

## The essence of gay

*Two new books sum up Manhattan-style, nouveau gai attitudes of the post-Stonewall sensibility. Has the gay movement become the gay market?*

B Y W. C. M c R A E

**Buddies**, by Ethan Mordden (St. Martin's Press, \$16.95)

**Gay Life: Leisure, Love and Living for the Contemporary Gay Male**, Edited by Eric E. Rofes (Doubleday, \$12.59)

In his first book of short stories, *I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore*, Ethan Mordden posed as the Cocktail Dandy, an eavesdropper and voyeur in the drawing rooms of gay Manhattan. In his second book of short stories, *Buddies*, Mordden moves to the family

## Books

room to become the cranky gay-triarch of gay brotherhood and wisdom.

Mordden has two themes, the bond between men, be they gay or straight, and the attitudes and philosophy that make up "gay."

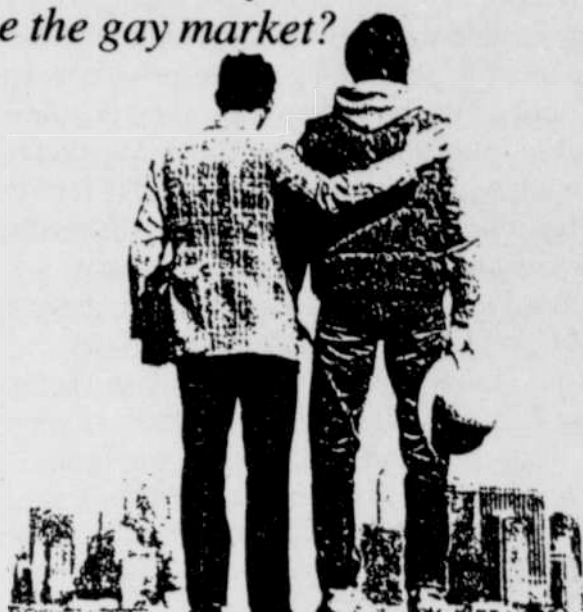
In the introduction to *Buddies*, Mordden writes, "American gay life, in what I believe is its most compelling iconoclasm, has bettered the straight world in combining romance and friendship. One's lover is one's buddy." And one's buddy, Mordden makes clear, is one's brother. Mordden explores, without drawing conclusions, his idea that gay friendships are the eroticization of family relations. A lover is a lover/brother, or a lover/father. Gay men, by not renouncing their attraction to other men, can play out the emotional structures we are born into, and have a lover who is a brother, a lover who is a father or son.

What links these men together, or separates them out, is "gay." Mordden uses "gay" as a term not to indicate mere sexual orientation, but as the assemblage of tastes, attitudes, abilities and histories of the Post-Stonewall sensibility. Queer is something you're born to, "gay" is something you aspire to, that you acquire after much learning, and in most cases, after an apprenticeship served in the drawing rooms and theatre foyers of Manhattan. And that is where "buddies" come in. Buddies are the keepers of taste and urbanity and the carriers of the torch of gay history: the guardians and purveyors of "Gay."

Gay, for Mordden, is the sensibility of the fellowship. It's our coterie — our brotherhood — (not our sexuality) that make us gay.

It's an interesting point, and I think he's right. Mordden is a writer of facility and erudition, and much of *Buddies* is compulsive reading. Even Mordden's efforts to delineate "gay" as one thing and not another, or containing one person and not another, are fine when viewed as camp. But as serious contentions, they cloy the intelligence.

Mordden's narrator is never as frisky or as fully characterized as when he's casting someone out of the Garden of Gay. Yet the qualities that inform Mordden's "gay" are old-fashioned and stereotyped,



containing knowledge of musical comedy, the opera, *Fire Island* — in other words, the High Road to Gay. At one point the narrator, a sullen, unlikeable character, incants a Great Tradition of gay books (William Burroughs, Edmund White, John Rechy, etc.), with all the fervor of an F.R. Leavis, and to much the same purpose.

While it seems clear that Mordden would not concoct such a list without asserting his more or less immediate inclusion on it, what is striking about all of Mordden's admonitions are their preoccupation with the past. Mordden's gays, when they're good, are straining to belong to something prior, like high culture, or last season at the Pines, or a cozy snuggle with a pre-adolescent brother.

"Gay" in Mordden's world is primarily obsession with nostalgia.

In *I've a Feeling*, Mordden managed to reveal what was implicit in the landscape of gay urbanity, in the pageant of gay wooing and winning. In *Buddies*, however, stories tend toward position pieces on who or what is or is not incorrectly gay. Gone the Sexual Outlaw, come the Cultural Arbiter.

\*\*\*

Gay culture is the subject of another recently released book, *Gay Life: Leisure, Love, and Living for the Contemporary Gay Male*. Editor Eric Rofes marshals his 42 contributors and presents a volume of information on how, in the categories of Health and Image, Home, Love, Culture and Leisure, and Identity, to be gay. This primer on all things gay initially seems interesting — one can compare opinions, at least, on such subjects as "Seven Heroes for Modern Gay Men," or "How to be an Opera Queen." However, the fun of this book — and surely much of it can't be taken seriously — to those of us old enough to appreciate it, is circumvented by the idiocy of a majority of the contributions. Did you know, for instance, that, "Most people feel that this area [between the legs] doesn't need much attention; oh, but it does! "Try to brush your pubic hair at least once a day"? Or did you care to know that one contributor "to this day [has] never fully trusted a gay man who doesn't love Judy Garland"?

