

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY
by Michael Chabon. Picador USA, 2000; \$15 softcover.

Michael Chabon, author of *The Wonder Boys*, took home a Pulitzer for his latest, which traces the lives, loves, fears and dreams of two titular Jewish cousins, immigrant Josef Kavalier and Brooklynite Sammy Clay, as they make it big creating comic books during the medium's golden age (roughly from the end of the Depression through the end of World War II).

Like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, this novel is profound, epic and rich with true, relevant, stirring themes. Its author's evident love of language doesn't prevent it from being that rarity—literary, serious and an exciting, funny page-turner.

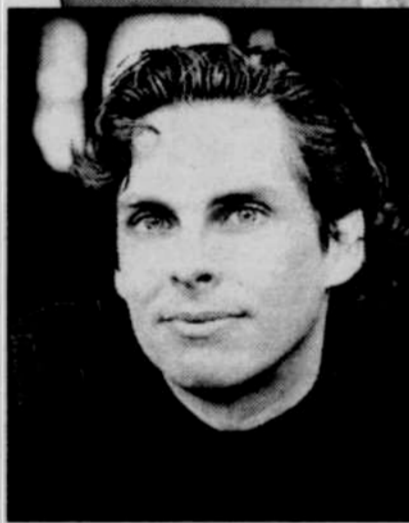
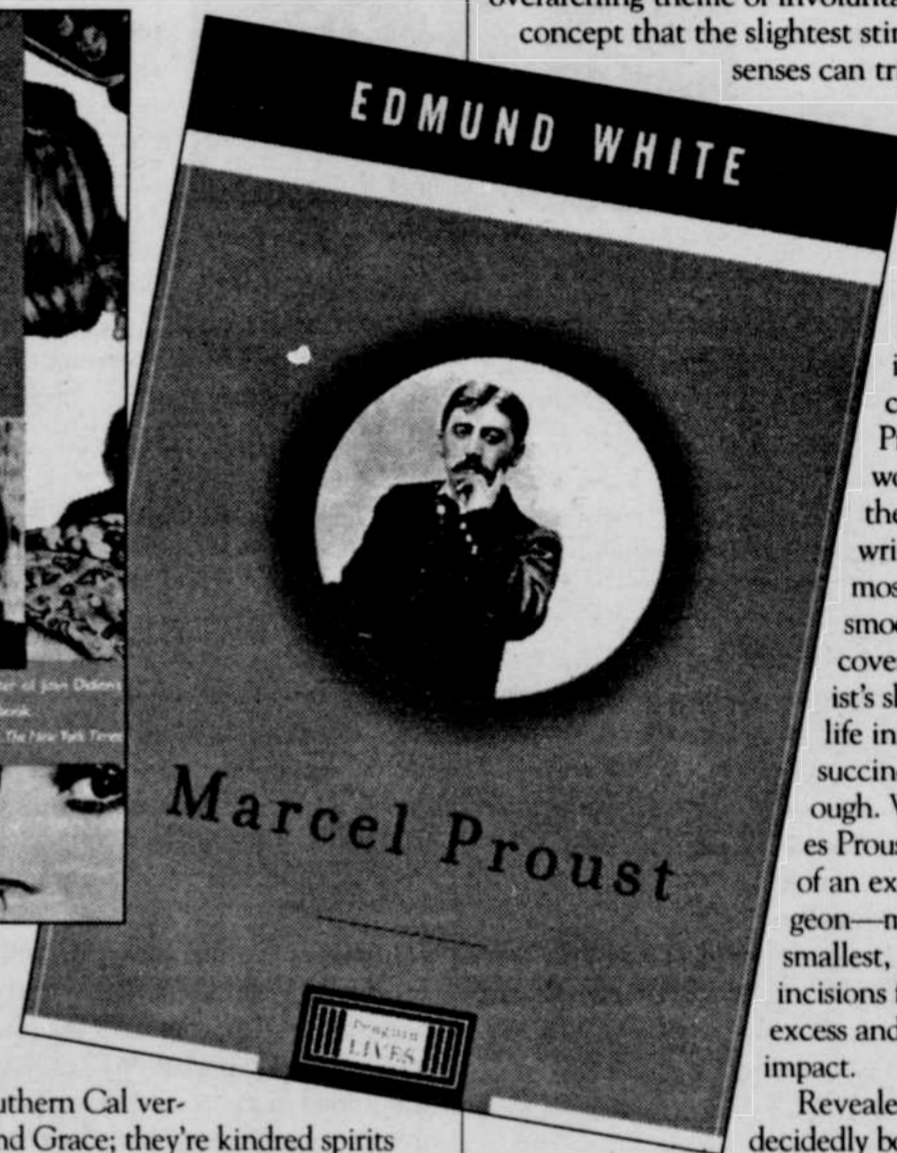
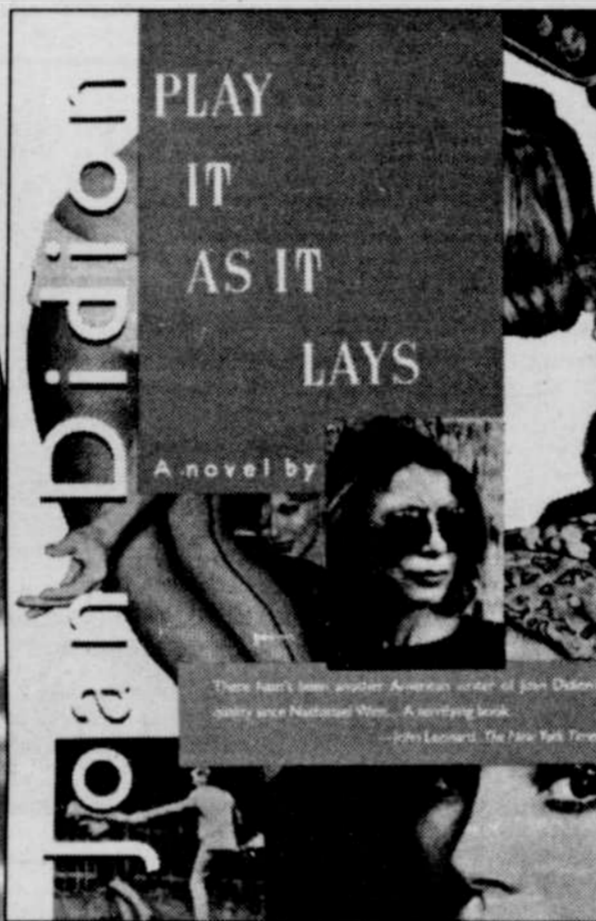
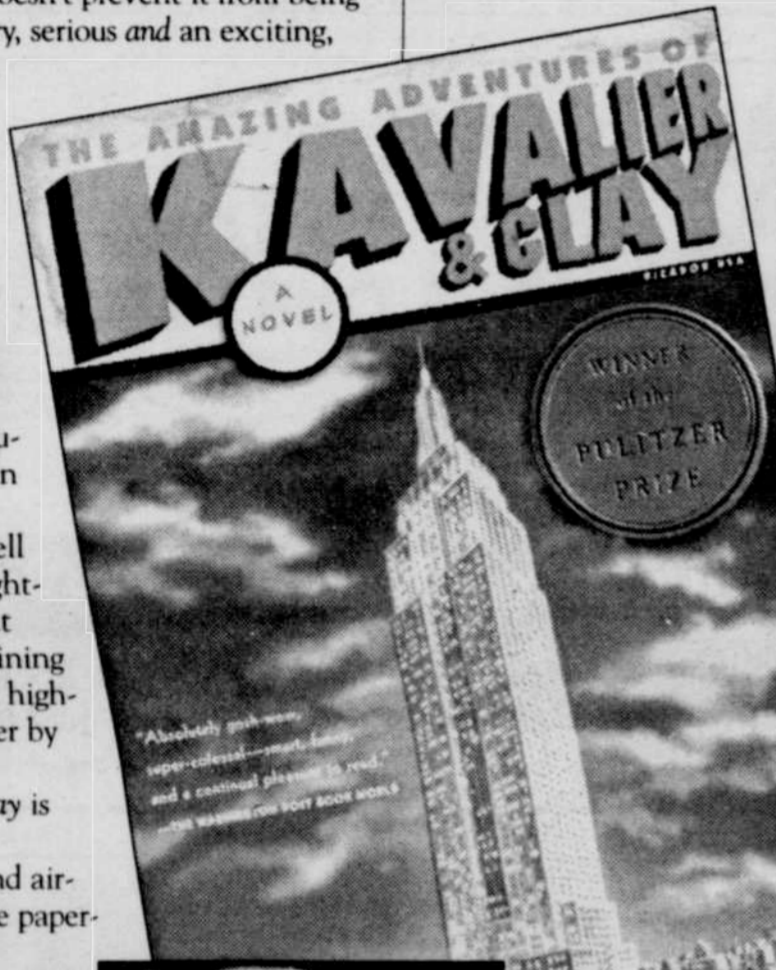
Also, like Franzen, Chabon pulls off the considerable feat of depicting a gay lead character in a tender yet wholly realistic light. His treatment of Sammy's homosexuality is exemplary in that the (straight) author is clearly well informed and enlightened on the subject while avoiding defining this endearing and highly original character by his orientation.

