

Tales of the City

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN

"Magically readable!"—Christopher Isherwood



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WHAT THE CRITICS HAVE SAID ABOUT ARMISTEAD MAUPIN'S *TALES OF THE CITY* SERIES:

"Armistead Maupin is an extremely funny and talented writer who has acquired the ability to make something happen in 700 words and to propel the reader's interest forward to the next day. Others have done it before—Dickens and Thackeray, to name two."

—*Sunday Times* (London)

"Armistead Maupin's San Francisco saga careens beautifully on. . . . Almost a decade into their promiscuous but caring friendships the characters are tempered by age and wisdom, though still layered in reflecting and intermittently revealing levels of absurdity."

—*New York Times*

"Maupin is gradually proving himself the spokesman for the entire Beatles-Vietnam generation, for the first generation that has to cope with issues of househusband and career wife, for the first generation that has been able to be freely and openly gay. When everything is possible, nothing is likely, and no one has caught the resulting uneasiness better than Armistead Maupin."

—*Baltimore Sun*

"Maupin's prose is seamless; it floats along invisibly without calling attention to itself, so that dialogue, exposition and description blend easily together. It can uniformly and flexibly accommodate a wide range of material, from the whimsical to the pathetic, from the vulgar to the beautiful, with equal capacity."

—*New York Native*

“Not even Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones or Joseph Andrews ever wandered so many parallel lines, converging to the handle of forked roads. Maupin is a mask-wearer, like so many of his actors. He is also capable of compassion, making us care about and care for the players. They may behave indecently, but they are innocents; the villains live in the larger world beyond Barbary Lane.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Maupin drops bombshell after bombshell, only to double back on himself and tie up the loose ends. It’s the Wild Mouse of modern literature . . . an affirmation of human sweetness and decency, packaged in a spicy wrapper.”

—*Houston Post*

“Hip, gossipy and often savagely funny. Friends from out of town continue to astonish me when they disdain visits to Twin Peaks and the Top of the Mark in preference for a peek at Barbary Lane, the Marina Safeway or Frannie Halcyon’s Hillsborough neighborhood. Maupin provides the only behind-the-scenes look they can get at Everybody’s Favorite City.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

For my mother and father
and my family at The Duck House

It's an odd thing, but anyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco.

OSCAR WILDE

Tales of the City

Taking the plunge

Mary Ann Singleton was twenty-five years old when she saw San Francisco for the first time.

She came to the city alone for an eight-day vacation. On the fifth night, she drank three Irish coffees at the Buena Vista, realized that her Mood Ring was blue, and decided to phone her mother in Cleveland.

“Hi, Mom. It’s me.”

“Oh, darling. Your daddy and I were just talking about you. There was this crazy man on *McMillan and Wife* who was strangling all these secretaries, and I just couldn’t help thinking . . .”

“Mom . . .”

“I know. Just crazy ol’ Mom, worrying herself sick over nothing. But you never can tell about those things. Look at that poor Patty Hearst, locked up in that closet with all those awful . . .”

“Mom . . . long distance.”

“Oh . . . yes. You must be having a grand time.”

“God . . . you wouldn’t believe it! The people here are so friendly I feel like I’ve . . .”

“Have you been to the Top of the Mark like I told you?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, don’t you dare miss that! You know, your daddy took me there when he got back from the South Pacific. I remember he slipped the bandleader five dollars, so we could dance to ‘Moonlight Serenade,’ and I spilled Tom Collins all over his beautiful white Navy . . .”

“Mom, I want you to do me a favor.”

“Of course, darling. Just listen to me. Oh . . . before I forget it, I ran into Mr. Lassiter yesterday at the Ridgmont Mall, and he said the office is just falling apart with you gone. They don’t get many good secretaries at Lassiter Fertilizers.”

“Mom, that’s sort of why I called.”

“Yes, darling?”

“I want you to call Mr. Lassiter and tell him I won’t be in on Monday morning.”

“Oh . . . Mary Ann, I’m not sure you should ask for an extension on your vacation.”

“It’s not an extension, Mom.”

“Well, then why . . . ?”

“I’m not coming home, Mom.”

Silence. Then, dimly in the distance, a television voice began to tell Mary Ann’s father about the temporary relief of hemorrhoids. Finally, her mother spoke: “Don’t be silly, darling.”

“Mom . . . I’m not being silly. I *like* it here. It feels like home already.”

“Mary Ann, if there’s a boy . . .”

“There’s no boy. . . . I’ve thought about this for a long time.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You’ve been there five days!”

“Mom, I know how you feel, but . . . well, it’s got nothing to do with you and Daddy. I just want to start making my own life . . . have my own apartment and all.”

