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BOOKS

Traveling by Swan

Portland author lets loose
Three Husbands
and a stateful of ghosts

BY FLOYD SKLAVER



Donald Olson kicks back at home in Northwest having spent the summer publishing a new novel and producing his latest play

Donald Olson has become a Swan.

The prolific travel writer, playwright and author has a new book and a new name. Olson's sixth novel, *My Three Husbands*, is published under the pseudonym Swan Adamson. (His previous novel, *Queer Corners*, is a fictionalized account of the events surrounding 1992's Measure 9.)

"I was going out on a limb on this book," he says, "because I was writing in the voice of a 25-year-old American woman.... The voice had to be hers. When I wrote *My Three Husbands*, I felt like a book with that title and the name Donald Olson would be a very different novel from one with an ambiguous [sounding] author."

Although he intentionally chose a sexually ambiguous name to avoid preconceived notions, in Scandinavia (home of Olson's ancestors) Swan is a popular man's name and the name of his great uncle, a "hard-drinking" logger from Minnesota.

"He was not a literary character at all," notes Olson. "But his name always had resonance to me in a land where everyone was a Johnson or a Larson or an Olson. I've always wanted to use the name Swan Adamson—it seems so much more romantic and dashing than Donald Olson."

My Three Husbands is a comic novel set in Portland that follows the adventures of young Venus, who has been unlucky in love. When the thrice-married woman becomes engaged to husband No. 4, her two gay fathers offer the newlyweds a luxury honeymoon at a wilderness resort in Idaho. The catch: Both dads are tagging along.

"I think it's the only novel with a family honeymoon," Olson laughs. "It's kind of a family story, very much about relationships with a lot of gay subplots. The gay dads have been in a relationship for 20 years, and it's contrasted with Venus' relationships, which last nine months at the longest."

Olson certainly knows about long-term relationships. He and his partner, architect Gary Larson, recently celebrated their 25th anniversary. They met in 1978 at the Rafter, a downtown piano bar/disco. Today they live in Northwest Portland in what Olson describes as "a treehouse."

Besides novels, the 53-year-old pens travel books and plays. His latest play, *Oregon Ghosts*, just completed a sold-out run at the Lakewood Theater Company in Lake Oswego. With original music by Olson, it tells the story of three haunted houses in Oregon: the Heceta Head lighthouse near Florence, the Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City and the White Eagle in North Portland.

Oregon Ghosts combines Olson's fascination with history and the supernatural. "I've always had an interest in ghosts," he shares. "I started reading about parapsychology at 8 or 10 years old. People tell about ghosts by

telling about the manifestations. They can tell you what happened, and they can conjecture, but no one really knows."

The closest Olson ever came to a spirit was at Heceta Head while researching *Oregon Ghosts*. The only lighthouse keeper's house left on the Oregon coast, the building has been turned into a bed-and-breakfast. "I'd like to believe I heard the ghost," Olson says. "Who knows? But I heard a series of rappings, and the room got so hot I could barely breathe."

But that's the closest he's ever gotten so far. "I've never had an experience where I actually encountered a ghost, but many of my friends have, and I believe them."

While novels and plays are his true passion, Olson actually supports himself by writing travel books such as *England for Dummies*, which received the 2002 Lowell Thomas Travel Writing Award for Best Guidebook. The honor is presented by the Society of American Travel Writers to recognize outstanding publications in the field of travel journalism.

His nine travel tomes also include *London for Dummies*, *Germany for Dummies*, *Fodor's Oregon* and the third edition of *Frommer's Gay & Lesbian Europe: The Top Cities & Resorts*.

Olson's articles have appeared in *The New York Times* and numerous other publications, including *Sunset* and *National Geographic's Guide to Small Town Escapes*. "The amount of travel writing I do allows me to pay my expenses in life," he explains, "but novels remain my first love."

Olson is at work on a sequel to *My Three Husbands*, titled *Happily Ever After*, and a travel guide about day trips from London, both due out next summer. [E]