; a smart review of Rabbi Steven Greenberg's *Wrestling With God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (\$35): www.washblade.com/2004/4-30/arts/books/books.cfm

*An online discussion with Jonathan Rauch, author of *Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America* (Times Books, \$22):

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57475-2004Apr30.html

*And Michael Bronski, no great fan of queer marriage, takes the pro role anyway in a debate with an evangelical Protestant who sputters about animals and sex: www.zmag.org/ZMagSite/May2004/bronski0504.html (marriage)



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Author Website of the Month

Prince Gomolvilas hasn't written a novel yet - he's primarily a busy playwright and hopeful screenwriter. But he has launched a novel-writing bee, with writers adding 250 words each to a book in progress. Check him out at this personable, cheeky, site - more fun than most: www.princegomolvilas.com



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And the Winners Ought to Be...

The Lambda Literary Awards for books published in 2003 will be handed out June 3. One can quibble with a few of the books that were anointed finalists, and groan at the number of fine books not listed - but all in all, the nominees are a distinguished bunch of books. Everyone's a winner. Except that only one will be. The list of finalists follows - with my personal choices highlighted.

Lesbian Fiction

And Then They Were Nuns, by Susan J. Leonardi (Firebrand Books)

Southland, by Nina Revoyr (Akashic Books)

The Way the Crow Flies, by Anne-Marie MacDonald (HarperCollins)

This Wild Silence, by Lucy Jane Bledsoe (Alyson Publications)

***What Night Brings, by Carla Trujillo (Curbstone Press)** - *It doesn't have the edgy flash of my other favorite, Southland, or the unique plotting of my other other favorite, This Wild Silence; but Trujillo's novel expresses pain, tenderness, and survival with elegance.*

Gay Men's Fiction

Beijing, by Philip Gambone (University of Wisconsin Press)

Lives of the Circus Animals, by Christopher Bram (William Morrow)

The Book of Salt, by Monique Truong (Houghton Mifflin)

War Against the Animals, by Paul Russell (St. Martin's Press)

***Where the Boys Are, by William J. Mann (Kensington Publishing)** - *Where is Mark Merlis? Where is Brian Bouldrey? Where is Dan Rhodes? Where is Trebor Healey? Where, oh where, is John Rowell? Any one of the books that were nominated is worthy, and I'm particularly fond of Bram's easy wit and Russell's well-wrought tension. But Mann's novel blended the best of fine writing, beach reading, and the entanglements of friendship and love in a most satisfying manner.*

Lesbian Poetry

***Embers, by Terry Wolverton (Red Hen Press)** - *Choosing among fine poets is like choosing to pick just one beautiful flower. I like Tea's brashness and Pratt's passion, but Wolverton's wisdom wins out.*

Final Girl, by Daphne Gottlieb (Soft Skull Press)

Swirl, by Susan McCabe (Red Hen Press)

The Beautiful, by Michelle Tea (Manic D Press)

The Dirt She Ate, by Minnie Bruce Pratt (University of Pittsburgh Press)

Gay Men's Poetry

***Middle Earth, by Henri Cole (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)** - *Choosing among fine poets is like ... oh, sorry, been there. All five books were rich reads, but Campo and Cole are the only two I'll reread, and Middle Earth is so moving.*

Otherhood, by Reginald Shepherd (University of Pittsburgh Press)

Saying the World, by Peter Pereira (Copper Canyon Press)

Sky Lounge, by Mark Bibbins (Graywolf Press)

The Healing Art, by Rafael Campo (W.W. Norton)

Lesbian Mystery

Cry Havoc, by Baxter Clare (Bella Books)

Damn Straight, by Elizabeth Sims (Alyson Publications)

***Epitaph for an Angel, by Lauren Maddison (Alyson Publications)** - *None of these fall into the category of "a cozy" - those are what Rita Mae Brown writes, over and over and over again. I like the intricacy of Maddison's characters, the tinge of the supernatural, and the brisk writing that makes long books short reads.*

Owl of the Desert, by Ida Swearingen (New Victoria Publishers)

The Woman Who Found Grace, by Bett Reece Johnson (Cleis Press)

Gay Men's Mystery

Blind Eye, by John Morgan Wilson (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Bourbon Street Blues, by Greg Herren (Kensington Publishing)

Dead Egotistical Morons, by Mark Richard Zubro (St. Martin's Minotaur)

***It Takes Two, by Elliott Mackle (Alyson Publications)** - *I've read all of Wilson's books, and like Blind Eye the best - his character isn't quite as self-loathing; Herren's book, first of a series, isn't really much of a mystery (there's more sleuthing in the sequel); Zubro and Stukas are fun to read, but their "mysteries" are often irritatingly illogical. Mackle's book had some meat to it, though.*