There is, I suppose, a value in 42 voices proclaiming that "Gay is Good." However, this how-to manual leaves me thinking, on its evidence, that "Gay is Facile." The slack muscles which drive this volume make me fearful that we are no longer a movement, but just another market. •

## BEST SELLERS

### Women's list from A Woman's Place Bookstore

1. *River House Stories* by Andrea Carlisle. (Calyx; \$7.95)
2. *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe* by Jane Wagner. (Harper & Row; \$15.95)
3. *Star Woman* by Lynn Andrews. (Warner; \$16.95)
4. *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow* by Opal Whitely. (Ticknor & Fields; \$16.95)

5. *Blood, Bread & Poetry* by Adrienne Rich. (Norton; \$7.95)

### Men's list from Twenty-third Avenue Books

1. *Measure of Madness* by Gordon Merrick. (Warner; \$4.95)
2. *Men on Men* ed. by George Stambolian. (New American Library; \$9.95)
3. *Glory Hole Murders* by Tony Fennelly. (Carroll & Graf; \$2.95)
4. *Little Dog Laughed* by Joseph Hansen. (Henry Holt; \$15.95)
5. *Spirit and the Flesh* by Walter L. Williams. (Harper & Row; \$21.95)

## ENCORE FLOWERS

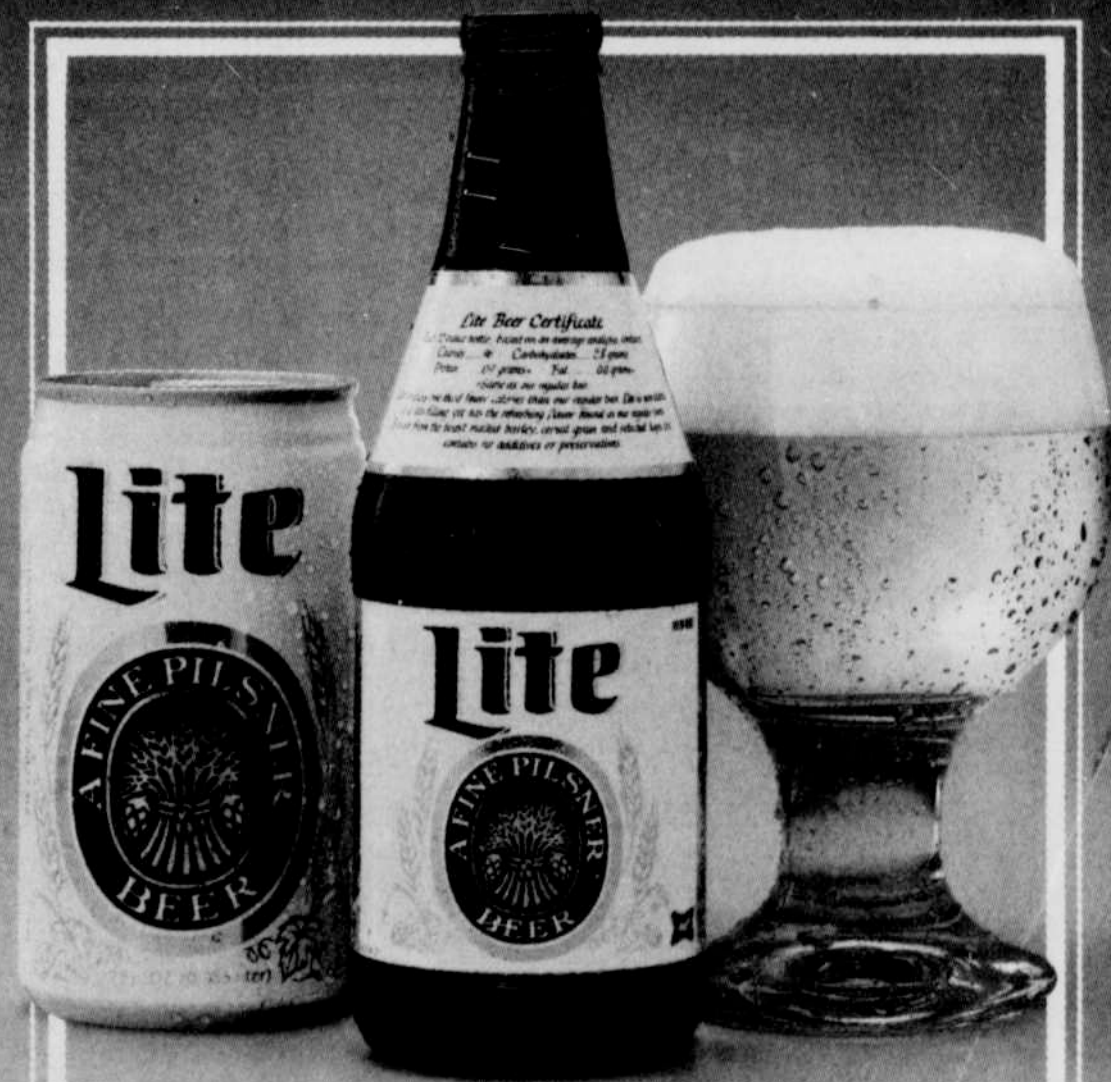
PLANTS - FLOWERS - GIFTS

"When the occasion matters...  
call Encore."

Call 287-6342

Delivery Anywhere  
Visa & Mastercard Accepted

4120 N.E. Sandy Boulevard - Next to the Hollywood Theater



Great Taste...  
Less Filling

Miller Brewing Co., Milw., WI