

Edmund White on writing about gay sex



November 3, 2016 - Edmund White published his first novel, *Forgetting Elena*, in 1973. In the years since, he has penned books that would not only be considered iconic within the canon of gay literature (1982's *A Boy's Own Story*), but would also reshape the concept of historical biography (1993's epic *Genet: A Biography*). Throughout the course of his career (and, specifically, in his four published memoirs), White has written candidly about sex, AIDS, and what it means—both personally and politically—to be a gay person living in the United States. At 76 years old, White continues to write and teach and talk about sex, which makes sense given that he co-wrote the first ever *Joy of Gay Sex*, which was published in 1977.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2835 words.

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Your most recent novel, *Our Young Man*, offers a sweeping view of a complicated gay relationship—including lots of descriptions of gay sex. Do you still have to deal with the argument that your books would somehow be more palatable if they contained less sex—gay sex, in particular?

Oh yes. I had both a gay writer friend and an editor tell me, "Couldn't you just make this straight?"

So it would be more marketable?

Yes, basically. Because there aren't that many gay people. There are only like 3 million of us or something. Not enough to buy all the gay books, apparently.

Do you remember the first gay sex scene you read in a book?

When I was a kid, there was absolutely no gay porno that I could see and no gay books that I knew of. I would look at pictures of ballet dancers, and always try to divine some kind of bulge. They always had the dance belts on, but they had good legs, and beautiful asses, so that was good. Then, when I was a teenager in Cincinnati, Ohio, there was one book shop that sold, literally, under the counter, these gay books. I mean, gay magazines. They had plain brown wrappers, and you'd buy them, and they'd be called *Grecian Guild*, or something like that. *The Greek Alibi*, I called it. This was in the '50s. These magazines were essentially pictures of men with loin cloths, or jock straps, holding a javelin, and posing like some ancient Greek statue up against a column or something like that. There was a whole industry of that kind of art.

There used to be a place in the '60s, when I first moved to New York, that sold vintage porno in the East Village. I'd go there and buy the stuff sometimes. It was funny, because when I first moved to New York in 1962, I lived with a man and a woman, and the woman was gay, but she thought if *she* asked for some of this gay porn—on my behalf—that it would be seen as normal for a woman to be asking for it. She'd say, "I'd like a *Grecian Guild*, please."

I'm sure that was just as scandalous in a different, weirder kind of way.

Weirder, yeah. This little old lady at the newsstand would pull this stuff up from behind the counter and sell it to her, and look at her like she was nuts. Then, on 42nd Street, there were lots of places that sold gay male porn. Again, it was in wrappers of some sort, but it was all laid out on tables. Every month or two, they'd all be shut down. It was on 42nd Street itself, between the movie theaters. Maybe mostly between Sixth and Seventh,

on the south side of the street. There would be people around there who you could have sex with. Not out in public, because there was nothing like that, but you'd pick people up and go back to the cheap little hotels around 42nd Street.

It's wild to imagine that, New York being what it is now...

New York is not very sexy now, I don't think. Eighth Avenue, Chelsea, all of these famously gay areas... now it's all young mothers with their baby carriages. It's all been gentrified. It's too expensive for gays.

What do you consider the Golden Age of gay life here in New York City?

Well, the '70s. It was after gay liberation but before AIDS. I moved to Rome in 1970—the beginning of 1970—then I came back maybe after six months and a friend of mine met me at the airplane and popped some acid in my mouth and then took me on a tour of all the back rooms which had opened in the time I had been gone. Stonewall had sort of released all that energy. Things became really wild very quickly.

The sexiest thing to me was the trucks at the Chelsea piers. All the trucks would be parked over there and people would go into the trucks and have sex late at night. Men would stand between the trucks, waiting to be serviced. Guys would come over from Jersey wanting their dicks sucked. Fags like us would get under the truck, and suck them off like an assembly line, one after another. That was the best. Very romantic. *[laughs]*

Was it ever dangerous? Did anybody ever rob you?

