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2020

Party-Bottom Paperbacks: Cruising Used Bookstores in Search of Queer History

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Recommended Citation

Weinstock, Matt, "Party-Bottom Paperbacks: Cruising Used Bookstores in Search of Queer History" (2020). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 69.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/69>

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PARTY-BOTTOM PAPERBACKS
Cruising Bookstores in Search of Queer History

Matt Weinstock

“To go to bed with him was hardly the most attractive prospect in the world—it was terrifying, even repulsive. But if I wanted to link myself to Oscar Wilde more directly than I was linked to Whitman, there was no other way....Within an hour and a half, we were in bed, the Church renounced, conscience vanquished, inhibitions overcome, revulsion conquered, pledges and vows and British laws all forgotten. Head down, my lips where Oscar’s had been, I knew that I had won.”

—Samuel Steward, on seducing the ancient lover of Oscar Wilde
in order to establish a queer lineage¹

For two years I volunteered at a used bookstore whose profits were dedicated to battling the twin plagues of homelessness and AIDS. During my shifts, I liked to set a picnic basket of old theater playbills by the cash register, knowing that it would function as an infallible honey trap. What better place to cruise guys than at an AIDS bookstore, where all of the patrons were by definition pure of heart? For the most part, though, I wound up cruising books instead. Thumbing through the crates of titles that arrived each day, you could often detect the donor’s sensibility. Often they pinged as gay. Often the books were of a particular vintage, suggesting someone who had recently died. Their books were an inheritance, and one that I cashed in on greedily.

The activist Avram Finkelstein has said that “to be queer is to be an archaeologist,” and for years I’ve been hoarding books that seek to excavate the buried pre-Stonewall past.² The titles range from scholarly anthropological studies to hallucinatory alternate-history novels, from the canonical (*Angels in America*) to the

¹ Mulderig, Jeremy, editor. *The Lost Autobiography of Samuel Steward: Recollections of an Extraordinary Twentieth-Century Gay Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 107, 112.

² Finkelstein, Avram. “FOUND: Queerness as Archaeology.” *Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art*, <https://www.leslielohman.org/project/found-queerness-as-archeology>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2020.

obscure (*Twenty-nine Letters from Coconut Grove*, of which my copy is one of 300 in existence). Some of the books document neglected moments in queer history; others turn to fiction in order to conjure a queer past that has been so meticulously suppressed that it is beyond recovery. The one thing that all of these books share is a guerrilla spirit that calls to mind a line from Taylor Mac's play *Hir*: "The past got stolen and I want to steal it back!"³

I'm not sure why I'm so preoccupied by the past as a reader and a writer. It makes me something of an anomaly in a queer literary landscape whose dominant strains have long been autofiction and memoir. Documenting the queer present was an urgent business in a brutally homophobic century, of course; for the foundational generations of "out" artists, there was little time to ponder the vast, uncharted waters of the past. Or perhaps the past did not seem available to them. Until recently, the discipline of LGBTQ history didn't exist, and it remains unacknowledged in most schools, limiting our sense of how deeply our roots run. Official histories have conditioned us to see ourselves as anachronisms, to the point that when a homosexual does pop up in period storytelling, it almost registers as a continuity error. In their efforts to steal back the past, the authors featured in my collection use methodologies ranging from research to séance to industrial-grade gaydar. Some of them even seem to be cruising the dead, scrutinizing nineteenth-century French acrobats and Harlem Renaissance poets and infamous jailbreakers from Georgian England in search of "dropped hairpins."

It makes sense to feel some form of erotic curiosity about the gays of the past: by virtue of having been dead for fifty-plus years, they are the ultimate unattainable men. George Chauncey's *Gay New York* has been justifiably lionized as an historical text, but it also functions, rather helplessly, as a dishy guide to landing a man in 1920s Brooklyn. (Per Chauncey, you were supposed to tweeze your eyebrows, bleach your hair, and skulk around Prospect Park looking saucy.) In *Queer Street*, James McCourt offers a "free-association '50s queer syllabus" of all the devastatingly arcane topics—Glenway Wescott! Eartha Kitt! Vespasian!—that one had to be fluent in to succeed at pansy dinner parties. These texts are guidebooks to vanished worlds, and their obsolescence is absurdly touching to me. They ought to pack them on time-travel missions.

³ Mac, Taylor. *Hir*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015. 72.

My favorite donation-crate find was a copy of Edmund White's 1988 novel *The Beautiful Room is Empty* that had evidently been passed from gay man to gay man, all of whom contributed their own annotations. It was a party bottom of a paperback, and the accumulated marginalia is confessional, maudlin, and on occasion unbearably moving. One man wrote "not not not not" in the margins whenever a paragraph didn't reflect his own coming-out narrative and "yes yes yes yes" whenever it did. On another page, he wrote the name "Todd" over and over.⁴ These men—possibly long-dead—were chaperoning my reading of the novel, chipping in when relevant, pointing out which passages were worth lingering on. I felt I was holding queer history in my hands, and wondered if this was what Samuel Steward had "won" by shtupping Oscar Wilde's lover: a sense of lineage, a feeling of belonging.

Elsewhere in my book collection, the margins offer evidence of my loneliness. When I was fifteen, I read *Angels in America* for school and filled its pages with performatively naïve questions: "AIDS?" "He's gay, too?" "is there really that thing where one is kind of the 'husband' and one is kind of the 'wife' (more feminine?)" My marginalia was staged, a kind of ingenious alibi, as if I was afraid that my copy of *Angels in America* would be intercepted by blackmailers. Still, my penmanship betrays me, becoming noticeably frenetic during the scenes between Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt. Years later, after graduating from college, I reread the play and added a fresh layer of annotations, forming a sort of palimpsest text that contains both my closeted self and my present self. Around that time, I entered my first long-term relationship, and my boyfriend and I annotated the same copy of *Giovanni's Room* in rapid succession after he mentioned reading a *New York Times* article that identified marginalia as a form of eighteenth-century foreplay. (According to the story, "people would mark up books for one another as gifts, or give pointedly annotated novels to potential lovers.")⁵ Sharing the margins of *Giovanni's Room* felt more intimate, by far, than sharing a bed. We dated for six years, and it was one of the triumphs of the breakup that I got to keep the book.

This isn't to say that all of the annotations in my book collection are epiphanic. There's the dross of daily life, too: shopping lists, Megabus codes, notes for an unrealized essay about the history of peg legs. Still,

⁴ These two sentences appear, in slightly altered form, in an essay on Edmund White that I wrote for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* in 2018.

⁵ Anderson, Sam. "What I Really Want Is Someone Rolling Around in the Text," *The New York Times* 4 Mar. 2011.

there are enough inadvertent confessions of self on the page that, by arranging my books in the order that I read them, I can chart the evolution of my queer identity—from *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, the book that made me realize I was gay, to *The Stonewall Reader*, which I finished in January.

I like to think that my annotations might chaperone future generations of queer readers through these books. Maybe they'll pick up my battered copy of *Orlando* at a garage sale and be pained by my bouts of self-hatred, bewildered by all my references to Nora Ephron, and perhaps even vaguely aroused. In Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, the furtively gay character of Hector says, "The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours."⁶ Samuel Steward was one of the lucky ones—a hand reached out from the queer past and gave him a hand job. For the rest of us queers in search of our lost history, literature will have to suffice.

⁶ Bennett, Alan. *The History Boys*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. 56.

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