

ANDREW SULLIVAN— VIRTUALLY NORMAL

In his new book, the editor of *The New Republic* turns the movement away from freedom and points it towards equality

by Bob Roehr

Heads turned when Andrew Sullivan was named editor of *The New Republic*, the venerable and perhaps most influential magazine of political thought in the nation. The lad was only 28, openly gay, doggedly Catholic, and—gasp—conservative!

Now, four years later, he has written his first book. *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* is "a monograph with a personal

Books

trainer" because "no one really reads books longer than 200 pages," says Sullivan.

It is "about how we as a society deal with the small minority of us which is homosexual...and try to make some social and political sense of it."

Normal examines four political typologies: prohibitionist, liberationist, conservative and liberal, finding them all lacking. The prescription Sullivan offers is essentially libertarian—eliminate government-sanctioned discrimination against homosexuals and work to change the hearts and minds of society.

But along the way, his sharp pen skewers with equal opportunity. It is sure to raise blood-curdling ripostes from many points along the political spectrum.

The British expatriate made his mark writing provocative pieces for *TNR* such as "Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage" in 1989 and "Gay Life, Gay Death" in 1990. For gay men "death is less an event than an environment," he penned in the latter.

"Socially, racially, politically, AIDS is quietly tearing the gay world apart," read the seven-page examination of the tensions between HIV positives and negatives, homophobia within the African American community, and the tactics of ACT UP, "a movement primarily designed to prevent the demise of its own."

"By breaking the taboo against aggressively candid homosexuality and the greater taboo against

aggressively candid death, ACT UP has not only strained understanding between gays and straights, it has also torn apart the code of security among gays."

Sullivan's was one of the few voices in the mainstream press writing regularly on gays and AIDS. He naturally drew notice, often unfavorable, from those communities.

Greg Scott, Washington, D.C., AIDS and queer activist, "admired" "Gay Life, Gay Death" for its "brutal honesty." He contacted Sullivan to discuss the subject but "found it odd when I found him taking emotional positions rather than intellectual positions on other matters."

"Andrew was just coming out of the closet himself, and he spoke often out of naiveté and ignorance. He spoke very authoritatively, and he defended himself by saying, there are a lot of homosexuals in the country who feel this way. My response was, that doesn't make it right, that doesn't mean it's true."

"It was a very denial-based view of homosexuality. For example, one of the most controversial things that Andrew said was there is no such thing as gay community. Which many of us, from personal experience, knew to be untrue. He, basically not being a part of any community, did not feel that community existed. This was the way he proceeded again and again on gay issues."

"Sullivan would rather marginalize gay activists by distorting their opinions than present them responsibly," wrote columnist Michelangelo Signorile in the afterward to the paperback edition of his book *Queer in America*.

Both critics now see some growth and change in Sullivan simply because he has had to deal more openly with homophobia.

Andrew Sullivan greets you at the office with a handshake: soft, flaccid, not at all what one

anticipates from a rapacious Visigoth of words.

His solid body is clad in what has become almost a uniform for him, a preppy-grunge hybrid, neat and slovenly at the same time. Today a blue plaid shirt tops ubiquitous khakis and Timberland boots. His hair is close-cropped, not so much a cultural statement as an acknowledgment of its thinning, receding path.

Education is one of the twin pillars of his being. It plucked this bright child from East Grinstead, a satellite town south of London, and delivered him to a scholarship at Oxford, then on to graduate work at Harvard.

The other, perhaps more pervasive influence, is the Roman Catholic Church. Sullivan grew up in a provincial town, besieged by a tedious television culture "where jibes about Catholics were part of the orthodoxy." The church "made claims about truth, about eternity, about the most fundamental questions of anybody's existence. It in-



Andrew Sullivan

involved itself in rituals that were equally deep, and dark, and moving, mysterious. It was a profundity in a world of shallowness." Young Andrew embraced it fervently.

The term "recovering Catholic" causes him deep offense. "It's a cheap shot. It describes one of the oldest and deepest religious and philosophical traditions in civilization as a psychological problem."

He recognizes the institutional frailties of the church but uses them to buttress his faith. "To me,

the very idiocy of the priest, the very tackiness of the service, the very preposterousness of some of the claims, is only evidence that it must be true. The more decrepit the institution, to my mind, the more self-evidently powerful the truth that survived it."

"Post-ideological" is a term he uses to describe *TNR*. "I am constantly attempting and failing to persuade people that we are not liberal or conservative. It is precisely those paradoxes that I am trying every week to avoid, or to get around, or to talk in a different language."

Sullivan is no optimist when it comes to the cause of gay rights. "We are going to lose most of the important cultural battles unless we put ourselves on the line. No political action committee is going to win all of this stuff for us."

"I really don't buy the Whiggish notion that there is inevitable progress." He cites the example of African Americans after Reconstruction who "were poised for complete integration and acceptance and saw a century of retrenchment until the civil rights movement" of the 1960s.

"To my mind, the last five years and the next five years are going to be a battle within the gay rights movement to frame it in a certain way. That is partly what this book is trying to do."

He wants to "reposition" the movement away from a counterculture freedom movement to one focusing upon equality in the central issues of marriage and the military.

Sullivan interprets the 1994 congressional elections as "a response to the dilatoriness of the Clinton administration. Clinton misunderstood his mandate...through not understanding the gravity of the crisis the Democratic Party was in and that liberalism was in. You had to literally junk the old left and the old way of thinking."

Thus he gives grudging respect to Newt Gingrich and the revolution he has wrought, agreeing on some points, disagreeing on others. "I'm against term limits but I'm for tort reform," he says, ticking off specifics. "I'm for the balanced budget. I would love to see NEA defunded. I would love to see PBS go down the tubes. I share a lot of their convictions. I'm not frightened of them."

He is even more enthusiastic about the return of strong congressional government. "I think the Congress is, before the president, the primary instrument of democracy and is more accessible to the people than the presidency and certainly more than the judiciary. I think the founders meant that to be. So good for him [Gingrich]."

Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality by Andrew Sullivan. Knopf, 1995; \$22 cloth. This article was adapted from an extended article in the September-October issue of *Men's Style* magazine.

PHOTO BY WOLFGANG TILMANS

FALL'S BEST BET

Save 20% when you support
Portland Police Sunshine Division

For the month of October receive 20% off your
custom framing by donating non-perishable food items
to help feed the less fortunate

* Certain restrictions apply, check for details

'Picture This' FRAMING GALLERY

2801 SE Holgate • Portland • 236-1400

Plenty of FREE parking at our convenient Eastside location

Mon.-Fri. 9:30 am - 6 pm • Saturday 10 am-5:30 pm

Expires Oct. 31, 1995



EUROPE has never been this close before



Excellent European Fully Escorted Sightseeing Tour
Packages highlighting **Paris, London, Rome, Venice,
Florence, Pompeii, French Riviera, Black Forest** and much more...

**Thanksgiving,
Christmas &
New Year's
Specials**

**10 Days
Nov. 5-14
Dec. 24-Jan 2
\$499/ \$1,249***

**14 Days
Nov. 18-Dec. 1
Dec. 16-29
\$599/ \$1,459***

Midnight Messe at St. Peter's Incl. Senior Citizen Discounts available

For a free detailed brochure call 1-800 EUROP93 (387-6793) or (503) 690-9405.

All packages include Land/Air & Land (*) Transportation initiating anywhere in the USA, meals and first class hotel accommodations as designed in brochure.