

INTERVIEW

JUST AS THEY ARE

E. Lynn Harris' popular depictions of black America may yet break the Hollywood gay color barrier

by Brian Cochran

In 1991 E. Lynn Harris left a lucrative career with IBM to follow his dream to become a novelist. His first and second novels, *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, respectively, were both bestsellers, putting him in a club with an extremely small membership: that of African American novelists who enjoy national bestseller status. Harris' third book, *And This Too Shall Pass*, spent nine weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Books

Harris writes about subjects that make some people nervous: AIDS, homophobia, religion and racism, to name a few. Whatever the subject matter, the author's popularity with a broad-based readership is undeniable. Women and men, black and white, straight and gay, Harris counts them all among his fans. I spoke with Harris about his writing and his life as a black gay man on the release of *And This Too Shall Pass* in paperback.

Brian Cochran: Congratulations on *And This Too Shall Pass* being named to *Genre Magazine's* Top 10 Books of 1996 list. That's quite an honor.

E. Lynn Harris: Yes, I was really happy about that.

One of the themes in the book is the conflict that most gay men feel with religion. Can you comment on that? Did that come from your own experience?

I guess I could say sort of, though my own faith and beliefs are very, very strong. Sometimes I have wavered, because of homosexuality and what you hear in the church. It's something that is very important to me and very important to convey to people, to try and understand what it's like being gay and Christian. But I feel I have come to a great resolve. A lot of times I am asked that question in front of large crowds—once in front of an audience at Hampton University. It was not in a malicious tone or anything, they just were concerned. I don't know where this answer came from, but I said: "I'll take my chances with Jesus Christ rather than human beings any day." The audience stood up and applauded and it dawned on me that that is how I really feel.

So many people think, on both sides of the issue, that homosexuality and Christianity are mutually exclusive.

Right. There's a minister here in Chicago who preached a sermon called "Good News for Homosexuals in the Black Church," and one of the things he pointed out was that in the Bible, all the references made to homosexuality were never made by Jesus Christ himself. What the Bible basically says is that anything that you're doing in excess, or not in the spirit of God, is wrong. The other night I really became irked in watching the State of the Union address and J. C. Watts' response, because he said something about family issues and not wanting to be part of anything considered immoral. I really took that as a slap at gay people as a whole, especially when you look at the media. It may not be as prevalent in the black gay community, but I think in the white gay community America is getting nervous because it seems like the gay lobby is wielding so much power. I don't think that's it at all—I think it's similar to any group fighting for the same rights anyone else has.

Unlike the now-tired phrase "special rights?"

Yes, it's the same thing. In the past I've always said the gay rights movement and the civil rights movement can't compare—because no one can tell for sure if you're gay, but they can tell when you're black. But the more things I see happening, the more I see similarities. What people are saying is that because you're this way, you're going to be excluded. For so long that's happened to black people and now we see it happening to gay

and gay, since in the black community being gay is not always well accepted—

No.

—and though they never actually speak to each other, two of your characters, MamaCee and Tamela, have a debate about the problem of gay African Americans finding acceptance in their own community. MamaCee sums it up pretty well by saying, and I'm paraphrasing, "He's my child and I love him."

or in my writing is: Why would anyone in their right mind choose to be black and gay in a country that has a problem with both? I think when anything comes across as sounding homophobic from a parent it really isn't, they are just concerned because they want the best for their children and they don't want anyone to treat their children differently.

In all of three of your books, your female characters are very well-drawn and you treat them with a lot of tender loving care.

Another stereotype is that because I was raised in a house full of women that it had a lot to do with my being gay. What it had a lot to do with was my respect for women—my utmost respect.

That definitely comes through in the writing.

It's almost hard for me to write a negative female character. I had difficulty with Mia (in *And This Too Shall Pass*). I didn't really know her.

There's been talk of a film version of *And This Too Shall Pass*. Is that coming along?

Yeah, but, you know, Hollywood is so strange. They love me, but they don't know what to do with me.

I think that's true of a lot of the gay-themed material they get.

I can't tell you how many meetings I've had where they've said, "Oh, I love this, I really want to do this," or "Hold on, we're really going to get it done," or "Are you ever going to write anything else, you know, you're such a wonderful writer." It's like saying: You're such a nice black man, are you ever going to be a different color?

Or "Could you write something that we wouldn't feel uncomfortable producing and putting out there?"

Right. Eventually I think it will happen. I haven't given up on it, but I don't put a lot of energy into it anymore. I have an agent who is great, but when you look at it, it's still amazing that a book that could spend nine weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list hasn't been optioned or already made into a movie. I had so many meetings with HBO on the phone, until finally one of the executives there said, "Does Zurich really have to be gay?" And I said, "I don't know, at the end I don't know if he was comfortable with that or not, but I really do think he is."

