

"The Gay Mystique" revisited

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B Y I A N Y O U N G

As the patterns of illness and healing within the AIDS crisis emerge, it becomes more and more apparent that those who contract the syndrome, are people whose immune systems have already been damaged. There are Africans whose health was impaired by a smallpox vaccination campaign that had catastrophic side-effects; Haitians living in conditions of extreme poverty and malnutrition; and urban North Americans with a history of poor nutrition, high stress, depression and frequent use of antibiotics and/or recreational drugs. In this last category, are the many gay men living what writer John Lauritsen has called "the immuno-suppressive lifestyle." In this lifestyle, chemical and psychological factors combine to cause chronic weakening of the metabolism, laying the individual open to destructive infection by parasites and viruses — including HIV.

AIDS did not drop from outer space. It was not sent by God as a punishment for sexual nonconformity. It is not "caused" by a virus. AIDS has a background of social events rooted in thousands of years of gay oppression and repression that caused deep psychological harm, to Western society as a whole, and especially to the many gay men whose sense of balance and self-worth was irreparably damaged.

Only with the emergence of AIDS can the seriousness and tragedy of that damage be seen clearly. But some of the best of our artists have offered us a picture of ourselves that many of us have not wanted to see — a true likeness. One of these artists is novelist and movement activist, Peter Fisher.

In his 1972 book *The Gay Mystique*, still one of the most intelligent and readable of the early gay liberationist tracts, Fisher describes his entry into the gay world as it was in the days before Stonewall:

"When I first came out into the gay world, I hoped that I would find someone to love who loved me and settle down together." What he found was that "no affair seemed to last more than a week or two . . . I remember waiting for phone calls that never came and the agony of hearing rumors or finding last week's lover in the bar with someone new. It wasn't long before I became cynical about the gay world and cynical about myself. . . . I heard myself repeating and believing things I had heard others say and had refused to believe. It was better not to become too deeply involved, because you would only get hurt in the end. You should never really open yourself up to another person — you were too vulnerable if you did. Sex was perfectly satisfying, anyway, and there was no need to waste your time looking for love. . . . I felt enormously guilty and cruel." The period whose frantic slogan was "so many men, so little time" had begun.

Fisher recounts his moving away from these negative attitudes as he came to a greater understanding of himself and discovered his capacity for love at the same time as the movement for gay liberation was unfolding. In a moving passage, he describes how he met his lover, Marc, through the Gay Activists Alliance, how as they sat on a loading dock in the mist of a rainy evening, Marc gave him a ring. Later, they exchanged simple vows in a chapel of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

"This was a place where many other people had come in the past to join their lives, and although we had no service, no family, no friends, no blessing but our own, we were part of that spirit."

Fisher does not condemn promiscuity in *The Gay Mystique*, recognizing that monogamous union is not for everyone. But he seems secure and happy in such a union for himself and his partner. "A dear friend, and certainly one of the keenest minds in the movement, strongly disapproves of the relationship Marc and I share. He views what once was the ideal, as the ultimate sell-out to the straight establishment. Marc and I do not love as we do because it is more 'respectable,' but because it is what makes us happy."

Eight years later, in 1980, Fisher published his autobiographical novel, *Dreamlovers*, a painfully honest, engaging, idiosyncratic look at gay life and fantasy. By now the gay world was in flux. "Gay people were questioning the nature of all their relationships." The gay liberation movement, new in 1972, had now been around long enough to have been largely co-opted by commercialism, "gay rights" liberalism and the Mafia. *Dreamlovers* was not widely reviewed.

By 1975, Fisher's lover is urging him to be free. "Enjoy yourself as much as possible. Get into pleasure." and pleasure for gay men was now defined as the porn-and-poppers lifestyle promoted in the Mafia mags. Fisher, whose two great joys in life are his writing and his lover, is confused, but not wanting to be possessive or rigid, he goes along. He and Marc soon find themselves in the dark, orgy room of a bar with the uncannily appropriate name Folsom Prison, where "poppers perfumed the thick, smoky air."

