

the book corner

A BOY'S OWN STORY

by Edmund White

Dutton, \$13.95

218 pp.

I have been intrigued by the writing of Edmund White since I first read Nocturnes for the King of Naples, his second novel, several years ago. I recall being first attracted to the book by the artsy collage on the cover (which featured one of my favorite beefcake shots from Blueboy), then challenged and stimulated by the rococo prose style, and finally bewildered by the complex interweaving of the threads of memory and desire into a tapestry of sensual imagery, philosophical meditation, and religious mystery.

White next collaborated with Dr. Charles Silverstein on The Joy of Gay Sex, a book whose important role in my coming-out process was due not only to its informative entries and sensitive and caring approach but also to the fact that I had to ask for it from behind the counter of the Waldenbooks store in our local mall. (I was amazed at the time that the clerk didn't seem appalled or shocked at my request, didn't make any snide remarks; in retrospect I'm more amazed that he didn't try to pick me up -- you know how those bookstore clerks are.)

Another non-fiction work followed, States of Desire -- Travels in Gay America, was the result of several months of travel, visiting and tricking with men throughout the country (White as a gay de Tocqueville or a literate Bob Damron.) In this book White combined his skill in capturing the essence of a place or person in a finely-tuned phrase with his acute social commentary in a carefully crafted, endlessly-fascinating look at the state of the country ten years after Stonewall.

It was at this point that I ran across White's first novel, Forgetting Elena (now available, as is Nocturnes, in a Penguin paperback), a book which seems to me almost the epitome of a "first novel," high in techniques and low in substance. As a tour de force it is indeed a remarkable document, but once you've figured out the "secret" of the book, there's little left to challenge or inspire. The book is of interest, both to readers pursuing gay interests (just what island kingdom is the narrator talking about?) and to students of the avant-garde in fiction (why did Nabokov single out White as the American writer he admired most?), but it fails ultimately to cohere on a unified level.

7
With his fifth book, A Boy's Own Story, White has charted a promising course between the two poles staked out by his earlier work, giving creative shape and force to his observations on being gay in America, and moving away from the crypto-gay society of Elena and from the quasi-mystical dream landscape of Nocturnes.

The adolescent narrator of this novel has problems and joys which seem unique and individual, yet constantly call up sympathetic vibrations within us. We share the turmoil of his parents' divorce, the agonies of trying to be popular ("I kept a phone list of the people I thought I knew well enough to call in the afternoon and evening, and I'd work my way down systematically through all the names"), the glorious freedom offered by two "bohemians" from a local bookstore who decide that he must learn German so that he can read Hesse, and the hopelessness of his crush on Helen Paper ("She was a puppet I could place in one playlet after another, but once I'd invoked her she became independent, tortured me, smiled right through me at another boy, her approaching lover").

The main thread of the book, however, is the boy's emerging sense of his own sexuality, and his difficulty in resolving the conflicting desires of friendship, romance, sex and selfhood. We hear his dreams of being carried away from his problems by an older lover, see the embarrassing futility of his early sexual encounters, and feel the wrenching conflict of his friendship with Tommy, the most popular boy in school. Their relationship is exhilarating in its simplicity and honesty, but crushing in the limits which Tommy imposes as he affirms his friendship despite the rumors he's heard that "you'd jump me in my sleep" and we sense the "medicinal smell, that Lysol smell of homosexuality. . .staining the air again."

White has reached a compromise in his writing between journalistic realism and baroque mysticism, combining the yearnings and embarrassments of adolescence with a sense of the patterns which lie behind them to create a picture that is at once strikingly immediate and achingly distant. In this passage, the narrator is watching his friend Kevin swimming in the lake the afternoon after their first sexual experiments:

After a bit he found what looked like the pink plastic lid of a bucket. He tossed it again and again into the air and swam to retrieve it. The late sun, masked once more by clouds, did not send its path across the water toward us but hollowed out behind it a golden amphitheater. The light was behind Kevin; when he held the disk it went pale and seductive as a pink hibiscus. His head was about the same
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