Kavalier and Clay is now available in a portable, beach- and airplane-friendly trade paperback edition.

—Christopher McQuain

PLAY IT AS IT LAYS
by Joan Didion. Noonday Press reprint edition, 1990; \$13 softcover.

Critics tend to rag on this fine, addictive 1970 novel, seemingly because it's an "unliterary" story by a "literary" writer. It's basically *Valley of the Dolls*, except instead of going for exploitative tit-



A Pulitzer Prize winner and adorable to boot: Michael Chabon should have been gay

illation, Didion pushes pill-popping, booze-guzzling, bed-hopping, anything-goes Hollywood ennui to the point of brutally gorgeous existential clarity. *Play It as It Lays* relates the downward spiral of an actress named Maria, her estranged husband, her lovers and her only real friend, a married bisexual called BZ who, despite his expertly jaded front, is less capable than the protagonist of handling the wearying emotional endurance test that is their weightless, pointlessly privileged showbiz existence.

BZ and Maria are like Ingmar Bergman's Southern Cal version of Will and Grace; they're kindred spirits and central characters because they're the only ones who've had to learn what "nothing" means.

The author's style is so perfectly anti-psychological—thoroughly and willfully uncluttered by distracting analyses—that by the time you've made it to the defiant release of tension on the last page, you may actually crave a value judgment. Didion doesn't patronize her characters or us with that, but she does offer us Maria's choice, and she's arranged it beautifully, so that it feels like a fairy-tale ending for fatalists.

—CM

MARCEL PROUST
by Edmund White. Viking Penguin, 1999; \$19.95 hardcover.

Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the gargantuan novel published between 1917 and 1927, was widely considered throughout the second half of the past century as the greatest novel of its time. Form-shattering and avant-garde, it nevertheless retains the ageless qualities of beauty and meaning that endear a work of art to the public.

Indeed, Proust has been so constantly and reverentially discussed that, though few have actually read all of *Remembrance's* seven volumes (comprising upward of 4,000 pages), the term "Proustian" is widely used to refer to his overarching theme of involuntary recall—the concept that the slightest stimulation of the

senses can trigger the most deeply buried memories.

Marcel Proust, a diminutive biography by Edmund White, is dwarfed by comparison to Proust's signature work. However, the celebrated gay writer makes the most of every word, smoothly and evenly covering the novelist's short, eventful life in a manner both succinct and thorough. White approaches Proust with the skill of an experienced surgeon—making the smallest, most precise incisions for minimal excess and maximum impact.

Revealed are Proust's decidedly bourgeois childhood; an adolescence spent attending France's most exclusive schools; the discovery and development of his literary gifts; his wasted young adult days as an intermittent writer and full-time playboy with a sycophantic, social-climbing streak; his constantly denied but freely practiced homosexuality; and, finally, the grueling and thankless task of writing his masterpiece. White also makes brief, tantalizing mentions of Proust's meetings with other famous gay culture heroes—Oscar Wilde and Jean Cocteau.

Proust's poor health and ambivalence

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