

THE FAREWELL SYMPHONY

Edmund White
Knopf, 1997; \$25 cloth

At the end of *The Farewell Symphony*, while remembering the death of his first great love, Edmund White writes, "I'd once told him that I thought in a masterpiece the whole network of impulses could be isolated in any paragraph throughout the book, a monad containing all the important features in miniature."

Books

So it is with White's latest output. Biopsy any paragraph and what you'll find are the signature signs of a great work of literature. From the first to the last page, it is a heartbreakingly beautiful elegy—brilliant, sensitive, joltingly honest. Universal needs—to love, to create and to fulfill oneself—hold the author's world together as AIDS tears it apart. He seems to admonish AIDS: You may take my life, but you may not have my memories, my joy, my spirit.

The autobiographical novel opens with the author visiting the grave of Brice, his deceased



lover, in Père LaChaise cemetery in Paris. AIDS has taken Brice and White is alone, in mourning and in exile in Europe. Recollections about his own life preoccupy him, and the ongoing struggle to create, a rich supply of brilliant friends and endless sexcapades flow from his grief. Marvelous portraits and wonderful anecdotes appear almost as separate volumes on a library shelf. With extraordinary skill, White weaves all these stories seamlessly together.

Death, though, is the bookend at either edge of the author's memory. Brice, who never quite materializes as a real-life person, occupies simultaneously the beginning and the end of this work. As White plunges into his own past, into his early life in Ohio and his difficult relationship with his family, his early days in New York and his removal to first Rome then Paris, the present—his grief—is never forgotten.

But not until the very end, when the whetted appetite to understand the relationship between Brice and White is insatiable, does White look at it. Just when the door is open, he slams it shut: "I can't go on. I can't tell this story, neither its happy beginning nor its tragic end...the look of his face, dead, when I awakened at dawn, his mouth open, his eyes startled, as though he'd seen something dreadful."

We all have. The AIDS Quilt is easier to take than the sight of the embalmed bodies of all those we have loved and lost. What is remarkable about *The Farewell Symphony*, and what makes it so vitally alive, is that it is an almost mythic rite and indulgence in grief without the nasty details of the funeral. Its title, based on Joseph Haydn's symphony of the same name in which the musicians one by one leave the stage until there is a single violinist left, suggests the romantic, the elegiac. White is the lone violinist on the stage of his world.

The message here is clear, profound and deeply, intensely offered. *Symphony* also represents the last installment of a trilogy (hopefully not the last work of the author) that includes *A Boy's Own Story* and the disappointing *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. Neither work contributes to this one, nor, for that matter, to the other. *The Farewell Symphony* stands on its own as a definitive performance. Bravo!

OPENLY BOB

Bob Smith
Rob Weisbach Books, 1997; \$23 cloth

To know comedian Bob Smith's work is to love him. To read him is to love him more. *Openly Bob* is a marvelous collection of comic, presumably biographical essays that work as well in print as in a live performance. If you don't already know it, Bob Smith is, in a word, hilarious. So is his book.

Openly Bob reads like a protracted one-man show, with Smith taking on subjects and absolutely exhausting them with his point of view. There are 13 chapters, and each of them is like a combined *Seinfeld-I Love Lucy* episode, though less because of verbal hijinks and overly contrived inanity, and more because of exquisite timing. Smith's gifts are immediately apparent.

In the first chapter, "Nostradamus Said There Would Be Days Like This," Smith and his lover are visiting Smith's parents in Buffalo for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Referring to his mother's food obsession, the author writes: "The refrigerator is so overstuffed that you can practically see the eggs pressing through the door. It's as if she's terrified that one of her children will have a sudden craving for a food that can't be procured immediately."

The degree to which Smith succeeds at this sitcom effect is startling, because on the page, hilarity isn't easy to achieve. When it does succeed it isn't easy to sustain, particularly when the written performance is intended to evoke a laugh track kind of response from the reader. Having been a sitcom writer definitely works to the author's advantage here, providing just the right amount of performance self-consciousness to make the reader aware that Smith is very aware of the reader. Moreover, there is nothing cold or detached about Smith's routine; it is surprisingly generous, revealing and personal.

By far the best and most memorable chapter is "Hurricane." The author, his lover and a house full of queer renters on Cape Cod brace themselves for Hurricane Bob. A cast of collectible characters, wonderful asides and digressions, and observations go on for nearly 50 pages. Never once is it not tickling.

Two quibbles: "A Few Notes on Sex Education" is preachy and dull, and seems part of some-



Bob Smith

body else's book, possibly Susie Bright's. The last chapter, "Heart Failure," about the death and funeral of Smith's father, seems an unnecessarily grim finish to an otherwise up-tempo book. No matter how much the author undercuts the gloom with humor, the fun simply isn't there. Of course, in tragedy there is always comedy, and perhaps the role of the comic is to find the laugh track even in the most heartbreaking silences.

Nevertheless, *Openly Bob* definitely and superiorly plays to the house.

Reviews by Shawn Stewart Ruff

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