

books

Being a Man

Author deconstructs "the stigma of effeminacy"

by Nick Pell

It might be hyperbole to say Jack Malebranche has written the manifesto queer men have been waiting for, but manifestos invite overstatement and require little justification. Rather than argue a position, they claim ideological turf.

The author of *Androphilia: Rejecting the Gay Identity, Reclaiming Masculinity* explicitly states, "I didn't write this book for gays." Rather, his target audience is "men who love men but who are sick to death of the gay community." Gay culture, Malebranche claims, has less to do with sexual preference than it does subculture, slang and stereotypes. Far from being a harmless diversion, the gay subculture imposes a false separation between heterosexual and homosexual men. This sexual apartheid not only negatively affects homosexuals, but also heterosexuals who acquire homophobic ideas in reaction to what Malebranche considers a small, vocal minority of "queenie" gay men grabbing all the attention.

In a scant 120 pages, Malebranche savagely deconstructs the gay community from the intimate perspective that only an insider can offer. A former New York City club kid and go-go dancer who did time in post-Stonewall Greenwich Village, he is no stranger to gay culture.

Androphilia does not argue for reforming the gay community. Instead, Malebranche argues for secession, seeking to create a loose fraternity of men who love men, free from the constraints of recent history. Its proclamation that "Gay is dead" might be premature, but *Androphilia* certainly represents another nail in the coffin. While Malebranche grants that the gay rights movement was "a successful tool in liberating same-sex-inclined persons from very real oppression," he posits a clear vision of how the gay rights movement degenerated. Organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation inflame fear and paranoia while presenting an inaccurate and (above all) neutered version of homosexuality.

"Having brought an end to police harassment and widespread discrimination, the gay rights movement has turned to nitpicking" and maintains "the illusion of oppression and victimization so that hundreds of thousands of checkbook revolutionaries can believe that they are fighting for their own freedom."

Same-sex marriage, according to Malebranche, represents the ultimate in nitpicking. He uses the 500-pound gorilla of perennial gay infidelity as evidence for the absurdity of such a campaign. "I've spoken to many gays who, while angry about the fact that they can't get married, have never really even had a successful long-term relationship," he writes, championing the libertarian solution of "moderate domestic partnership and civil union laws that would be more flexible and more satisfactory for

a broader range of people."

However, he's clearly interested in more than just thumbing his nose at gay liberals. "The stigma of effeminacy" forced Malebranche's pen to paper. He begins his discussion of the stigma with Bishop Alexander of Diospolis, who was castrated and forced to walk the streets as a stark warning to homosexuals (and, apparently, an offering to Yahweh). While attempting to explain ancient and medieval stigmas against effeminacy—somewhat spuriously, as in antiquity "effeminate" referred, *ipso facto*, to weakness and a shirking of male responsibility—he also reminds the reader of history's diverse homosexualities, paying special (if not obsessive) attention to the role of same-sex-attracted men in martial contexts both East and West.

While admitting a selective presentation of ancient history, his recent history is far less so. Malebranche crafts a brief history of the gay rights movement and its genesis in the "born gay" theories of German Enlightenment figures Ludwig Casper and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Their legacy in the gay rights movement "made a Faustian bargain...trading away the masculinity of all homosexual men."

But what's the alternative? Malebranche maintains: "There's something to this 'being a man'

