

Lambda Rising BOOK REPORT

PROTOTYPE

A Contemporary Review of Gay & Lesbian Literature

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The Reader Alone Redeems the System

TELLING STORIES ABOUT WRITING AND PUBLISHING

by John Preston

I became a writer because I love telling people stories. I've been lucky in my career and I've been able to publish in many different areas, but no matter what kind of writing I do, the interchange between myself and an audience must always exist if I am going to practice my craft with any skill, certainly with any of that care which readers want, and whose presence—or absence—they are so good at sensing.

When I'm writing historical essays, I speak with the voice of a professor, conscious of a class of students in front of me. If I'm creating adventure novels for young men, I picture a group of them sitting cross-legged with me on a lawn, waiting to hear how the hero is going to rescue the lad in distress. And when I'm writing erotica, I have about myself the air of one sharing whispered secrets in a lover's ear.

The complaints about publishing today strike home with me because of these very needs of mine. It seems the industry makes us forget too often the importance of that intercourse between author and audience.

Books are caught in high-level negotiations between agents and publishers; and percentage points of royalties and the split of subsidiary rights—things most readers aren't even aware of—seem to become the overwhelming factor deciding their fates. Corporate publishing has created a gauntlet which a writer must run. There are editorial departments which seem to store up arsenals of insensitivity and publicity offices in which only the most callous functionaries seem to thrive.

I have actually been blessed with much good luck in my own publishing career and have avoided experiencing the

worst of the horror stories. Still, I have enough scars to understand full well why writers spill their bile in columns for "My Say" in *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* and the one membership I never allow to lapse is the National Writers Union.

What makes the publishing process feel all the more grueling to writers is the fact that it usually takes at least a year to go from manuscript to the bookstore and, during that year, the author may only hear the reponse of the people in the publisher's office. Instead of being able to wonder at the magic of storytelling, an author is faced with requests to cut out five pages to save on paper costs. Rather than receiving response to ideas and emotional support for writing the next book, the author gets memos explaining why there will be no advertising for the first.

Then, finally, there is actually a book. And, of course, then there are the critics.

Nothing I have ever read has communicated well enough the brutality of contemporary American book criticism. When one of our books is published, I and every writer I know has shared the wonder of holding that volume, realizing that we created those words that readers might find them. It's a heady experience, to have that first copy in one's hands, and it's a moment of pleasure that is negated by the reviewer who takes it upon his or her self to question its very right to exist.

By this point the author has lost all sense of why he or she has even bothered to write the book. The pressures on us to see ourselves not as artists, and not even as craftspeople, but as commercial entrepreneurs is tremendous these days and it comes from the experience of having gone through these obstacles. Our work no longer seems to be anything special, it's become labor from which someone else wants a profit and which might hopefully produce an income for us.

It is the reader alone who redeems the entire system.

What consistently reminds me of my original purpose—that desire to be a storyteller—are the letters I receive from



readers. I have wanted to give in, there are many invitations to venality, to thinking about my work as only the way I earn my salary. Readers are the ones who bring all of it back to me, and who demand my best work.

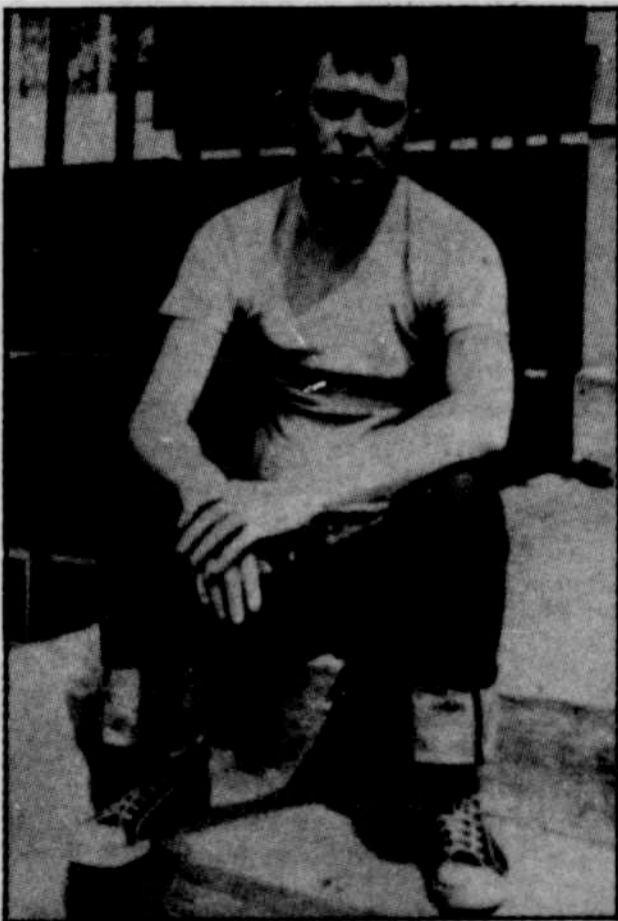
Even when I've written pseudonymous mass market novels—something I have, in fact, done for the money at times when I needed it—I have gotten fan mail from high school boys

