

the faber book of



gay short fiction

edited by edmund white

John Sklute

The Faber Book of
GAY SHORT FICTION

EDITED BY
EDMUND WHITE

ff

faber and faber

BOSTON • LONDON

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American
Copyright Conventions, including the right of reproduction in whole
or in part in any form

First published in 1991 in the United States by Faber and Faber, Inc.,
50 Cross Street, Winchester, MA 01890 and in the United Kingdom by
Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AU

This paperback edition first published in 1992

Collection, Introduction and Notes copyright © 1991
by Edmund White

The acknowledgements on pages vii-viii constitute an
extension of this copyright notice

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Faber book of gay short fiction / edited by Edmund White.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-571-12908-0 (paper) : \$15.95

1. Gay men—Fiction. 2. Gays' writings, English. 3. Gays'
writings, American 4. Short stories, American. 5. Short stories,
English. I. White, Edmund, 1940-

PR1309.H57F33 1992

823'.0108920642—dc20

92-19700

CIP

Jacket shows "Cilindrone" by Clemente/Warhol/Basquiat, courtesy
Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich

Jacket design by Mary Maurer

Printed in the United States of America

The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction

Edmund White is acknowledged to be one of the leading interpreters of gay culture. In *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction* he has created a rich anthology that explores the literary expression of male homosexuality in the American and English tradition, from the oblique beginnings of Forster and Firbank, through the mid-century fiction of Isherwood and Welch, to the bolder recent work of Vidal, William, Burroughs and Baldwin, and contemporary works through the age of AIDS.

White's thoughtful introductory essay describes his personal experience of gay literature and provides an insightful historical and psychological context for the stories. As he points out, gay writers are "not just reporting the past but also shaping the future, forging an identity as much as revealing it."

'An excellent read.' - *San Francisco Review of Books*

'A distinguished anthology. . . . Offers a revealing and rewarding excursion into a subculture's language and mores.'
- *Publishers Weekly*

'Don't get this for the gay lit collection. . . . Get it for the lit collection, period.' - *Booklist*

Edmund White is the author of *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room is Empty*. He is a professor of English at Brown University and is completing a biography of Jean Genet.

Faber and Faber titles of related interest:

MAE WEST IS DEAD: RECENT LESBIAN AND GAY FICTION
edited by Adam Mars-Jones

THE STANDARD LIFE OF A TEMPORARY PANTYHOSE SALESMAN
Aldo Busi

UNENDING DIALOGUE: VOICES FROM AN AIDS POETRY WORKSHOP
Rachel Hadas

SAINT OSCAR
Terry Eagleton

SALOME
Oscar Wilde

MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE *with* THE RAINBOW SIGN
Hanif Kureishi

LAST DRAWINGS OF CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD
Don Bachardy

Acknowledgements

The editor would like to express his gratitude to Alex Jeffers.

We are indebted to the following copyright holders for permission to print the stories in this volume.