Wearing Black to White Party, by David Stukas (Kensington Publishing)

Fiction Anthology

All I Want for Christmas, by Jon Jeffrey, Chris Kenry, William J. Mann, Ben Tyler (Kensington Publishing)

Best Lesbian Love Stories 2003, Angela Brown, ed. (Alyson Publications)

***M2M, Karl Woelz, ed. (AttaGirl Press)** - *Last newsletter I*

accused Woelz of whining and sniping and fulminating about the eroticization of gay literature; but this is one fine literary collection. Bronski's anthology is a close runner-up, though. So is Hall's.

Pulp Friction, Michael Bronski, ed. (St. Martin's Press)

Telling Moments, Lydia Hall, ed. (University of Wisconsin Press)

Nonfiction Anthology

***Boyfriends from Hell, Kevin Bentley, ed. (Green Candy Press)** - *An impossible category; the only thing these books have in common is that they were printed on paper and have page numbers. Mortal Secrets and Queer Crips are both solid anthologies about topics that need airing, the Wharton book is fascinating sexual biography, and Pinned Down - well, I haven't read that one.*

Mortal Secrets, Robert Klitzman and Ronald Bayer, eds. (John Hopkins University Press)

Queer Crips, Bob Guter and John R. Killacky, eds. (Harrington Park Press)

The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name, Greg Wharton, ed. (Boheme Press)

Pinned Down by Pronouns, by Toni Amato and Mary Davies, eds. Conviction Books)

Memoir/Autobiography

Cleopatra's Wedding Present, by Robert Tewdwr Moss (University of Wisconsin Press)

Going the Other Way, by Billy Bean (Marlowe & Company)

Highsmith: A Romance, by Marijane Meaker (Cleis Press)

***Naked in the Promised Land, by Lillian Faderman (Houghton Mifflin)** - *Another impossible category. Moss's book is unforgettable, Bean/Chris Bull's book is inspirational, Meaker's book is a masterpiece of memory in miniature, and Boylan's book ought to win elsewhere; Faderman's book is heart-wrenching history.*

She's Not There, by Jennifer Finney Boylan (Broadway Books)

Biography

Beautiful Shadow, by Andrew Wilson (Bloomsbury)

Intertwined Lives, by Lois W. Banner (Alfred A. Knopf)

Lost Prophet, by John D'Emilio (Free Press)

***Original Youth, by Keith Fleming (Green Candy Press)** - *The D'Emilio has won a slew of prizes, deservedly so, and it's a major book. But I've got more of a literary than political bent, and Fleming's glimpse into Uncle Ed's boyhood was a treat.*

That Furious Lesbian, by Robert A. Schanke (Southern Illinois University Press)

Children/Young Adult

Boy Meets Boy, by David Levithan (Knopf Books for Young Readers)

***Geography Club, by Brent Hartinger (HarperTempest)** - *If there were to be a tie (and there have been), it should be between this book and Levithan's utterly original, completely hilarious, and fundamentally wise book. And in a three-way: Rainbow High.*

Gravel Queen, by Tea Benduhn (Simon & Schuster)

Keeping You a Secret, by Julie Anne Peters (Little, Brown & Company)

Rainbow High, by Alex Sanchez (Simon & Schuster)

Erotica

***Best Gay Erotica 2004, Richard Labonte, ed., and Kirk Read (Cleis Press)** - *You know, I really do like the quality of writing in this collection. And Taormina's book is just as good. And both Johnstone and Tulchinsky are Canadian like me...*

Best Lesbian Erotica 2004, Tristan Taormino, ed. (Cleis Press)

Hot and Bothered 4, Karen X. Tulchinsky, ed. (Arsenal Pulp Press)

Masters of Midnight, by Michael Thomas Ford, William J.

