

## INTERVIEW

## MANN FROM THE BOYS

William J. Mann's debut novel probes the next horizon for gay men: long-term relationships

by Michael Bride

It's a typical gathering of gay men for Sunday brunch at my friend Peter's house. We're in high spirits: preparing mushroom caps, drinking Mimosas, comparing notes from the night before and, as usual, bemoaning our lack of boyfriends.

Except for Peter, of course, who met a new man last month and is the envy of all of us. "My God," I say to the assembled flock of thirtysomething gay men, "are we becoming the

## Books

stereotypical gay queens or what?"

Mark, an unusually wise friend, simply smiles. "As long as gay men breathe, they will talk about men. Which ones they want, which ones they've had, which ones they can't get, the proverbial white knight who never seems to ride in on his damn horse."

I'm still thinking about his words the next day, when I show up to interview William Mann. His debut novel, *The Men from the Boys*, is about this very theme. It's being pumped as the gay novel of the summer.

"What's the most important thing on a gay man's mind?" Mann asks me as we settle down for our talk.

Hey, I think, I'm supposed to be the interviewer here. But I hazard a guess nonetheless. "Finding a boyfriend?"

"Part of the answer," Mann says. We're sitting on his deck in Provincetown, looking out over the ice-blue bay.

"What's the rest of the answer?" I ask.

"Keeping a boyfriend," he says.

And he's right. In this time of plague, we have been so struck by the slaughter for so long that we haven't had the luxury to consider what relationships—and specifically long-term relationships—mean in our lives.

It's no coincidence that the issue of gay marriage has surfaced now, over 25 years since Stonewall. Whether one supports the idea or not, it seems part of a dawning new frontier for the gay movement: looking beyond the immediate, looking beyond specific political goals and, indeed, looking beyond AIDS. For the first time, many of us are looking at our own futures and the relationships we want to be part of them.

That's what excited me about *The Men from the Boys*, one of the few novels to really probe relationships among gay men. The book is a free-wheeling, lighthearted, romantic romp, with lots of sexy adventures between the characters. But in between the melodramatics and the relationship shenanigans, there's some heartfelt, insightful commentary on who we are and where we're going.

*The Men from the Boys* concerns Jeff O'Brien, a thirtysomething gay man who divides his time between Boston and Provincetown. He's involved

in a long-term, nonmonogamous relationship with his lover, Lloyd. Their carefully balanced world is threatened by three things: their advancing age (both are past 30—egad!); the imminent AIDS death of their friend and mentor, Javitz; and the arrival of Eduardo, a 22-year-old houseboy with whom Jeff (quite unexpectedly) falls in love.

Mann has been an award-winning journalist for the last decade, both in the gay and the straight press. Being a journalist, Mann brought particular social and political insights to his novel. My conversation with him proved enlightening and provocative.

**Michael Bride: Why haven't long-term gay relationships been explored before?**

William J. Mann: Well, I think we've really been in crisis management for the last 15 years. How could we consider long-term relationships when we barely had time to have short-term relationships? We've been caretaking, grieving, acting up. The literature that has explored this issue are narratives of loss—lovers who die. Paul Monette. Fenton Johnson. Beautiful, beautiful love stories. But what about lovers who don't die?

I think looking at long-term relationships is the next horizon for gay men.

**How traditional will those relationships be? Jeff and Lloyd, in your book, have a nonmonogamous relationship. What effect does that have on long-term relationships?**

That's tricky. Jeff does fall in love with Eduardo, and it does challenge his relationship with Lloyd. I'm not sure how much tradition—the heterosexual model—we need to follow. Obviously it varies between individuals. I think many gay men have prided themselves on the fact

that we've overthrown the heterosexual paradigm, that we can have more than one significant relationship at a time. Certainly the characters in my novel feel that way.

