

INTERVIEW

LAVA LOVE

Author Guy Kettelhack relates the pleasure and pain of
"dancing around the volcano"

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Gay men are sexual geniuses," firmly states literary-agent-turned-author Guy Kettelhack, who has written or co-written more than 25 nonfiction books, including *Easing the Ache* and *How to Make Love While Conscious*. "We have come up with an unprecedented spectrum and rainbow of ways to explore our sexuality. It has no parallel. We have incredible imaginations. We're incredibly daring and incredibly brave."

Kettelhack investigates and celebrates gay male sexuality in his latest endeavor, *Dancing Around the Volcano*, recently published by Crown. Subtitled "Freeing Our Erotic Lives: Decoding the Enigma of Gay Men and Sex," the book joins such recent titles as Douglas Sadowick's *Sex Between Men* and Jack Morin's *The Erotic Mind* in the pro-sex section of your local bookstore. Yet Kettelhack is quick to stress that "My book is pretty different. Number one, it's an out-and-out therapeutic book. It virtually promises to help you to free your erotic imagination and your erotic life.... It offers a way to look at one's mind, fantasies and sexual behavior in a much wider way than I think most gay men have allowed themselves to do. It's not a survey book, which is what *Sex Between Men* was. And it's not a book of essays, like Frank Browning's stuff. I've got a mission here, and it's pretty ambitious."

Simply stated, Kettelhack's main objective is to help gay men get what they want from their sex lives.

"That requires, for most of us, discovering what it is we want, and that's a very tricky question," says the author. "So many of us are either afraid to answer it, or have just never given ourselves permission to ask it...."

"Be prepared for some surprises," Kettelhack adds, laughing. "A lot of the stuff we say we want, we don't."

Kettelhack, 45, has lived in New York City since 1975. "I have seen a lot," he admits, and in *Volcano* he gives us a glimpse of what he's witnessed over the years. The book opens with an intimate account of one of the author's own sexual experiences, and goes on to introduce the reader to an astoundingly diverse cast of supporting characters who willingly reveal some of their darkest carnal secrets.

"The first sentence I write is, 'This book is based on material generously shared with me by hundreds of gay men over the past twenty-five years of my life,'" says Kettelhack, who warns in his acknowledgments that "This book is not about AIDS, even though, obviously, no book about sex and gay men can avoid the issue. Sex has for too long been equated with death because of AIDS. We have never more needed a book that separates the two and invites us to explore and once again take joy in the power and mystery of sex, the endless and fascinating information about ourselves we can derive from it."

I recently spoke at length with Kettelhack about his new book, gay men, promiscuity, sex clubs, monogamy, AIDS and what the author is working on now as he waits for his *Volcano* to erupt among gay male communities coast to coast.

Vaillancourt: Your choice of title is very interesting. Here is a book lauding gay sex, yet your primary metaphor is that of this lethal pit of fiery liquid magma. Stumble over the edge, and you die.

Kettelhack: Well, it's dangerous stuff. I'm not

saying, "Let's all just jump in and play, boys...." You can get into some scary stuff, and some very regrettable behavior. I'm not saying that we should all just be hedonists and not see that our actions have consequences.