Mann, Sean Wolfe, Jeff Mann (Kensington Publishing)

Quickies 3, James Johnstone, ed. (Arsenal Pulp Press)

Humor

Chelsea Boys, by Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth (Alyson Publications)

Dykes and Sundry Other Carbon-Based Life-Forms to Watch Out For, by Alison Bechdel (Alyson Publications)

Men are Pigs, But We Love Bacon, by Michael Alvear (Kensington Publishing)

My Big Fat Queer Life, by Michael Thomas Ford (Alyson Publications)

***That's Why They're in Cages, People!, by Joel Perry (Alyson Publications)** - *Every one of these collections, the wordy ones and the pictorial ones, made me laugh. But Perry's twisted essays (not in a kinky way, but in a, well, unexpected way) made me laugh out loud most often.*

Romance

Best Lesbian Love Stories 2003, Angela Brown, ed. (Alyson Publications)

Daytime Drama, by Dave Benbow (Kensington Publishing)

Last Summer, by Michael Thomas Ford (Kensington Publishing)

***Maybe Next Time, by Karin Kallmaker (Bella Books)** - *If you're going to have a romance category the winner might as well be the gooiest, as well as one of the best-written.*

They Say She Tastes Like Honey, by Michelle Sawyer (Alyson Publications)

Sci-Fi/Fantasy

Elf Child, by David M. Pierce (Southern Tier Editions)

Necrologue, Helen Sandler, ed. (Diva Books)

The Red Line of Yarmald, by Diana Rivers (Bella Books)

***The Substance of God, by Perry Brass (Belhue Press)** - *It's a romance, a thriller, an erotic odyssey, and good old-fashioned science fiction - four genres in one.*

Vampire Thrall, by Michael Schiefelbein (Alyson Publications)

Spirituality

Anything But Straight, by Wayne Besen (Harrington Park Press)

Gay Perspective, by Toby Johnson (Alyson Publications)

Gay Witchcraft, by Christopher Penczak (Red Wheel/Weiser)

***Keeping Faith, by Fenton Johnson (Houghton Mifflin)** - *I have no idea what the admirable Besen book is doing in this category - it's kind of an anti-religious-kooks book. I've reviewed the Penczak book elsewhere in this newsletter, and it intrigued me. The Johnson book is thoughtful, and the Jennings book is provocative. But Keeping Faith is a strong blend of personal odyssey and spiritual discovery.*

The Man Jesus Loved, by Theodore W. Jennings (The Pilgrim Press)

LGBT Studies

Anything But Straight, by Wayne Besen (Harrington Park Press)

Love in the Time of HIV, by Michael Mancilla and Lisa Troshinsky (Guilford Press)

***Queer Street, by James McCourt (W.W.Norton)** - *Another category in which the nominees have little in common, except accomplishment. Love in the Time of HIV is an eloquent book about the importance of honesty and openness in gay relationships, Strapped for Cash is an impressive history of hustling, Anything But Straight is important politically, and Time on Two Crosses is a major collection of source material for anyone interested in history. But Queer Street is a hypnotic roller coaster of facts and fancies.*

Strapped for Cash, by Mack Friedman (Alyson Publications)

Time on Two Crosses, Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, eds. (Cleis Press)

Drama

Forbidden Acts, by Ben Hodges (Applause Theatre & Cinema Books)

Motifs and Repetitions, by C.E. Gatchalian (The Writers' Collective)

Prok, by Brian Drader (Scirocco Drama)

***The Band Plays, by Mart Crowley (Alyson Publications)** -

Artifacts from the past and updates in the present matter.

Women in Turmoil: Six Plays, Robert Schanke, ed. (Southern Illinois University Press)

Transgender/Genderqueer

***She's Not There, by Jennifer Finney Boylan (Broadway Books)** - *A memorable memoir.*

The Drag King Anthology, Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, Jean Noble, eds. (Harrington Park Press)

Trans-gendered, by Justin Tanis (The Pilgrim Press)

Transgender Journeys, by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan (The Pilgrim Press)

Visual arts/Photography

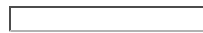
A Face in the Crowd, John Peterson and Martin Bedogne, eds. (Prospect Publishing)

***Familiar Men, by Laurie Toby Edison (Shifting Focus Press)** - *I really like Vacation in Ibiza, though its presence in this category is a bit odd; it's a bit erotic, and a bit fictional, and a bit cartoonish ... well, I'm glad it was nominated. But I'm in Edison's book.*

Focus on Living, by Roslyn Banish (University of Massachusetts Press)

Vacation in Ibiza, by Lawrence Schimel and Sebas (Eurotica/NBM)

Women Seeing Women, Lonther Schirmer, ed. (W.W. Norton)



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...And the Winners Are

In other awards: The Publishing Triangle named the winners of its assorted awards on May 12, in New York. Here are the winners, in ****BOLD**, and my preferences, in **ITALIC* (and if the title is in ***bold italic***, those judges got it right ... saw it my way ... expressed their own cultivated opinions); and it's a sign of the quality of our literature that the Lambda Literary Foundation and the Publishing Triangle nominations in comparable categories aren't carbon copies of each other.

