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The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered



Synopsis

The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered, edited by Tom Cardamone, includes appreciations by 28 contemporary writers of significant gay novels and short story collections now out of print. The Lost Library includes an essay on reprints of gay literature by Philip Clark. It features a cover illustration by Mel Odom. The Lost Library won the San Francisco Book Festival's gay category for best book of the Spring season.

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Customer Reviews

In his introduction to THE LOST LIBRARY Tom Cardamone says that he e-mailed authors he had recently read and writers he knew personally about out-of-print books that had had an impact in some fashion on their lives as gay men. What he got was a variegated response. One writer used his choice as a guide to travel in Sicily. Another's favorite book helped him get through the difficult middle and high school years when he was the object of ridicule because of his sexual orientation.

He reminded us that gay teens are three times more likely to commit suicide than other young people, a sobering statistic. Others wrote of being embarrassed when they checked out a gay novel in a school library or when they bought the book in a bookstore and of the joy of finding out that they were not alone, even when the book may not have measured up as first class literature. Some authors wrote about books that friends had written. As Christopher Bram said about Allen Bennett (THE BODY AND ITS DANGERS): "He was an amazing writer, even better than I thought at the time. I would love these stories even if I had not known him." Twenty-eight individuals wrote essays on twenty-eight writers, many of whom I had read but at least half or more of them were new to me. As you would expect from any anthology, the quality of writing varies from individual to individual. The collection is by no means exhaustive and is of course subjective-- as are my comments. For instance, I usually found that my favorite writers for the most part wrote the best essays. That would include Paul Russell's essay on Paul Rogers' SAUL'S BOOK and Philip Gambon on Donald Windham's TWO PEOPLE; but there were two brand new writers for me that I liked immensely, Michael Graves on Rabih Alameddine's THE PERV. The most obfuscated phrase has to be "the youngest experiences his first penetrative sexual experience" from Richard Reitsma's essay on Agustin Gomez-Acros' THE CARNIVOROUS LAMB. The strangest essay is Philip Clark's on Neil Bartlett's READY TO CATCH HIM SHOULD HE FALL. Clark attempts to take passages from that novel and act them out in his own sexual encounters with someone he describes only as "Boy." This essay would not have convinced me to read this novel if I had not already read it years ago. I assume Mr. Cardamone's purpose in the first place in publishing this book was to convince readers to seek out these out-of-print authors. Clark redeemed himself, however, with his list of out-of-print books included at the end of this collection. I was glad that he included two of my favorites, Terry Andrews' THE STORY OF HAROLD and Edward Swift's SPLENDORA, one of the funniest books I ever read. He should also add MARK by Lonnie Coleman--certainly a romanticized view of gay life but ten times better than Gordon Merrick's cotton candy-- and anything the brilliant French writer Yves Navarre wrote. The only book recommended in this collection that I have read in the past few months and remember enough to comment on is Daniel Curzon's SOMETHING YOU DO IN THE DARK, a very fine novel and as relevant today as when it was published in 1971. Sam Miller wrote a beautiful article on Michael Grumley's LIFE DRAWING, a book I bought and sadly never read, and made the point that we ultimately must make some sort of peace with our biological families. Freud said something similar. Michael Graves made a verb out of hissy-fit, a fine touch. Wayne Courtois reminded us that nothing is sadder than the ignorance of decent people. Reading this collection convinced me to buy five books: TWO PEOPLE by Donald Wyndham, THE APPLE

OF THE EYE by Glenway Wescott, MUSIC I NEVER DREAMED OF by John Gilgun and two by Paul Reed: THE Q JOURNAL and THE REDWOOD DIARY. Iana Rafael Titus' article of Melvin Dixon's VANISHING ROOMS made me want to reread it. Seven of the writers included here died of AIDS: Robert Ferro, Melvin Dixon, Christopher Coe, Allen Barnett, Richard Hall, Paul Reed, George Whitmore. (The ancient Egyptians believed that by repeating the names of the dead, we make them immortal.) Alex Haley said that "when an old person dies, it's like a library burning." Most of these writers barely lived to see forty and did not live to write fine autumnal novels in old age. Their libraries burned far too soon. But not only did we lose gay writers to AIDS. As Sam J. Miller says so eloquently: "AIDS did not just kill the brilliant writers and artists whose names we know. AIDS also killed the literary agents and the editors and the publicists and the audiences that nurtured and supported these artists, and in the process an overwhelming amount of art and talent has been lost, in a very real sense." THE LOST LIBRARY-- a beautiful title-- should be required reading for those of us who want to know more about our gay literary history.

You can dip in anywhere in Tom Cardamone's imaginative and bold anthology and find something of great worth. In fact maybe all reading experiences should be like this, the richness of great plenty, and an elimination of traditional narrative structures that insist on beginning with the beginning and ending with the end. If you read this book backwards, it would have the same instruction, the same allure, as if you read it from A to Z, and even better, you could skip every other essay and still come away dazzled by the variety of the writers Cardamone has coaxed into writing for him, as well as by the books they remember so vividly. And all (well, maybe one or two) seem to have really wanted to put their best foot forward, knowing perhaps that they would be writing alongside some of the best current writers and critics we have. In some cases, in fact, the essay is better than the book it describes, though of course that's only my opinion. (Well, in the case of Michael Bronski's analysis of CHILD OF THE SUN, it's a fact written in stone.) I was very moved by younger writers reaching out and discovering the writings of an older generation, finding them still of some use, still of some beauty: maybe I'm projecting and thinking, ha, that would be great if someday this happened to me! Rob Stephenson's account of Bruce Benderson is a unique collision of one wildly experimental writer taking on another, while many of the writers give good accounts of the bizarreness of some of the writing they're discussing--yes, the strangeness of other ways and other ways of living. And that might be the most valuable lesson of all--it's sort of a gay shame textbook in a certain light, for some of the most interesting and amazing work was done by those forebears who believed in the scandal, the disgust, the sin and the shame that nowadays we don't even see, for today sex is cellophane,

invisible and unsustainable. There's a funny jump between book 1 chronologically--Glenway Wescott's 1924 novel *The Apple of the Eye*) and book 2, which comes nearly 40 years later. What about all those decades in between, Tom Cardamone, did no one have anything to say about the gay cultural production of all those years of shared social struggle? Or maybe this issue is addressed somewhere and I didn't see it thanks to my blithe skip-every-other-chapter aesthetic. In any case, God bless you for this enormous and delightful work.

Tom Cardamone gives us an excellent brief resume of the recent history of gay literature. Drawing on American authors he outlines the experiences of gay people as expressed through their literature and in the process creates an enlightening perspective of the restrictions and tribulations they experienced (and still experience) in certain circles. The burden of identity has become a whole lot easier for gay people. Some of this is thanks to the more militant members of the community, but not a little can be credited to the voices that expressed their anguish and outrage in literature.

Tom Cardamone's book *The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered* is a book I highly recommend to any reader, straight or gay. I had thought I possessed a fine library of gay literature, but after reading Cardamone's book, I realize I have some book-hunting to do. The sad aspect of my collecting gay fiction is that many of the authors have died of AIDS. Every so often I will take one of them down from the shelf for a re-read, and I am always moved because invariably the books are beautifully written. So much talent gone so soon! I vowed I'd add my own book to the list of gay fiction, which I have recently accomplished with my new novel, published in Ireland, about the gay poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. For a comprehensive view of contemporary gay fiction, you may want to purchase *The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered*.

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