PAUL BAILEY: from *Trespases*, published in 1989 by Penguin Books Ltd, first published in 1970 by Jonathan Cape, copyright © 1969, 1970 by Paul Bailey, by permission of the author; JAMES BALDWIN: from *Just Above My Head*, published by The Dial Press, New York, copyright © 1978, 1979 by James Baldwin; NEIL BARTLETT: 'Three Wedding Ceremonies' from *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, published in 1990 by Serpent's Tail, copyright © Neil Bartlett, by permission of the author; PAUL BOWLES: 'Pages from Cold Point' from *The Delicate Prey*, copyright © 1950 by Paul Bowles; WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS: 'The Wild Boys' from *The Wild Boys*, published in 1982 in a collection by Pan Books Ltd, first published in 1972 by Calder & Boyars Ltd, copyright © 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1982 William S. Burroughs, by permission of Aitken & Stone Ltd; SIMON BURT: 'Good Fortune', copyright © Simon Burt, by permission of the author; ALFRED CHESTER: 'In Praise of Vespasian' from *Behold Goliath*, first published in 1965 by André Deutsch Ltd, copyright © 1955, 1957, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1964 by Alfred Chester, by permission of André Deutsch Ltd and A. M. Heath & Co Ltd; DENNIS COOPER: 'My Mark' from *Safe*, published in 1984 by The Sea Horse Press Ltd, New York, copyright © 1984 by Dennis Cooper, by permission of Ira Silverberg Communications, New York; JAMES M. ESTEP: 'BM', copyright © James M. Estep, by permission of the author; RONALD FIRBANK: 'Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli' from *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, published in 1988 by Picador Classics (Pan Books Ltd), first published in 1961 by Gerald Duckworth and Co Ltd, copyright © 1961 by Thomas Firbank; E. M. FORSTER: 'Dr Woolacott', published in 1975, 1979, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1988 by Penguin Books Ltd, first published in 1972 by Edward Arnold, copyright © 1972 by The Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge, by permission of King's College, Cambridge and The Society of Authors as the literary representatives of the E. M. Forster Estate; PATRICK GALE: 'The List', copyright © Patrick Gale, by permission of the author; ROBERT GLÜCK: 'Denny Smith', copyright © Robert Glück, by permission of the author; ALLAN GURGA-

nus: 'Forced Use', copyright © Allan Gurganus, by permission of the author; WILLIAM HAYWOOD HENDERSON: from *Native*, copyright © William Haywood Henderson, by permission of the author; ANDREW HOLLERAN: 'Sunday Morning: Key West', copyright © Andrew Holleran, by permission of the author; ALAN HOLLINGHURST: from *The Swimming-Pool Library*, published in 1988 by Chatto & Windus Ltd, copyright © 1988 by Alan Hollinghurst, by permission of the author; TIMOTHY IRELAND: from *The Novice*, published in 1988 by GMP Publishers Ltd, copyright © 1988 by Timothy Ireland, by permission of the author; CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD: 'Mr Lancaster' from *Down There on a Visit*, first published in 1962 by Methuen & Co Ltd, copyright © 1962 by Christopher Isherwood, by permission of the Estate of Christopher Isherwood; HENRY JAMES: 'The Pupil' from *Fourteen Stories by Henry James* selected by David Garnett, published in 1946; DAVID LEAVITT: 'When You Grow to Adultery', copyright © David Leavitt, by permission of Wylie, Aitken & Stone, Inc., New York; DAVID MALOUF: 'Southern Skies' from *Antipodes*, published in 1986 by Penguin Books Ltd, first published in 1985 by Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press, copyright © 1985 by David Malouf, by permission of the author; ADAM MARS-JONES: 'The Changes of Those Terrible Years', copyright © Adam Mars-Jones, by permission of the author; ARMISTEAD MAUPIN: 'Suddenly Home', copyright © Armistead Maupin, by permission of the author; DAVID PLANTE: 'The Secret of the Gentiles', copyright © David Plante, by permission of the author; JAMES PURDY: 'Dawn' from *The Candles of Your Eyes*, published by Peter Owen Ltd, London, originally published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York, copyright © 1967, 1970, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1979, 1984, 1987 by James Purdy; LEV RAPHAEL: 'Another Life', copyright © Lev Raphael, by permission of the author; GORE VIDAL: 'Pages from an Abandoned Journal' from *A Thirsty Evil*, copyright © 1956 by Gore Vidal; TOM WAKEFIELD: 'Darts' from *Forties' Child*, published by Serpent's Tail, first published in 1980 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, copyright © 1980 by Tom Wakefield, by permission of Richard Scott Simon Ltd; DENTON WELCH: 'When I was Thirteen' from *The Stories of Denton Welch*, published in 1985 by E. P. Dutton, New York, copyright © 1966, 1985 by the University of Texas, by permission of David Higham Associates; EDMUND WHITE: 'Skinned Alive', published in 1989 in *Granta* 27, copyright © 1989 by Edmund White, by permission of the author; TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: 'Two on a Party' from *Hard Candy*, copyright © 1954 by Tennessee Williams, by permission of the Estate of Tennessee Williams.