Finalists for the Ferro-Grumley Awards for Fiction: Men

Christopher Bram, *Lives of the Circus Animals* (William Morrow)

****Trebtor Healey, *Through It Came Bright Colors*** (Harrington Park)

**John Rowell, *The Music of Your Life* (Simon & Schuster) - Excellent; Rowell made it to this list. Healey, too!*

Finalists for the Ferro-Grumley Award for Fiction: Women

**Alison Bechdel, Dykes and Sundry Other Carbon-Based Life-Forms to Watch Out For* (Alyson) - *Excellent to see cartoon narrative recognized as award-worthy fiction.*

Rebecca Brown, *The End of Youth* (City Lights)

****Nina Revoyr, Southland** (Akashic)

Finalists for the Randy Shilts Award for Gay Nonfiction

Augusten Burroughs, *Dry* (St. Martin's)

****John D'Emilio, Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin** (Free Press)

**Dale Peck, What We Lost* (Houghton Mifflin) - *Burroughs makes me laugh and wince, and D'Emilio makes me stop and think, but Peck is the most impressive.*

Finalists for the Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction

Casey Charles, *The Sharon Kowalski Case: Lesbian and Gay Rights on Trial* (University Press of Kansas)

****Lillian Faderman, Naked in the Promised Land** (Houghton Mifflin) - *The most wondrous here, too.*

Andrew Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (Bloomsbury USA)

Finalists for the Publishing Triangle Award for Gay Male Poetry

Patrick Donnelly, *The Charge* (Ausable Press)

Peter Pereira, *Saying the World* (Copper Canyon Press)

****Brian Teare, The Room Where I Was Born** (University of Wisconsin Press)

Finalists for the Audre Lorde Award for Lesbian Poetry

****Daphne Gottlieb, Final Girl** (Soft Skull Press)

**Marilyn Hacker, Desesperanto* (W.W. Norton)

Minnie Bruce Pratt, *The Dirt She Ate* (University of Pittsburgh Press)

Hmm - two of my six picks were honored. No matter. All of the books nominated are a testament to good queer writing ...



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Bests from Our Bookstores:**The Open Book - April****Men's Favorites:**

1. *Someone You Know*, by Gary Zebrun (Alyson, \$13.95)
2. *Latter Days*, by C. Jay Cox (Alyson, \$13.95)
3. *Murder by Design*, by Jon P. Bloch (St. Martin's Minotaur,

\$23.95)

4. Jackson Square Jazz, by Greg Herren (Kensington, \$23)
5. The Trouble Boys, by Tom Dolby (Kensington, \$23)
6. Man of My Dreams, by Dave Benbow (Kensington, \$14)
7. I'm On My Way, by Christopher David (1stBooks Library, \$14.50)
8. Bondi Classic, by Paul Freeman (Cowboy Mouth Publishing, \$49.95)
9. Someone is Watching: Gay Youth Chronicles, by Mark A. Roeder (iUniverse Star, \$17.95)
10. The Man Pilot, by James W. Ridout IV (Southern Tier Editions, \$17.95)

Everyone's Favorites:

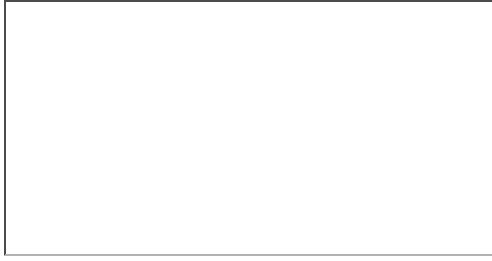
1. Troll: A Love Story, by Johanna Sinisalo (Grove Press, \$16.95)
2. King & King, by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland, (Tricycle Press, \$14.95)
3. King & King & Family, by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland (Tricycle Press, \$14.95)
4. Queer Eye For the Straight Guy: The Fab Five's Guide to Looking Better, Cooking Better, Dressing Better, Behaving Better, and Living Better, by Ted Allen, Kyan Douglas, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley, and Jai Rodriguez, (Clarkson Potter, \$27.50)
5. Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century, by Graham Robb (W.W. Norton, \$26.95)
6. The Funny Thing Is..., by Ellen DeGeneres (Simon & Schuster, \$23)
7. Strength of Stone, by Greg Bear (iBooks, \$6.99)
8. Slave Trade, by Susan Wright (Pocket Star Books, \$6.99)
9. The Da Vinci Code, by Dan Brown (Doubleday, \$24.95)
10. The Last Chance Texaco, by Brent Hartinger (HarperTempest, \$15.99)

www.openbookltd.com/



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