

# THE BODY REMEMBERS

*Kenny Fries explores identity and memory in his memoir of growing up disabled, Jewish and gay*

by William J. Mann

**T**he body doesn't lie," says Kenny Fries, and indeed, his new memoir, *Body, Remember*, looks to his body as the place where memory begins.

The award-winning poet and essayist was born prematurely 36 years ago with "congenital deformities of the lower extremities"—as precise a diagnosis his birth defect would ever get. "I have no idea why I was premature," he writes. "Nor does anyone know why at birth I was

## Books

missing the fibula, why there were sharp anterior curves of the tibia and flexion contractions of the knees, in both my legs. Absent were two toes and posterior calf bands on each foot. There was no scientific name for my birth defect."

From that imprecise beginning, Fries has had to chart a course for himself without benefit of maps or diagrams—or detailed medical records—exploring the meanings and demarcations of his composite identity. He is disabled with an undiagnosed condition. He is the son of working-class Jewish parents who were both lovingly supportive of their son and tragically neglectful, leaving him vulnerable to physical violence and emotional abuse. And finally, he is gay, confronted by the homophobia that assumes his sexual orientation is somehow the result of his disability.

Such ambiguity in every facet of his existence led him to write this memoir, which, he says, is not so much concerned with mapping the development of his aggregate identities as it is about the process of remembering it. "This is a book first about memory," Fries says, "about how we remember, about what events and feelings stay with us, and how our relationship with [such memories] changes over time."

He is determined in confronting his past. *Body, Remember* opens with a scene of the author as a teenager in Brooklyn, walking home from school and every day encountering a 10-year-old boy. "Every time I passed," Fries writes, "this boy asked: 'Why are your legs the way they are?' And I would answer, 'I was born that way,' never stopping or slowing down.... Never did I think of answering him in any other way. Or not to answer him at all.... And never once did it occur to me that I could walk down another street, not see this boy, and evade his question."

*Body, Remember* is precisely about not evading questions. And yet it isn't so much about asking them as remembering which ones were already asked, and how the lack of definitive answers has impacted his life. "This wasn't a healing endeavor, as some might think," Fries

says. "I don't know if healing, per se, ever really occurs. Wounds heal, but there are still scars. It sounds cynical and depressing, but it's not. It's a fact."

As a young boy, Fries suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of his older brother. It is in remembering such things—memories disowned by the rest of the family—that Fries recognizes his own development, his own passage. In a small yet powerful moment, Fries, while bathing, tries to recall his father's hands washing his feet when he was a small boy. It is a warm, loving and yet very distant image, and no matter how hard he tries, he cannot call his father's caressing hands from memory. He muses: "Like those distorted reflections given back to me years ago by the X-ray machine above my naked body,



Kenny Fries

it is as if my legs, which minutes ago brought me to the tub, remain anesthetized, rendered inaccessible except for utilitarian tasks, or an occasional sudden jolt of pain."

Another time he is stretched out on the couch when his mother sits beside him. He lifts his legs to make room, and his mother tenderly rests them on her lap. It is the first time he can remember his mother touching his legs, although she must have, many thousands of times, dressing him and caring for him as a child.

When he confronts the abuse that plays havoc with memory, Fries is attempting to overcome

such blockages. "You weren't very nice to me when we were young," he says to his brother many years after the fact. The brother dismisses him. "That's what kids do to each other," he says. "What is it that you want me to say?"

Fries answers forthrightly: "I was hoping you'd be able to say you were sorry." But his brother isn't able, and Fries is left, yet again, as the vulnerable younger brother, enduring a night of distorted dreams and random memories.

Even later, with a loving, supportive partner, Fries is left with the realization that remembering the questions doesn't mean there are answers. "What if I told Kevin that even though I know what happened years ago is not my fault, I still feel responsible that it happened? How do I tell him that even though I know I am not responsible for

*Fries has had to chart a course for himself without benefit of maps or diagrams—or detailed medical records—exploring the meanings and demarcations of his composite identity. He is disabled with an undiagnosed condition. He is the son of working-class Jewish parents who were both lovingly supportive of their son and tragically neglectful, leaving him vulnerable to physical violence and emotional abuse. And finally, he is gay, confronted by the homophobia that assumes his sexual orientation is somehow the result of his disability.*

being born with deformed legs—I gave that up years ago, didn't I?—I feel responsible for how my disability causes me problems now? That no matter how many times he tells me how attractive I am, so much within me, as well as so much that surrounds me, conspires to tell me otherwise? How can I make him understand that although remembering is necessary for acceptance, forgiveness takes a much longer time?"

