

BOOKS

Sketches of memory

The devastation of AIDS is forefront in effective memoirs



Edmund White and Hubert Sorin's literary and literal sketches make for touching memoir in *Our Paris*

OUR PARIS: SKETCHES FROM MEMORY by Edmund White. Ecco Press, 2002; \$19.95 hardcover.

Edmund White is a singularly special writer. He may be, along with the equally compulsory but more cerebrally detached Gore Vidal, the most distinguished gay male literary figure writing today.

White's work is radiant, alive and intellectually vibrant, and acclaim has followed him throughout his slew of published work beginning in the early 1970s. (Among other kudos, he's been made an officer of the French Order of Arts and Letters.) But, as attested to by his appealing appearance at last year's Portland Arts and Lectures series, he hasn't let this well-deserved acknowledgment prevent him from having a down-to-earth, self-effacing, unassuming personality.



It's that personality that shines through in *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*. Rereleased after its original publication in 1994, this brief series of conversationally but beautifully written anecdotes covers White's rather eventful experiences in the French capital, his adopted hometown for 16 years.

The author's literary sketches are accompanied by penciled ones by his partner, Hubert Sorin, who was suffering from AIDS throughout the book's creation and died shortly after it was completed. The circumstances—which must surely have been painful and difficult—are, however, belied by the book's exuberant, celebratory tone.

Our Paris is full of dropped names and juicy, gossipy stories. White's little black book apparently contains not only the names of "big" celebs (like Tina Turner and the descendants of Nabokov and Hemingway) but eccentric, absurd characters such as Pierre Guyotat, a long-winded, avant-garde novelist whose fame has thankfully not spread beyond the French border; U.S. jeweler and Barbie doll

collector Billy Boy; and an amusing assortment of French grocers, landladies and prostitutes.

Sorin's charming, cartoonish drawings make a fine complement for the text. Especially smile-inducing are his humorously exaggerated depictions of himself, White and their basset hound, Fred.

The book's frivolity is tempered by White's reflective introduction and afterword, in which he speaks more seriously about Sorin's disease and his own. (Though he's never fallen ill with AIDS, he was diagnosed with HIV in 1985.) When he writes of his lover's expatriate childhood in Ethiopia, their life together in Paris and the way their artistic collaboration seemed to ease Sorin's suffering, it not only clarifies the book's context, it's also incredibly, romantically moving.

Our Paris may be full of fun and glamorous people and events, but it's no *Year in Provence*. White's endearing vulnerability and bemusement at his own odd moments of bitchiness and superficiality make his book read less like a self-satisfied recounting of inimitably rarified experience than a generous confidence from a good friend.

—Christopher McQuain

A BOY I ONCE KNEW: WHAT A TEACHER LEARNED FROM HER STUDENT by Elizabeth Stone. Algonquin Books, 2002; \$19.95 hardcover.

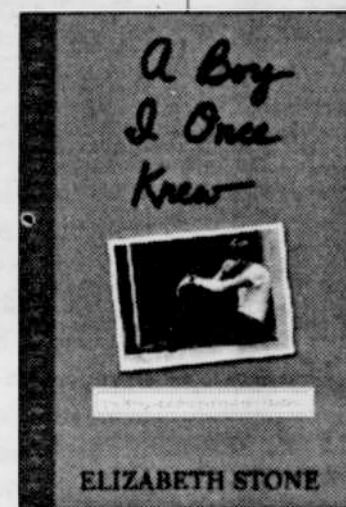
One morning a package containing 10 years of diaries arrives at teacher Elizabeth Stone's door. She hasn't seen nor spoken to the young writer, Vincent, since he was a student of hers 25 years before. Yet he has bequeathed his diaries to her with the request she create a book from them.

For the next three years, Stone immerses herself in the diaries (more than 3,500 pages) and in Vincent's life as a gay man living in San Francisco during the height of the AIDS epidemic. She reads the memoir page by page, determined to experience Vincent's day-to-day life exactly as he did, refusing to skip ahead, even though she knows the final inexorable outcome. In the process, she learns how to connect with memories of lost loved ones and how to care for her aging mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's.

Heartfelt and sincere, *A Boy I Once Knew* is simple and yet sometimes difficult to read as we witness and become angry (right along with Stone) at Vincent's self-destructive ways, including heavy drug use and unprotected sex.

Yet despite the terse and often inexpressive diary entries, Stone reveals the young man's humanity and allows it to shine. In the process, we are reminded that it is never too late to live and love fully.

—Floyd Sklover



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