“Oh, *that*. Well, darling . . . of *course* you can. As a matter of fact, your daddy and I thought those new apartments out at Ridgemont might be just perfect for you. They take lots of young people, and they’ve got a swimming pool and a sauna, and I could make some of those darling curtains like I made for Sonny and Vicki when they got married. You could have all the privacy you . . .”

“You aren’t listening, Mom. I’m trying to tell you I’m a grown woman.”

“Well, act like it, then! You can’t just . . . run away from your family and friends to go live with a bunch of hippies and mass murderers!”

“You’ve been watching too much TV.”

“O.K. . . . then what about The Horoscope?”

“What?”

“The Horoscope. That crazy man. The killer.”

“Mom . . . The Zodiac.”

“Same difference. And what about . . . earthquakes? I saw that movie, Mary Ann, and I nearly died when Ava Gardner . . .”

“Will you just call Mr. Lassiter for me?”

Her mother began to cry. “You won’t come back. I just know it.”

“Mom . . . please . . . I will. I promise.”

“But you won’t be . . . the same!”

“No. I hope not.”

* * *

When it was over, Mary Ann left the bar and walked through Aquatic Park to the bay. She stood there for several minutes in a chill wind, staring at the beacon on Alcatraz. She made a vow not to think about her mother for a while.

Back at the Fisherman’s Wharf Holiday Inn, she looked up Connie Bradshaw’s phone number.

Connie was a stewardess for United. Mary Ann hadn’t seen her since high school: 1968.

“Fantabulous!” squealed Connie. “How long you here for?”

“For good.”

“Super! Found an apartment yet?”

“No . . . I . . . well, I was wondering if I might be able to crash at your place, until I can . . .”

“Sure. No sweat.”

“Connie . . . you’re single?”

The stewardess laughed. “A bear shit in the woods?”

Connie’s place

Mary Ann dragged her American Tourister into Connie’s apartment, groaned softly and sank into a mock zebra-skin captain’s chair.

“Well . . . hello, Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Connie laughed. “Your mom freaked, huh?”

“God!”

“Poor baby! I know the feeling. When I told *my* mom I was moving to San Francisco, she had an absolute hissy-fit! It was a zillion times worse than the summer I tried to join Up With People!”

“God . . . I almost forgot.”

Connie’s eyes glazed nostalgically. “Yeah . . . Hey, you work up a thirst, hon?”

“Sure.”

“Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

Thirty seconds later, Connie emerged from the kitchen with two airlines glasses and a bottle of Banana Cow. She poured a drink for Mary Ann.

Mary Ann sipped warily. “Well . . . look at all this. You’re practically a native, aren’t you? This is . . . quite something.”

“Quite something” was the best she could manage. Connie’s apartment was a potpourri of plastic Tiffany lamps and ankle-deep shag carpeting, needlepoint Snoopy pictures and “Hang in There, Baby” kitten posters, monkey pod salad sets and macramé plant hangers and—please, no, thought Mary Ann—a Pet Rock.

“I’ve been lucky,” Connie beamed. “Being a stew and all . . . well, you can pick up a lot of art objects in your travels.”

“Mmm.” Mary Ann wondered if Connie regarded her black velvet bullfighter painting as an art object.

The stewardess kept smiling. "Cow O.K.?"

"What? Oh . . . yes. Hits the spot."

"I love the stuff." She downed some more of it to demonstrate her point, then looked up as if she had just discovered Mary Ann's presence in the room.

"Hey, hon! Long time no see!"

"Yeah. Too long. Eight years."

"Eight years . . . Eight years! You're lookin' good, though. You're lookin' real . . . Hey, you wanna see something absolutely yucky?"

Without waiting for an answer, she leaped to her feet and went to a bookshelf made of six orange plastic Foremost milk crates. Mary Ann could make out copies of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, *The Sensuous Woman*, *More Joy of Sex* and *Listen to the Warm*.

Connie reached for a large book bound in burgundy vinyl and held it up to Mary Ann.

"Ta-ta!"

"Oh, God! *The Buccaneer*?"

Connie nodded triumphantly and pulled up a chair. She opened the yearbook. "You'll absolutely *die* over your hair!"

Mary Ann found her senior picture. Her hair was very blond and meticulously ironed. She was wearing the obligatory sweater and pearl necklace. Despite the camouflage of an airbrush, she could still remember the exact location of the zit she had sprouted on the day of the photograph.

The inscription read:

MARY ANN SINGLETON

"Still Waters Run Deep"

Pep Club 2,3,4; Future Homemakers of America 3,4;

National Forensic League 4;

Plume and Palette, 3,4

Mary Ann shook her head. "Rest in peace," she said and winced.

Connie, mercifully, didn't offer her own biography for examination. Mary Ann remembered it all too well: head majorette, class treasurer for three years, president of the Y-Teens. Connie's waters had run fast and shallow. She had been popular.