Faber and Faber Limited apologizes for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful to be notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in the next edition or reprint of this volume.

Foreword

Since no one is brought up to be gay, the moment he recognizes the difference he must account for it. Such accounts are a kind of primitive gay fiction, the oral narrations told and retold as pillow talk or in pubs or on the psychoanalytic couch. Every gay man has polished his story through repetition, and much gay fiction is a version of this first tale. 'Coming out' is the rite that marks the passage from homosexual desire to gay identity, and this transition begins and ends in avowal. Philosophers may object that the urge to avow is itself a trap, based as it is on Christian confession and assuming as it does that sexual identity is profound, hidden, constitutive, more a matter of being than doing.

Despite such objections, gays continue to believe their gayness is in fact something they are rather than something they do (notice, for instance, the number of celibate priests who have felt the need to bear witness to their gayness, even though their sexuality is held firmly in abeyance).

If gays tell each other – or the hostile world around them – the stories of their lives, they're not just reporting the past but also shaping the future, forging an identity as much as revealing it. Most gay men believe they did not choose to be homosexual, that this orientation was imposed on them, although whether by nature or nurture they have no way of knowing. Many men recollect homosexual desires amongst their earliest childhood memories, although they often attempt to keep those longings separate, in quarantine or between parentheses. Acknowledging

homosexual desires and integrating them into a larger notion of the self is the first bold act of gay fiction, whether written or whispered. Sometimes these revisions of the self approach nullity – or universality. As a character remarks in Christopher Isherwood's 'Mr Lancaster': 'What I am has refashioned itself throughout the days and years, and until now almost all that remains constant is the mere awareness of being conscious. And that consciousness belongs to everybody; it isn't a particular person.'

Sometimes, naturally, gay men, such as Paul Bailey's narrator, feel that they were born too early, before the redefinitions effected by gay liberation changed everyone's life. These men tell stories, but their stories are tales of loss, regret and bitterness: 'I'm very out of date, aren't I? I scarcely fit into this modern society. I can't get used to freedom; I suppose I crave the martyr's crown. The dirty back-streets and the stinking lavatories are my hunting-grounds; they're fit settings for humiliation; the clubs and bars, with everyone so open and happy, they only oppress me. They tear at my heart because I remember what I had and anyway, I always did hate my kind *en masse*.'

I suppose I'm suggesting that being gay is a bit like being a writer, just as exalting or annihilating and always as perilous. Like most writers, most gays are urban, at least in the years necessary for consolidating their identity. Almost all the men in this anthology once lived or still live in London, New York or San Francisco. The city is the big human market-place that allows even quite strange people to seek out those of fellow feeling; it offers the economic independence, the anonymity and the randomness needed to sponsor original styles of life. Writers drift to the big city and learn how a writer lives from observing others of his kind, just as homosexuals perfect their values and manners by imitating older exemplars.

Many writers – creatures with working-class salaries, middle-class origins and upper-class pretensions – have taken a bitter refuge in dandyism; homosexuals, even in the recent past, have found consolation for their low status in comparable fantasies of aristocratic camp – not for nothing do they call themselves

'queens'. A novelist, even if he is a swaggering he-man such as Hemingway or Tolstoy or a misogynist such as Flaubert, must not only interest himself in 'female things' such as dress, manners and romantic adventure, he must also at certain moments of writing even *become* a woman. The male homosexual often has a more direct access to women's secrets than the average man; more importantly, the homosexual man has *lived* from the inside the problem of dealing with male arrogance and even brutality, since gay men not only are men but must also live with them.