**They also feel jealousy and insecurity.**

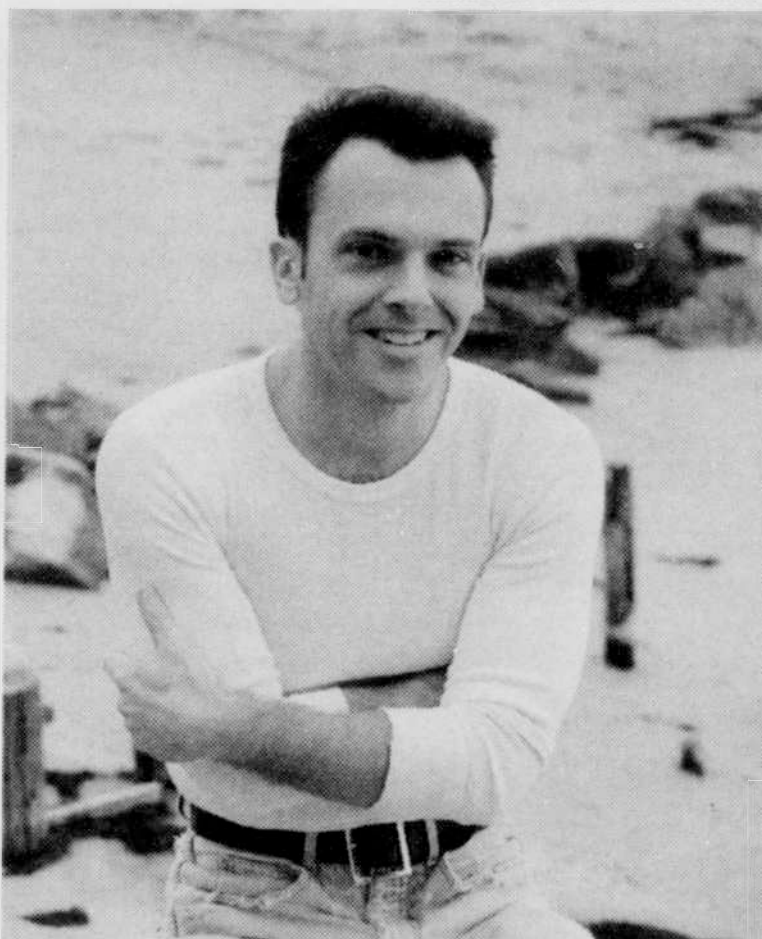
Sure. Absolutely. We can't pretend that in redefining patterns and rewriting rules, it's not going to be scary. I think for a lot of gay men, particularly of my generation, we've wanted to believe middle-class values like home and commitment weren't as important as things like sexual freedom and social achievement. But as we get older, we start to think how nice it would be to have the security of one lover, one home—in effect, one future.

**Jeff wrestles with that in your book. Do you think many gay men are struggling with this sense of traditional versus nontraditional?**

I do. Do we want our parents' lives? Those of us of the ACT UP generation thought we definitely did not. But now we're starting to think pieces of those lives might not be so bad. It may be just a natural process of getting older.

**You must have gotten some people saying that Jeff's obsession with getting older is a bit—well, much.**

It is a bit, well, much. Jeff is completely self-absorbed at the start of the novel. One of my friends who read an early draft said, halfway through, "You know, I'm not sure I like Jeff all that much." I said, "Fine. You will." And she did. He changes, but more than that, I think people eventually see he's just really scared. This is a hard world we live in. I wouldn't trade being gay for anything, but let's face it—we don't make it easy on ourselves. We live in a culture that ac-



William Mann

PHOTO BY TIM HUBER

tively devalues the aging process—and gay men take it to the extreme, with all this pumping up and cosmetic alterations.

**Hey, 28 is considered too ripe for the party circuit.**

Some of my older friends—I'm talking 40s and 50s—had a hard time understanding that. I've had some say, "Come on, he's only 32." But younger readers—20s and 30s—they get it. Monette said gay years are like dog years.

**The book raises the issue of "body fascism," which Michelangelo Signorile has just written about in his new book, and about which you did an article.**

I got more mail from that article than anything else I ever did. It first ran in *Metroline* and was syndicated to just about every gay publication in the country, and some non-gay ones too. The issue touches a nerve. People either felt completely oppressed by the prevailing imagery of what's hot and how you're "supposed" to look, or they wrote to me and said, "Get a life." I admit I still go the gym. I had some people say it was hypocritical to write the piece and still play along the party circuit, as I sometimes do. But the point is not so much to stop doing what we're doing, but rather to be aware of the pressures we feel to look a certain way, as well as the implications of those pressures. Striving to be big and buff is a reaction against AIDS, a reaction against feeling ostracized as kids—all those things, tied into the same youth-obsessed culture that has oppressed women for centuries.

**Do you think it's worse for gay men?**

Not worse, although it's gotten more intense over the years. The image we seek for ourselves is now so idealized that it's practically unattainable, unless you use steroids, which Signorile's book looks at. In my book, Jeff doesn't use steroids, but he is obsessed about his body image and whether he can still, as he says, "get away with it."

**There's a lot of sex in the book. Was there any concern about that?**

No. Hey, there's a lot of sex in gay men's lives. If not actual sex, then a lot of thinking about it, play around it. I used to think that public sex, anonymous sex, was more honest than the sex you find going out to bars or on the party circuit. But there's bullshit everywhere that you have to cut through.

**All Jeff really wants is love, after all.**

True. It's all any of us really want. I think Jeff and Lloyd are still very much in love with each other, but they don't know how to take the next step, to integrate the very real changes in their lives into their relationship. Hey, passion—as I try to point out in the book—can be about a whole lot of other things besides sex.

*Michael Bride is an educator and freelance writer who lives in Massachusetts.*

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