* * *

Mary Ann struggled back into the present. "So what do you do . . . like for fun?"

Connie rolled her eyes. "You name it."

"I'd rather not."

"Well . . . for instance." Connie bent over her hatch-cover coffee table and dug out a copy of *Oui* magazine. "You read that?" asked Mary Ann.

"No. Some guy left it."

"Oh."

“Check out page seventy.”

Mary Ann turned to an article entitled “Coed Baths—Welcome to the World’s Cleanest Orgy.” It was illustrated by a photograph of intermingling legs, breasts and buttocks.

“Charming.”

“It’s down on Valencia Street. You pays your money and you takes your chances.”

“You’ve been there?”

“No. But I wouldn’t rule it out.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to count me out, if you’re planning on . . .”

Connie laughed throatily. “Relax, hon. I wasn’t suggesting we . . . You’re a new girl. Give it time. This city loosens people up.”

“I’ll never be that loose . . . or desperate.”

Connie shrugged, looking vaguely hurt. She took another sip of her Banana Cow.

“Connie, I didn’t . . .”

“It’s O.K., hon. I knew what you meant. Hey, I’m hungry as hell. How ’bout a little Hamburger Helper?”

* * *

After dinner, Mary Ann napped for an hour.

She dreamed she was in a huge tile room full of steam. She was naked. Her mother and father were there, watching *Let’s Make a Deal* through the steam. Connie walked in with Mr. Lassiter, who was furious at Mary Ann and began to shout at her. Mary Ann’s mother and father were shouting at Monty Hall’s first contestant.

“Take the box,” they screamed. “Take the box. . . .”

Mary Ann woke up. She stumbled into the bathroom and splashed water on her face.

When she opened the cabinet over the sink, she discovered an assortment of after-shave lotions: Brut, Old Spice, Jade East.

Connie, apparently, was still popular.

A Frisco disco

The discotheque was called Dance Your Ass Off. Mary Ann thought that was gross, but didn't tell Connie so. Connie was too busy getting off on being Marisa Berenson.

"The trick is to look bored with it all."

"That shouldn't be hard."

"If you wanna get laid, Mary Ann, you'd better . . ."

"I never said that."

"Nobody ever *says* it, for Christ's sake! Look, if you can't deal with your own sexuality, hon, you're gonna get screwed but good in this town."

"I like that. You should make it into a country-western song."

Connie sighed in exasperation. "C'mon. And *try* not to look like Tricia Nixon reviewing the troops." She led the way into the building and staked out a battered sofa against the wall.

The room was supposed to look funky: brick-red walls, revolving beer signs, kitschy memorabilia. Henna-rinsed women and rugby-shirted men clustered decoratively along the bar, as if posing for a Seagram's ad.

While Connie was buying their drinks, Mary Ann settled uncomfortably on the sofa and commanded herself to stop comparing things with Cleveland.

Several yards away, a girl in cowboy boots, sweat pants and a red squirrel Eisenhower jacket stared haughtily at Mary Ann's polyester pantsuit. Mary Ann turned away from her, only to confront another woman, looking blasé in a macramé halter, black fingernails and a crew cut.

"There's a dude at the bar who looks *exactly* like Robert Redford." Connie was back with the drinks. A tequila sunrise for herself, a white wine for Mary Ann.

"Warts?" asked Mary Ann, taking the wine.

"What?"

"That guy. Does he have warts? Robert Redford has warts."

"That's sick. Look . . . I feel like a little heavy bumping. Wanna hit the disco?"

"I think I'll just . . . soak it in for a while. You go ahead."

"You sure now?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll be O.K."

"Suit yourself, hon."

Seconds after Connie had disappeared into the disco, a long-haired man in

a Greek peasant shirt sat down next to Mary Ann on the sofa. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sure . . . I mean, no."

"You're not into boogying, huh?"

"Well, not right now."

"You're into head trips, then?"

"I don't know exactly what . . ."

"What sign are you?"

She wanted to say, "Do Not Disturb." She said, "What sign do you think I am?"

"Ah . . . you're into games. O.K. . . . I'd say you're a Taurus."

He rattled her. "All right . . . how did you do it?"

"Easy. Taureans are stubborn as hell. They *never* want to tell you what sign they are." He leaned over close enough for Mary Ann to smell his musk oil, and looked directly into her eyes. "But underneath that tough Taurus hide beats the heart of a hopeless romantic."

Mary Ann moved away slightly.

"Well?" said the man.

"Well, what?"

"You're a romantic, right? You like earth colors and foggy nights and Lina Wertmuller movies and lemon candles burning when you make love." He reached for her hand. She flinched. "It's all right," he said calmly. "I'm not making a pass yet. I just wanna look at your heart line."

He ran his forefinger gently across Mary Ann's palm. "Look at your point of insertion," he said. "Right there between Jupiter and Saturn."