I could go on inventing ways that gays are like writers, but I don't want to exaggerate the resemblance. I just want to point out that if everyone acknowledges that the writer's greatest gift is to look at familiar things from an odd angle, then the gay man inevitably enjoys what is both an advantage and a curse – a permanent sense of alienation from the tribe. This is the famous 'defamiliarization' that the Russian Formalists first discussed: it is built into the social identity of being gay. Just as a Russian aristocrat, Vladimir Nabokov, wrote best about American motels and nymphets, just as the unmarried Jane Austen wrote best about courtship, just as today the most discerning writers about Britain are of Indian or Pakistani or Chinese or Japanese extraction, so the novelists who have best described power and how it couples with sex – even heterosexual sex – are Henry James and Marcel Proust, and the fantasists who found silvery comedy in the tragic seriousness of marriage are Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank.

The recognition of the link between gays and other minorities is pondered in very different ways in Lev Raphael's 'Another Life' and David Plante's 'The Secret of the Gentiles', in which a separate but parallel world is Jewish, while in William Haywood Henderson's 'Native' that reflecting surface can be seen in the black stare of an American Indian's dancing eyes. In two other stories (Patrick Gale's 'The List' and Tom Wakefield's 'Darts') gay men (implied or potential) look at lesbians. In a working-class pub a young boy in Wakefield's story learns that lesbians are called 'willdews' ('When they are at home it must be "will yer do this or

will yer do that''. Got it? So, they are willdews.'), a bit of folk anthropology by a friendly heterosexual not unlike the explanations gays themselves derive from science, astrology, Freud, religion, folklore, Foucault or the ancient Greeks. Homosexuality demands an explanation, and gay fiction is often an attempt to provide it.

Sometimes homosexuality seeks itself out in travel, as though acceptance and adventure will be found only *elsewhere*. For E. M. Forster, who'd travelled enough to be disillusioned, 'elsewhere' turns out to be supernatural. But in many of the other stories in this anthology, I was struck by how often they take place 'abroad'. Another country promises compassion or at least promiscuity, the land of marvels, where the traveller's inner contradictions will be resolved or where the tyranny of reproductive society will suddenly, unaccountably be set aside. Gore Vidal's innocent abroad all too quickly becomes an initiate completely at home in a sophisticated Paris. Alfred Chester explores the *pissotières* of Paris as thoroughly as Vidal examines men who used to be called 'pissy queens'. In Denton Welch's 'When I Was Thirteen' an English cast of characters goes to Switzerland to discover that desire itself is always pure, no matter what lewd constructions may be put on it by corrupt observers. Similarly Paul Bowles's characters travel far to unearth (or conjure up) forbidden longings. Tennessee Williams sets his odd couple in perpetual motion; the speed of their travels belies the timid slowness with which they acknowledge their mutual love.

If one of the main impulses behind gay fiction is avowal and self discovery, another is surely sexual affirmation. James Baldwin's young men look at each other with a real hunger, a simple wonder before the flesh of another man, so similar and yet so radically different: '. . . a miracle of spinal column, neck to buttocks, shoulders and shoulderblades, elbows, wrists, thighs, ankles, a miracle of bone and blood and muscle and flesh and music.' This simple catechism is one the gay lover never tires of telling, a language that has been suppressed as often as it was invented and that must be created again and again.

Of course if some gay fiction was an apology addressed to the straight world, other books, badly printed and sold under the counter, were pornography aimed at the gay reader. Even today gay fiction retains the identifying marks of this double heritage – the obligation to explain and the ambition to excite.

Some new writers, of course, are trying to get beyond these twin urges. Allan Gurganus in 'Forced Use' bans the vocabulary, the folkways and the conventional confessions of gay life in order to find once again the inherent strangeness of sexual desires that are inassimilable. Timothy Ireland goes daringly in the opposite direction; his characters announce with dazzling simplicity, 'We are married.' If Lev Raphael's characters, Nat and Mark, also hope to introduce their new wine into old skins, Henderson's men, Blue and Sam, don't want to acknowledge their desires at all, and this very denial lends an edgy, indeterminate sexuality to everything they do and think, even to the landscape that dwarfs them. In Dennis Cooper's fiction sex is reinvented through the dislocations in the language that describes it and in the constant, chilling pairing of love and death. Robert Glück is a writer who startles us with his odd conjunctions, passionate emphases and sophisticated ellipses. He's capable of dilating scenes that are ordinarily elided and gliding over passages that would be obligatory in any other writer's work. His treatment of love in 'Denny Smith' is at once fanciful and literal, since he combines literary parody and wild digressions with the use of the names of real people, products and contemporary political figures.