By 1976, Fisher is writing in his diary, "My fantasies are becoming realities. . . . My typewriter keeps breaking down. Obsessive depressions come on me in waves. All I can think about is what a failure I am. . . . Marc is my only reason for not killing myself. . . ." And Marc is urging him to go to the orgy bars alone. By 1977, seven years after their exchange of rings, only eleven years after the beginning of gay liberation, Pete and Marc are staggering, drunk and drugged, through a frantic, confused tangle of emotions, and crowding, ejaculating bodies.

Things have reverted, apparently, to the instability, hurt and self-hatred the author had cast

Parents Matter: Parents' Relationships with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons, by Ann Muller (Naiad Press, 1987, 218 pages \$9.95).

Ann Muller's intentions are in the right place.

As the mother of a gay son, she wrote *Parents Matter* to see more clearly the layered reactions in her own family and others like it. As an author, she tried to correct the imbalance in many books about homosexuality, which contain a primary discussion of gay male issues with lesbian concerns tacked on like a postscript. And as an amateur sociologist, Muller worked to make sense of a pattern yielded from 71 questionnaires: that lesbian daughters had bumpier relationships with their parents than gay sons.

But clear intentions don't necessarily make for eye-opening conclusions — or for a compelling read. *Parents Matter* raises some provocative, even radical notions. Unfortunately, they drop between the cracks in Muller's simplistic analyses, lists of anonymous quotes and loose framework built on the results of a small, unscientific study.



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aside only a few years before. Only now, drugs and a multiplicity of sex partners give an additional intensity to the fragmentation, anguish, and loneliness. In an interview he gave after *Dreamlovers* was published, Fisher said, "Nowadays I wonder if by participating in such frequent visits to the sex bars, I was acting out the verdict that society had delivered."

Dreamlovers is a poignant portrait of a people in transition — newly recognized, confused, still very off-balance, with an overpowering urge to celebrate being thwarted and repressed.

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse warned of "repressive tolerance," and how right he was. The two young men who pledged themselves to one another in the Cathedral chapel, now in *Dreamlovers*, find themselves still not accepted into the congregation as they wished to be, but instead consigned to a Prison that they have been told is freedom. There, they are being driven mad. The novel ends with Pete in the arms of a phantasm.

At this point, the first appearance of AIDS in the gay community is less than a year away.

As homosexual men of this century's fin-de-siècle live and die in the wake of the drugged

promiscuity of the gay lib decade, we begin to see the insidious pattern of social forces and mental states that led so many of our brothers to the slaughter. The gay movement wanted freedom and acceptance from North American society. It was cheaply and easily bought off with the glittering scraps of a Mafia-controlled, commercial "gay lifestyle" that proved ruinous to psychological and physical health.

When the gruesome fact is fully grasped, we may see another wave of gay anger that will make Stonewall and the Dan White protests look like the street skirmishes they were. For now, the gay movement, such as it is, remains for the most part in the hands of the 40-year old yuppie survivors, shellshocked and battle fatigued, very few of whom are ready to take a good hard look at their recent past (and present!) with even a fraction of Pete Fisher's honesty.

But when the history of gay liberation is eventually written, whoever writes it will find books like *A Day and a Night at the Baths*, *Faggots*, *Numbers*, *The Rushes*, and *Dreamlovers* to be documents of immense sadness, value, and truth.



Ann Muller

To her credit, Muller avoids repeating what's already on the shelves. She cites books such as *Now That You Know*, which walks parents slowly through myths about homosexuality, popping stereotypes like soap bubbles. She also refers to *Coming Out to Parents: A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents*, which offers concrete help for

sons and daughters deciding whether, when and how to come out to parents. The section in this book on parent-child separation issues is especially insightful and applies to all families, not just those with a gay or lesbian child. Muller does not mention *Different Daughters*, an anthology of personal stories by mothers of lesbians.

Muller's discussion of sex roles — in fact, her discussion throughout the book — fails to recognize cultural differences that might influence parents' relationships with their children. This gap becomes obvious when she examines her statistics on the basis of other variables, including religion, education, geography, parents' ages, politics and number of siblings. Even with these breakdowns, the size and scope of her sample — all respondents were from the Chicago area — curtail the force of her conclusions.

Parents Matter does succeed in giving lesbians and gay men equal representation. It does broach some potentially fascinating thoughts about relationships between lesbian daughters and their parents. But after the back cover is closed, it is up to readers to take those ideas and pursue them in other books, in discussions or in their own lives.

— Anndee Hochman