"What does that mean?" Mary Ann looked down at his finger. It was resting between her middle finger and forefinger. "It means that you're a very sensual person," said the man. He began to slide the finger in and out. "That's true, isn't it? You're a very sensual person?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Do you know you look exactly like Jennifer O'Neill?"

Mary Ann stood up suddenly. "No, but if you hum a few bars . . ."

"Hey, hey, lady. It's cool, it's cool. I'll give you space. . . ."

"Good. I'll take the other room. Happy hunting." She headed for the disco in search of Connie. She found her in the eye of the storm, bumping with a black man in Lurex knickers and glitter wedgies.

"What's up?" asked the stewardess, boogying to the sidelines.

"I'm beat. Could I have the keys to the apartment?"

"You O.K., hon?"

"Fine. Just tired."

"Hot date?"

"No, just . . . could I have the keys, Connie?"

“Here’s an extra set. Sweet dreams.”

Boarding the 41 Union bus, Mary Ann realized suddenly why Connie kept an extra set of keys in her purse.

* * *

Mary Ann watched *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, then turned off the television and fell asleep.

It was after 2 A.M. when Connie got home.

She wasn’t alone.

Mary Ann rolled over on the sofa and buried her head under the covers, pretending to be asleep. Connie and her guest tiptoed noisily into the bedroom.

The man’s voice was fuzzy with whiskey, but Mary Ann knew immediately who he was.

He was asking for lemon candles.

Her new home

Mary Ann crept out of the apartment just before dawn. The prospect of sharing Trix for three at breakfast was more than she could take.

She wandered the streets of the Marina in search of For Rent signs, then ate a mammoth breakfast at the International House of Pancakes.

At nine o’clock she was the first customer of the day at a rental agency on Lombard Street.

She wanted a View, a Deck and a Fireplace for under \$175.

“Jees,” said the rental lady. “Awful picky for a girl without a job.” She offered Mary Ann “a nice Lower Pacific Heights studio with AEK, wall-to-wall carpeting and a partial view of Fillmore Auditorium.” Mary Ann said no.

She ended up with three possibles.

The first one had an uptight landlady who asked if Mary Ann “took marijuana.”

The second was a pink stucco fortress on Upper Market with gold glitter in the ceiling plaster.

The last was on Russian Hill. Mary Ann arrived there at four-thirty.

The house was on Barbary Lane, a narrow, wooded walkway off Leavenworth between Union and Filbert. It was a well-weathered, three-story structure made of brown shingles. It made Mary Ann think of an old bear with bits of

foliage caught in its fur. She liked it instantly.

The landlady was a fiftyish woman in a plum-colored kimono.

"I'm Mrs. Madrigal," she said cheerfully. "As in medieval."

Mary Ann smiled. "You can't feel as ancient as I do. I've been apartment-hunting all day."

"Well, take your time. There's a partial view, if you count that little patch of bay peeping through the trees. Utilities included, of course. Small house. Nice people. You get here this week?"

"That obvious, huh?"

The landlady nodded. "The look's a dead giveaway. You just can't wait to bite into that lotus."

"What? I'm sorry. . . ."

"Tennyson. You know: 'Eating the lotus day by day, To watch the crisping ripples on the beach, And tender curving lines of creamy spray; To lend our hearts and spirits wholly To the influence of' . . . something, something. . . . You get the point."

"Does the . . . furniture go with it?"

"Don't change the subject while I'm quoting Tennyson."

Mary Ann was shaken until she noticed that the landlady was smiling. "You'll get used to my babbling," said Mrs. Madrigal. "All the others have." She walked to the window, where the wind made her kimono flutter like brilliant plumage. "The furniture is included. What do you say, dear?"

Mary Ann said yes.

"Good. You're one of us, then. Welcome to 28 Barbary Lane."

"Thank you."

"Yes, you should." Mrs. Madrigal smiled. There was something a little careworn about her face, but she was really quite lovely, Mary Ann decided. "Do you have any objection to pets?" asked the new tenant.

"Dear . . . I have no objection to anything."

* * *

Elated, Mary Ann walked to the corner of Hyde and Union and phoned Connie from the Searchlight Market. "Hi. Guess what?"

"You got kidnaped?"

"Oh . . . Connie, I'm sorry. I've been looking for a place. . . ."

"I was freaked."

"I'm really sorry. I . . . Connie, I've found this darling place on Russian Hill on the third floor of the funkiest old building . . . and I can move in tomorrow."

"Oh . . . that was quick."

"It's so *neat*! I can't wait for you to see it."

"Sounds nice. Look, Mary Ann . . . like, if there's any problem with money or anything, you can stay with me until . . ."

"I've got some saved. Thanks, though. You've been wonderful."