Of course, the dominant fact of gay life today is AIDS, and this anthology includes several stories on that theme, including my own. Adam Mars-Jones touches on the question of our responsibility to the ill, and Andrew Holleran shows how people attempt to domesticate what can only be a scandal. The enormous body of fiction that has sprung up in the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world about AIDS in the last few years reveals that literature is still the gay community's strongest response to crisis.

For me the evolution of the gay novel has seemed breathlessly rapid and strangely personal. As a boy I looked desperately for things to read that might confirm an identity I was piecing together and accommodate a sexuality that fate seemed to have thrust on me without my ever having chosen it. In the early 1950s one of the few books I could find in the Evanston Public Library was the biography of Nijinsky by his wife in which she obliquely deplored the demonic influence of the impresario Diaghilev on her saintly husband, the great dancer. I alternated between grim psychiatric case studies and the outrageous Anthony Blanche scenes in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. I caught dim echoes of the scandalous Oscar Wilde trial – all bits of half-information to convey the then prevailing notions of homosexuality as sin, madness or crime.

In the 1960s I was lucky enough to discover Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, a sane, unapologetic picture of an English professor living in Los Angeles. He muddles through a long, eventful day and confides his feelings to his straight friends, which proves a breakthrough in several different ways, since the protagonist suffers as everyone does, from the death of loved ones, the numbing of routine, the fear of loneliness, but not in the specially damned or debilitated sense supposedly peculiar to homosexuals. André Gide's journals and his memoir *If It Die* showed a civilized adult mind given over to far-ranging interests (classical piano music, Greek theatre, Russian politics, travel in Africa), as well as to a frank attraction to boys. William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, John Rechy's *City of Night* and Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* moved in the opposite direction, towards rendering gay life as exotic, marginal, even monstrous, as possible. Not incidentally, these books were all original and genuine works of art. Burroughs' collage techniques, Rechy's ear for gay speech and sympathy for the gay underdog, Genet's way of turning all ordinary values upside down – these were shock tactics for transforming our received notions of reality.

The beginning of gay liberation in 1969 did not produce straight

off a new crop of fiction, but by 1978 the new gay novel was beginning to emerge. That was the year Larry Kramer's controversial *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's romantic *Dancer from the Dance* were published; among other things both books documented the new gay culture that had been spawned by liberation, prosperity and a society-wide tolerance.

In 1980, seven New York gay writers formed a casual club named The Violet Quill. We'd meet once a month in one another's apartments. Four of us each time would read our latest pages, then settle down to high tea. We were more competitive about the richness of our desserts than the quality of our prose. The mood was certainly friendly and collaborative; we thought of calling our organization The All-Praise Club. Nevertheless the atmosphere was sufficiently challenging to prompt us to our best efforts.

The members were Felice Picano, who was working on a gay psychological thriller, *The Lure*, and later on an elegaic love story, *Late in the Season*, Andrew Holleran, at work on stories and his second novel *Nights in Aruba*, Robert Ferro (*The Family of Max Desir*), George Whitmore (*The Confessions of Danny Slocum* and *Nebraska*), Chris Cox (*Key West: A Traveler's Companion*), Michael Grumley (then at work on *Life Studies*, remarkable for its lyrical language) and I (*A Boy's Own Story*). Our occasional visitor was Vito Russo, who was writing the authoritative book about gays in Hollywood, *The Celluloid Closet*.