When I first came to New York, I remember that I picked up a hustler who robbed me. I had been picking up hustlers since I was 16, but I was maybe 21 and I picked up a hustler on 42nd Street. He took me to his apartment and while we were in the bedroom he made me leave my clothes in the living room, and then he closed the door. His accomplice went through my clothes. Then he pushed me out the door of the building, and once the door closed, there was no way of getting back in. I was so stupid, I finally realized I'd been robbed, but it wasn't violent. Before that, when I was 16 or 17, I would hire hustlers in Cincinnati and that was very sexy, because they were straight, and they were usually from Kentucky. They were hillbillies. You'd drive with them someplace, and eventually he would suggest you park somewhere. So then you'd park there, and then his accomplice would jump in and demand all your money and your high school ring or whatever. Or your shoes.

You are someone who has—in different ways and from different angles—chronicled so much of gay life in America. Are you surprised by how prudish people continue to be when talking about sex?

Americans are famous for being prudish. As it turns out, it's true. They're puritans. All kinds of things shock them. For instance, down in Key West, if you go to the straight beach, Fort Tyler, there are all these European women who are topless. The cops will come by and say, "Put your goddamn top on, there are children around!" They don't get it. You can be topless in Greece, in lots of very traditional countries. Nobody understands that. I think partly it's a class thing. I think upper class people are pretty trashy, and middle class people are very prudish. Working class people are probably hypocritical. They're trashy but they pretend to be respectable. That's been my experience.

I feel like people make a big deal about the sex in your books specifically because it's gay sex. It's not like you write about sex gratuitously. The sex in *Our Young Man*, for example, is very specific... and often not very "sexy" at all.

Yeah, that was strategic. My idea is that I don't want to write porno, which is "one-handed reading" and is really designed to get you off. What I like to do is write about the sex realistically, which is oftentimes humorous, and oftentimes strategic in the sense that one person is trying to figure out what the other person wants. It becomes complicated... one character doesn't want to bottom too soon for the other person because he fears it will alter the relationship.

The book examines the way sexual roles in gay relationships often reflect some kind of power dynamic, how much these roles are politicized, and how much internalized homophobia is/was wrapped up in how we think about what we do in bed.

Your masculinity was tied up in these things. That was the perception, anyway. It's not who you do it with, it's *what* you do. If you fuck, whether it's a man or a woman, then you're a man. If you get fucked, then you're a fag.

You've never shied away from writing about sex and you've never been someone overly concerned with political correctness. Do you get a lot of heat for writing about these things? Even now?

I did and I do. For instance, I edited an anthology of gay short fiction for Faber & Faber in England, and the English weren't politically correct at all and will just say whatever they think. It's quite amazing. A woman reviewed that book and she said, "I always wondered what gay men did in bed. Now I know and it's boring." I think boredom is something that straight people oftentimes claim to feel in the face of gay sex, because they don't want to sound like they're shocked. Boredom, Freud says, is a mild form of anxiety, and I think that's true.

That's interesting. Rather than admit they were bothered by it, they just call it boring.

Boring, yeah. Then they sound sophisticated and blasé, like they've already seen it all.

If you were to write some of your early books now—in today's cultural climate—do you think they would be different? Maybe even more risqué?

I don't think so. One of the things that I keep thinking of wanting to write is a book that would be sort of like a gay Casanova, but I don't have the nerves for it. I keep thinking everybody would go, "Oh, no. Please don't."

The thing is, I can remember almost all of the tricks I've ever had—or at least the good ones—and there are thousands. I would love to write about that. I think I could make them differentiated enough. You know, there's always the person's story, how you met them, and then sometimes they end up being very freakish people. All kinds of weird things come up around this subject. People really reveal themselves when it comes to how they have sex. Renaud Camus wrote a book called *Tricks: 25 Encounters* that Roland Barthes wrote the introduction to. He had 25 tricks and about nine of them were bad. I mean, bad in the sense that he didn't get off or something weird happened. That was considered a really revolutionary book in the '70s. Richard Howard translated it into English. It is salacious, but it's also interesting as a character study of sorts, what you come to know about these people via the sex they have.

I'm friendly with this woman, Catherine Millet, who wrote *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* which was wildly scandalous. She describes having had about 3,000 different partners. She had a specially designed couch where she could somehow be penetrated in every possible way, yet she never had an orgasm until she got a dildo. I wrote at the time that it was the most sexually explicit book ever written by a woman. People were so outraged by it, but mostly because it was by this woman who was unashamed about sex and pleasure. I found it very interesting.