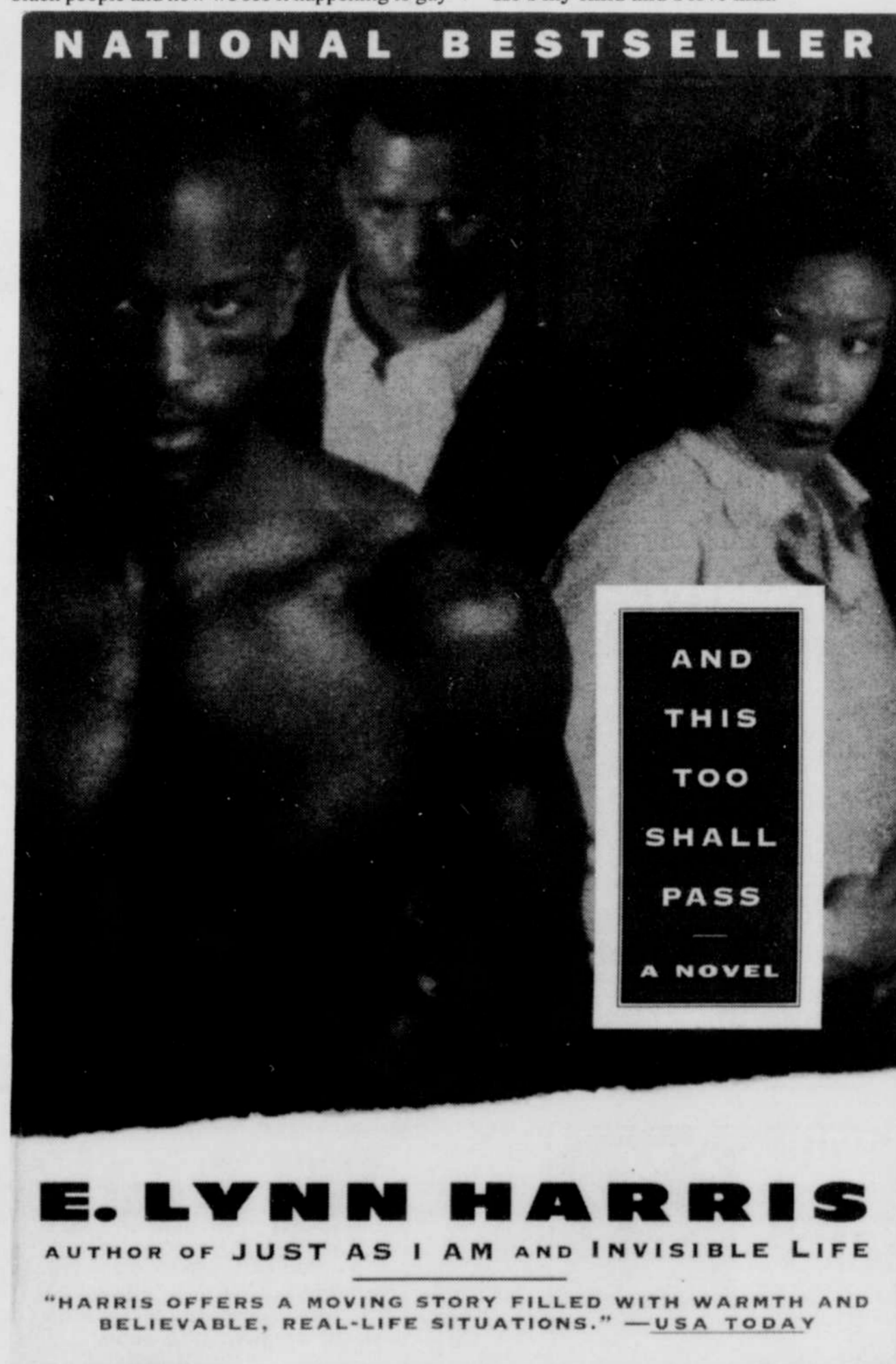
Would *And This Too Shall Pass* be the same story if Zurich wasn't gay?

It could be. He was just a nice guy. I have known guys who have struggled with their sexuality for so long, and they're usually the nicest people, but they're just afraid to take that next step—some of them never do. They get married, or stay single, but they never do. And that's the way I saw Zurich, he knew what was going on in his heart but he was afraid.

The ending is rather ambiguous—he could have gone either way.

And a lot of my female friends were going, "Oh, why did he have to be gay?" It's been very interesting for me and will be even more interesting as I grow as a writer. The novel I'm working on now was going to be a more commercial novel, but I can't write a novel without having a strong black gay character, I just can't do it. I don't even think my fans would like it if I did. It's amazing.

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people because they are finally saying, "This is who I am." I have a character in my new book who is a 70-year-old gay man, who says, "We didn't have any problems because we didn't talk about it. Y'all are too busy trying to make people respect and accept you." Respect really should be the most important thing. I never ask anyone to accept me, but what I do ask—or demand—is that they respect me.

Another conflict that I found interesting in the book is the problem of being both black

I think that's the feeling among a lot of people in the African American community, but they don't want to talk about it. I did a radio show the other day, and this was a black radio station, and they asked me what my mother said about [my being gay]. The one time I tried to have a conversation with her about it she stopped me in the middle and said, "You're my child and I love you no matter what." And to me, that was enough.

I think all parents feel the same way really, they want the best for their child. The thing I always bring out to black audiences when I speak