All of us, however, were linked to other book people. Felice was the publisher of The Sea Horse Press, Chris Cox became an editor at Dutton and later Ballantine. Many of us were published by *Christopher Street* magazine, which was for a long while virtually the only serious gay literary review in America. Michael Grumley was later a regular contributor to the *New York Native*. Whitmore, Cox and I were all professional journalists and we all frequently wrote on gay topics. We were in touch with such gay editors as Bill Whitehead and Michael Denny and the gay writer and psychotherapist Charles Silverstein. Most of us knew the playwright Harvey Fierstein (*The Torchsong Trilogy*), the historian Jonathan

Katz (*Gay American History*) and the literary critic David Kalstone, who at that time was finishing his book *Five Temperaments*, a study of Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, John Ashbery and – as the sole heterosexual – Robert Lowell.

In 1983 I moved to Paris. When I came back to the States in 1990 this literary map had been erased. George Whitmore, Michael Grumley, Robert Ferro and Chris Cox were dying and Vito Russo was dead. Of our original group only Felice Picano, Andrew Holleran and I were still alive. Better than anyone else, Holleran has captured our sense of living posthumously in his personal essays, *Ground Zero*. Many younger writers had also died; of those I knew I could count Tim Dlugos, Richard Youmans, Gregory Kolovakis, the translator Matt Ward and the novelist John Fox (who'd been my student at Columbia). My two closest friends, David Kalstone and my editor, Bill Whitehead, had died.

For me these losses were definitive. The witnesses to my life, the people who had shared the same references and sense of humour, were gone. More important, the 'novels' these friends were living, were creating daily out of their very existence, stories I had wanted to unfold at a leisurely pace and with a wealth of detail, had been rudely summarized or slammed shut in mid-tale. I speak only of personal losses. The loss of all the books these young people might have written was incalculable.

Curiously enough, AIDS, which had destroyed so many of these distinguished writers, had also, as a phenomenon, made homosexuality a much more familiar part of the American landscape. It had also divided the gay community along ideological lines which have been reflected in gay literature. A lesbian writer, Sarah Schulman, has written eloquently about AIDS activism in her novel *People Like Us*, as has Larry Kramer in his plays and essays; both writers are openly polemical, in contrast with less angry, more elegaic writers like Holleran and me. Similarly, a new puritansim is setting in. Felice Picano is especially vocal in his denunciation of novelists who exclude sex scenes from their books, accusing them of hypocrisy and cynicism. 'A gay man who

writes without including sex in his work is a traitor,' he thunders. 'Such neutering is just internalized homophobia – after all, sex is the only thing that defines homosexuality.' Many younger gays, however, feel that unbridled sex scenes in fiction are irresponsible and even criminally dangerous.

My own belief is that censorship of any sort is to be feared. Cultural and affectional ties are as defining of homosexuality as sexual practices, and those writers (such as David Leavitt) who reflect in their work the erotic conservatism of their generation are well within their rights, but so are frankly sexual writers such as Dennis Cooper and Alan Hollinghurst. What is being played out in gay fiction reflects the more general conflict between gay assimilationists and gay militants.

Despite such controversies, gay and lesbian studies are on the way to being institutionalized in the United States. Hundreds of lesbian and gay scholars have just met at Harvard. Several universities are offering courses in lesbian and gay history and culture. Yale's Beinecke Library hopes to collect the papers of the Violet Quill – a development that would a decade ago have surprised those of us who read to one another in our Manhattan apartments. Not long ago I wrote that gay culture seemed to be following a rapid trajectory – oppressed in the 1950s, liberated in the 1960s, exalted in the 1970s and wiped out in the 1980s. Perhaps I was too hasty. The 1990s may be the decade when gay fiction will be institutionalized.

For that to happen, however, several questions will have to be answered or at least framed. Do gays really constitute something like an ethnic minority? Does an author's sexuality represent a more crucial part of his identity than his social class, generation, race or regional origins? Is gay literature of more than passing interest to people outside the gay community, or is it like sci-fi or murder mysteries – essential to adepts but dispensable to everyone else?

These questions have already prompted considerable debate and will long continue to be discussed. What seems indisputable,

however, is that, now more than ever before, if gay books of universal appeal do happen to be written, they will have a real chance of being published, read and recognized.

Edmund White, March 1991