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One Hectic Romance, One Delicate Life

by David Bergman

Gay writers have been afflicted with what could be called the St. Sebastian Syndrome—dying just when their genius was coming into full bloom. Christopher Marlowe, Hart Crane, Rene Crevel all suffered the St.



(From THE ORTON DIARIES)

THE ORTON DIARIES, edited by John Lahr (Harper & Row, 304 pp. \$19.95).
JOURNALS OF DENTON WELCH, edited by Michael De-la-Noy (Penguin, 378 pp. \$10.95).
THE STORIES OF DENTON WELCH, edited by Robert Phillips (Dutton, 377 pp. \$24.95).
THE COMPLETE PLAYS OF JOE ORTON, by Joe Orton (Grove Press, 448 pp. \$9.95).

Sebastian Syndrome along with Joe Orton and Denton Welch whose diaries have recently been published. These journals testify to their genius and vividly recreate the last years of their lives.

Orton's life, no doubt, is the more sensational and has recently been turned into the movie *PRICK UP YOUR EARS*, based on John Lahr's excellent 1978 biography. At 34 with two West End hits to his credit and having completed his masterpiece *WHAT THE BUTLER SAW*, Orton was bludgeoned to death by his lover of 16 years, Kenneth Halliwell, who then took his own life. Now the diaries in which Halliwell claimed "all will be explained" have appeared. They explain a good deal, but hardly make plain their hideous end.

Of the two, Halliwell was the older, better educated and wealthier—at least at first. However, as Orton became more successful, Halliwell seemed to regress. Halliwell's wit, intelligence and literary skill (Orton relied on his criticism up to the very end) faded, and he became increasingly a "middle aged nonentity," as a friend dared to call him to his face. Orton enjoyed humiliating Halliwell, ridiculing his increasing sexual difficulties, bating him in social situations.

One senses in the diary (which closes just a few days before the murder) that Orton is aware of his doom and is inviting death. "Life is difficult," he writes "but not altogether intolerable...provided one spent the time drugged or drunk." And in the last months, Orton and Halliwell went off to Morocco where Orton engaged in a perpetual orgy of drug taking and sex with teenage boys. At one point he downs two Nembutal, which he prophetically calls "Kenneth's secret suicide pills," for it was Nembutal that Halliwell used to kill himself. When Orton leaves Morocco, the young boy whom he has fancied weeps, certain that Orton never would return.

Yet it would be a mistake to overlook Orton's genuine love of life and peculiarly melancholy affection for the beauties of the world. "How incredible," he writes, "to really see a nude fifteen-year-old. The small waist, sudden jutting of the bum; it wasn't just sex, it was the aesthetic experience...as if he were on a canvas by a French impressionist—some painter of the stature of Renoir. There was a faint flush of hair in the small of his back, spreading out to the top of the buttock."

Nor should Orton's sensational end divert attention from his remarkable plays. *WHAT THE BUTLER SAW* is the finest English comedy since *THE IMPORTANCE*

OF BEING EARNEST, and it would be a pity if the twentieth anniversary of Orton's death passed without a major revival of it.

Denton Welch died nearly twenty years before Orton, but it might as well have

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(From THE JOURNALS OF DENTON WELCH)

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