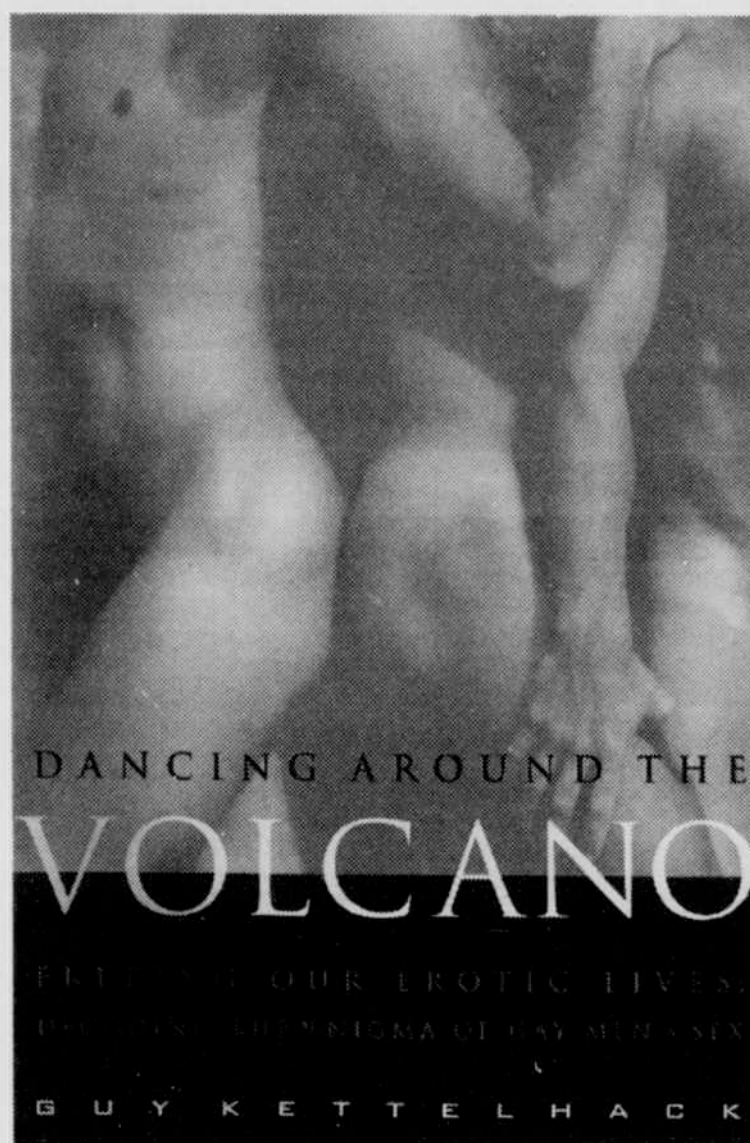
Does the volcano simply symbolize AIDS?

Oh, not at all. It's the whole psychic war that I'm talking about. It's the whole internal furnace that's going on. It's much more complicated than just AIDS. AIDS is almost the least part of it.

Central to the book is your theory that a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde dichotomy is inherent in many people in general, but specifically here, in gay men. What is your thesis, in a nutshell?

Jekyll and Hyde are only two of the ways in which we can talk about this. The split has an infinite number of yins and yangs, but it's really just saying the obvious, which is that we all have outer and inner selves. To my mind, gay men experience a much greater and vivid division between [the two]. For a lot of different reasons. A lot of them are externally imposed because the second we have a libidinal urge toward a boy or a man, we instantly learn from the culture that that's the worst possible thing we could be feeling. So often, at the age of five or six, we begin this kind of shocking recognition that, "Oh, my God! I'm going to have to hide this feeling because I can see that it's not acceptable." It seems to me that most of us—not all of us—learn very early on to have this hidden inner self. It's neither good nor bad. It's just how we adapt to the reality that we find ourselves born into....

This darker inner world, because of being held back, often has greater strength—the strength of trying to get out—and it breeds all kinds of explorations and fantasies. It's just often more complicated, I think, than [it is for] people who don't feel that they have to hide their sexuality. It can create a kind of fearsome beast. This is why it seems to me the Jekyll-Hyde split does have some resonance. It's just a metaphor, and it's a Victorian one, which is interesting. It just shows how deeply rooted that Victorian shit is.



I know you're aware that many readers may think you're advocating a return to what you've termed the "no-holds-barred promiscuity of the 1970s" with this book.