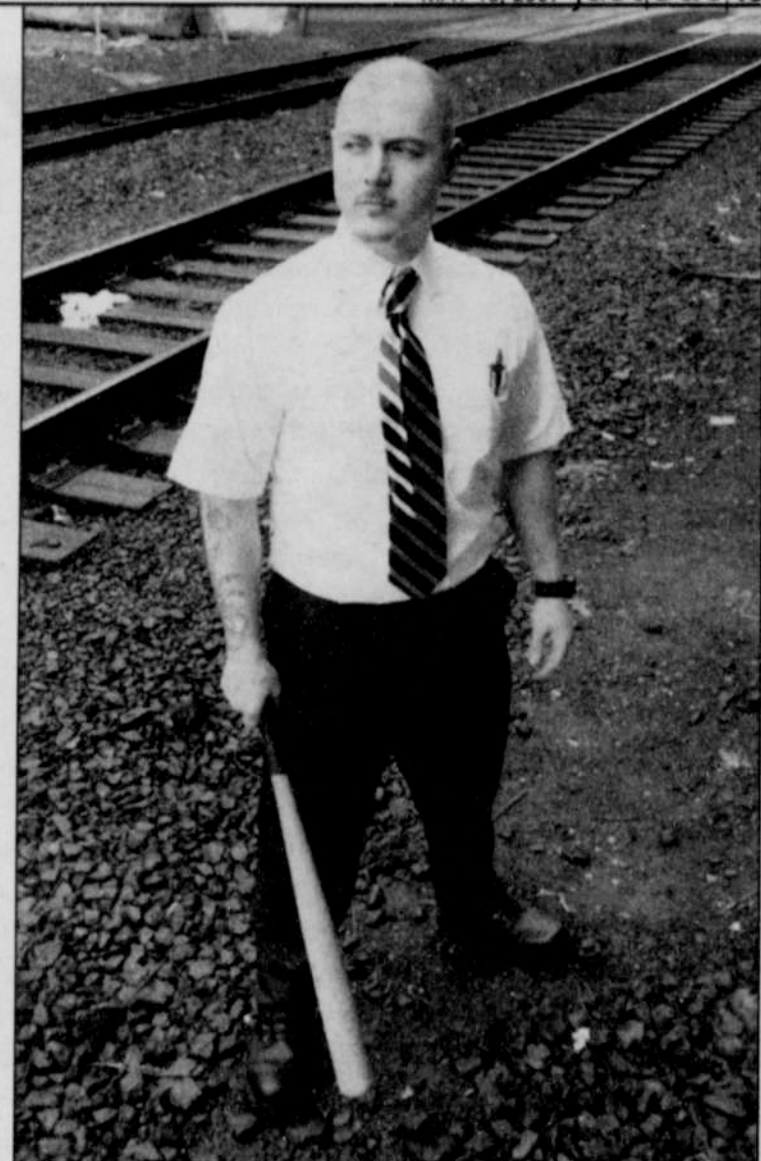
business. It's not just some completely constructed social identity." His choice of words is important. He does not posit a hormonal overdeterminism to combat cultural overdeterminism. For Malebranche, masculinity represents a nuanced interplay among physical masculinity, essential masculinity and cultural masculinity. Men necessarily inhabit a specific phenomenological reality.

Malebranche further claims (without reference to either the hard or soft sciences) that physical masculinity causes men "to be more naturally aggressive or assertive." Still, it's hard to argue with his contention that "being manly essentially means being different from the majority of women."

Cultural masculinity seems most problematic, though his most succinct statement of what cultural masculinity entails ("What a man will and won't do is more often than not related to what he personally believes a man should or should not do") is hard to dispute. While acknowledging masculinity "can be problematic," he also claims, "It's not a problem, it's a solution."

Ultimately, Malebranche argues for adult values within the gay community. Not mere philosophical abstraction, he outlines specific behaviors that express masculinist values. His values can be attacked as semi-arbitrary constructions. However, it seems harder to attack the substance of his argument. Responsibility, for Malebranche, means merely accepting responsibility for one's actions. Achievement is the antidote to widespread superficiality that esteems appearance over action. Respect means treating other adult men—regardless of sexual identification—as brothers. Finally, masculine honor has nothing to do with blood feuding and grudges. Rather, homosexual men would do well to keep their mouths shut about who their sexual partners are and what goes on between them. After outlining the values of his nascent movement, Malebranche offers suggestions for reclaiming masculinity.

Androphilia is not without problems. Malebranche has a tendency to universalize his own experiences. He claims political neutrality, but a cursory glance at his influences betray this—as is often the case—as



Jack Malebranche's *Androphilia* is both a self-assured embrace of homosexuality and an indictment of mainstream gay culture's celebration of perpetual victimhood, effeminacy and feminist gender theory.

a code word for conservatism. His obsessive emphasis on martial homosexuality similarly belies an essentially conservative and traditionalist worldview. Further, his critique of homosexuals affiliated with the Democratic Party seems bizarre considering it is the only major party not using homophobic bigotry to win votes. Perhaps Malebranche's shrewdest observation is that it is patently fallacious to suggest that all homosexual men can or should organize under one banner and that all who fall without are self-loathers, equivalent to Jewish Nazis.

Androphilia is relevant and timely, tapping into the same energy as *Brokeback Mountain*, *That's Revolting* and the novels of Chuck Palahniuk. It is also a pleasure to read, as Malebranche writes with an easy, relaxed style that is informal but never amateur. I have no doubt that *Androphilia* will soon be required reading for young homosexual men looking for an alternative to disco balls, rainbow flags and celebrity gossip. 10

JACK MALEBRANCHE reads 7:30 p.m. May 24 at Powell's on Hawthorne, 3723 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

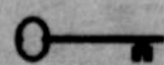
NICK PELL is a Portland freelance writer and the event director of esoZone. Hate mail and homemade porn can be directed to nick@esozone.com.

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