

books

Politics as Usual

Former governor's autobiography disappoints

by Gary Morris

The Confession

by James E. McGreevey; Regan Books, 2006; \$26.95 hardcover

Former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey's August 2004 announcement that he was gay was a cause célèbre at the time, equally celebrated as an example of an American hero telling "my truth" and reviled as an immoral liar because he breached his oath of office and his marriage by engaging in an affair with a staff member.

Golan Cipel was a handsome Israeli employed in a vague advisory role involving homeland security, coalition building with the Orthodox Jewish community and public—and private, it seems—relations. Their love affair ended when McGreevey fired him for incompetence and an embittered Cipel allegedly tried to blackmail him for \$5 million. Cipel returned to Israel without collecting any cash, and McGreevey faded from sight after leaving office. He recently returned to the spotlight, and all major

media, with his *mea culpa* autobiography, *The Confession*.

Anyone expecting a steamy tell-all should look elsewhere.

McGreevey was raised as a good Catholic boy, conformist and upright and very careful about his self-image, and that early training seems to have made him reluctant to probe too deeply, despite the publisher's attempts to sell this as a frank, unsparing story. McGreevey does make a credible case for himself—and, by inference, anyone who leads a closeted life—as a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, based on years of rigid repression of his sexual orientation and the resulting psychological problems of dissociation and depression.

This self-portrait of a closet casualty and his redemption is probably the most interesting part of the book, though even here there are serious problems. The author seems to shrink from any vivid details of his actual gay life; what he claims was a life of serial anonymous sex is barely described



(perhaps to spare his supportive family, who are all over this book). Even the Cipel affair, which he claims changed his life by freeing him from the closet, is rendered in broad strokes.

Most disturbing is a tiny detail: McGreevey's life mate, Mark O'Donnell, isn't mentioned at all except in a brief caption under a photograph and one sentence in the acknowledgments. If McGreevey always longed for the kind of "authentic, integrated life" (his words) represented by being an out gay man living with his lover, wouldn't the lover merit some discussion? What is his life with Mark like? Did McGreevey succumb to an editor's homophobia, or perhaps his own? What is the point of his story if it's all process and no payoff? The author seems most engaged with himself ("my journey") and with politics, and *The Confession* ultimately feels more like an inside look at the day-to-day life of a self-consumed governor than a fleshed-out gay autobiography. 10

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.

The Naked Truth

Trashy memoirs take us inside the world of porn

by Stephen Blair

My Undoing: Love in the Thick of Sex, Drugs, Pornography and Prostitution

by Aiden Shaw; Carroll & Graf, 2006; \$15.95 softcover

Aiden Shaw has a ridiculous amount of experience under his belt.

The prodigiously endowed, HIV-positive British porn star has appeared in more than 50 films with randy titles like *Forced Entry*, *Grease Gums* and *Hand Jobs*.

When he's not hard at work at Falcon or Catalina Studios, he's a Renaissance man of sorts. He composes music and performs in a band called Whatever, and he has published novels and poetry collections.

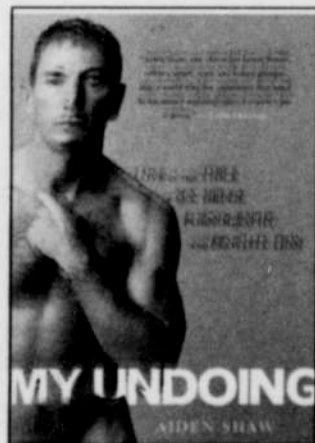
Heck, the writers of *Sex and the City* liked him so much that they named John Corbett's character after him.

Shaw, 40, just published the memoir *My Undoing*. Given the fact that he's naked on the front cover, he might as well have called it *My Undressing*. But don't get too excited, boys. In the photo Shaw's treasure trail ends right above his package o' plenty.

This revealing picture would probably ensure good sales even if the book sucked. Fortunately, Shaw is a reasonably compelling writer who balances juicy tidbits about prostitution gigs and recreational drug use with weighty accounts of his psychotherapy sessions and his bout with paralysis after a car accident. Most of all he chronicles his ongoing struggle to find true romance in an industry that values cum shots over heartfelt relationships.

It must be said, however, that *My Undoing* is a real limp dick when Shaw spends long and tedious stretches cataloging the mundane details of his daily life, such as doing laundry.

The most troubling aspect of the memoir is that Shaw does not seem particularly concerned about



practicing safe sex despite his HIV-positive status. In one scene, he complies when an HIV-negative man at a party asks him to ejaculate in him without wearing a condom. Shaw lets himself off the hook by implying that such indiscretions are inevitable when booze, drugs and horny men join forces.

Shaw is candid and engaging throughout most of his memoir, but it's hard to warm up to him when he dodges responsibility for extremely dangerous behavior.

Playground: A Childhood Lost Inside the Playboy Mansion

by Jennifer Saginor; Harper, 2006; \$13.95 softcover

I normally don't pay much attention to author photos. But Jennifer Saginor's mug shot for her memoir, *Playground*, is so odd that I flipped back to it dozens of times to seek refuge from the wretched prose.

The fuzzy photo depicts a 30-something woman with straight blond hair. Her sunglasses and her hipper-than-thou sneer are totally off-putting. Apparently Saginor wants to inform her readers that she's one hot ticket, but she looks so insincere that you can't help but brace yourself for an unpleasant 277 pages.

Playground is an unlikable book for sure, though it must be said that this knockoff of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* and Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* offers some unadulterated guilty pleasures.

Saginor's dubious claim to fame is that she spent much of her childhood cavorting at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles. She watched John Belushi have sex with a bouncy-breasted woman, and she started knocking back Quaaludes ages before she scored her driver's permit.

Her father, a famous physician known as "Dr. Feel Good," was part of Hugh Hefner's inner circle of friends. Saginor ultimately blames her parents for exposing her to sex, booze and drugs at such an early age. In a mystifying lapse of reason she exonerates Hefner, as though he had nothing to do with cultivating the libidinous environment at the mansion.

"I realize that Hef's the one person who never wronged me," she writes. "He allowed me to be a child in his midst."

Whatever helps you sleep at night, girlfriend.

The good news for queer readers is that *Playground* packs some serious lesbian heat, though Saginor's ongoing secret relationship with one of Hefner's girlfriends is a bit unnerving considering the author was underage at the time.

The author fares best when she inventories pop culture highlights of the Reagan era, from pop songs by Bananarama to Brat Pack movie classics like *The Breakfast Club*. Anyone who came of age in the '80s will feel pangs of nostalgia, even if they don't identify with Saginor's predicaments.

But in the end this book is irredeemably clichéd, and just as self-indulgent as Saginor's snapshot. 10

STEPHEN BLAIR is a Portland freelance writer. The first memoir he ever read was Martina Navratilova's *Martina*.

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