Forging an identity as a disabled gay man necessitated Fries to make himself vulnerable yet again. In a wonderfully erotic and yet supremely tender passage, he recounts a sexual experience

with a man named Miguel, who told him he was beautiful. Miguel's delicate exploration of Fries' body is as thoughtful as Fries' own exploration of the memories that that body conceals. "It is his kiss on the scar on my lower right leg that forces me to open my eyes," Fries writes. "My legs as they dangle in his palms. I watch him as his lips trace my scars, as his teeth delicately pull on the hair on my legs, on my thighs.... I stop him and hold his head in both my hands. For a short moment, the rare moment when attention is riveted in the present to what is directly before you, time is suspended, becomes all time—and then the moment has passed and his tongue is searching for mine, our bodies pressing against each other. Then, I feel his hands once again begin to caress my legs, and find my scars."

Living in Israel for a period brought Fries into greater examination of both his gay and Jewish identities. Meeting repressed gay Israelis after living in San Francisco forced him to see the important role that his gay identity had come to play in his world view. It also afforded him greater awareness of what his Jewish heritage had taught him on his journey toward self-discovery. "Part of the Jewish experience is the idea of never forgetting, of always remembering," he says. "That is why I explore memory, why I force myself to remember the past—all of the past."

There is much in this often lyrical, tantalizingly amorphous memoir. Fries is a poet—his *Healing Notebooks*, a beautiful collection of poems about a lover with AIDS, won the Gregory Kolovakos Award for AIDS Writing—and much of *Body, Remember* has the grace and elegance of poetry. It is presented as a series of images, sometimes past tense, sometimes present, often moving backward and forward through time. This is the way, of course, that memory works: zooming in on certain events, gliding over other, vaster stretches of time.

"It's certainly not linear," Fries says. "We don't remember in linear ways. We remember bits at a time, and sometimes we remember them differently each time, and always differently than others [remember them]."

It is with that process that *Body, Remember* concerns itself. "What you're doing when you write a memoir," Fries says, "is really transforming your life." And ultimately, he concludes, in accepting that some questions—like that of the boy on the street—have no answers. Except, of course, for the one Fries gave: "I was born that way."

*Body, Remember* by Kenny Fries.

Dutton, 1997; \$21.95 cloth.

William J. Mann's novel, *The Men from the Boys*, will be published in June.



### Nora Isacson Portland's Alternative Realtor

I have chosen to take a more human approach as a Realtor. I build my business on a referral basis and firmly believe that the satisfaction of my client is far more important than my financial gain. I communicate clearly and openly, and I'm always honest with my clients. I'll gladly climb a nearby tree to check on a roof or get a bit dirty investigating a crawl space or an attic. I work mainly in Portland's close-in Southeast and Northeast neighborhoods and specialize in older homes with character. Whether you're thinking of buying or selling, please do give me a call.

Nora Isacson

**ThePrudential** Performance Group One, Inc. REALTORS®  
215 SE 102nd, Suite 300  
Portland, OR 97216  
(503) 256-1234  
VM/pgr 9503) 948-5610

## DON'T SAY YOU CAN'T GET A HOME LOAN UNTIL YOU'VE PHONED HOME

*We handle all conventional and nonconventional loans.*

- First Time Buyers • FHA/VA Loans • Self-Employed
- Bankruptcies & Foreclosures • Complicated Borrowers
- Investment Properties • Manufactured Housing/Land
- Credit Problems • 3% Down Programs
- Pre-approvals for Purchase

*We're your full service  
mortgage company.*

Call today for a  
free qualification  
over the phone.

**Christine C. Hall**  
Mortgage Broker

**503/870-1666**

**HOME**  
MORTGAGE CORP.