We're at an interesting place culturally in regards to queer art and literature. Because of things like PrEP, there seems to be less anxiety about sex in general among gay men, but there is often such a fear about being taken seriously—about not alienating anyone—that what we would call "gay novels" are still often so somber and sexless.

That's what Felice Picano calls "dickless fiction." He claims that all these young gay writers write dickless fiction. There are no big dicks in them.

It's either that or you get the other extreme—the sex is over-the-top explicit and portrayed as kind of degrading and not at all fun. The joy of it seems to be lost.

Absolutely. I remember talking to some straight people who worked for *The Village Voice* in the late '60s, and

they were followers of Foucault, as I was. They were encouraging me, because I'd written something for *The New Masses*, which was kind of a Marxist-minded magazine at the time, about sex as a source of pleasure. They thought that was a radical new idea, because back then everybody talked about sex as a social indicator, or a psychodrama or something, but almost nobody ever talked about it simply as pleasure.

You also have the audacity to write about sex—and to keep having it—as you've grown older. There is generally an expectation that, unless you're writing your memoirs and recalling the escapades of your youth, that after a certain age...

You're not supposed to have sex. Or that you should tastefully stop talking about it. Or that you're supposed to be eternally faithful to your ancient lover. Straight women are always saying, "Oh, I know another elderly professor who you would really like." What could be more dreadful?

I think if people were honest and not so hung up they would write about sex a lot more because people actually think about it a lot... and they do it a lot, too—even old people. I always thought it was weird when the beautiful couple goes to bed in the movies and they always cut away from that scene. Why didn't you get to see that? I think it can be character-revealing, especially in fiction, because fiction is usually written from the point of view of one person or another, and it allows you to see how the person is processing sex, strategizing sex, or wondering about having sex.

For instance, in *Our Young Man* the guy decides to bottom for his very young lover, who's got a tiny, micro dick, because he thinks that's the way he will capture his enthusiasm and make him fall in love. I actually knew a couple like that. I had a friend who was a Texas millionaire and he was tiny. He always bottomed for everybody because of that, but then he met a guy who was clever enough to bottom for him instead, and so then the millionaire fell madly in love with this guy and showered him with gifts and houses and everything. I had him in mind, actually, when I was writing the book. Not as a personality, but as a strategy.

Edmund White recommends:

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy—my favorite novel

Annie Hall, film by Woody Allen

"The Flagellation of Christ," painting by Piero della Francesca in Urbino

Concerto Barocco, ballet by Balanchine

Proust

Your work often addresses the currency of sex, and the currency of youth, and the currency of beauty as things that function very specifically in relationships.

I lived in France, where people really do trade sex for money or position, or houses, or something. They're all living in a Balzac novel. Americans are shocked by that. It's partly, I think, that it's another sign of American prudishness that you can't really trade favors for sex. Or that you can't be honest or upfront about it when, in reality, that's what you might be doing.

Did being a famous gay writer allow you to have a lot more sex?

Not really. I always think it's not much fun being a famous gay writer, because nobody puts out for that. They all want to be famous gay writers themselves, whereas, if you were a famous straight writer, you seem to get a lot of sex... or so I'm told.

Has your notion of beauty evolved much over the years?

It's expanded. Almost anything male will do. I can find something sexy about almost anyone. I always thought I'd be a good prostitute for that reason... or a member of a harem. I would find some 300 pound pasha sexy, simply because he was a pasha.

John Waters famously said that if you go home with somebody and they don't have books you shouldn't sleep with them. Seems like a good rule of thumb.

I love that. That reminds me of something. Way back before gay liberation, I was in group therapy with a bunch of straight people, and there was a very cute, young guy who was like 19 or something in our group. He was straight, but he was a hippie. Then, one day he announced that he had met a guy in Central Park and really liked him, and was having sex with him. They were all horrified, these straight people. "Oh my God, you've become gay! This is terrible." Then, like three weeks later, they asked him about it and he was, "No, I broke up with that guy because he made me listen to Barbra Streisand." I guess we all have our breaking point.

Name

Edmund White

Vocation

Writer, Provocateur

Fact

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