

REVIEWS

WHY THE LONG FACE: THE ADVENTURES OF A TRULY INDEPENDENT ACTOR
by Craig Chester; LA Weekly Books, 2003; \$23.95 hardcover

Craig Chester is one of very few openly gay actors in Hollywood. Although not yet a household name, he has appeared in 15 films, including *Swoon*, *Kiss Me Guido* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*.

His new autobiography, *Why the Long Face: The Adventures of a Truly Independent Actor*, details his childhood as the son of religious zealots in suburban Texas and follows him as he becomes a working actor and outspoken gay rights advocate.

Through a series of brutally honest and painfully funny episodes, Chester recounts his humiliating experiences growing up gay outside Dallas. He describes himself as "having the athletic ability of a throw pillow" and "painfully shy, socially retarded," while his doting mother tells relatives, "He's not a sissy—he's special!"

Among the many humiliations he suffers are being confused for a girl at summer camp and wearing a homemade Halloween costume to elementary school, where they aren't celebrating "the devil's holiday" any longer.

Just when he thought things couldn't get worse, at age 11 Chester shows symptoms of Long Face Syndrome, a genetic disorder that stretches his face into an exaggerated frown and that forces him to undergo a series of agonizing operations.

Eventually he moves to New York, where he settles on a career focused on independent films because he steadfastly insists on being openly gay. "Coming out once you have a mansion and a Range Rover," he says, "isn't really the same as putting your ass on the line from the get-go."

Throughout the stories, Chester's humor and humanity are always evident, although the tales of his childhood are more interesting and better written than some of the later ones. All in all, the author deserves admiration for his bravery and steadfastness. One certainly wishes more actors (Sean Hayes comes to mind, for one) had such courage and convictions.

—Floyd Sklaver

ARROYO
by Summer Wood; Chronicle Books, 2002; \$14.95 paperback

This first novel by Summer Wood, originally published in 2001, offers readers a fly-on-the-wall view of the fictional, middle-of-nowhere town of Los Fuegos, N.M., filled with characters haunted by their past and unsure about their future.

When Willie Lee Woolston, new to Los Fuegos and trying to shake her past, meets naturalist Chavela Lopez, the two hit it off instantly but struggle to overcome their fears of loving each other. We also meet Hector, the aging fix-it man who is haunted by his lost brother, and



THE ADVENTURES OF A TRULY INDEPENDENT ACTOR

teen-age Mattie, who learns the ropes of love from Roxy, a girl whose family was just passing through but ended up staying for years in the boxcars outside town. The matronly Lupe, who runs the local cafe, keeps them all well fed with fried sweet dough and green chiles.

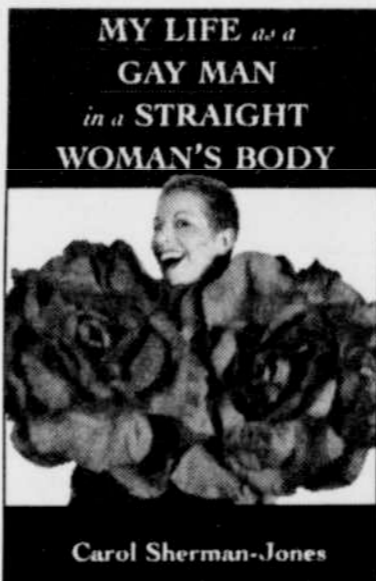
Wood writes in staccato sentences and peppers the work with bits of Spanish; the result is a beautifully rhythmic prose that carries the reader through the lives of a remarkable tumble of characters. The vivid tastes, sights and sounds of *Arroyo*

make up for a slightly scattered plot about loving, losing and loving again.

—Karen Kudej

MY LIFE AS A GAY MAN IN A STRAIGHT WOMAN'S BODY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
by Carol Sherman-Jones; Five Star Publications, 2002; \$14.95 softcover

Carol Sherman-Jones is not nearly so interesting a person that she actually feels herself to be a gay man trapped in a woman's body; she simply came up with a rather misleading way to say she's a straight girl who's friends with a lot of gay guys. (There's a blunt, clichéd, widely used euphemism for it, but maybe that doesn't make a good book title.)



That discrepancy is why at least a good half of Sherman-Jones' autobiography is, while not unreadable, not really worth reading. She's someone who had a troubled childhood, has known some colorful people in her time, has had some ups and downs in regard to her relationships and self-worth, has experienced good luck and bad in business and has some funny stories—though never as funny as the cutesy-confessional, somewhat self-impressed tone seems to imply.

Sherman-Jones lightly turns every crisis and fuck-up into a Message of Hope or a toot of her own horn (often both), destroying the prospect of much real insight or humor.

There are oases wherein the author thankfully restrains her inner cheerleader. In the space of just a few pages, she goes from "What could I possibly talk to my nice, upper-middle-class...sister about? Getting loaded and waking up in strange places? Petty theft...being the lookout for a shaky cocaine heist?" to "I applied for a job at T.G.I. Friday's" to "I love rainbows!" to "I just knew I was destined to be a high-class hooker." It's self-deprecating, insane and hilarious—a glimpse into what the book could've been.

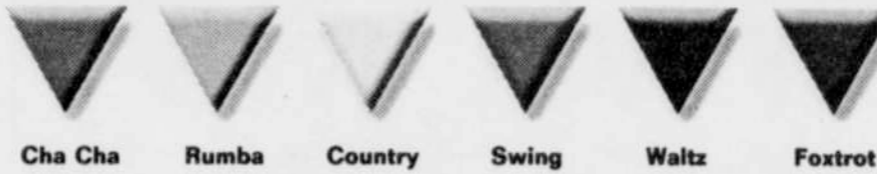
Unfortunately, buried as they are under a smothering blanket of empty self-help-isms, these dashes of worthwhile are far too little to save an enterprise that falls too short of justifying its solipsism.

—Christopher McQuain

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