

A valentine to us all

Through successes and failures and periods of depression, they share a friendship and a love that defines what is special about gay love between men

B Y E R I C R O F E S

Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F.O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney, edited by Louis Hyde (Alyson Publications, \$9.95).

As our contemporary gay and lesbian community becomes interested in the inner workings of couples, a book is published that provides us with an illuminating and moving account of the relationship between two remarkable homosexual men who found each other in

Books

the 1920s. *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F.O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* provides us with an intimate look into the lives of a Harvard professor and a Maine painter who began a twenty-year love affair in 1924. Their story — told through a collection of letters between them — is a rare and wonderful look at gay identity, substance abuse and love between men during a time when we have few firsthand accounts. Thank goodness these letters were rescued from an archive and published!

Quite separately, as individuals, these men made their mark on American culture. Matthiessen, well known as a champion of American literature through his groundbreaking book *American Renaissance*, which is still used in college classes, was a popular teacher, writer and political activist in Cambridge until his death by suicide in 1950. Cheney, the darling son of an old New England family and the "older man" in this relationship, traveled throughout America and Europe making a name for himself with painting. Their union — and I've seen that word applied to many couples less worthy of the term — provided each man with the foundation to live a life with some degree of integrity and openness during very repressive years.

They met by chance aboard the ocean liner *Paris* on a trans-Atlantic journey in 1924. Their meeting is recounted in a letter written by Matthiessen to his Yale classmate Russell W. Davenport, and is fascinating both because of Matthiessen's joy at finding a gentleman of like

mind and because of its clear connection to the long line of gossip, storytelling and dishing that constitutes the history of queers:

Came two o'clock, and we went down to our cabins. Now, I said, steeled by desperation, now, now. I'll never get up courage enough if I don't do it now. So I sat Rat down in a chair in my cabin on the pretense of giving him some fruit before we went to bed. And while his mouth was stuffed with a pear, I said in a voice that attempted to maintain its usual pass the bread, please conversational tone, but which sounded queer and remote for all that:

"I know it won't make any difference to our friendship, but there's one thing I've got to tell you: before (my extraordinary senior year at Yale) I was sexually inverted. Of course I've controlled it since . . ."

The munching of the pear died away. There followed perhaps half a minute of the most heavily freighted silence I have ever felt. Then, in a far away voice I had never heard came the answer: "My God, feller, you've turned me upside down. I'm that way too."

Coming out to each other — 1920s style — and from this point on through 20 years of time together and time apart traveling, through successes and failures and periods of depression, they share a friendship and a love that defines — to me at least — what is special about gay love between men.

The issues are all there: talking about cruising other men in dark alleys, monogamy and sexual issues, how a couple articulates itself and its values to straight friends. The letters take the reader on a journey down a special path of love. The twists and turns are there, but so are many golden sunsets and warm hugs.

Two aspects of the relationship and the book demand special attention. The first is the manner in which their identity as "inverts" undergoes a period of transition during the 20 years. Matthiessen and Cheney discuss Whitman, Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and one can note specific changes in their conceptualizations of themselves and their love as new concepts of sexual identity are popularized. While a subtext throughout the letters reveals a deep and ominous homophobia and sex-negative attitude on both men's part (Matthiessen appears to have quite deliberately avoided other homosexual men at Harvard; both fall into traditionally moralistic attitudes about their sexual

urges and guilt drips from some of the finer passages of the book), at other times they seem brazenly open about being gay.

Some have argued that Matthiessen's suicide, a few short years after Cheney's death, was due less to his political feelings about the state of the world during the Cold War — the traditional view of his death — than to the fact that he could only survive as a homosexual within the trappings of a relationship that appeared, on many levels, to be a standard marriage.

The other fascinating aspect of this book involves Cheney's obvious problem with controlling his alcoholism, and Matthiessen's consistently co-alcoholic response. It was not until the '70s that gay men as a community began to address issues of addiction and co-addiction, but these men appear as textbook examples — much like Auden and his Chester. Matthiessen's

attempts to keep Cheney sober — through any means possible — add a dimension to the relationship that is both comic and tragic. For anyone interested in a portrait of a couple tangled in a web of addiction-related issues, this book will have special meaning.

Louis Hyde is to be commended for editing his friends' letters — controversial when first published in hardcover in the '70s — and Alyson is to be commended for making the book accessible in paperback. These men with their lovey-dovey nicknames are fertile ground for more scholarship and for treatment in theatrical settings. These letters are a valentine to all of us.

Eric Rofes is a former teacher, a writer and the executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center.

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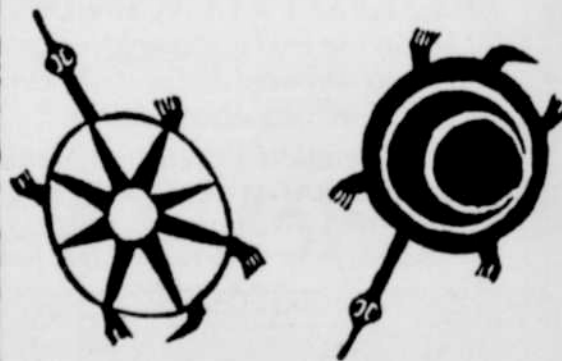
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"Someone Was Here" best AIDS book

This may be the book people will read to fully understand, on all levels, the impact of AIDS on life in the 1980s

B Y J O E L R E D O N

Someone Was Here: Profiles of the AIDS Epidemic, by George Whitmore (NAL Books, \$14.95).

George Whitmore's nonfiction vignettes are straightforward accounts of people with AIDS and those around them. In *Someone Was Here*, the author helps to define the cultural reality of AIDS from 1985 through 1987. Whitmore leaves no question unanswered about the political climate, the emotional states between patient and healthcare workers, and families' reactions.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part is about a PWA and his social worker; the second is about a former San Francisco hustler who comes down with AIDS, becomes a street

person, and eventually goes home to his mother in Colorado; and the third covers several different lives as they come to an end in a South Bronx hospital. In the epilogue, Whitmore acknowledges that while he was writing *Someone Was Here* he himself was diagnosed. Undoubtedly the diagnosis helped Whitmore's perspective, but more than this, it is his writing ability that makes this book such a satisfying and challenging read.

Whitmore makes clear what an incredibly difficult time we're all living through — if we choose to be aware of it. He writes about people we care about. This may be the book that people will read to fully understand, on all levels, the impact of AIDS on life in the 1980s. If you don't know AIDS first-hand already, you will feel as if you do after reading *Someone Was Here*. It's the best book available about AIDS.