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**BOOKS**

**Letters to an angry young man**

James Harmon provides chicken soup for the hipster soul

BY FLOYD SKLAVER



James Harmon with "Lucy and Linda Liplocked #1"—part of his *I Can't Afford Terry Richardson* series

Funky philosophers. Social gadflies. Cyber-punks. Radical academics.

These, along with a mixed assortment of "raconteurs, literary outlaws and obscure but wildly talented poets" fill the pages of Oregon native James Harmon's new collection, *Take My Advice: Letters to the Next Generation from People Who Know a Thing or Two*. It's a provocative compendium of 79 essays written by the folks he admires: everyone from Bette Davis to Betty Paige, from Ram Dass to Dr. Laura (of all people) as well as Camille Paglia, Ken Kesey, Linda Barry and William S. Burroughs.

"I wanted to mix highbrow and lowbrow," he says. "I hate the word 'eclectic' because it sounds like 1984 *House & Gardens*, but that's my taste. It's all over the map."

Along with the wisdom, sages in *Take My Advice* urge young people to have the courage to follow their hearts, to be alternative and not to conform. It's a book for artists and would-be artists, and its message of unconventionality is sure to resonate with queer readers.

Such messages include activist Abbie Hoffman's "Don't piss on the shoes of someone standing behind you," actor Joe Dallesandro's

"If you happen to be beautiful...have some dirty pictures taken to look back on when things get wrinkled" and bon vivant Quentin Crisp's "Don't tell your mother anything; whatever you say will one day be used against you."

Harmon began work on the book in 1989 when, as a 22-year-old, self-described "angry, cynical, ironic, black-clad, cafe-dwelling, cigarette-puffing, wannabe-artist poseur," he began sending letters to the people he admired.

"I was surrounded by idiots, and I wanted mentors," the bi editor and photographer says of growing up in Banks, a small town in rural Washington County. "I thought these people were really cool and would make great teachers."

Harmon found his first teachers in books. "I hibernated in my room," he says, "and devoured Gore Vidal, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams. I punched holes in the walls and listened to

Joe Williams and Connie Francis and cried a lot.... When people ask where I went to school, I say, 'The Multnomah County Library, and I summered on the front porch.'"

Inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, a collection of correspondence to a struggling artist seeking guidance, Harmon asked mentors if they could offer one piece of advice to young people, what would it be? The first reply came from none other than Katharine Hepburn, who said simply, "Work as hard as you can, whatever you do, and try to spread generosity of spirit."

With contributors like these, it didn't take long for the young Harmon to find a publisher. But he soon realized they had different visions of the book. "What the publisher wanted was a warm, goey book...the literary equivalent of 'Up with People'...I was damn sure it was going to be different."

Being a "discerning and critical-minded creature by nature," Harmon ignored the advice of the publisher ("a bit contradictory when compiling a book on taking advice," he admits) and continued soliciting the opinions of his countercultural icons. Eventually, he felt that in order to be true to his vision he needed to pull

the book from publication, and the letters languished in public storage for close to a decade.

"When I hit the big 3-0, I realized I'd never attack any of my other creative endeavors if I allowed these letters to remain unpublished," Harmon writes in the book's foreword. He found another publisher and began contacting even more artists, writers and social critics.

Originally intending to target 20-somethings ("kindred spirits of mine...outcasts, misfits and black sheep"), Harmon "kept stretching the demographic as I got older to include myself." But the mixture of advice, wisdom, sentiment and rants seems to be capturing the zeitgeist of the nation.

Since its publication last spring, the book has received a tremendous reception, including a rave review in *O, The Oprah Magazine*. ("I love Oprah, I love Oprah, I love Oprah," Harmon intones.) He was also the subject of a two-page spread in *Abercrombie & Fitch Quarterly*. ("When you're over 30, you need to sign a release saying that you'll keep your clothes on," he jokes.)

Harmon, who now lives in Palm Springs, Calif., but continues to visit his parents in Banks, is relishing his success precisely because it was a long time coming. "I waited tables for 11 years, and if I hadn't kept falling in love with idiot boys and girls, I would have done this a lot sooner." (He recognized his bisexuality at an early age, "although when you are singing Julie Andrews at age 2, I don't think you need to worry about coming out.")

With the success of *Take My Advice*, Harmon is able to concentrate exclusively on writing and already has two projects in the works. One is a coffee table book called *Lugs, Thugs and Big Galoots* that will feature his own photographs of beautiful "bad boys." The other is *The Big Bad Bette Davis Book*, in which he asks famous writers to deconstruct and write about one of Davis' films.

When asked about any other ambitions, the rebel editor unhesitatingly answers, "To be Jake Gyllenhaal's jockstrap." Now, there's advice worth taking. **JK**

Feel free to contact JAMES HARMON with advice of your own at [youttakeitandlikeit@yahoo.com](mailto:youttakeitandlikeit@yahoo.com).

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lancer writer.

Excerpts from *Take My Advice: Letters to the Next Generation from People Who Know a Thing or Two*

"Choose your friends carefully. Many of the people you know in high school and college will wind up selling insurance."

—Dan Jenkins, writer

"Find a person to love who enlarges the world for you."

—Scott Russell Sanders, writer

"Burn your bridges.... It's the best way I know of not going back."

—Bette Davis, actress

"Beware of whores who say they don't want money. *The hell they don't.* What they mean is they want MORE MONEY, much more."

—William S. Burroughs, aesthetic terrorist

"Assume that all governments lie. Do not accept the idea that the violence of war can be justified by claiming to prevent a larger violence. Understand that all war is a war against children, and therefore can not be justified, whatever the reason."

—Howard Zinn, historian

"Remember what your driver's education teacher...always told you: *Good God, slow down.*"

—Richard Powers, writer

"At least once a month, remind yourself that your purpose on earth is to enlarge your soul, light up your brain and liberate your spirit."

—Tom Robbins, writer