I'm not suggesting we go back to anything. If I'm suggesting a return to anything, it's to a sense of joy that I think often characterizes this adolescent bash that we had in the '70s. It was an adolescent rebellion. It was exactly analogous to [the backlash to the Victorian era] that happened in the 1920s. We just rebelled, and we had a fucking good time doing it. But it wasn't especially conscious, as adolescent rebellions tend not to

be. All we're aware of is big, bad mommy and daddy, and we're going to show them. We're going to be as outrageous as we want to, we're going to have sex clubs. I mean, it was like a 14-year-old. And it was a lot of fun, and it was very necessary. We really had to do it. But it wasn't especially conscious, and sometimes it was literally not conscious because we were so zonked out by drugs and alcohol. So we were a little like insects twitching rather than conscious, sentient beings looking at our behavior and wondering what it meant about us. That kind of self-questioning really didn't happen. I don't know that it would ever have happened except for the role of AIDS, which slammed us into a sense of mortality way before we should have had to confront it. It was a profound shock, and in a way an extraordinarily, movingly wonderful one, because it has forced us to be conscious in ways that I don't know that we would have been otherwise.

Sex clubs in the '90s: Their purpose? Pros and cons?

Well, we're obviously giving ourselves what we want. Just look at what we do, and you'll see what we want to do. These sex clubs wouldn't be popping up if there weren't some real desire for them. I mean, once again, we're sexual geniuses. We'll construct, we'll make institutions out of, we'll create, what we need. To some degree, it's as simple as that. I just see ourselves creating what we need. Now, as far as the pros and cons—a

debate about what's safe, how to protect yourself—that becomes a debate about politics, and I don't really have any interest in politics.

Monogamy and gay male couples: Any comment?

What I more or less gently tried to do in *Dancing Around the Volcano* was just to reassure all of us about what we already know, which is that monogamy is tough between two men. It's tough between two human beings, but it's tough between two men for some fairly specific reasons, many of them cultural because we've all been bred to be predators. We are in some sense a society of all predators and no prey, just by being male. It's just a part of the Western male paradigm. No man, including no gay man, escapes that kind of conditioning. But I would suggest that there's also something more hormonal going on that has to do with testosterone. I mean, you look at any tribe of male mammals, and you're going to see promiscuity, you're going to see enormous aggressive behavior.

I am, as I've said in the book, exploring—with great tumult—monogamy with my lover now. It's not to say that we haven't experimented with and thought about other sorts of twosome, threesome ideas, but the basic pact we're making now is a monogamous one. And it's extraordinary, because I never thought I'd be capable of doing it before. You do what's going to best serve you. Creating that kind of a pact can be a real adventure for two men. It's probably never going to be a bland little peaceful thing unless you're really just so sitting on your impulses that you're just determined to be bland. Monogamy is never going to be easy for two men. And it's only one of infinite modes of being. It's not preferable to any other as far as I'm concerned.

Give us a preview of your next book, *Shadows of the King: The Secret Bonds Between Gay Men and Their Fathers*.

I just feel like I've fallen onto this gold mine. I can't believe how powerful this book could be. I hope I can do it justice.... As you know, the cliché is the gay man, his overbearing mother, his absent father. All that was saying to me is that we've all had this tacit complicity in keeping the father absent. The father wasn't absent. The father had a huge, huge effect on us. Not the least of which is that he was the first model of male that we ever knew. I mean, the first models of male and female are daddy and mommy. That's what gave us the blueprint for male. There is some sense in which all men are daddy, and all women are mommy, which I really believe.... It behooves us as gay men—who are attracted to other men—to look at the model of male that we first were given, and to see the impact on our lives. What I'm discovering is that it affects everything: how we deal with career, our self-esteem, the limits to which we think we can aspire. It affects our sexual fantasies so strongly that it's almost unbelievable that this hasn't been talked about before.... I want to help us resolve our Oedipal complexes, basically, so that we can get past them and not be limited by these assumptions that may be holding us back. I want us to get what we want. That's my one mission as a writer, and probably as a human being. Apart from getting me what I want. [Laughs].

Dancing Around the Volcano by Guy Kettelhack. Crown, 1996; \$25 cloth.

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