

BOOKS



White on Proust

Prolific writer and modern gay icon Edmund White visits Portland this month to talk about one of his predecessors. Here's a little sneak preview.

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Edmund White has unequivocally been one of the most valuable participants in post-Stonewall gay culture, from his involvement in the Violet Quill, a group of gay writers formed in New York in the early '70s, to his own successful career as a novelist, essayist, biographer and cultural critic.

He co-wrote the original 1977 *The Joy of Gay Sex*, and his 1982 autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story* is widely considered a landmark of contemporary gay fiction.

In the '90s, White turned his focus to literary biography, writing on the lives of two of the 20th century's most revered novelists, both gay men: Marcel Proust, whose *Remembrance of Things Past* (1917-1927) is considered one of the greatest novels of all time, and Jean Genet, whose midcentury novels of transgressive, dangerous and criminal homosexual existence were seen as beautiful allegorical texts.

As a modern cultural figure, White himself can be described as a more approachable, contemporary version of Gore Vidal. He is a man of learning whose writing is expansive, insightful, informative and invigorating.

This month White will be in Portland discussing his book on Proust as part of the Portland Arts and Lectures series. *Just Out* interviewed him via e-mail about Proust, Genet and gay writing today.

Christopher McQuain: You'll be discussing Marcel Proust, on whom you've written a biography. Aside from Proust and Jean Genet, who are your "writer-muses"?

Edmund White: Two of the most important influences on my own writing are Christopher

Isherwood and Vladimir Nabokov—Isherwood as a model of clarity and sincerity, Nabokov as someone gifted with a deeply sensuous approach to the material world and a tirelessly inventive style. I have always admired Colette for her huge vocabulary, her unexpected take on love and sex and her passionate response to nature.

Among living gay writers, the three that make me feel that I'm not alone are Alan Hollinghurst, Andrew Holleran and David Levitt.

CM: Do you consider Proust a more primary influence than Genet?

EW: Proust is the bigger influence, the writer I have reread the most often at crucial points in my life, starting in high school and continuing at strategic moments in my subsequent career.

CM: Would the lives and work of Proust or Genet be so inspired if their sexuality had not been the focus of internal and external conflict? Were these difficulties a sort of backhanded "gift" that will be denied to current and future gay writers?

EW: That is a fascinating question and hard to speculate about. Genet, of course, was quite open about his sexuality and a genius so perhaps his example disproves the idea inherent in your question.

To be sure, Genet had no available positive metaphor for homosexuality. Like everyone else of his epoch he could choose only among three models—homosexuality as crime, as sin or as illness. Whereas most middle-class authors chose the illness metaphor (as a claim on the heterosexual reader's sympathy), Genet

chose the other two (sin and crime), which makes his fiction much stronger than that of his gay contemporaries.

Proust did transpose many of his gay experiences into heterosexual terms, just as he reconstituted his Jewish mother as a Catholic, and as he converted his father from a doctor to a government minister. These transpositions from the gay autobiographical reality to the straight fictional invention is, in fact, one of the most creative aspects of his novel.

CM: Would you have any interest in writing a biography of a writer or other figure who was not gay?

EW: Yes, of course. I'm working on a historical novel now that is based on the life of Frances Wright, a Scottish woman (heterosexual) who founded a disastrous utopian colony in Tennessee in the 1820s.

CM: What does being a "gay writer" mean to you?

EW: I think the era of gay fiction is coming to an end, mainly because there's no longer much of an audience for it. In the 1970s gay fiction was exciting to writer and reader alike because new areas of experience—cultural, sociological, intimate and political—were being mapped. But now gay culture has assumed its permanent form, perhaps.

CM: Do you ever feel you've been pigeonholed as a gay apologist, shifting the focus away from the merits of your work?

EW: Although writers pretend they are indifferent to their audience, in fact they are usually more sensitive to it than they admit. The audience, naturally, can be a small coterie rather than the general public, but a coterie's expectations can be all the more tyrannical.

Gay novelists of my generation (Larry Kramer, Felice Picano, Andrew Holleran, Armistead Maupin, Paul Monette) were subjected to a rigorous examination, book after book. For instance, I can remember my 1978 novel *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* was criti-

cized at the time for showing a gay man as the product of a suffocating mother and absent father—the neo-Freudian explanation of homosexuality that the gay community had rejected. Of course I argued feebly that I had been showing one mother, a particular father, an individual son, and that I was not at all proposing a general etiology. But at that moment in gay history there were still so few representations of gay men or lesbians that inevitably each portrait was taken as generic.

Gay critics asked if a new novel gave young gays positive role models. Did it endorse clichés about gay effeminacy, bitchiness, immaturity? Did it show the gay community as suitably progressive and socialist and united with blacks, women and other minorities? Did it show Asian men as sexually passive (a dangerous cliché)? Did it present black men as well-endowed studs (an equally destructive assumption)?

Some of this emphasis on political correctness... was a useful corrective to unexamined prejudices, but gay writers often perceived gay critics as narrow and Stalinist. One solution was to insist that gay critics did not speak for the general gay reader.

This early clash between critics and novelists eventually developed into a much larger

split between gay academics and theorists on the one side and the gay creative community on the other. In the 1980s, when queer theory was the most lively intellectual trend in the States, this split appeared particularly dramatic. Gay novelists were overshadowed by more glamorous queer theorists.

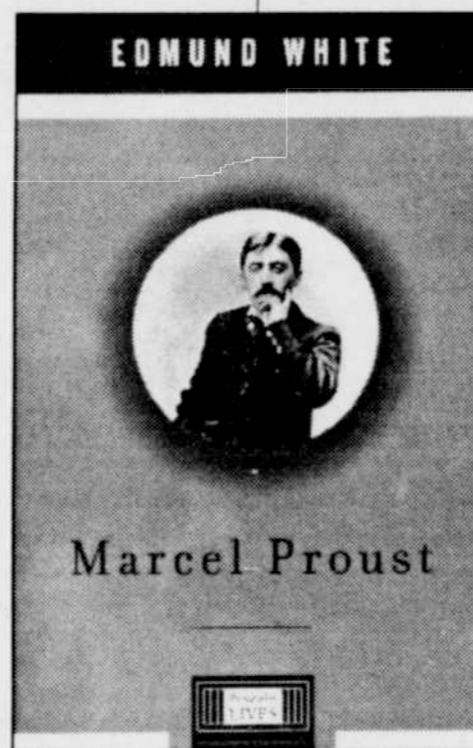
CM: In a gay culture that often seems as vacuous as mainstream pop culture, is there still a place for relatively difficult art, such as the novels of Proust and Genet?

EW: There will always be a coterie of gay readers who will prize their sophis-

tication and depth, their refinement and originality. □

Portland Arts & Lectures presents EDMUND WHITE along with fellow biographers Francine du Plessix Gray and James Atlas 7:30 p.m. Jan. 16 at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. For tickets call 503-227-2583.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.



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